

Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling

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SUMMARY

The works of the Puritans are a rich resource for biblical counselors because:

1. The Puritans were committed to the functional authority of the Scripture. For them it was the comprehensive manual for dealing with all problems of the heart.
2. The Puritans developed a sophisticated and sensitive system of diagnosis for personal problems, distinguishing a variety of physical, spiritual, temperamental and demonic causes.
3. The Puritans developed a remarkable balance in their treatment because they were not invested in any one 'personality theory' other than biblical teaching about the heart.
4. The Puritans were realistic about difficulties of the Christian life, especially conflicts with remaining, indwelling sin.
5. The Puritans looked not just at behavior but at underlying root motives and desires. Man is a worshipper; all problems grow out of 'sinful imagination' or idol manufacturing.
6. The Puritans considered the essential spiritual remedy to be belief in the gospel, used in both repentance and the development of proper self-understanding.

IMPORTANCE OF THE PURITANS

Why should those seeking to develop a truly biblical counseling approach give special consideration to the Puritans? Because they were the first Protestant school of Biblical Counseling.

J. I. Packer, who is most conversant with the writings of these men, puts it well:

... the Puritans ... were strongest just where evangelical Christians today are weakest ... Here were men of outstanding intellectual power, in whom the mental habits fostered by sober scholarship were linked with a flaming zeal for God and a minute acquaintance with the human heart.¹

Today's biblical scholars don't understand the human heart, Packer says, while our counselors don't know the Scripture. But the Puritans were an entire generation of men who combined these two strengths. He goes on:

The hollowness of our vaunted biblicism becomes apparent as again and again we put asunder things God has joined ... we preach the gospel without the law and faith without repentance ... in dealing with the Christian experience we dwell constantly on joy, peace,

¹ P. Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Haywards Heath: Carey Publications, 1975), p. 12

happiness, satisfaction, and rest of soul with no balancing reference of the divine discontent of [Romans 7](#), the fight of the faith of [Psalm 73](#), or any of the burdens of responsibility and providential chastenings that fall to the lot of the child of God ... they consult their pastor, and he perhaps has no better remedy than to refer them to a psychiatrist! Truly, we need help, and the Puritan tradition can give it.²

LESSONS FOR COUNSELORS

1. THE PURITANS WERE COMMITTED TO THE 'FUNCTIONAL AUTHORITY' OF THE SCRIPTURE IN COUNSELING

The Bible was the main authority for the Puritans in helping souls in distress. We need to take very little time to establish this point. They considered the Scripture more than comprehensive enough to deal with every basic human condition or problem. John Owen was happy to glean from pastoral experience and the variety of "casebooks" of that era, but he added a warning that nothing was a substitute for

a diligent study of the Scriptures, meditation thereon, fervent prayer, experience of spiritual things, and temptations in their own souls, with a prudent observation made to the work of his grace in them. Without these things, all pretences unto this ability and duty of the pastoral office are vain.³

Clearly, the Puritans rested their counseling approach on Scripture.

In many ways the Puritans are an excellent 'laboratory' for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology. Many of those today claiming to be strictly biblical in their counseling approach still evidence the heavy influence of Maslow or Rogers or Skinner or Ellis. But the Puritans had the field of the "cure of souls" virtually to themselves; they had no secular competition in the area of counseling. Thus we need to consider very seriously their counseling models.

2. THE PURITANS HAD A HIGHLY DEVELOPED SYSTEM OF PROBLEM DIAGNOSIS

The Puritans had sophisticated diagnostic casebooks containing scores and even hundreds of different personal problems and spiritual conditions. John Owen was representative when he taught that every pastor must understand all the various cases of depression, fear, discouragement, and conflict that are found in the souls of men. This is necessary to apply "fit medi-

² *Ibid.* p. 13.

³ Quoted in Daniel Webber, "[The Puritan Pastor as Counselor](#)" in *The Office and Work of the Minister* (Westminster Conference, 1986), p. 84.

nes and remedies unto every sore distemper.”⁴ Puritans were true physicians of the soul. Their study of the Scripture and the heart led them to make fine distinctions between conditions and to classify many types and sub-types of problems that required different treatments.

Discerning Conditions

Thomas Brooks’ *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* and Richard Baxter’s *A Christian Directory* are two classic Puritan case-manuals.

Brooks discusses twelve types of temptation, eight varieties of discouragement, eight kinds of depression, and four classes of spiritual pride!

Brooks’ “temptation” sections are addressed to anyone struggling with besetting patterns of sin, particularly to those fighting addictions. As a pastor, I often have turned to this manual to help confused people who have fallen into an old temptation after years of freedom. Invariably I discovered that, while they had become fortified against a couple of temptation approaches, they were still defenseless against others named in the casebook.

The “discouragement” section applies to persons who suffer from ‘burnout’ as well as anxiety, grief, and disappointment. Brooks distinguishes between discouragement caused by covetousness,⁵ by false expectations,⁶ by a manpleasing spirit,⁷ by self-righteousness,⁸ by doctrinal distortion,⁹ or by simple lack of selfdiscipline.¹⁰

The “depression” section largely deals with persons whose despair arises from guilt and from a “low self-image.” The Puritans called this condition “accusation,” in which the conscience and the devil attack the person over his failures and sins. Brooks recognizes several types of pathologies of the conscience: a numb conscience,¹¹ a wounded conscience,¹² a seared conscience,¹³ and an over-scrupulous conscience.¹⁴

⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 81

⁵ Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, vol. I (Banner of Truth, 1980). See device II. I “by presenting the world in such a dress ... to win upon the affections of the soul.”

⁶ *Ibid.* See device II. 2: “by presenting to them the dangers, the losses, and the sufferings that do not attend the performance of such and such religious services.”

⁷ *Ibid.* See device II. 5: “by presenting to them the paucity and poverty of those that walk in the ways of God.”

⁸ *Ibid.* See device II. 8: “by working them to rest in their holy performances.”

⁹ *Ibid.* See device II. 4. This deals with persons who use the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints as a basis for languor in Christian life.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See device II. 3: “by presenting to the soul the difficulty of performing them.”

¹¹ *Ibid.* See device III. 7: “by suggesting to the soul its often relapses into the same sin, which formerly he hath pursued with particular sorrow, grief, shame, and tears, and prayed and resolved against.”

¹² *Ibid.* See device III. 1: “by causing them to pore more, and mind more their sins than their Saviour.”

Finally, the section on “pride” deals with several forms of this great sin. It brings out cases of materialism, of power-lust, of intellectual arrogance, of love of ignorance and crudeness, of bitterness, and of jealousy.¹⁵

Richard Baxter’s *Directory* is staggering in its scope and comprehensiveness. It fills 900 pages of tiny, two-columned type. A broad outline of its contents follows.

Christian Ethics

A. For the unconverted

1. 20 directions for the unconverted
2. 30 hindrances that keep men from Christ
3. 10 ways non-converted men are deceived into believing they are converted

B. For weak Christians

20 directions on how to grow in grace

C. General Directions for Walking with God

D. For dealing with “the Great Sins most directly contrary to Godliness” [These are ‘root’ motivated drives underlying more obvious sins of behavior.]

1. Unbelief
2. Hardness of heart
3. Hypocrisy
4. Man-pleasing; the idolatry of approval
5. Pride; the idolatry of power/influence
6. Materialism and worry; the idolatry of possessions
7. Sensuality; the idolatry of physical pleasure

E. Dealing with the results of ‘root’ sins (more obvious behavioral sins)

1. Control of time (the sin of time-wasting)
2. Control of the thoughts
 - a. Idle thoughts
 - b. Meditation vs. introspection
 - c. Depressed thoughts
3. Control of the passions
 - a. Over-attachment (“sinful love”) of things or persons

¹³ *Ibid.* See device I. 3: “by extenuating and lessening of sin.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See Device III. 2: “by working them to make false definitions of their graces.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 117–138.

- b. Discontentment
- c. Sinful Humor
- d. Anger and bitterness
- e. Fear
- f. Grief and distress
- g. Despair and doubt
- 4. Control of the senses
 - a. Gluttony
 - b. Addiction to drink
 - c. Fornication and sexual immorality
 - d. Lust
 - e. Regulating sleep
- 5. Control of the tongue
 - a. Swearing/profanity
 - b. Lying and deception
 - c. Rambling/babbling
 - d. Scorning/mock
 - e. 30 other sins of the tongue
- 6. Control of the body
 - a. Work and idleness
 - b. Sport and recreation
 - c. Fashion and apparel

This was just the first section of the *Directory*; three more followed! “Christian Economics” treated the Christian’s relationships: of husband and wife, of employer and employee, of parents and children. In addition, Baxter here discusses a Christian’s relationship with God, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, the sacraments, and problems of assurance and backsliding. In the third and fourth sections he deals with Christians in the life of the church and, finally, “Christian Politics,” in which he outlines a Christian’s social responsibilities. At this point Baxter shows more maturity of thought than most Puritans (and most biblical counselors today!) who were individualistic and often pietistic in their approach to discipleship. On the contrary, Baxter outlines in detail the public discipleship duties of Christians who were poor and who were rich, who were rulers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and military personnel.

Discerning Causes

In addition, the Puritans were able to make fine distinctions in diagnosing the root causes of the problems. Baxter’s sermon, “What are the Best Preservatives against Melancholy and

Overmuch Sorrow?” discerns four causes of depression (sin, physiology, temperament, and demonic activity) which can exist in a variety of interrelationships.

Baxter lists a number of sins which feed depression. He first notes the underlying sinful inclinations which are the ground for depression: impatience, discontent, too much love of the material world, selfishness, a distrust of God, and a lack of real submission to the sovereign will of God.¹⁶ He concludes that any guilt over willful sin (i.e., a bad conscience) is a cause of depression.¹⁷ But Baxter carefully distinguishes between physical and spiritual causes of a problem:

With very many there is a great part of the cause in distemper, weakness, and diseasedness of the body; and by it the soul is greatly disabled to any comfortable sense. But the more it ariseth from such natural necessity, the less sinful and less dangerous to the soul; but never the less troublesome, but the more.¹⁸

Baxter then notes some of the specific physical causes of “overmuch sorrow” or depression. He includes “violent pain as natural strength is unable to bear,” a weakening of the rational abilities (such as mental decay in very elderly persons), and “when the brain and imagination are crazed” through other physiological causes.¹⁹

This shows a remarkable balance. Baxter recognizes that some depression is not caused by sin or a failure to handle life God’s way. (At the end of his sermon on depression he provides instructions on proper diet and health care!) But on the other hand, he recognizes a very complex relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Note that he says, the more the sorrow arises from physical causes, the “less sinful and dangerous to the soul.” There are some degrees of sinfulness and of responsibility. In some cases a person’s pain is mild, and his sorrow is partially due to a refusal to trust God. But if the pain is violent and unbearable, a person’s hysteria might have very little sin involved in it.

This is highly instructive for modern counselors. Modern research is finding physiological bases for everything from addiction to schizophrenia to selfishness. On the one hand there is a danger that biblical counselors will ignore this information and still insist that virtually all problems are caused completely by deliberate sin. But on the other hand we must resist the growing trend in the world to label nearly every problem a ‘disease’ over which the patient

¹⁶ Richard Baxter, “What are the Best Preservatives against Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow?” in *The Morning Exercises At Cripplegate*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, Ill.: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), pp. 264–265.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 258.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 258–259. Baxter speaks of “the disease called ‘melancholy,’” by which he was referring to a depression caused by physical causes.

has no control and in which he has no responsibility.

But Baxter is not done; he also posits two other roots of depression, “this complicate disease of souls.” “Temperment” is a factor. Some people have a “natural temper” which is “timorous and passionate”²⁰ and which, while not the first cause of depression, can be an inclination which causes some people to be more cast down by trials than others. It aggravates “overmuch sorrow” and makes certain people far more prone to it throughout their lifetime.

Besides temperment, Baxter devotes attention to satanic activity as a cause of depression. “I must tell the melancholy person that is sincere, that the knowledge of the devil’s agency in his case may be more to his comfort than to his despair.”²¹ While stating that Satan “possesseth only the souls of the ungodly,” nevertheless he “maketh too frequent motions to the faithful.”²² These “motions” can include bodily diseases (he notes the book of Job as an example), but Satan also causes temptations and can inject streams of sinful and blasphemous thoughts and doubts into the mind.²³ Baxter carefully states that Satan “cannot do what he will with us, but what we give him advantage to do. He cannot break open our doors, but he can enter if we leave them open. He can easily tempt a ... phlegmatic body to sloth ... a choleric person to anger ... a sanguine man to lust ...”²⁴

It is important to note that Baxter does not seek to work pastorally on Satan directly, authoritatively addressing him directly and commanding him in the method of some today. Instead, he seeks to get us to “close the doors” that we have left open for Satan. “Most evil motions on the soul have Satan for their father, and our own hearts as the mothers.”²⁵ Baxter deals with satanic activity by telling the troubled person not to feel guilty for the blasphemous imaginations and thoughts (which come from Satan), as long as he does not act on them.

But I add, God will not impute [Satan’s] mere temptations to you, but to [Satan], be they ever so bad, as long as you receive them not by the will, but hate them. Nor will he condemn you for these ill effects which are unavoidable from the power of bodily disease, any more than he will condemn a man for raving thoughts or words in a fever, frenzy, or utter madness. But so far as reason yet hath power, and the will can govern the passions, it is your fault if you use not the power, though the difficulty make the fault the less.²⁶

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 259.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 262–263.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 263.

Baxter's balance here is intriguing. He does not believe satanic activity should be ignored in diagnosis or treatment. He comforts the afflicted person by showing him Satan's hand in his troubles. He confronts demonic activity through bold prayer and encourages the believer to use the authority he has for spiritual conflict. He shows the believer how to eliminate the "footholds" that he has given Satan (such as bitterness, [Ephesian 4:27](#); [2 Corinthians 2:10, 11](#)). Yet Baxter does not see "demon possession" as the major cause of any Christian's problem. Lovelace draws on the Puritan approach when he says, "the ordinary remedy may not be exorcism but counseling into the fullness of Christ, including an understanding of our authority against demonic agents and a stance of resistance against them in contested areas of personality."²⁷

The Puritans' balanced understanding of the roots of personal problems is not mirrored in the pastoral practice of modern evangelicals. Most counselors tend to 'major' in one of the factors mentioned by Baxter. Some will see personal sin as the cause of nearly all problems. Others have built a counseling methodology mainly upon an analysis of "transformed temperments." Still others have developed "deliverance" ministries which see personal problems largely in terms of demonic activity. And of course, some evangelicals have adopted the whole 'medical model' of mental illness, removing all 'moral blame' from the patient, who needs not repentance but the treatment of a physician.

But Baxter not only shows an objective openness to discovering any of these factors in diagnosis, he also expects usually to find all of them present. Any of the factors may be the main factor which must be dealt with first in order to deal with the others.

So we see sophistication of the Puritans as physicians of the soul. If anything, the Puritans sometimes made distinctions unnecessarily. (Anyone reading a Puritan's fourteen-point sermon can see how it could have been reduced better to three or four headings!) But biblical counselors today, who sometimes are rightfully charged with being simplistic, could learn from the careful diagnostic method of these fathers in the faith.

3. THE PURITANS PROVIDED BALANCED SOLUTIONS NOT BASED ON A PARTICULAR 'PERSONALITY THEORY'

We just have seen how balanced the Puritans were in their diagnosis of the causes of personal problems. We should not be surprised to discover that they were just as balanced in their prescriptions and treatments. Many Christian counselors tend to mirror secular approaches that either focus their treatment largely on the feelings (such as the client-centered approach of Rogers), on the actions (such as the behaviorist approach of Skinner and his kin), or on the 'thinking' (such as the rational-emotive therapies of Ellis and Beck). But the

²⁷ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP), p. 143.

Puritans do not fit into any of these modern categories.

Consider Thomas Brooks' classic discussion of temptation in *Precious Remedies*. He writes that some temptations have straightforward doctrinal roots. Brooks sees roots of temptation in false views of repentance, an inadequate understanding of God's holiness, and a shallow understanding of indwelling sin.²⁸ Many other temptations have social roots, namely wicked company, a man-pleasing idolatry, or the disillusionment caused by inconsistent Christian leaders.²⁹ And many temptations come from distorted thinking about what will really satisfy. We "rationalize sin as virtue."³⁰

To each case Brooks attaches from three to four 'remedies' or counseling approaches. Some of the remedies are behavioral 'homework,' such as shunning wicked company.³¹ Many other remedies are pure comfort, as for the person who repeatedly is relapsing into the same sin. Instead of simply charging the person to repent, Brooks tenderly encourages. He points out "that the most renowned and now crowned saints have, in the days of their being on earth, relapsed into one and the same sin. A sheep may slip into a slough, as well as a swine."³² He also gently reminds the discouraged believer that no experience of the conviction of sin or even the love of God can "forever fence and secure the soul from relapsing into the same sin."³³ Even people like Peter, who saw Jesus in his glory on the mount, later denied him. Such counseling is indeed aimed at comforting, at bringing peace to a person in emotional pain.

Yet many of Brooks' remedies look very similar to 'cognitive' therapy. Brooks sees problems as being largely due to doctrinal distortions, to unbelief, and lies that we believe about God and ourselves. Therefore, many of Brooks' remedies are passionate scriptural arguments to be thrust forcibly and constantly into the consciousness against the lies which are dominating the heart. He constantly urges the reader to "dwell more upon" particular truths. For example, Brooks recognizes that many persons are tempted to presume on grace. The person has come to believe that "the work of repentance is an easy work, and that therefore the soul need not make such a matter of sin." " 'Why! Suppose you do sin,' saith Satan, 'it is no such difficult thing to return, and confess, and be sorrowful, and beg pardon.' "³⁴ Brooks tells the tempted person, under the power of this distortion, to remember continually that Satan is a liar. Before you sin, he will tell you repentance is easy, but after you sin, he will tell you repentance is too

²⁸ Brooks, *op. cit.* See devices I. 3, 5, 6, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.* See devices I. 4, 8, 9, 10, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.* See device I. 1, 2, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

hard! Both are lies. “Ah, souls! he that now tempts you to sin, by suggesting to you the easiness of repentance, will at last work you to despair, and present repentance as the hardest work of all in the world, and a work as far above man as heaven is above hell, as light is above darknes. Oh that you were wise to break off your sins by timely repentance! Repentance is a work that must be timely done, or utterly undone forever.”³⁵

In another example, Brooks explores the problem of the prosperity of the wicked. Many Christians are lead into self-pity and thus into sin because they see that the unholy often live comfortable lives. Brooks helps the tempted person to “dwell upon that strict account that vain men must make for all that good that they do enjoy.”³⁶ He quotes Phillip III of Spain on his deathbed, who cried out: “what doth all my glory profit me, but that I have so much the more torment in my death?” Brooks tells the tempted person to dwell upon and see life from the perspective of God’s judgement. Therefore, he also tells the person, tempted through self-pity, to tell himself “that there is no greater misery in this life, than *not* to be in misery—no greater affliction, than not to be afflicted. Woe, woe to that soul that God will not spend the rod on!... Hos. 4:7: ‘Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.’”³⁷ These are powerful arguments that the believer is told to “solemnly consider.”

Throughout the book Brooks continuously urges the believer to argue with his soul, “to dwell, till your hearts are affected,” to “receive the truth affectionately, and let it dwell in your souls plenteously.”³⁸

By modern standards this is balanced remarkably! We see that many of Brooks’ remedies appear similar to ‘cognitive’ therapy, seeking to change the thinking in order to relieve anxiety, fear, depression. Yet he also can appear to be a ‘behaviorist’ at times, calling people to change their pattern of living immediately. Brooks is not afraid to plumb deep for underlying motives and desires. He comforts. He takes emotional states very seriously.

Then is Brooks a behaviorist, a cognitive therapist, or a Rogerian counselor? Of course the answer is: “none of the above.” His balance comes from the fact that he is not controlled by either a ‘cognitive’ personality model or a ‘behaviorist’ personality model. He does not consider either ‘thinking’ or ‘behavior’ or ‘emotion’ to be the more basic part of personality. Neither does he appear to have his own personality theory in which he inter-relates these components in a neat pattern of cause and effect. Instead, he concentrates on the heart (a word Brooks uses interchangeably with the word soul). The “motions” of the heart are thoughts, feelings, and actions. Problems develop when the heart operates in unbelief. Problems are solved

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 38.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 61, 57.

when the truth of the Word is “presented” (Brooks’ terminology) to the heart, and that means to the thoughts as well as the will and emotions. Brooks will tell a person to obey a truth instantly and at the same time to reflect and dwell on it until the principle changes his thinking and feelings as well.

4. THE PURITANS WERE REALISTIC ABOUT INDWELLING SIN, CONFLICTS, AND PROBLEMS THAT CHRISTIANS ROUTINELY FACE IN THEIR WALK

The Puritan View of Sin

The Puritans, with just a few exceptions, were staunchly Reformed in their theology. They believed, therefore, in the radical depravity of man’s heart and in the continued presence of indwelling sin in the believer.

Modern evangelicals on the whole do not reflect this realism due to a shallow understanding of sin. The tendency in some circles is to see all deeply ingrained, compulsive behavior as demon possession or else to deny that real believers have such problems. Other evangelicals are ready to adopt the ‘disease model’ for any addiction.³⁹ That view absolves the patient of responsibility; he is the victim of biological conditions or of some deep emotional traumas from childhood.

All of these approaches presume a non-Augustinian view of sin as willful, voluntary actions. On the basis of such a theological view any sin which does not yield immediately to repentance and efforts at self-discipline is considered to be demonic or physical (or impossible!). But the Puritans, because of their understanding of remaining, indwelling sin (the flesh), recognized that deep problems are caused by sin and that change may be only gradual—the result of the ‘penetration of truth.’

To observe the modern, overly optimistic evangelical understanding of the Christian life,

³⁹ “The 12-step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous and adapted by Overeaters, Gamblers, Narcotics, and other anonymous groups ... calls addiction a disease and stresses that the individual is powerless over it ... This concept removes the stigma of addictions and makes it easier for people to accept their vulnerability ... The anonymous groups allow you to admit that you are vulnerable and, moreover, provide a basis for forgiving yourself and being forgiven. [You can forgive yourself because you are not responsible.]” *The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, February 21, 1988, p. 27. Even secular therapists question the ‘disease’ theory of addiction. “G. Alan Marlatt, professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle, worries about the implications of the notion of addiction as a disease, that is, an ingrained biological condition. This, he says, carries the message that there is nothing much one can do about it. It reinforces the notion that the individual who experiences relapses is a helpless victim of circumstances beyond his or her control.” p. 27.

one need only peruse the headings of our most popular discipleship materials. The Navigators' *Design for Discipleship* is a case in point. It is a six-book, 29-topic course of instruction in the Christian walk. It is used as part of a two-year course called the "2:7 Series." Yet, in that two-year program only three chapters deal with trials and conflict with sin.⁴⁰

Contrast this with the Puritan "design for discipleship," Baxter's *Directory*. Baxter spends a great deal of time on backsliding and a loss of assurance (a sense of being "far away from God"). He provides a specific inventory of the "great sins" (including materialism and pride, not just sensuality), helps with temptation, the "benefits of affliction," and wonderful instructions on facing death. And while *Design for Discipleship* assumes a safe, middle-class existence, Baxter treats the particular troubles of the poor, the rich, the oppressed, as well as the professional.

By no means does Baxter stand alone in this 'realism.' Two other classic Puritan texts on depression are Thomas Goodwin's *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness* and William Bridge's *A Lifting Up for the Downcast*. Both authors assume that genuine Christians with 'true peace' will go through periods of 'desertion'—times when the light of God's countenance is hidden. Bridge lists the causes of the loss of peace:

- 1)"great sins" [gross, sinful behavior];
- 2)"weak grace" [the growth of pride and underlying idolatrous desires];
- 3)"miscarriage of duties" [neglect of basic disciplines of the means of grace];
- 4)"lack of assurance" [demonic accusation of the conscience];
- 5)"temptation";
- 6)"desertion" [God's deliberate removal of His nearness for the purpose of discipline];
- 7)"affliction";
- 8)"unserviceableness" [failure to use gifts in ministry];
- 9)"discouragements drawn from the condition itself" [being depressed that you are depressed!];⁴¹

The Dominion of Sin

As noted above, the real cause for the Puritans' realism was their full understanding of the nature of indwelling or remaining sin. One scans modern counseling literature in vain for anything like the treatment given by John Owen, the master in this field. His four works on the sub-

⁴⁰ *Design for Discipleship* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1973). The three chapters referred to: Book 4, chapter 3 on "Purity of Life" [Temptation], chapter 5 on "Character in Action" [Suffering], and Book 5, chapter 4 on "Spiritual Warfare."

⁴¹ William Bridge, *A Lifting Up for the Downcast* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961)

ject are peerless: “Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers,” “Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It,” “The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers,” and “A Treatise on the Dominion of Sin and Grace.” The first three are found in volume 6 of Owen’s *Works* and the last is in volume 7.

To Owen the major difference between the believer and the non-believer is that the dominion of sin is broken ([Romans 6](#)). However, the influence of sin remains in the believer with its basic tendencies the same, though badly weakened. There are, then, two basic pastoral problems: to convince those under sin’s dominion that they really are and to convince those not under sin’s dominion that they really are not.⁴² Biblical counselors must be prepared to skillfully accomplish both tasks.

What are the signs of the dominion of sin? To Owen dominion sometimes can be “absolutely and easily discernable ... such there are who visibly ‘yield their members instruments of unrighteousness unto sin.’ ”⁴³ An open licentious life shows the person to be under the dominion of sin, whatever he may claim. But Owen is quick to point out that dominion does not have to show itself in outward acts. A life of outward morality, an interest in Bible study, an enjoyment of religious duties, and a repentance for outward sins (all of these may be present and yet sin still be ‘reigning’). Sin is reigning when the ‘imagination’ (i.e., the motives) of the heart are controlled by sin. The basic patterns of sinful imaginations are three, according to Owen: 1) “pride, self-elation, desire of power and greatness,” 2) “sensuality and uncleanness of life,” and 3) “unbelief, distrust, and hard thoughts of God”; self-centeredness, self-gratification and self-will.⁴⁴

While believers are not under the dominion of sin, they are still under the influence of it. It has a real power; it remains in believers, though dethroned. The ‘flesh’ is that remaining corruption that desires to be God rather than to be under God. It is a principle of hatred of God.⁴⁵ Self-centeredness, self-gratification, and self-will are still powerfully present in us.⁴⁶ Thus Christians must learn to detect the flesh and its operations which, like old tree roots, can penetrate and entangle the life beneath the surface. Unless these roots are discerned, they will control and distort our lives, bringing us to do even religious duties for false motives. Self-will, self-gratification, and self-centeredness must be discerned wherever they are lurking and affecting behavior, relationships, attitudes, and postures. Puritans would not be shocked by

⁴² I am indebted in these paragraphs to the analysis of Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), chapter 6.

⁴³ William Goold, ed. *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 7, (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1965) p. 520.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 522–523.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 176.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

revelations of (apparently) effective Christian leaders falling into sexual sin. They knew how easy it is for real Christians to do ministry and good works under the control of the flesh. Lovelace speaks as a good Puritan when he says:

It is therefore not surprising that many congregations which are full of regenerate people are nevertheless not very alive spiritually, since spiritual life demands *metanoia*, a new mind of repentance, and this requires more than an initial setting of the heart against the shallow expressions of sin which the believer is aware of at the time of conversion ... Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of *dead goodness* ... surface righteousness which does not spring from faith and the Spirit's renewing action, but from religious pride and conditioned conformity to tradition ...⁴⁷

How, then, can we tell the difference between the dominion of sin and remaining sin in the believer? Owen believed it was crucial for counselors to be able to tell the difference! This question is especially important because sin may become more violent and apparently stronger because it has been overthrown and is dying.⁴⁸

Owen teaches first that the dominion of sin is seen in "hardness of heart." Believers are influenced by the power of sin but they are grieved over their sinful motives.⁴⁹ The very grief and concern over their sin are a healthy sign that a person is not under sin's reign. Owen also points out that real believers engage in "mortification": they recognize and work on sinful motives, rather than just notice external behavior.⁵⁰ "When the only restraints on sin are the consequences of the action, sin has dominion in the will."⁵¹

The Puritans (and Owen was no exception) were concerned extremely to classify everything. But even Owen admits that there is a kind of "intermediate condition" that a person can be in, in which it is impossible to tell whether the person is under the dominion of sin or whether he has just fallen into such a deadness of spiritual power that he is not recoverable by the ordinary means of grace.⁵² An example is David in the months after his adultery with

⁴⁷ Lovelace, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30. "As a man nailed to the cross; he first struggles, and strives, and cries out with great strength and might, but, as his blood and spirits waste, his strivings are faint and seldom ... when a man first sets on a lust or distemper, to deal with it, it struggles with great violence to break loose; it cries with earnestness and impatience to be satisfied and relieved; but when by mortification the blood and spirits are let out, it moves seldom and faintly ..."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 523.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁵¹ Ferguson, *op. Cit.*, p. 129.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Bathsheba. In such cases a pastor must deal with the person as Nathan did, warning him in the most dire terms of his danger.

The counseling approach for those under the dominion of sin is evangelism, of course. Owen tells us that these people are in pain only over the consequences of the sin. They cannot see their sin as sin at all. They need a clear presentation of the gospel.

Mortification of Sin

But what about the believer who is being controlled by his indwelling sin? What if a Christian finds his indwelling sin weakening his communion with God, destroying his peace and assurance, giving him a wounded conscience, and hardening his heart? Owen's answer is two-fold: he must be counseled to do "mortification" and to "set his mind on things above." On the basis of [Romans 8:13](#) ("if by the spirit you put to death [mortify] the deeds of the body, you will live") and [Romans 8:5–6](#) ("those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires,") Owen wrote his treatises on mortification and on "The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded."⁵³ We will look at the teaching from this latter work below under another heading. But for the moment we should discuss Owen's significant help to counselors in his teaching on mortification.

Mortification is loosening sin at the motivational level, detecting the roots and shapes of one's characteristic fleshly motives, and withering them through repentance until they lose their attractive power. To "mortify" is "to take away the principle of all [its] strength, vigor, and power, so that [it] cannot act or exert, or put forth any proper actings of [its] own."⁵⁴ Mortification is not just the suppressing of the external action of sin, but it refers to the weakening of the root motives, the desires of the sin.

How do we mortify sin? From Owen we can discern these measures:

1) We must be clear that the person must be a Christian before he does this work; it is not for the unregenerate.⁵⁵ A foundational understanding of the gospel and of righteousness by faith is absolutely necessary. Without an understanding of one's standing in Christ the person cannot repent fully or accept the full dimensions of his sin. It is too devastating. The conscience must be 'framed' and supported by the gospel or it cannot stand deep repentance.

2) One must recognize the shape his sin is taking. Man-pleasing? Need for power? Pride? Thoughts of envy? Look at the most basic motives. We must recognize and "rise against the *first actings*"⁵⁶ of our sin. "It is like water in a channel—if it once breaks out, it will have its course ... Ask envy what it would [really] have—murder and destruction is at the end of it."⁵⁷

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 267f.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

And one must recognize the signs of a dangerously “unmortified lust.” Has it been abiding for a good length of time? Does he find virtually no distaste or disgust but rather a great delight in the sin? Then he must realize that extraordinary measures must be taken.⁵⁸

3) One must fill the mind and conscience with the danger and guilt of sin by bringing it to the cross. One must look at his sin for what it is, unmask it and see it for the ugly thing it is in itself, not just for what it has done to him. There are two parts to this unmasking.

To see the ‘danger’ of sin, one needs to consider what all the consequences will be: hardening of the heart, the loss of peace and strength, the loss of assurance that he is really a Christian, and the possibility of temporal correction or punishment from God.⁵⁹

But one should not consider merely the consequences of sin. Sorrow on that basis can arise out of self-love. Also one must load the conscience with the ‘guilt’ of his sin. It grieves the Spirit, it wounds the new man within him, it makes him useless to the God who has done so much for him, it offends the holiness and majesty of God, and spurns the blood of Christ.

It is important to make this conviction of guilt evangelical as opposed to legal. This is accomplished by taking one’s sin not just to the law (though he must reflect on the majesty and holiness of God for conviction) but also to the gospel—to the cross of Christ. A healthy conviction of sin grows by seeing the patience of God, the riches of grace, the suffering of Jesus—all so one would not sin.

Bring thy lust to the gospel—not for relief [yet] but for farther conviction of its guilt ... Say to thy soul, “What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed spirit has chosen to dwell in?... Do I account communion with him of so little value, that for this vile lust’s sake I have scarce left him any room in my heart? Shall I endeavour to disappoint the [purpose] of the death of Christ?” Entertain thy conscience daily with this treaty. See if it can stand before this aggravation of its guilt. If this make it not sink in some measure and melt, I fear thy case is dangerous.⁶⁰

This process of loading the conscience before the cross of Christ helps the sinner begin to hate the sin in itself. It begins to lose its attractiveness and thus its power to move to sinful

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50–56.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

deeds and actions.

Many modern counselors, influenced by the current 'self-esteem' movement, will think this dangerous. But Owen very clearly warns that "to apply mercy then to a sin that is not vigorously mortified is to fulfill the end of the flesh upon the gospel."⁶¹ It is natural for a person to briefly express sorrow over a sin and then to reassure himself quickly with a verse of forgiveness (e.g., 1 John 1:8–9). But this can produce a tremendous hardness of heart, especially in people who are falling repeatedly into besetting sin. Often the repentance is purely intellectual or based only on a fear of consequences. Without any evangelical conviction of sin no real repentance can take place, and thus no real weakening of sin takes place. Richard Sibbes provided a classic Puritan definition of repentance when he wrote that it is "not a little hanging down our heads ... but a working our hearts to such grief as will make sin [itself] more odious unto us than punishment, until we offer an holy violence against it."⁶²

When some claim that Owen's approach will create a 'lack of self-esteem,' a self-hatred, they ignore the difference between legal and evangelical repentance (see also Stephen Chamock for helpful comments).⁶³ Owen explains that we must take our sins to the cross and that anyone doing mortification must have a conscience framed by the gospel of grace.

4) After the loading of the conscience, one must go to the scriptural promises of mercy and grace through which God speaks peace to our consciences. This is done by directing one's faith to the death, blood, and cross of Christ.

Set faith at work on Christ ... His blood is the great sovereign remedy ... Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror; yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet ... Act faith peculiarly upon the death, blood, and cross of Christ; that is, on Christ as crucified and slain.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶² Richard Sibbes, "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax," *Works*, vol. 1. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth. 1973), p. 47

⁶³ "A legal conviction ariseth from a consideration of God's justice chiefly, and evangelical from a sense of God's goodness. A legally convinced person cries out, I have exasperated a power that is as the roaring of a lion, a justice that is as the voice of thunder; I have provoked one that is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, whose word can tear up the foundations of the world with as much ease as he established them. This is the legal conviction. But an evangelically convinced person cries, I have incensed a goodness that is like the dropping of the dew; I have offended a God that had the deportment of a friend ... I have incurred the anger of a judge, saith the legalist; I have abused the tenderness of a father, saith an evangelically convinced person." Stephen Charnock, "A Discourse of Conviction Of Sin," *Works*, vol. 4, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 199.

We are to meditate simply on Christ crucified not only for a sense of pardon but also for a confidence that, because of Christ's triumph, sin shall not and does not have dominion over us. This provides grace and strength for holiness.⁶⁵ And now, because of our previous work of loading our conscience, we will find the doctrines of God's grace and mercy and imputed righteousness to be thrilling and comforting, as they never would have been had we only a light sense of our sin. They will find us with love for God and a new freedom from sin.

Owen points out that we must not speak peace to ourselves until God does.⁶⁶ At first this appears that Owen is saying, "You must wait for some kind of emotional experience from God until you are forgiven." That is not the case. During mortification a believer need not be in doubt about God's acceptance. There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus ([Roman 8:1](#)). Owen is saying that mortification is the work of the Spirit alone: He is the only "efficient" means of mortification.⁶⁷ We cannot mortify sin. In other words, it is the Spirit who "brings the cross of Christ into the heart of the sinner by faith"⁶⁸ with its "sin-killing power." Thus we must not move too quickly to end our procedure of mortification. If we say the procedure is finished, when there is still little or no humiliation or joy or freedom experienced, we are "self-healers."⁶⁹

5) We should continue our watchfulness, discovering the "occasions of sin," the situations and conditions that particularly draw out our sin.⁷⁰ We must fortify ourselves against those. This means we must bring out those things we have learned through mortification 'in the closet' and use them in our hearts when we face the occasions of sin in the world. We rehearse those things the Spirit has shown us and our new freedom to guard both our heart (attitudes, thoughts) and our steps (actions) in those situations.

6) We should pray consistently for a greater distaste of sin as well as longing for deliverance from it. In other words, pray for deeper repentance: "his heart breaks out with longings into a most passionate expression of desire of deliverance."⁷¹ Whereas the first four steps of mortification happen through concentrated times of prayer, these last two happen constantly and continually during the day.

This Puritan theology of indwelling sin, expounded in its most masterful form by John

⁶⁴ Owen, vol. 6, pp. [81](#), [83](#).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. [79](#).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. [70](#).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. [16](#).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. [19](#).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. [71–76](#).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. [61–62](#).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. [60](#).

Owen, has many implications for counseling. It sheds light on theoretical issues. First, we see that patterns of besetting sin and addictive behavior have antecedents. There are roots and causes behind the actions which the person can work on. Since our flesh has 'shapes' or patterns to it, we can come to know ourselves and root out the evil motives to which we are most prone. Secondly, we are saved from the notion that sin is easily dealt with by quick repentance and will power. And yet we also are kept from the belief that we are not responsible for our own behavior. Thirdly, we have a solution to the controversy over 'self-image': we are to live by faith. A person's self-understanding must be reprogrammed, but not through taking an inventory of one's 'good traits.'

But there are also practical, methodological implications of the Puritans' view of indwelling sin. By modern standards any person struggling with deep patterns of self-gratification or self-will might be told: "You aren't responsible" or "A real Christian wouldn't feel like that" or "You must have a demon." But Owen would both encourage and warn a person: "You have a pattern of the flesh which only can be weakened by concentrated prayer, obedience, and the penetration of the truth of the gospel. However, your very sorrow and grief over the sin is a wonderful sign that sin does not reign in you, you are a believer and, therefore, the strength of this particular bondage can be overcome in Christ."

What is my clinical evidence that Owen's pastoral counseling works? I have used it personally for many years with great profit. And John Owen counseled me in a highly effective way in a period of my life when no one else could.

5. PURITANS UNDERSTOOD MAN AS FUNDAMENTALLY A WORSHIPPING BEING AND SAW AN IDOL-MAKING IMAGINATION AS THE ROOT OF PROBLEMS

We have seen already that the Puritans believed pastoral counseling had to help the believer (and the unbeliever) detect indwelling sin in order to reveal the underlying motives and desires beneath surface behavior. We also saw that they sought to help a person discern the patterns or 'shapes' of the flesh by which they were affected. However, to understand better the Puritans' counseling approach, we must observe that they considered the essential character of sin to be 'idoltry' and the fundamental nature of man to be a creature who must worship.

The Heart as Idol-Factory

Stephen Chamock in his *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* spells out the Puritans' view fully. First, he writes, "all sin is found in secret atheism ... Every sin is a kind of cursing God in the heart; an aim at the destruction of the being of God, not actually, but virtually ... A man in every sin aims to set up his own will as his rule, and his own glory at the end of

his actions ...”⁷² Every sin is an effort to turn from the worship of God to the worship of self. That is the Puritans’ view. At the base of man’s nature is not some fundamental ‘need’ for relationship or happiness or significance but rather a necessity for worship. He must worship. At the root, sin is self-worship.

Later Chamock goes on to talk about the effects of self-trust or self-worship. “Inordinate self-love is the first inlet to all iniquity. As grace is a rising from self to center in God, so is sin a shrinking from God into the mire of a carnal selfishness ... therefore, all sins are well said to be branches or modifications of this fundamental passion.”⁷³ Then he goes on to support this claim. He demonstrates that uncontrolled anger is merely a proud self-defensiveness, that envy is merely a selfish desire to have joy at the expense of another, that impatience is a proud demand for sovereignty of one’s own schedule, that drunkenness is merely self-indulgence, that a desire for ‘self-worth’ is merely a proud desire to have self in a higher elevation over others. “Sin and self are all one. What is called a living sin in one place ([Romans 6](#)) is called a living to self in another ([2 Corinthians 5:15](#)).”⁷⁴

We should recognize that Chamock calls sin an “inordinate” self-love. He discusses three types of “self-love.” There is a “natural” self-love that humans share with all living things. It is a non-self-conscious concern for health and wholeness, an affection for our existence. Paul referred to this when he says, “No man ever hated his own body, but feeds and cares for it” ([Ephesians 5:29](#)). It has nothing to do with ‘self-image.’ Secondly, there is a “carnal self-love.” Chamock says it is “when a man loves himself above God ... when our thoughts, affections, designs, center only in our own ... interest.” This is the natural self-love which has become “criminal in the excess” under the influence of sin. We come to “expect a blessedness from ourselves,” an expectation which must be always frustrated.⁷⁵

Lastly, there is “a gracious self-love” which can be generated by the Holy Spirit. It is “when we love ourselves for higher ends than the nature of a creature ... [i.e.] in subserviency to the glory of God.” Chamock says a Christian was created for good works ([Ephesians 2:10](#)) and as he comes to see this as his true ‘end’ or purpose, he becomes well pleased with himself.⁷⁶ By no means does this appear to be what many moderns call ‘self-love.’ It is a state of peace and satisfaction that comes from a proper self-understanding that fits with our true nature as servants.

⁷² Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 93–94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Then Chamock discusses the result of this self-idolatry: “Man would make anything his end and happiness rather than God.”⁷⁷ Because we worship ourselves, we will make gods of other objects besides God, creating our own ‘religion’ as a way to stay in charge of our own lives.

He acts so if something below God could not make him happy without God, or that God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; and the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end, to which he directs his thoughts: thus he vilifies and lessens the true God, which can make him happy, in a multitude of false gods, that can only render him miserable.⁷⁸

Here then is the basic reason that our indwelling sin has different shapes: all of us have manufactured ‘idols’ or false gods that we bow to. We are certain that they will bring us blessedness, but they cannot. Chamock goes on to list some of the common idols: worldly wealth (materialism), worldly reputation (power-idolatry), sensual pleasure (physical gratification-idolatry) and respect to man (approval of love-idolatry).

The implications for counseling are obvious. Chamock himself uses this model in personal work. In a sermon Chamock warns the listeners to root out ‘the bosom sin’:

All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination, and the like ... When a general is taken, the army runs. This [the main “idol”] is the great stream, others [other sins] but rivulets which bring supply ... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort ... The Spirit convinces of spiritual sins, and this is the great work ... it presseth most upon spiritual sins, the first motions, self-conceit of our own worth, pride against God, unbelief, and the like.⁷⁹

Chamock recognizes that on the one hand the central idol (s) of our lives is straight from our fundamental problem, self-worship. But on the other hand he sees that the particular shapes of our idols are formed by a complex of factors: education, custom, and natural inclination. In other words, our genetic inclinations, our experience, our home life, and so on do have a major hand in forming our problems. But the bondage is still sin; we are responsible to deal with it as a sin. The Puritans again exhibit remarkable balance and insight.

So then, what are the underlying motives and desires behind our behavior? Why do we choose the goals that we do? Why do we struggle with the problems we have? What is “be-

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷⁹ Charnock, “A Discourse of Conviction of Sin.” *op. cit.* pp. 193, 195.

neath the water line” (to use Crabb’s terminology)? The Puritans would answer: man is *homo religioso* and each person is manufacturing his own particular idol-religion. These must be identified and rooted out by a process of mortification.

Chamock was by no means alone in his division of ‘idol’ underlying sinful life-motivations and external sinful behavior. We saw that Baxter outlined “great sins” or idolatries as pride, sensuality, materialism, hypocrisy, hardness of the heart, and man-pleasing. Owen names self-elation (power-idolatry), sensuality (comfort-idolatry), and unbelief (self-will.) Though the lists differ in length, the same basic analysis is held by most of the Puritan divines.

The Power of the Imagination

How do idols efficiently exercise their power over our lives? The Puritans again would answer, “through the imagination.” In the non-believer (as Owen tells us) the imagination is completely dominated by indwelling sin and its particular idols.⁸⁰ But in the believer the imagination can become controlled by idols and thereby the thoughts, affections, and actions are effected.

One of the earliest Puritans to define the “imagination” was Richard Sibbes (1577–1635). He wrote that imagination was a “power of the soul” which is “bordering between our senses [on the one side] and our understanding [on the other].” The office of imagination “is to minister matter to our understanding to work upon.” However, sinful imagination “usurps” and misleads the understanding.⁸¹ Chamock is more specific, for in a sermon he states that the imagination is the place of the “first motion or formation” of thoughts. The imagination

was not a power designed for thinking, but only to receive the images impressed upon the sense, and concoct them, that they might be fit matter for thoughts; and so it is the exchequer [bank account], wherein all the acquisitions of sense are deposited, and from thence received by the intellective faculty. So that the thoughts are inchoative in the fancy, *consummative* in the understanding, *terminative* in all the other faculties; thought engenders opinion in the mind; thought spurs the will to consent or dissent; it is thought also which spirits the affections.⁸²

Let us pause for a moment to summarize what is being said. Modern cognitive therapists see ‘thinking’ as fundamental to behavior and feeling. If we change the thinking, we can change the feelings and thus behavior—so goes this approach. But the Puritans considered

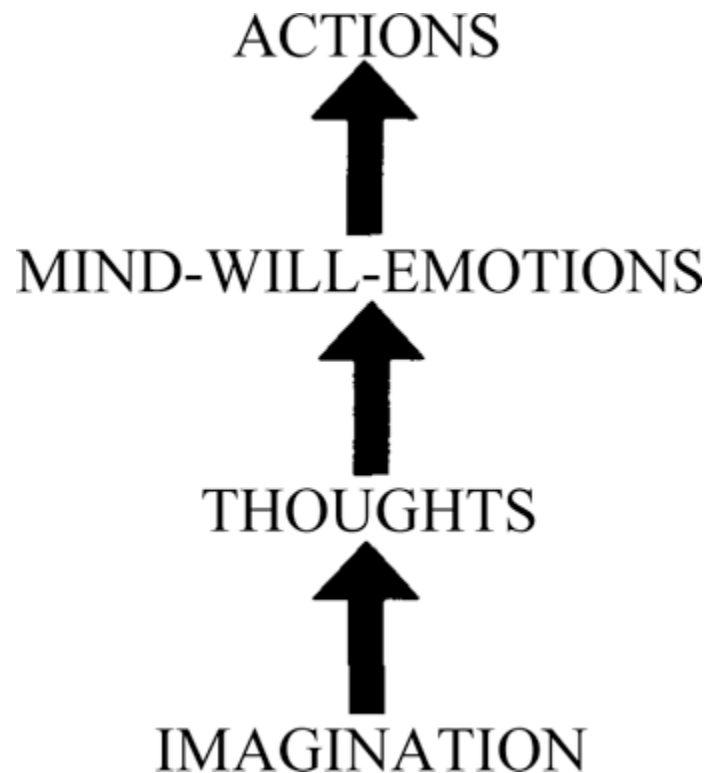
⁸⁰ Owen, vol. 7, p. 520.

⁸¹ Sibbes, “The Soul’s Conflict with Itself, and Victory over Itself by Faith,” *Works*, vol. I. pp. 178, 180.

⁸² Stephen Charnock, “The Sinfulness and Cure of Thoughts,” in *The Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*, vol. 2. pp. 387–389.

imagination, even more fundamentally than thinking, as the control of the behavior. Imagine two thoughts sitting on the intellect: “This sin will feel good if I do it” and “This sin will displease God if I do it.” Both are facts in the mind. You believe both to be true. But which one will control your heart? That is, which one will capture your thinking, your emotions, and your will?

The Puritan answer: the one that possesses the imagination will control the mind, will, and emotions (all three will be captured at once). The imagination is that which makes a thought ‘real’ or vivid. It is the faculty for appreciation and value. Thus Sibbes can say that another name for ‘imagination’ is ‘opinion.’⁸³ It conjures up pictures. Then, from the imagination come thoughts, which illuminate the mind, stir the emotions, and move the will to choose. It can be diagrammed like this:



The Deceitfulness of Sin

As usual, no one put this more clearly and more comprehensively than John Owen. We have seen how he recognized that indwelling sin with its idols influences us before we do any sinful act. Owen also produces an entire outline of what he calls the “deceit” of sin—how it works to deceive or produce distortions and lies which become the basis for sinful behavior. It

⁸³ Sibbes, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

is the clearest description of how sin uses the ‘imagination’ to give idols power in their lives.

First of all, Owen says, indwelling sin makes us lose our appreciation for both the vileness of sin and the wonder of grace.⁸⁴ In other words, these truths lose their control over our imaginations. They become abstractions, ceasing to be real and vivid. They lose what the Puritans call “relish” and become mere intellectual notions. When this happens, prayer and meditation become difficult, and we cease serious efforts to seek God’s face.

Secondly, when the thoughts lose focus, the affections cool toward God. We no longer find ourselves filled with love, zeal, joy, or humility. This clears the imagination to begin to appreciate sin. The moment that a person can conceive of sin without a sense of disgust, the believer “has entered into temptation.”⁸⁵ And when the sin becomes positively desirable, sin has then captured the imagination.⁸⁶ Owen is extremely helpful when he explains the operation of imagination through the biblical term “lust of the eyes:”

Now, it is not the bodily sense of seeing, but the fixing of the imagination from that sense on such things, that is intended. And this is called the ‘eyes’, because thereby things are constantly represented unto the mind and soul, as outward objects are unto the inward sense by the eyes. And oftentimes the outward sight of the eyes is the occasion of these imaginations. So Achan declares how sin prevailed with him, ([Josh. 7:21](#)). First, he saw the wedge of gold and Babylonish garment, and then he coveted them. He rolled them, the pleasures, the profit of them, in his imagination, and then fixed his heart upon the obtaining of them. Now, the heart may have a settled, fixed detestation of sin; but yet, if a man find that the imagination of the mind is frequently solicited by it and exercised about it, such a one may know that his affections are secretly enticed and entangled.⁸⁷

That is a vivid picture of how the imagination works! It ‘rolls’ the pleasures and profits, like the rolling of food on the tongue for tasting.

Now, thirdly, once the imagination is captured, the whole heart becomes affected. Owen, with all the Puritans, teaches that the heart is the seat of the whole man, mind, will, and emotions.⁸⁸ How does the imagination affect the whole heart?

The will consents to whatever possesses an “appearance of good, of present good.”⁸⁹ Thus,

⁸⁴ Owen, vol. 6, 2 18–223.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 245–246.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

at this stage, 'mental arguments' may occur in the mind. The believer begins to develop rationalizations and reasons for doing the behavior. Sin "parleys ... reasons ... entices and allures ..." ⁹⁰ The affections become stirred up and inflamed by the vivid representation of the pleasure of sin. Even at this stage the 'chain of deceit' can be intercepted if these thoughts are recognized as being the lies they are, born out of a sinful imagination. (Thomas Brooks' "devices" are a list of the 60 or so most common lies which occur at this stage of the operation of indwelling sin.) However, if this interception does not take place soon, sin erupts into sinful behavior.

Later, after indwelling sin has developed a habit pattern, the cycle can occur so quickly that there is no longer any consciousness of 'stages,' of "parleying and enticing." Instead, the behavior erupts swiftly and with little warning.

The Discipline of Spiritual Mindedness

How then can the imagination of the Christian be captured for righteousness? Owen treats this in his work on "Spiritual Mindedness." This is nothing more than a comprehensive and sophisticated manual for Christian meditation. The imagination and the thoughts must be programmed full of "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is admirable" ([Philippians 4:8](#)). Owen believes, however, that the reprogramming of the imagination is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is not merely the learning of new information or of passing thoughts through the mind.

'To be spiritually minded'; that is, to have the mind changed and renewed by a principle of spiritual life and light, so as to be continually acted and influenced thereby unto thoughts and meditations of spiritual things, from the affections cleaving unto them with delight and satisfaction. ⁹¹

Becoming spiritually minded consists, first, in an 'actual exercise of the mind' on spiritual subjects. In other words, while being spiritually minded is more than learning information, it is not less. Owen notes that some try to be spiritually minded without study. But they are without 'rational conceptions' and have "no notions wherein either faith or reason is concerned." In such cases, "imagination they have of something that is great and glorious, but what it is they know not ... when their imaginations have fluctuated up and down in all uncertainties for a while, they are swallowed up in nothing." ⁹²

But we must go beyond mere study. Then, through prayer, meditation, and application the

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 270.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 335.

actual operation of the Holy Spirit captures the ‘affections’ with the truths of the Word. To be spiritually minded is to find “that gust, relish, savour” in spiritual truths. “There is salt in spiritual things, whereby they are conditioned and made savoury unto a renewed mind; though to others they are as the white of an egg, that hath no taste or savour in it ... Speculative notions about spiritual things, when they are alone, are dry, sapless, and barren. In this gust we taste by experience that God is gracious, and that the love of Christ is better than wine ... This is the proper foundation of that ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory.’ ”⁹³

What is it to be “spiritually minded”? It is to live in holy consciousness of, to be melted by spiritual understandings of one’s privileges and standing in Christ.

Once counselors have helped counselees identify idols and the resulting lies which distort their lives, how can they help them ‘put on’ spiritual mindedness, an imagination and thought-life which is set on Christ? Many counselors are quite baffled by this. They will tell counselees, “You are accepted in Christ,” only to hear, “But I don’t feel accepted!” The temptation simply is to admonish the person to not rely on his feelings. The Puritans would have given such counsel as well, but they would not stop there. They were not after mere ‘feelings’ either but they recognized that the truth must penetrate to the heart for real growth to occur, and that takes work. Counselors need also to learn how to communicate ‘imaginatively,’ concretely. The counselor must use illustrations.

Regarding the importance of illustration, Richard Sibbes said in an introduction to another book, “But because the way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy [imagination], therefore this godly man studied by lively representations to help men’s faith by the fancy. It was our saviour Christ’s manner of teaching to express heavenly things in an earthly manner ...”⁹⁴ An even earlier Puritan, William Ames, in *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* wrote: “As touching the matter of delivery, the Scripture doth not explain the will of God by universal and scientific rules, but by narration, examples, precepts, exhortions, admonitions, and promises: because that manner doth make most to affect the will, and stirred up godly notions, which is the chief scope of divinity.”

While recognizing that these Puritans were talking about how to preach imaginatively, we should realize that what they say holds true for all kinds of communication, including counseling. The “art of illustration” was no mere embellishment for Puritan preachers, but was central to their philosophy of communication and that was based on their understanding of the imagination. The best Puritan speakers literally peppered their discourses with sparkling word pictures and metaphors. Imagination is thinking by seeing, as distinguished from reasoning. Jonathan Edwards had a theology which held these two (reasoning and seeing) together in his

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 270–271.

⁹⁴ *Works*, Vol. I, p. 66.

theology.

In *Religious Affections* Edwards names one sign of a true Christian experience: “our minds are so enlightened that we obtain proper and spiritual views of divine things.”⁹⁵ Edwards distinguishes between two false views of spiritual knowledge. On the other hand, “mere speculative knowledge” is not in view. Spiritual knowledge leads the mind “not only [to] speculate, but to feel and relish.”⁹⁶ Spiritual knowledge is not less intellectual, but it is also “connected to the affections.” On the other hand, mere imagination is not spiritual knowledge:

For instance, when a person is affected by a lively idea suddenly excited in his mind, of a very beautiful countenance, a vivid light, or some other extraordinary appearance, there is something conceived in the mind, but there is nothing of the nature of instruction. Persons do not become wiser by such conceptions, or know more about God ...⁹⁷

Having said that, Edwards qualifies:

I do not assert, however, that no affections are spiritual which are attended by something imaginary. When our minds are fully occupied, and our thoughts intensely engaged, our imaginations are often stronger, and our ideas more lively ... But there is a great difference between lively imaginations arising from strong affections, and strong affections rising from lively imaginations. Undoubtedly the former often exist in many cases of truly gracious affection. The affections do not arise from the imagination, nor have they any dependence upon it; but on the contrary, the imagination is only the accidental effect, or consequence of the affection, through the infirmity of human nature. But when affection arises from the imagination, and is built upon it, instead of being founded upon spiritual illumination, then is the affection, however elated, of no value.⁹⁸

What do we see here? A far more careful and balanced refinement of the views of Sibbes and Ames. Like Ames, Edwards sees the goal of truth-communication affecting the ‘whole person.’ But Edwards is also careful to explain that the imagination must be based upon an illuminated view of biblical truth. It is possible to do an ‘end run’ around the exposition of biblical information; we may provide extremely vivid, strong illustrations which arouse only emotions but do not affect the heart, the center of our being. Instead, Edwards warns that our imaginations must arise out of the spiritual understanding of the truth.

Biblical counselors must learn to communicate Christian truth vividly! They must teach and

⁹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise on Religious Affections* (American Tract edition, Baker reprint, 1982), p. 192.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 193–194.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

exhort as well as listen.

6. THE PURITANS SAW THE ESSENTIAL SPIRITUAL REMEDY TO BE BELIEF IN THE GOSPEL, USED IN BOTH REPENTANCE AND A DEVELOPMENT OF PROPER SELF-UNDERSTANDING

This last point can be made concisely here because it has been made throughout this article. We have seen that troubled people need a two-fold treatment: mortification and “spiritual mindedness.” But these are just two ways of applying the gospel to a person’s heart. In mortification, we have seen, both conviction of sin and comfort come from a faith-look at Christ on the cross. In fact, mortification is impossible unless the conscience is supported by the conviction that salvation is strictly through grace, not through our own efforts or even our repentance. Thus Owen writes: “the daily exercise of faith on Christ as crucified. This is the great fundamental means of mortification of sin in general.”⁹⁹

On the other hand, “spiritual mindedness” is nothing more than a continual rehearsing and delighting in our privileges in Christ: access to the Father, sonship, an inheritance that cannot be lost, and our complete acceptance as well as our forensic righteousness before the Father. Believers receive power and boldness and joy to the degree that they grasp the reality of their standing in Christ. Spirit power comes from filling the mind with, reflecting on, and acting in accord with our position: a son, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a king seated and reigning.

For example, Baxter notes that depression is brought on by “ignorance of the tenor of the gospel or covenant of grace ... that no sins, how treat or many soever, are excepted from pardon ...”¹⁰⁰ He goes on to discuss the case of a person who believes that “if their sorrow be not so passionate as to bring forth tears and greatly to afflict them, they are not capable of pardon.” Their problem is that they do not consent “to be saved on his covenant terms.”¹⁰¹ In other words, it is self-righteousness which keeps these people distressed.

Another lucid example of the Puritans’ use of the gospel is provided by William Bridge in his work on depression:

The more you are humbled by God’s free love and grace, the more you will be humbled and the less discouraged ... If you will be truly humbled and not be discouraged [depressed] ... then trace all your sins to your unbelief and lay the stress and weight of all your sorrow upon that sin.... if a man can trace every sin to the fountain, the head sin, he will be most humbled. Now what is the great sin, the fountain of sin, the head sin of all your sins, but unbelief ... if you can present God to your soul under the notion of His gen-

⁹⁹ Owen, vol. 7, p. 527.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

eral goodness, as good in Himself, you will never be discouraged, but truly humbled.¹⁰²

Bridge connects all sin to a fundamental unbelief, a refusal to accept the gospel. The gospel does not make us lax; it humbles us over sin. Yet it keeps us from discouragement because we see our sins are covered.

William Gurnall gives a detailed explanation of how a believer must “talk to himself”:

This is the difference between a Christian and an honest heathen. He values himself by his patience, temperance, liberality, and moral virtues which he hath to show above others. These he expects will commend him to God and procure him a happiness after death; and in these he glories ... But the Christian ... hath a discovery of Christ, whose righteousness and holiness by faith become his; and he values himself by these more than what is inherent in him ...¹⁰³

Works-righteousness is at the root of all of our idolatry. Thus it is fundamental to dealing with all idolatry to penetrate the imagination and heart with the gospel of righteousness through faith. The human conscience is disordered deeply in its belief that we must have our own holiness and good works to be acceptable. Works-righteousness comes from the taproot of self-worship, a desire to be our own God.

For example, the power idol speaks to the heart like this: “Life will only have meaning, you will only be a worthwhile person if you are popular and loved by these people.” Beneath both idols is a basic rebellious desire to ‘earn’ our glory, meaning, and self-appreciation by our own efforts. The drive to reach these false goals is terribly strong because it is worship. We feel we must have the idols or we will die. The gospel alone frees us from salvation from self-effort. Lovelace puts the Puritan position succinctly when he says: “Faith that ... is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness ...”¹⁰⁴

A MODEL

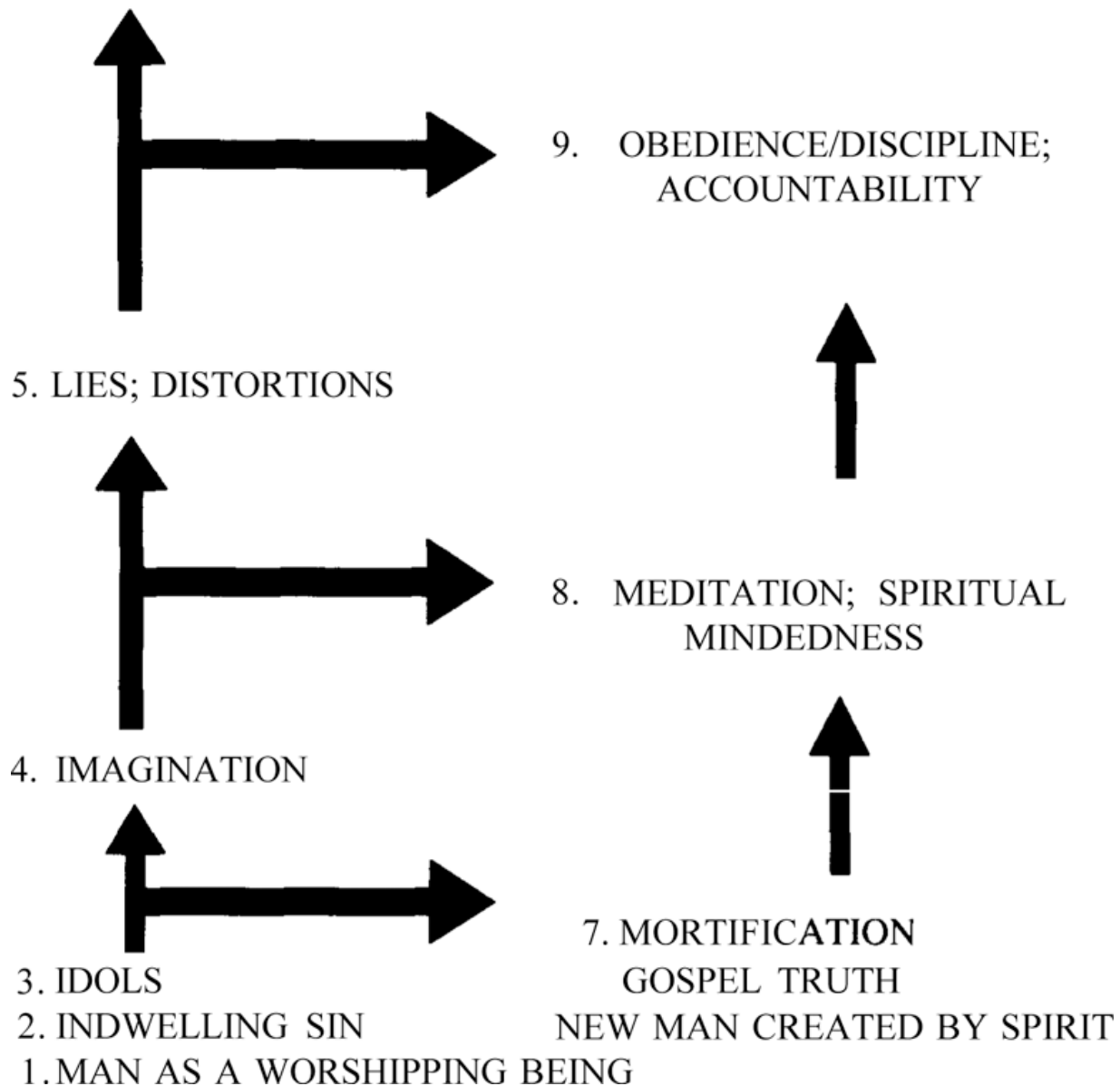
Perhaps it is possible now to pull together the various elements of Puritan theology into a counseling model.

¹⁰² Bridge, *op. cit.*, p. 85–86.

¹⁰³ William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ Lovelace, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

6. ACTIONS



A. Man must worship something (Charnock).

B. Sin causes every person to worship himself, to 'be as God,' self-existent and independent. Christians have remaining sin which is dethroned but still seeking to capture the heart for self-worship. They also have a 'new man' created by the spirit (Charnock).

C. While we each seek self-existence, we choose different routes to it. We believe we can reach self-sufficiency through an idol. Every man devises an idolatrous religion of his own which is essentially self-worship and some form of works-righteousness (Charnock). Three examples of idolatrous forms of the flesh (Baxter) are:

Power idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I have power and influence over others."

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I am loved/popular to."

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning/I only have worth if—I have this kind of pleasure, this quality of life."

D. Idols seek control of the person by capturing the imagination (Owen). Our characteristic flesh comes to consciousness in the form of positive mental pictures of certain conditions that we believe will make us happy and fulfilled. Our desires or 'drives' toward these goals are powerful because the goals are being worshipped.

E. The flesh-controlled imagination produces distortions and lies about one's self, the world, human relationships, God, and the nature of things (Brooks).

F. The lies and distortions lead directly to gross sin, depression, hardness of the heart, bitterness, and all kinds of sinful behavior which lead to greater misery (Brooks).

G. At the deepest level idols must be rooted out through a process of mortification (Owen).

H. At the thought level lies must be replaced by meditation on the truth (Owen and Brooks). This is a procedure that both comforts and confronts.

I. At the behavioral level disobedience must not be tolerated. Holy living is practiced through a discipline and accountability.

Items G, H and I are never to be separated from each other. Faith in the gospel truth is the basis for each of them. Faith is not simply changing our thinking but is a combination of acting upon a truth into the imagination. When it 'catches fire,' it results in illumination of the mind, conviction and joy in the emotions, and then behavioral change comes naturally. Looking in faith at Christ is the only way to destroy idolatrous longings because then we begin to see that our longings were illegal ways to become ourselves what Christ is for us.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

The Puritans probably would not find themselves fitting in comfortably to most of the existing 'schools' in the evangelical counseling field. They probably would find some counselors overly concerned to 'raise self-esteem' when man's main problem is self-worship. Yet, on the other hand they would not be in agreement with those who completely ignore or even reject the importance of reprogramming the self-understanding through the penetration of gospel truth. They probably would find many biblical counselors are being far too superficial in their treatment of problems by merely calling for surface repentance and behavioral change. But they also would be quite uncomfortable with the 'inner healing' approaches which virtually ignore behavior and the need for mortification. In fact, the Puritans would be quite unhappy talking about people's 'unmet needs' because at bottom they believed a man does not have

abstract needs, only a necessity for worship.

As stated previously, the Puritans would not be able to align with anyone either who stressed the thoughts or the emotions or the will (behavior) over the other aspects of the soul or who saw any one faculty as more basic than the others. Puritans worked 'wholistically' on the heart through teaching, exhorting, and comforting.

I should not end without noting that the Puritans could learn from us. Many of the Puritans feared calling non-Christians to immediate repentance; they were guilty of what has been called Preparationism. And many of the Puritans defined true spiritualism in such lofty terms that many weaker Christians lost their assurance unnecessarily. As one teacher put it, the Puritans' net "caught a lot of whales but lost a lot of guppies." Nevertheless, these pathologies were not true of all the Puritans to the same degree and do not offset their enormous contribution.

Above all, the Puritans' 'spirit' would differ quite a bit from other counselors today. Most modern evangelical counselors simply lack the firmness, directness, and urgency of the Puritans. Most of us talk less about sin than did our forefathers. But, on the other hand, the Puritans amazingly were tender, encouraging, always calling the counselors to accept the grace of God, and extremely careful not to call a problem 'sin' unless it was analyzed carefully. One of their favorite texts was: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoking flax he will not quench" ([Matthew 12:20](#)).

When will we see their likes again?