

An examination of the Puritan principle of preaching the law to wound and the gospel to heal

Matthew Spriggs

In his study of Puritan theology, Ernest F. Kevan maintains that Puritanism cannot be understood apart from 'the Puritan pulpit', for its preachers did not give mere studies and doctrine, but laid 'stress upon practical exegesis ... the application of the Scripture to the Christian life ... Puritanism was something more than a system of doctrine, it was above all ... a life, a real, earnest, practical life.'¹ Hence much of the writing and preaching was guided by the phrase *practical divinity*. Puritanism came to embody the ideal of a holy community that was characterised by a deep reverence for God and a profound moral earnestness in life. Puritans became the theologians of the Christian life. As they were thwarted in their attempts to reform the church and nation, Puritans gave themselves the task of reforming the church from within. From the pulpit, instead of the political platform, they undertook the task of creating a new understanding of spiritual things based on the scriptural principles of the Reformation.

A fundamental principle of Puritanism was the recognition of the exclusive authority of Scripture for all things, a recognition which, in turn, drew attention to the significance of the law of God. Kevan summarises the Puritan view of the law: sin is the transgression of law, the death of Christ is the satisfaction of law, justification is the verdict of law, and sanctification is the believer's fulfilment of the law.² According to the Puritans, the ongoing authority of the law in the life of a believer was a key concept in the Christian experience. Thus, a major concern of Puritanism the relationship of the moral law to the saving grace of God and the subsequent life of the believer.

At one extreme there were those who maintained the necessity of law-keeping to such a degree that they were regarded by some of their contemporaries as forsaking the gospel altogether and reverting to a doctrine of salvation by good works. These teachers were often called 'nomists'. At the other extreme there were those who maintained that the believer was completely free from all obligation to law and who held that any concession to legal duty was an infringement of free grace. These were usually called 'antinomists' (or 'antinomians'). The Puritans endeavoured to stand clear of both these extremes.

Law and gospel in Puritan theology

Though not strictly a Puritan, Theodore Beza (1519-1605) was influential on Puritan thought and provides a good starting point for exploring Puritan understandings of law and gospel.³ According to Beza, the word of God has two parts to it: the law and the gospel. The law is that which is written on man's heart in the form of conscience and made more exact in

¹ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Baker, 1983), 19.

² Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 21.

³ Theodore Beza, 'The Two Parts of the Word of God: Law and Gospel,' from *Confession De Foi DU Chretien* (1558, homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/tblawgospel.htm).

the ten commandments. The law requires of man one hundred percent obedience and love which we owe to God and our neighbours. The gospel is good news, and is not in our nature, but was revealed first to Adam shortly after his sin (Genesis 3:15), then in increasing degrees to the patriarchs and prophets until it was fully manifested in the person of Jesus.

We must not think that the gospel abolishes the essence of the law. On the contrary, the law establishes the essence of the gospel, but the law and the gospel are distinct (Romans 10:2-4). The law lays us bare to the justice of God; the gospel sets forth his same justice to us as satisfied by the mercy of Jesus Christ. The law brings us to an end of ourselves in order to accomplish righteousness, but the gospel teaches us where we shall find the righteousness that we do not have. Thus the law can only show us, and make us see, our evil more exceedingly, and aggravate our condemnation. The gospel not only shows us the remedy, but is accompanied by the Holy Spirit who regenerates us and changes us.

Beza gives a number of reasons why the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the law. We are so blind to our corruption, that it is necessary that God shows clearly the position that we are in. 'He could do it no better than by informing us, by the declaration of His law, what we ought necessarily to be.' The law was not given to justify us, but to condemn us so that 'we begin to be miserable and greatly humble ourselves ... the first degree of repentance.'

In summary, Beza states: "This then is how the Holy Spirit, by the preaching of the gospel, heals the wound which the preaching of the law has uncovered and made worse (Rom. 6:14)."

*Thomas Shepard concludes: 'When it wounds
that it may heal, this is not contrary but agreeable ...
First humble by the law, and then revive by the gospel.'*

Thomas Shepard (1605-1649) was an American Puritan minister. In his thesis on the Sabbath,⁴ Shepard writes about the lack of direct preaching on the law. Shepard is quite forceful in his belief that the law wounds and the gospel heals, and that it must follow in that order:

When the Spirit comes, his first work (if Christ may be believed), even when he comes as a Comforter, is to convince the world of sin (John 16:9-10) which we know is chiefly by the law (Rom. 3:20), and shall the ministers (not of the letter, but of the spirit) refuse to begin here?

Shepard, however, is careful to refute those who only preach of the gospel: 'to abandon this use of the law as a rule [is to] abolish much more readily this use of the law to prepare men thereby for the receiving of Christ'. But likewise to preach the law and not the gospel will not drive people to Jesus:

The law of itself wounds and kills, and rather drives from Christ than unto Christ; but in the hand of the gospel, or as Christ handles it, so it drives the soul unto Christ, and (as hath been shown) is the means to that end. The force of the law to condemn and curse, to hold a man under the curse, and to hold a man under the power of sin, which the apostle calls the strength of the law, (1 Cor. 15:56,) is but for a time, and is but accidental to the law, and may be separated from it, and is separated indeed from it as soon as ever the soul is in Christ (Rom. 8:1:) he is then free from the obligation of it to perform personal and perfect obedience to it, that so he may be just.

⁴ Thomas Shepard, *Theses Sabbaticae, or The Doctrine of The Sabbath* (thomasshepard.org/sabbaticae.shtml).

Thomas Watson (1620-1686) was an English Puritan preacher and author. In his work on the ten commandments in *The Body of Divinity*, Watson emphasises the importance of not only hearing God's voice, but obeying it.⁵ Watson writes that, since the fall, man (who was naturally endowed with the ability to obey the law of God) has daily broken the commandments in thought, word and deed. Sin has so weakened us that man will never recover the ability to live a righteous life until clothed in immortality. Man is self-exalting and puffed up with pride. But when a man sees that he owes perfect obedience to the law, but has nothing to pay, it makes him flee to Christ to be his friend, and answer for him all the demands of the law, and set him free in the court of justice.

Watson describes how the preaching of the law is necessary because it first 'puts us in deep mourning, spring[ing] a leak of sorrow in all our souls'. Second, 'it confutes the Armenians, who cry up the power of the will. They hold they have a will to save themselves' and as such 'do absolutely put themselves under the covenant of works'. For Watson, as for the others mentioned, the law plays a key role in breaking the heart for repentance:

There is, as the schoolmen say, a twofold humiliation, or breaking of the heart. (1) Attrition; as when a rock is broken in pieces. This is done by the law, which is a hammer to break the heart. (2) Contrition; as when ice is melted into water. This is done by the gospel, which is as a fire to 'melt the heart.' (Jeremiah 23:9).

Shepard states that neglecting the wise and powerful preaching of the law to make way for the glorious gospel is both foolish and shameful. But none of the Puritan figures considered uphold that this is the only way to preach. The preaching of the law to unbelievers is necessary as man in his pride does not see the need for repentance. But the law is never preached on its own. It is always preached in conjunction with the gospel. Watson opposes the Armenians, who claim salvation is initiated by an act of will on our part that is rewarded by the giving of grace. For Watson the preaching of the law is vital to show men their complete inability to uphold the just requirements of God. But preaching should not stop at the weight of sin; it always provides the refuge in the gospel. Shepard concludes: 'When it wounds that it may heal, this is not contrary but agreeable ... First humble by the law, and then revive by the gospel.' Thus it would be wrong to conclude that a heavy emphasis on the law humbling men's hearts meant that Puritan sermons were solely 'fire and brimstone' designed to cause fear in men's hearts. Their emphasis on the law is because of the need of genuine repentance in order to turn to the great Physician.

This phrase – preach the law to wound and the gospel to heal – is an accurate description of the preaching of many Puritans. It is, however, also a simplistic phrase that does not do justice to the Puritans' rich understanding of the law and grace.

Watson breaks repentance into two parts: attrition (the breaking of a man's pride to acknowledge his sin) and contrition (feeling of regret over our sins). It is the preaching of the law that causes repentance, but it is the

⁵ Thomas Watson, 'The Ten Commandments' in *The Body of Divinity* (1692, www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/commandments.html).

sense of abused kindness proclaimed in the gospel which brings about contrition. Watson writes:

Breaking off sin must be sincere; it must not be out of fear, but upon spiritual grounds; as from antipathy and disgust, and a principle of love to God. If sin had not such evil effects, a true penitent would forsake it out of love to God. The best way to separate things that are frozen, is by fire. When sin and the heart are frozen together, the best way to separate them is by the fire of love. Shall I sin against a gracious Father, and abuse that love which pardons me?

Finally, it would be wrong to think that the Puritans only used the law in a negative sense. The law can also be a point of delight, but only for the believer who has previously been wounded by the law and healed by the gospel. Beza states:

When our disposition has been changed, the preaching of the law begins also to change its effect in us, such that instead of terrifying us, it consoles us (1 John 2:17; 2 Peter 1: 10, 11); instead of showing us how near our damnation is, it serves us as a guide to teach us the good works ... instead of being an unpleasant and unbearable yoke, it becomes pleasant and light to us (Matthew 11:30).

This phrase – preach the law to wound and the gospel to heal – is an accurate description of the preaching of many Puritans. It is, however, also a simplistic phrase that does not do justice to the Puritans' rich understanding of the law and grace. However, is this an accurate (and helpful) description of the task of a preacher?

Law and gospel in the New Testament

One of the most familiar summaries of New Testament preaching is that of Paul in 1 Corinthians:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

*Paul does not mention the law here.
He preaches Christ crucified to the Jew and the Gentile.*

Paul does not mention the law here. He preaches Christ crucified to the Jew and the Gentile. What does it mean to preach Christ crucified? First, we need to understand the context. Paul asserts that the world through its wisdom has failed to know God. True knowledge of God can only come by revelation. But that revelation of God's wisdom turns out to be the exact opposite of human wisdom. Not only does this please God, but this is what will save those who believe. In human eyes God must function as either the all-powerful or the all wise, but always in terms of our best interests - power on our behalf, wisdom like ours! Gordon Fee comments that for both the Jews and the Gentiles the ultimate idolatry is that of insisting that God conforms to our prior views and expectations.⁶ God's wisdom always shatters our idols. Thus Jews demand miraculous signs – this reflects Jewish messianic expectations. God had acted

⁶ Gordon Fee, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

powerfully on their behalf in history and the Jews expected the Messiah to do the same. 'Show us a sign' they repeatedly demanded of Jesus.⁷ Their idolatry was that they felt they had God completely figured out: he would simply repeat the exodus, but in a greater way. Greeks looked for wisdom – wisdom was their national pursuit. It was through their learning and philosophy that the Greek civilisation advanced so rapidly. Their idolatry was to conceive of God as ultimate reason (reason that is that they deemed reasonable!). These are the two basic idolatries that are always before us. Fee concludes that 'the demand for power and insistence on wisdom, always for us or from our point of view, are still the basic idolatries of a fallen world.'⁸

To the Jews the message of a crucified Messiah was the ultimate scandal. To the Gentiles the message of Christ crucified was utter foolishness. Yet it is at the cross of Christ that God shows himself to be all-powerful and all-wise according to his own desires and not that of humanity. We can now see a difference between preaching the law followed by the gospel and that of preaching Christ crucified. The difference is subtle, but the Puritan saying, 'preach the law to wound and the gospel to heal', does not get to the heart of our sin, which is our idolatry. Paul, in preaching Christ crucified, is revealing the idolatry of the Jews and the Gentiles and is thus showing them how they have replaced the worship of God with a desire for power and wisdom. Paul exposes their idolatry by showing them the glory of God in the cross and thus convicts them of their 'god-swap'.

Paul preaches Christ crucified, and it both condemns and saves. It reveals the glory of God, but humanity chooses to swap that glory for another and so call the cross foolish. But to those who are being saved, the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

This is the language in Romans 1 where the problem of our hearts is that we refuse to honour God as God and give him praise. Instead humanity worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator. A 'glory-exchange' takes place: from God to man. Humanity's sin is that we know God and we know the decrees of God, yet we do not give glory to God. Paul preaches Christ crucified, and it both condemns and saves. It reveals the glory of God, but humanity chooses to swap that glory for another and so call the cross foolish. But to those who are being saved, the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The Puritan saying, 'preach the law to wound and the gospel to heal', does not quite do this. There is an unnatural separation between law and gospel. It is true that the law does wound and the gospel does heal, but Paul lets the gospel do both the wounding and the healing. The cross of Christ is both a picture of sin and grace, of judgement and salvation. So an explanation of the cross necessarily requires that we explain sin and how we have not loved God as we should, nor have we loved our neighbour as we should. But the cross of Christ is not just a neat way of showing both sin and grace together: by its very nature it also exposes our idols by showing us the glory of God.

⁷ Matthew 11:38-39; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 6:30.

⁸ Gordon Fee, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 75.

The two thieves of the gospel

Tim Keller describes two false ways of thinking, each of which steals the power and distinctiveness of the gospel.⁹ These thieves can be called 'religion' and 'irreligion'. The 'religion thief' teaches us to believe that we are acceptable to God because of our attainments. The 'irreligion' thief (or liberal thief) believes that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for themselves and thus God is unjust to punish humanity according to God's own law. The irreligious do not repent at all while the religious only repent of sins or bad works. But, according to Keller, Christians are those who repent not only of their unrighteousness, but also of their attempts at righteousness. Keller concludes that both the religious and the irreligious need to see the gospel of Christ crucified. It is at the cross that the following truths are declared:

I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe (vs. irreligious or antinomianism). I more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope (vs. religious or legalism).

At the heart of the religious or legalistic belief is the idolatry that 'I am good enough for God, and my works merit my acceptance.' Preaching the law might convict, but it might also confirm the legalist in their idolatry. They might end up just trying harder. At the heart of the irreligious or antinomian belief is the same idolatry. They do not think of themselves as sinners. It is a way of avoiding Jesus as Saviour and keeping control of one's life.

*At the heart of the religious or legalistic belief
is the idolatry that 'I am good enough for God,
and my works merit my acceptance.'
Preaching the law might convict, but it might also
confirm the legalist in their idolatry.
They might end up just trying harder.*

In Mark 10:17-22 the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus is an example of those Keller calls 'religious'. The young man is not convicted by Jesus' summary of the law. He is convicted when Jesus reveals the man's love for wealth. That was his idol; that was where the rich young ruler had exchanged the glory of God for a lie. His claim to have kept all the commandments was actually a cover that enabled him to worship his idol of wealth guilt free. Only the preaching of the cross of Christ reveals how it is that we can truly be accepted by God while at the same time proclaiming the depth of our sin and the judgment that we deserve.

Conclusion

The Puritan contention that one should preach the law to wound and the gospel to heal is ultimately inadequate. The law alone only convicts of transgressions. It does not convict of the underlying idolatry against God. It may even confirm a legalist in their pursuit of self-righteousness. Feeling the conviction brought about by the law, they may simply endeavour to try harder.

Moreover, preaching law in this way places a negative emphasis on the law. The law was given to a people who had been saved. It was to instruct them how to be the holy nation and kingdom of priests they were saved to

⁹ Tim Keller, 'The Centrality of the Gospel,' (www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/centrality.pdf).

be. But what made Israel truly distinctive was that the glory of God dwelt among them. In their law and in their holy lives, Israel would be to the surrounding nations a reflection of the God who lived among them. Now the glory of God has been manifested in the cross of Christ. It is in the church that that glory of God dwells through the Spirit as we preach the cross of Christ to wound and to heal.

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:5-17)

Matthew Spriggs is a church planter in Loughborough. He is currently a third year student with the Northern Training Institute.

Northern Training Institute

The Northern Training Institute provides an affordable, Bible college-level programme of study that enables students to integrate theological training with involvement in ministry through residential weeks, seminar days and guided reading. The Institute also promotes theological reflection on the practice of mission and ministry.

The Northern Training Institute papers are a vehicle for disseminating this reflection. The views expressed in the papers do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

The Institute is part of the Porterbrook Network – a family of ministries which contributes to a wider church planting movement by equipping individuals and churches to rediscover mission as their DNA through training, resourcing and consulting.

info@northerntraininginstitute.org
www.northerntraininginstitute.org
www.theporterbrooknetwork.org