



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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The Puritans and Revival Christianity

by Iain Murray

Following as it did so closely upon the Reformation it is not surprising that the Puritan movement in England believed so firmly in revivals of religion as the great means by which the Church advances in the world. For the Reformation was itself the greatest revival since Pentecost – a spring-time of new life for the Church on such a scale that the instances recorded in the apostolic era of three thousand being converted on one day, and of a ‘great multitude of the priests’ becoming ‘obedient to the faith’, no longer sounded incredible.

The Reformation, and still more, Puritanism, have been considered from many aspects but it has been too often overlooked that the main features of these movements, as, for instance, the extensiveness of their influence, the singular position given to Scripture and the transformation in character of the morally careless, are all effects of revival. When the Holy Spirit is poured out in a day of power the result is bound to affect whole communities and even nations. Conviction of sin, an anxiety to possess the Word of God, and dependence upon those truths which glorify God in man’s salvation, are inevitable consequences.

Today men may wonder at the influences which changed the spiritual direction of England and Scotland so rapidly four hundred years ago making them Bible-reading nations and witnesses to a creed so unflattering to human nature and hateful to human pride.

Innumerable writers have attempted to explain the phenomena by political and social considerations. They have supposed that the success which the historical Reformers and Puritans achieved occurred through a curious combination of historical circumstances which cannot be expected to happen again. To the Christians of that era, however, the explanation was entirely different. They read in Scripture that when the Spirit is poured from on high then the wilderness becomes a fruitful field [Isaiah 32:15]. They read also, ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts’ [Zechariah 4:6], and they attributed all the spiritual renewal of their age to the mercy of God. In taking this view they understood at once that all the successes of the Reformation were repeatable – as repeatable as the victories of the apostolic age – for Scripture

places no limitation upon the Spirit's work of glorifying Christ and extending His kingdom. Thus there was recovered at the time of the Reformation belief in what may be called revival Christianity, and the attention which the Puritans who followed gave to this area of truth profoundly influenced the following centuries and gave to the English-speaking world what may be called the classic school of Protestant belief in revival. So prevalent indeed did this outlook become that until the nineteenth century all who wrote specifically upon the subject represented the Puritan standpoint. Of these writers the most notable who treated the subject of revival at length were Robert Fleming [1630-1694] in his *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*, Jonathan Edwards [1703-1758] in several works, and John Gillies [1712-1796] in his *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel*.

The commencement of the Reformation in England and Scotland was marked by a thirst for Scripture among the people. Tyndale's version of the New Testament circulated in both realms from 1526 onwards and soon a train of preachers appeared, at first small in number, whose ministry was attended by effects which had not been commonly seen for many long centuries. Of the Scottish reformer, George Wishart, martyred in 1546, we have this account of his open-air preaching: 'He mounted an earthen fence, and continued preaching to the people above three hours, and God wrought so wonderfully by that sermon that one of the wickedest men in the country, the laird of Sheld, was converted by it, and his eyes ran down with such abundance of tears that all men wondered at him.'

Scenes like this were soon to become common in the northern kingdom. In May, 1556, John Knox, running the gauntlet of the Catholic powers who still controlled the country, preached for ten consecutive days in Edinburgh. When he returned to Scotland again, in 1559, the spiritual revival became general. 'God did so multiply our number', Knox writes of the growth of the Protestant cause, 'that it appeared as if men had rained from the clouds.' In a letter to an English friend written on June 23, 1559, he says: 'Now, forty days and more, hath my God used my tongue in my native country, to the manifestation of His glory. Whatsoever now shall follow, as touching my own carcass, His holy name be praised. The thirst of the poor people, as well as of the nobility here, is wondrous great, which putteth me in comfort that Christ Jesus shall triumph for a space here, in the north and extreme parts of the earth.'

Looking back on this glorious period the Scottish Church historian, Kirkton, later wrote: 'The Church of Scotland hath been singular among the churches. And, first, it is to be admired that, whereas in other nations the Lord

thought it enough to convict a few in a city, village, or family to himself, leaving the greater part in darkness, in Scotland the whole nation was converted by lump; and within ten years after popery was discharged in Scotland. there were not ten persons of quality to be found in it who did not profess the true reformed religion, and so it was among the commons in proportion. Lo! here a nation born in one day.’

Even when allowance is made for the number who were carried by outward persuasion rather than by inner spiritual conviction the history of the Scottish Reformation bears eloquent record to the vast success which the Gospel then had. It was a great revival.

The same holds true of England. Despite the severest penalties against the possession of Scripture, and against unauthorized preaching, spiritual concern spread rapidly in the later years of Henry VIII, after the appearance of Tyndale’s New Testament. During the reign of the boy King, Edward VI [1547-1553], the public preaching of the Gospel by Latimer, Hooper, Bradford and others was attended with remarkable success. An entry in the records of St. Margaret’s, Westminster, bears its own witness to the way in which people pressed to hear the Word of God; it notes that one shilling and sixpence was expended, ‘for mending divers pews that were broken when Doctor Latimer did preach’. Speaking of a few years later, John Jewell writes thus of open-air gatherings in the City of London: ‘Sometimes at Paul’s Cross six thousand persons were sitting together, which was very grievous to the papists.’ Details like these show that the English Reformation was much more than a series of legislative Acts executed by the authorities. Political decisions certainly entered in, but the policy of burning which claimed nearly three hundred Protestants in the reign of Mary Tudor [1553-1558] served to demonstrate that convictions were planted in many hearts which no force could uproot. Upon the death of Mary the last English Catholic monarch passed from the scene until the restoration of Charles II in 1660, and two years later, in 1560, the Scottish Parliament formally abolished the Catholic religion in Scotland.

The storm of persecution which blew itself out in Mary’s reign did more than test the roots of the new faith. By driving into temporary exile a number of the younger spiritual leaders it brought them into closer contact with the Reformed churches of the Continent. The influence of the two Continental theologians, Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr, had already been felt as they had taught at Cambridge and Oxford respectively in the days of Edward VI, but now, as a congregation of some two hundred exiles gathered at Geneva, the full weight of Calvin’s ministry – as mighty in the pulpit as in the lecture hall – was experienced at first hand. From this haven in the Swiss Alps Knox and

Christopher Goodman went to Scotland, while the others returned to England after the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558. Thereafter the two groups, ‘the Covenanters’, so-called in the north because of the public and national covenants by which they affirmed their common allegiance to God, and the Puritans, in England, developed along parallel lines, like two streams originating at one fountain. The fountain was not so much Geneva, as the Bible which the exiles newly translated and issued with many marginal notes in 1560. Between that date and 1644 no less than 140 editions of the Geneva Bible were to be issued and, as a modern writer says, ‘it was read in every Presbyterian and Puritan home in both realms’. When these two streams came together again at the convening of the Westminster Assembly in 1643, their unanimity was given peerless expression in the great truths of evangelical religion set down in the Confession of Faith. In their understanding of the gospel and in practical divinity the Christians of England and Scotland were then one, and the expositions of the Scottish divines were as eagerly read in London as were the writings of the English Puritans north of the Border.

The problem which confronted the English and Scottish evangelicals in 1560 was basically the same, namely the need to spread the gospel at the parish level in countries which had become formally Protestant. In England the main hindrance to this endeavour was the dead-weight of the Church, which though ‘reformed’ by Acts of Parliament remained in many areas in its old pre-reformation spiritual condition. For the next century the ‘Puritans’, as they were nicknamed in the 1560’s, gave themselves to the work of renewal in the national Church – a work which was terminated by the ejection of most of them after the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. The Puritan age proper spanned these hundred years.

In Scotland, from the outset, the Church of Scotland was free from the entanglements which the semi-reformed state of the Church caused in England. At one blow the old priesthood and episcopal hierarchy lost their places, except in the still Catholic Highlands, and the leadership of the Reformed Church was in the hands of Knox [c. 1514-1572] and his brethren. Yet the Presbyterian form of church government, which set them free from the corruption of prelacy and made possible the exercise of a scriptural church discipline, was not long allowed to continue unimpeded. James VI of Scotland had no more enthusiasm for experimental godliness than his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, who was deposed from the throne in 1567, and shortly he set himself against Knox’s successors an activity in which he could engage with all the more power when he also became James I, King of England in 1603. Thereafter, aided by willing bishops, he worked to shackle the independency of the Scottish Church and to suppress the

English Puritans. This was the policy which led at length to the Civil War of 1642 and the defeat of his son, Charles I.

Despite the force exerted against both Puritan and Covenanting causes they both prospered and that because the rising tide of spiritual life could not be effectively countered. A school of preachers arose in both realms of whom it could truly be said that their gospel came not in word only, 'but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance'. [I Thess. 1 :5].

In the south the University of Cambridge was the nursery for this school. Thomas Cartwright gave the movement its momentum in the late 1560's when his preaching in Great St. Mary's became so popular that 'the sexton was fain to take down the windows, by reason of the multitudes that came to hear him'. Cartwright and others were soon deposed for their boldness, but the watchword of the movement continued to be, 'Pray for reformation by the power of the word preached'. From the 1570's onward, friends of Cartwright, such as Richard Rogers, John Dod and Arthur Hildersham, began to put this into practice at the parish level. In the next thirty years the few swelled to a flood, partly through the foundation of Emmanuel College at Cambridge by Sir Walter Mildmay in 1584 ['to render as many as possible fit for the administration of the Divine Word and Sacraments'], and partly by the conversion of William Perkins.

Perkins, born in the year of Elizabeth's accession, became a student at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1577 when he was without any spiritual concern. The great change came while he was still a student. At the age of twenty-four he was made a fellow of his College and later, for over fifteen years until his early death in 1602, preached at St. Andrew's Church in the same university city. In these capacities Perkins had enormous influence. Even in 1613, when Thomas Goodwin went up to Cambridge, he tells us that 'the whole town was filled with the discourse of the power of Mr. Perkins' ministry'. 'Master Perkins,' says Samuel Clarke, 'held forth a burning and shining light, the sparks whereof did fly abroad into all the corners of the kingdom.'

A similar power rested upon the ministry of Laurence Chaderton [1546?-1640], the first Master of Emmanuel College, a position he resigned in favour of another Puritan, John Preston, in 1622. For fifty years Chaderton was also lecturer at St. Clement's, Cambridge, and when he laid down this charge in 1618, at the age of seventy-two, it is said that forty ministers begged him to continue, attributing their conversion to him. Thomas Goodwin reports the words of a Cambridge friend who, speaking of the conviction of sin which accompanied his preaching, declared that 'when he heard Mr. Chaderton preach the gospel, his

apprehension was as if the sun, namely Jesus Christ, shined upon a dunghill'. On one occasion when Chaderton had preached for two hours and promised to stop, he was interrupted by a cry from the congregation, 'For God's sake. Sir, Go on, go on!'

By the end of the sixteenth century Cambridge was beginning to reap results from the work done by the first generation of Puritans on the parish level. Richard Rogers, for instance, who toiled with much success at Wethersfield, Essex, from 1574 to 1618, saw Paul Baynes, one of the former pupils at his parish school, become Perkins' successor in the lectureship in St. Andrew's Church in 1602. Not wishing to have another like Perkins, the authorities later suspended Baynes but not before he had been an instrument in the conversion of many, including Richard Sibbes who himself became one of the most successful preachers of the Puritan era. When Sibbes was appointed lecturer at Holy Trinity, Cambridge, in 1610, additional galleries had to be built to accommodate the crowded congregation. After 1615 he was 'preacher' at Gray's Inn, London, but he returned to Cambridge, as Master of St. Katherine's Hall, in 1626 and combined this with his London post until his death in 1635. One of the fellows at St. Katherine's Hall at this period was Thomas Goodwin who in a sermon preached at this time reflected thus on the great work of God in Cambridge: 'If in any age or in any coast it is or hath been full tide, it is now in England . . . And this gospel hath made this kingdom and this town as a "crown of glory in the hand of the Lord;" and "the glory of the whole earth", as Jerusalem is called.'

It is when one looks at some of the crop produced from this school of preachers in Cambridge that the Puritan age as an age of revivals reveals itself. We can here only pause to give a few illustrative examples.

William Gouge [1575-1653], a student at Cambridge in Perkins' day, became minister of the church at Black-friars, London, in 1608; here he remained for forty-five years and six months. His general practice was to preach twice on Sunday and once every Wednesday forenoon to a crowded church. His expository sermons on Hebrews numbered more than a thousand, a work which save for half a chapter he had completed for publication by the time of his death. Of this man we read, God made him 'an aged father in Christ . . . for thousands have been converted and built up by his ministry'. His son, Thomas Gouge, followed him in the ministry and after his ejection in 1662 did much to establish the gospel in the Principality of Wales.

Samuel Fairclough [1594-1677] left Cambridge in 1623 for Barnardiston in East Anglia. Two years later he moved to Kedington, seventeen miles from

Cambridge, where he remained until the Great Ejection. At the time of his settlement the place was characterized by profanity and ignorance, but 'when he had been there sometime so great was the alteration that there was not a family in twenty but professed godliness'. Many would ride from Cambridge to hear Fairclough's Thursday 'lecture' and not till long after were those days of spiritual blessing forgotten. Kedington Church, Samuel Clarke tells us, was 'so thronged, that [though, for a village, very large and capacious, yet] there was no getting in, unless by some hours' attending before his exercise began; and then the outward walls were generally lined with shoals and multitudes of people, which came [many] from far, [some above twenty miles], so that you could see the Church yard [which was likewise very spacious] barricaded with horses, tied to the outward rails, while their owners were greedily waiting to hear the word of life from his mouth'.

It is plain that scenes like this were far from rare in East Anglia in the first half of the seventeenth century. Samuel Fairclough's own father, Lawrence Fairclough, had seen spiritual prosperity in his ministry at Haverhill, Suffolk, before his death in 1603. The successor to his work in Haverhill was one of the most 'awakening' of all Puritan preachers and one whose ministry was attended with a power which was still being spoken of in the mid-eighteenth century. This was John Rogers, nephew of Richard Rogers of Wethersfield, by whose financial support he studied at Emmanuel from 1588 until 1592. In 1605 he was called from Haverhill to be 'lecturer' in the beautiful vale of Dedham, later to be known throughout the world by the paintings of John Constable but famous in the seventeenth century for the great spiritual harvest which took place under Rogers' ministry. 'Let us go to Dedham to get a little fire' became a common saying among his contemporaries. One who went was Thomas Goodwin, while a student at Cambridge, and many years later when he was Dr. Goodwin and President of Magdalen College, Oxford, he reported his memory of it to John Howe. Howe recorded it as follows: 'He told me that being himself, in the time of his youth, a student at Cambridge, and having heard much of Mr. Rogers of Dedham, in Essex, purposely he took a journey from Cambridge to Dedham to hear him preach on his lecture day. And in that sermon he falls into an expostulation with the people about their neglect of the Bible [I am afraid it is more neglected in our days]; he personates God to the people, telling them, "Well, I have trusted you so long with my Bible; you have slighted it; it lies in such and such houses all covered with dust and cobwebs. You care not to look into it. Do you use my Bible so? Well, you shall have my Bible no longer". And he takes up the Bible from his cushion, and seemed as if he were going away with it, and carrying it from them; but immediately turns again and personates the people to God, falls down on his

knees, cries and pleads most earnestly, "Lord, whatsoever thou cost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods; only spare us thy Bible, only take not away thy Bible". And then he personates God again to the people: "Say you so? Well, I will try you a little longer; and here is my Bible for you, I will see how you will use it, whether you will love it more, whether you will value it more, whether you will observe it more, whether you will practice it more, and live more according to it". But by these actions [as the Doctor told me] he put all the congregation into so strange a posture that he never saw any congregation in his life. The place was a mere Bochim, the people generally [as it were] deluged with their own tears; and he told me that he himself when he got out, and was to take horse again to be gone, was fain to hang a quarter of an hour upon the neck of his horse weeping, before he had power to mount, so strange an impression was there upon him, and generally upon the people, upon having been thus expostulated with for the neglect of the Bible'.

Another eye witness of John Rogers' ministry was John Angier who was under his supervision for a period while he completed his preparation for the ministry. 'Mr. Rogers,' says Angier, 'was a prodigy of zeal and success in his ministerial labours and he recalled how a sense of the greatness of eternal issues would at times overcome the crowded church at Dedham; on one such occasion Rogers took hold of the supports of the canopy over the pulpit with both hands 'roaring hideously to represent the torments of the damned'. At another time when Rogers was taking a wedding service he preached on the necessity of the wedding garment: 'God made the word so effectual that the marriage solemnity was turned into bitter mourning, so that the ministers who were at the marriage were employed in comforting or advising those whose consciences had been awakened by that sermon'.

When the 'Great Awakening' began in America in 1740 and its critics complained of the novelty of the outward signs of grief and conviction to be witnessed in many congregations, the aged Timothy Edwards reminded them of how common this had once been in the days of John Rogers.

We shall content ourselves with one further example of the extraordinary measure of the Holy Spirit which rested upon much preaching in England in the Puritan period. This time we can quote from one of the few personal ministerial narratives which survive from three hundred years ago, the Autobiography of Richard Baxter.

Baxter was born and spent his youth in Shropshire, a part of England then comparatively little influenced by the Puritan movement. In childhood he heard

the word 'Puritan' only as a term of scorn in his neighbourhood, where the villagers spent Sunday, except for the brief time in which Common-Prayer was read, 'dancing under a May-Pole and a great tree, not far from my father's door'. Books, however, did penetrate where there was no worthy preacher. About the age of fifteen Baxter was awakened and went 'many a-day with a throbbing conscience' through a reading of Edmund Bunny's *Resolution*. Another book, obtained from a travelling pedlar, resolved this state of sorrow: it was Richard Sibbes' *Bruised Reed*, 'which opened more the Love of God to me, and gave me a livelier apprehension of the Mystery of Redemption, and how much I was beholden to Jesus Christ'. In these new convictions he was further confirmed by the loan of part of William Perkins' *Works* from a servant of his father.

Baxter's theology never reached the full scriptural maturity of the school of Sibbes and Perkins, partly, perhaps, because he did not share the opportunities which many had who trained at Cambridge in these years. Nevertheless as an awakening preacher to the conscience, with constant emphasis on the need for personal godliness, Baxter attained to the front rank among the later Puritans. His most memorable ministry was exercised in Kidderminster, Worcestershire, first for two years preceding the Civil War of 1642-6; then resuming in the late 1640's when peace was again restored, and through until 1660. Looking back on the great change which had been wrought in Kidderminster, Baxter wrote about the year 1666: 'When I came thither first, there was about one family in a street that worshipped God and called on his Name, and when I came away there were some streets where there was not past one Family in the side of a street that did not so; and that did not, by professing serious godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity . . . And God was pleased also to give me abundant encouragement in the Lectures which I preached abroad in other places; as at Worcester, Cleobury, etc., but especially at Dudley and Sheffnal; at the former of which [being the first place that ever I preached in] the poor Nailers and other Labourers would not only crowd the Church as full as ever I saw any in London, but also hang upon the windows and the leads without . . . so that I must here, to the praise of my dear Redeemer, set up this pillar of remembrance, even to His praise who hath employed me so many years in so comfortable a work, with such encouraging success!'

Baxter goes on to write of the general spiritual success which marked the Commonwealth period and refutes the sneers of those in the days of Charles II who attributed the 'godliness' of the former age to the material profit which men obtained by their hypocrisy:

‘I know in these times you may meet with men that confidently affirm that all religion was then trodden down, and heresy and schism were the only piety; but I give warning to all ages that they take heed how they believe any . . . I must bear this faithful witness to those times, that as far as I was acquainted, where before there was one godly profitable Preacher, there was then six or ten; and taking one place with another, I conjecture there is a proportionable increase of truly godly people, not counting heretics or perfidious rebels or church-disturbers as such: But this increase of godliness was not in all places alike: For in some places where the ministers were formal, or ignorant, or weak and imprudent, contentious or negligent, the parishes were as hard as heretofore. And in some places, where the ministers had excellent parts, and holy lives, and thirsted after the good of souls, and wholly devoted themselves, their time and strength and estates thereunto, and thought no pains or cost too much, there abundance were converted to serious godliness. And with those of a middle state, usually they had a middle measure of success And I must add this to the true information of posterity, that God did so wonderfully bless the labours of his unanimous faithful ministers, that had it not been for the faction of the Prelatists on one side that drew men off and the factions of the giddy and turbulent Sectaries on the other side, [who pull’d down all government, cried down the ministers, and broke all into confusion, and made the people at their wits’ end, not knowing what religion to be of]; together with some laziness and selfishness in many of the ministry, I say, had it not been for these impediments, England had been like in a quarter of an Age to have become a land of Saints, and a pattern of holiness to all the world and the unmatched paradise of the earth.’

The testimony of Philip Henry [1631-1696] may also be cited in regard to the prevalence of evangelical religion in the Commonwealth period. Henry went up to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1647, and within a few years when Thomas Goodwin became President of Magdalen College and John Owen, Dean of Christ Church, the University enjoyed a period of spiritual life comparable to that known in Cambridge in earlier years. Others then studying or teaching at the University included Joseph Alleine, John Howe and Stephen Charnock. Later in the seventeenth century, when the spiritual blight which accompanied the Restoration had done its work, the fashionable Spectator diverted its readers with a tale how Goodwin examined applicants at Magdalen not so much on Latin and Greek as on the state of their souls. The examination of one fearful boy, ‘bred up by honest parents, was summed up in one short question, namely, whether he was prepared for death?’ Ridiculous this might seem to the Spectator’s readers, but Matthew Henry learned differently of the Oxford of those days from his father:

‘He would often mention it with thankfulness to God, what great helps and advantages he had then in the University, not only for learning, but for religion and piety. Serious godliness was in reputation, and besides the public opportunities they had, there were many of the scholars that used to meet together for prayer, and Christian conference, to the great confirming of one another’s hearts in the fear and love of God, and the preparing of them for the service of the church in their generation. I have heard him speak of the prudent method they took then about the University sermons on the Lord’s day in the afternoon; which used to be preached by the fellows of colleges in their course; but, that being found not so much for edification, Dr. Owen and Dr. Goodwin performed that service alternately, and the young masters that were wont to preach it, had a lecture on Tuesday appointed them.’

Philip Henry spent the first eight years of his ministry at Worthenbury in Flintshire, and thereafter at Broad Oak, Flintshire, until his death in 1696. In those later years the great benefit which England had formerly enjoyed became the more apparent. ‘He would sometimes say,’ writes his son, ‘that during those years between forty and sixty [i.e. 1640-1660], though on civil accounts there were great disorders, and “the foundations were out of course”, yet, in the matters of God’s worship, things went well; there was freedom, and reformation, and a face of godliness was upon the nation, though there were those that made but a mask of it. Ordinances were administered in power and purity; and though there was much amiss, yet religion, at least in the profession of it, did prevail. This, saith he, we know well, let men say what they will of those times.’

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