

Puritan Instruction for Profitable Hearing of Sermons

By Andy Perry

Introduction

In recent decades a renewed interest in Puritan preaching and church leadership has led to a resurgence of Puritan works in print,¹ biographies of Puritan leaders,² and books about the Puritans in general.³ Much has been written about Puritan preaching, theology, worship, missions, church-state relations, and pastoral theology. However, one area in the life of the church which the Puritans frequently addressed but which has been largely overlooked in the recent renewal of interest in Puritan studies is their responsible care to ensure that their hearers not only heard the word of God through their sermons, but were also carefully taught how to listen for maximum personal profit.⁴ Before examining the Puritan examples of instructing hearers how best to listen to Christian preaching, two explanatory notes are needed, the first dealing with the definition and scope of “Puritan” as used in this paper, and the second explaining the structure of this article.

Definitions for “Puritan” over the centuries have varied widely, sometimes based more on cultural connotation than factual denotation. For instance, the satirist H. L. Mencken expressed his disdainful view of the Puritans, offering the following tongue-in-cheek caricature: “Puritanism: the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”⁵ More soberly, Peter Lewis notes that defining Puritanism has led to “crowded debate and widespread confusion” given its national, political, and social, not to mention religious, entailments

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1. A number of contemporary publishers specialize in Puritan reprints, most notably The Banner of Truth Trust, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, and Reformation Heritage Books. Other publishers specialize in a single Puritan author's works, such as Yale University Press's twenty-six volume reprinting of the works of Jonathan Edwards.

at the various stages of its development.⁶ Historian Perry Miller hits close to the mark by defining Puritanism as follows:

The Puritans acquired their name because they were English Protestants who in the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries were resolved to ‘purify’ the Church of England. They determined to continue the reformation begun under

2. Though many volumes of Puritan works include a brief “life of” the author, several notable Puritan biographies have been written in recent times, including George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000); Joel Beeke, *A Habitual Sight of Him: The Christ-Centered Piety of Thomas Goodwin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009); Philip Simpson, *A Life of Gospel Peace: A Biography of Jeremiah Burroughs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011); Andrew Thomson, *John Owen: Prince of the Puritans* (Fearn, Ross Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2004); and Derek Cooper, *Thomas Manton: A Guided Tour of the Life and Thought of a Puritan Pastor* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2011).

3. Most notably, J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010); Kelly Kapic and Randall Gleason, *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet The Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007); and Leland Ryken, *Wordly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

4. Though modern writers on the topic of how to listen to sermons for maximum blessing sometimes refer marginally or briefly to this special focus of the Puritans (see Joel Beeke, *The Family At Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004], 7, 10–14; Thaddeus Bergmeier, *Helping Johnny Listen* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010], 37, 47, 62; and Ken Ramey, *Expository Listening* [The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2010], 4, 15, 38, 92, 94, 105), no contemporary work has been written that gives particular focus to the Puritan contribution in this area.

5. H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), 624.

6. Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publishers, 1996), 11.

Henry VIII until they duplicated in England the precise form of ecclesiastical polity they believed to be clearly set forth in the New Testament.⁷

A more nuanced definition is given by Kelly Kapic and Randall Gleason in their introduction to *The Devoted Life*, in which they state that “Puritans should not be limited strictly to radical, Protestant non-conformists, but rather to a much broader movement of individuals distinguished by a cluster of characteristics that transcends their political, ecclesiastical, and religious differences” (Kapic and Gleason, 17). These authors mention seven traits: Puritanism (1) was a spiritually-motivated movement; (2) stressed personal experience with God; (3) depended upon the Bible as the sole authority for spiritual and personal reformation; (4) was primarily Augustinian in its emphasis on human sinfulness and divine grace; (5) placed special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit; (6) was deeply troubled by the forms of Roman Catholic sacramentalism fostered in the Anglican Church; and (7) was, among other things, a movement of spiritual revival (Kapic and Gleason, 24–30).

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of defining the Puritans concerns identifying their proper temporal boundaries. Who were the first Puritans, and when did they finally fade from the scene? In a broad sense, Puritanism began during Thomas Cranmer’s tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer’s gradual policy of Protestant reformation, under the scrutinizing eye of Henry VIII, was opposed on principle by other Anglican leaders who agitated for quicker and more wide-ranging reforms. One thinks of men such as John Hooper, bishop of Gloucester, John Knox during his early ministry in England before Mary’s accession drove him to Geneva, and such Marian martyrs as John Bradford and John Rogers. However, as Miller points out, Puritanism did not technically begin as a movement until after the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 when the crown “officially identified itself with that compromise between radical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism which today constitutes the Church of England. Hence, the Puritans . . . became opponents, even enemies, of the state” (Miller, 1). Therefore, when one thinks of the earliest Puritans, names like John Foxe, Thomas Cartwright, Robert Browne, and William Perkins come to mind.

Identifying a terminating boundary for Puritanism is even more difficult than defining its inception.

7. Perry Miller, *The American Puritans* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 1.

Though the so-called “Golden Age” of Puritanism lasted roughly from 1580 until 1700 (reaching its apex with the Westminster Assembly [1643–1649] and the period of Interregnum [1649–1660]), the theology, worldview, pastoral-homiletical skill, and godliness of the Puritans lived on well into the eighteenth century. Men like Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, John Newton, John Gill, and Henry Venn stand out as representative examples. Even into the early years of the nineteenth century one can find church leaders in England, Scotland, and the United States who carried on the spirit of Puritanism, not least the duty of instructing their people how to listen to their preaching for maximum profit. In *A Quest for Godliness*, J. I. Packer posits that the distinguishing characteristics of Puritanism included “a whole-hearted version of Christianity that paraded a particular blend of biblicist, pietist, churchly, and worldly concerns.” Though he writes that “when John Howe, the last of the [Puritan] giants died in 1705, [the movement] was over,” Packer elsewhere refers to Edwards (1703–1758) and even Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) as Puritans (Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 329, 60, 69). For the purposes of this article, primary attention is given to like-minded church leaders living between the late sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. However, influential predecessors as early as John Calvin (1509–1564), and significant successors as late as Gardiner Spring (1785–1873), are also briefly noted.

Based on the respectively broad and narrow definitions of Puritanism, it might make sense to structure this paper temporally, looking first at proto-Puritan contributions to the study of listener-based homiletical instruction, followed by the Puritans more narrowly defined, and wrapping up with an examination of writings by like-minded Puritan successors. One problem with such an approach is that many of the works surveyed cover a wide array of sub-topics related to helping Christians listen to sermons for maximum effect. Though the diachronic approach may make historical sense, it would entail much jumping back and forth between relevant topics. Consequently, this article will instead be broken down into three topically-based sections, citing representative samples from the spectrum of Puritan writers. First, examples will be offered of Puritan writings which sought to help Christian listeners better understand themselves as hearers of the word preached. Second, the panoply of a hearer’s responsibilities will be examined. Finally, we will consider the Puritans’ emphasis on the serious nature of sermonic listening.

Understanding Oneself as a Hearer of the Word Preached

Singer Dolly Parton once remarked, “Find out who you are, and do it on purpose.”⁸ The Puritans couldn’t have agreed more, especially when it came to helping their hearers understand themselves as listeners to biblical preaching so that they might exert their wills to maximize the blessing they received through the sermonic experience.

THE HEARER’S NATURAL FALLENNESS

John Calvin, whose works were widely read by the Puritans both in Great Britain and North America, was influential as a pioneer of self-conscious sermonic instruction. Calvin made clear to his hearers the vital importance of self-knowledge, particularly knowledge of the natural, anti-godly inclinations of the flesh which inhibit homiletic benefit. As T.H.L. Parker notes, “The task of the congregation, as Calvin portrays it, is a continuous life-long battle against natural, internal rebelliousness, apathy, and arrogance in favor of God’s teaching and call.”⁹ Based on texts like Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 7:14–19, and Ephesians 4:17–24, Calvin knew that even soundly converted believers experience an internal struggle in their minds and wills as the flesh and Spirit battle for supremacy. This is not least the case when Christians sit under the preaching of the word in church. Therefore, the Genevan Reformer sought to teach his flock to arm themselves with the self-knowledge that their fleshly dispositions would influence them to tune out, dismiss, and rebel against the sermon. Only through an intentional frontal assault against his own deceptive flesh would the listener’s heart adopt a receptive posture to the benefit of his soul.

Building on the knowledge of man’s innate self-deception and rebellion to the word preached, William Ames writes in his famous *Marrow of Theology* that hearers of the word should take pains to receive it not just outwardly but inwardly and with a submissive attitude.¹⁰ Ames also entreats his readers to come to a sermon ready to discern and receive the will of God through the word, knowing that their natural wills are set against God’s. He quotes Psalm 119:106, “I have sworn...and will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgment,” commenting, “Intention is the application of our will to the devout observance of the will of God now known. The purpose of the intention ought to be so strong and firm that we are ready without exception to obey whatever God commands” (Ames, 255).

The natural will of the flesh, which is wired to oppose submissive listening, must be understood and counteracted by a self-conscious act of the will.

Furthermore, Ames highlights two particular dangers deeply rooted in the flesh of every hearer (Ames, 256). The first is pride. Since every person is naturally wrapped up in his own supposed excellence, a willingness to listen to a sermon exalting God’s excellence is not natural and will be naturally opposed. Second, every hearer naturally loves the world and all week long has been taking advice from and imbibing the worldview of individuals and institutions which are opposed to God’s will and ways. Counteracting the voice of the world with God’s voice through preaching requires self-conscious effort and clear self-knowledge.

THE HEARER’S NEED FOR FAITH

Faith in the heart of the sermonic listener is another element of self-knowledge made clear by the Puritans. William Ames, in an excellent called “The Hearing of the Word” in his *Marrow of Theology*, quotes Hebrews 4:2 which contrasts the faithless Israelites with faithful Christians in the church age. This verse reads, “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.” On this text Ames comments, “... for by faith we believe the word of truth is that which God reveals to us and are accordingly influenced by it... By this faith we cling to the word ... and the word itself clings to us and is engrafted for salvation (cf. Js. 1:21)” (Ames, 256).

Thomas Watson, in his commentary on the Westminster Shorter Catechism, similarly highlights the vital nature of faith in hearing the preached word well. Like Ames, Watson references Hebrews 4:2 and then writes, “Mingle the word preached with faith.... If you leave out the chief ingredient in a medicine, it hinders the operation; do not leave out the ingredient of faith.... [Rather, to include faith] is to suck the flower of the promise, and turn it to honey.”¹¹ The Westminster Larger Catechism also speaks to the central nature of faith in hearing the preached word well. Question 160

8. Dolly Parton, quoted in *A Walk To Remember*, DVD, directed by Adam Shankman (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Home Video, 2002).

9. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1992), 53.

10. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Boston, MA: The Pilgrim Press, 1968), 254.

11. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1881 reprint), 378.

asks, “What is required of those that hear the Word preached?” It is answered, “It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer on it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.”¹²

Faith as a necessary condition of hearing and applying sermons well was not only presented in Puritan writings on the Westminster Standards and through theological texts like Ames’ *Marrow*, but was also made clear through printed sermons. Two examples come from the pens of Thomas Manton and Thomas Shepherd. Basing his remarks on Romans 1:16, that salvation only comes to those who believe the proclaimed gospel of Christ, Manton points out that the preached word does no good unless it is “mixed with faith in the hearing.”¹³ He goes on to remind his congregation that the core substance of biblical sermons is covenantal promise. Christ-centered promises, which are the central thread woven through Scripture, should make up the central theme of biblical sermons. Manton also quotes 2 Peter 1:4, “To us are given exceeding great and precious promises, that by these you may be partakers of the divine nature.” Justification and sanctification depend on our apprehension of and belief in God’s Bible-based promises. Therefore, getting the most out of biblical preaching is impossible without ardent faith (Manton, 157).

In his sermon entitled “Of Ineffectual Hearing of the Word,” Thomas Shepherd, who followed Thomas Hooker as pastor of the first church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, approached the same subject from a negative vantage point. “What will become of the Christian who fails to combine hearing the preached word with faith?” Shepherd asks. His answer is that such a hearer will not hear a holy God speaking, not hear a gracious Christ calling, not find his heart “quickened, fed, cherished, healed, and comforted, relieved and visited.”¹⁴

12. “Westminster Larger Catechism,” in *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Education of the OPC, 2005), 314–315; emphasis added.

13. Thomas Manton, “The Life of Faith in Hearing the Word,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* (Worthington, PA: Maranatha Publications, 1979), 15:155.

14. Thomas Shepherd, “Of Ineffectual Hearing the Word,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas Shepherd* (New York: Abrahams Magazine Service Press, 1967), 3:367.

15. David Clarkson, “Hearing the Word,” in *The Works of David Clarkson* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 1:440.

Furthermore, Shepherd warns his congregation that those who refuse to combine hearing with faith anger God. Consequently, the preacher calls those to mourn who have heard insensibly in the past, and to hear with faith while there is still time (Shepherd, 368, 372).

THE HEARER’S NEED FOR GOD’S GRACE

Given man’s natural antipathy to submissively listen to God’s word preached, he is entirely at God’s mercy for the grace needed to change his uninterested heart into eager interest for the good of his soul and the glory of God. Without a generous measure of God’s grace applied by the Spirit to the heart of the hearer, biblical sermons will be of no effect. The Puritans knew this to be the case; therefore they sought to make their hearers aware of their need for God’s grace as they came to sit under the preaching of the word. Two pastors whose writings speak to this topic in particular are David Clarkson and Jonathan Edwards.

One example is Clarkson’s sermon “Hearing the Word,” based on Jesus’ parable of the sower in Luke 8, especially the closing exhortation in v. 18, “Take heed, therefore, how you hear.” Clarkson points out that the preacher of a sermon is merely the instrument for the message, but God is the author of the regenerative life for which the gospel is proclaimed. Therefore, one of the chief duties of each hearer is to “[g]et a punctual knowledge of the state of your souls in reference to God. Every man is either in a state of nature or grace, regenerate or unregenerate, either in the faith or in his sins.”¹⁵ Clarkson makes clear that the preached gospel is of little value when its hearers do not know whether or not it concerns them. Consequently, a faithful pastor is one who helps his congregation understand the state of their souls in preparation for best applying the gospel when it is preached. For instance, if a hearer has not yet laid hold of justification by grace through faith in Christ, it will do him not good but positive harm to hear sermons about sanctification. Such messages would only have a discouraging, damning effect. A clear knowledge of his own state before God and his need for saving grace, therefore, must precede his need for sanctifying obedience. Clarkson helpfully makes this clear, and it is no less a need in contemporary churches today.

Similarly, Jonathan Edwards was a great benefit to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts through his sermon “Profitable Hearers of the Word.” One of his pastoral ambitions in this sermon was helping them think reflectively about their own dependence upon God’s grace in order to maximally benefit from the

preached word. Though all true Christians have the capacity to benefit from biblical sermons, some, according to Edwards, are able to benefit more than others based upon the degrees of grace bestowed on them by God. First, Christians are given more or less grace for the growth of faith in the fight against sin and an increasing delight in Christ. Second, the good works performed by Christians are ultimately related to the greater or lesser degree of grace God gives them. Writes Edwards, “As to the foundation of this difference, it is no other than God’s good pleasure. . . . God did not only from all eternity determine who he would give his grace to, but also in what measures and proportion.”¹⁶ The practical application Edwards gives his congregation as a result of the Spirit’s diverse dissemination of sanctifying grace is increased trust and praise of God. As he says, “God is infinitely wise, and he has many reasons for his own actions that we have no conception of” (Edwards, 14.269). Some of the reasons, according to Edwards, include highlighting God’s sovereign freedom in doing as he pleases; that God has different work for different people to do for his glory, some of which require more grace than others; and that some are given greater grace to endure greater suffering than others (14.269–271). Edwards taught these truths to his congregation to equip them to listen to the preached word and be content to apply it with the degree of grace God had given them, and to trust and praise God as the Sovereign who gives the power and desire to the various members of the congregation so that they might respond to it in keeping with the degree of grace given them. Though some may find Edwards’ teaching about various measures of grace dangerous, since it could be used as an excuse for congregational laxity in application, in fact it has the potential to equip pastors to expect varying degrees of response in their listeners, and to see and delight in God’s multifaceted work of grace throughout the congregation. Many contemporary pastors who preach with an unrealistic expectation of “revival level” response from every hearer after every sermon could benefit much from Edwards’ insights.

THE HEARER’S OPPORTUNITY FOR BLESSING

Christopher Love, the pastor of St. Lawrence Jewry in London who was executed in 1651 for his strident Presbyterianism and opposition to the Interregnum, published a sermon to help his congregation entitled “The Right Hearing of Sermons.”¹⁷ In addition to the duties attendant upon sermonic listeners, Love highlights the particular blessing promised to one who listens well.

Contrasting the blessing in Luke 11:27–28 spoken about Mary with the greater blessing promised by Christ, “But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”; Love highlights five unique blessings available for true hearers of the word preached today.

First, the fact that Christ says in the Mark 3 account of the same scene that those who hear his word and keep it are his true brother, sister, and mother, argues Love, proves that Christ holds dearest to his heart not his blood relations, but those who attend most carefully to his word proclaimed. This fact should compel Christians to listen to sermons with greater eagerness (Love, 132).

Second, Love turns to the climactic illustration rounding out Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24–25, reminding his congregants that if they listen carefully to Jesus’ words and do them, they will be blessed with spiritual strength, able to stand the storms of heart and life like the man who built his house on a rock. Says Love, “So only those who hear the Word of God and practice it shall have the end of their faith, and have their souls built upon the rock of Jesus Christ that shall never be removed” (Love, 132).

Third, Love highlights 1 Peter 3:1, pointing to the power of the positive example of Christian wives of unbelieving husbands who display obedience to the word and so win them over. Love uses Peter’s words to entice his audience to remember that their similar attentiveness and obedient response to biblical preaching will not only benefit them, but bless others in their lives—even unbelievers unto salvation.

Fourth, this Puritan pastor turns to the last book of the Bible in order to press home the hope that though Christians might not endeavor to bring all others with them to heaven through their gospel witness, they themselves, if they attend to the preached word with faith and hope, will indeed be brought home. Listening carefully to the word preached week after week strengthens the Christian soul to persevere in faith in the end. In this vein, Love quotes Revelation 14:12–13, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’” A proper listening to sermons leads to perseverance, which leads

16 Jonathan Edwards, “Profitable Hearers of the Word,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsay (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 14:269.

17 Christopher Love, “The Right Hearing of Sermons,” in *The Mortified Christian* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1998), 123–148.

to certain entrance to heaven. Consequently, hearing well leads to profound blessing (Love, 133).

Finally, Christopher Love insightfully points out the unique blessing afforded hearers of God's preached word under the administration of the covenant of grace. He writes, "For your comfort, know that if you lived under a covenant of works, you could never be a blessed man, for you are not able to perform the conditions of it" (Love, 137). Listening to biblical sermons under the covenant of works would have a crushing and discouraging effect on the soul. But by God's grace, Christians during the church age are blessed to listen through the reality of the finished work of Christ. Consequently, Christians should come to hear with eager, restful souls, knowing that the preached word is for their good, not their harm; their blessing, not their condemnation.

Understanding one's responsibilities as a hearer of the word preached

As important as it is to know oneself as a human listener, the Puritans were also clear that sermonic listening was to be much more active than passive. Each hearer, they taught, was responsible in a number of practical ways to maximize the blessing he could receive from God, and the glory he could give God, from the sermon. To these responsibilities this paper now turns, examining them through the three lenses by which most Puritan pastors taught them: one's listening responsibilities before, during, and after the sermon.

RESPONSIBILITIES BEFORE THE SERMON IS HEARD

The chief responsibility a Christian has prior to a worship service is the decision to attend, for all other preparations will be wasted if he fails to be present. Samuel Annesley, in a sermon entitled, "How May We Give Christ a Satisfying Account Why We Attend Upon the Ministry of the Word?" cautioned his congregation concerning diverse obstacles which would prevent them from attending the worship service and failing to hear biblical preaching.¹⁸ Annesley challenges Christians

18. Samuel Annesley, "Sermon 1," in *Puritan Sermons: 1659–1689*, ed. James Nichol (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 1981), 4:173–198.

19. Wilhelmus á Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout and ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 1:xliv.

20. Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 473.

21. John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1987), 876–881.

to consider first the obstacles in their own hearts, such as their love of ease and their natural unbelief. They must remind themselves on Saturday that their sinful flesh wars against attending church services on Sunday. Therefore, they must resolve to fight against their natural love of ease and unbelief and endeavor to attend (Annesley, 179–180).

Similarly, Wilhelmus á Brakel, the Dutch contemporary of the English and American Puritans of the seventeenth century, cautioned Christians about watching their diet prior to attending a worship service, citing its potential effects upon the body during the sermon. He recommended that his hearers eat "a sober diet, for too much food and drink is harmful to the brain, and this in turn renders the memory weak. The weakening of the memory would be detrimental to the retention of spiritual knowledge."¹⁹

Yet another obstacle which Christian hearers are responsible to avoid prior to attending the worship service is the decision to place themselves under the teaching of an unconverted or subpar pastor. Certainly, some Christians find themselves in contexts in which only one worship option exists, leaving them little choice. However, when given the opportunity to attend a more biblically faithful ministry, one should do so. As Richard Baxter suggests in his massive *Christian Directory*,

Live under the clearest, [most] distinct, convincing teaching that possibly you can procure. There is an unspeakable difference as to the edification of the hearers, between a judicious, clear, distinct, and skillful preacher, and one that is ignorant, confused, general, dry, and only scrapeth together a cento or mangle of some undigested saying to fill up the hour with.... Ignorant teachers, that understand not what they say themselves, are unlike to make you men of understanding; as erroneous teachers are unlike to make you orthodox and sound.²⁰

Once a Christian hearer has found a godly preacher to sit under, other duties prior to the worship service will gain him blessing. For instance, several duties toward one's minister will come back to bless a Christian's hearing of the word through that man, according to the London preacher John Gill.²¹ Parishioners, first, should take pains outside of Sunday to make themselves known to their pastor so that his preaching may be not merely hypothetical and general, but personal and practical as he studies and prays for the flock with specific knowledge of their life circumstances and diverse spiritual conditions. Second, church members should esteem

their pastors very highly in love because of the nature of their work (1 Thess. 5:12–13). Special affection should be cherished in the heart toward one's pastor. As a result, listeners will be positively biased toward hearing the preacher's words on Sunday. Third, parishioners should pray regularly for their pastor (Heb. 13:18). In doing so, Christians themselves reap many blessings, since God answers their prayers for their pastor by keeping him holy, and giving him biblical wisdom, speaking grace, and unction in the pulpit. Fourth, Christians do well to obey their pastor (Heb. 13:17), particularly obeying the biblical sermons he preaches and obeying his exhortations for them to attend worship services diligently and constantly. As Gill writes, "... for if their pastors are to be diligent and constant in their work, they are to be diligent and constant in attending upon them in it" (Gill, 879). A Christian's relationship with his pastor does much to prepare him to hear and benefit from the preached word.

David Clarkson adds to these pre-sermonic disciplines the important habit of preparing one's soul to hear the message preached. He writes, "Take pains with your hearts in private before you come, make them tender, fit to receive impressions. Set them open, that Christ may come in.... You expect no increase from seed if it be cast into unploughed ground."²² Thomas Watson agrees, writing, "If you would have the word preached effectual, come with a holy appetite.... The thirsting soul is the thriving soul" (Watson, 377). Christopher Love reminds his hearers that just as the preacher must take care to find acceptable words, so the people should work hard to bring to the sermonic moment acceptable affections for Christ (Love, 143). Specifically, Clarkson suggests seeking the Lord prior to the worship service with much "heart-breaking, heart-melting prayer," rooting out cares, pleasures, and lusts from one's affections, and actively filling the mind with holy thoughts and apprehensions of God (Love, 143).

This last practice is also underscored by Thomas Boston in his sermon entitled, "How the Word is to be Read and Heard."²³ Boston impresses on his hearers the importance of having one's heart impacted with an awe-filled sense of God's majesty and holiness prior to hearing biblical preaching, since the Lord's proclaimed word brings one uniquely into his holy presence. As he approaches gathered worship, the Christian should feel the awesome sense which vassal governors felt prior to coming into the throne-room of their covenant suzerain lords in the ancient world. This is not natural for humans who are wired by the flesh for autonomy, so Christians would do well to stir up a similar sense of

holy awe prior to hearing biblical preaching. Such efforts will result in hearing the word with greater seriousness and respectful vigilance.

Additionally, Boston adds other important disciplines to the preparation of one's soul prior to listening to biblical preaching. They include working hard to banish worldly concerns from the mind, applying the blood of Christ to the soul for removing thoughts or feelings of guilt, stirring up spiritual desires in the heart, and purging the heart of carnal lusts and affections. Of this last point Boston writes, "For what good effect can be expected on the heart, filled with corrupt lusts, passions, and prejudices, nourished and not striven against; surely none at all. Whereas, if the heart be purged from these, the happiest effects may be looked for" (Boston, 2.428).

Finally, Boston highlights the crucial nature of prayer prior to attending Christian preaching. Particularly on the Lord's Day morning before church attendance, time should be set aside to pray. Three key foci should dominate the Christian's pre-service prayers. First, pray for divine assistance for your pastor.²⁴ Boston recounts the several times in Paul's epistles in which the apostle asks his readers for prayer. How much more do non-apostolic ministers need divine grace? Second, counsels Boston, pray for your own soul's nourishment during the forthcoming sermon in the spirit of the entreaty captured in Psalm 119:18, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." He writes, "Pray that God would direct the word to your case, and send it home on your hearts with his blessing, that ye may be enlightened, sanctified, strengthened, humbled, or raised up by it, as your case requires" (Boston, 2.429). Third, pray for an outpouring of the Spirit in agreement with the Lord's own promises. Boston wanted his congregation to be concerned not merely for personal blessing, but that the entire world might be blessed by the proclaimed gospel of Christ's grace. For this all Christians should earnestly pray each week prior to the preaching of the word.

An additional consideration for the Puritans was the unique centrality of the Lord's Day gathering for worship. In every age there are Christians who minimize the importance of gathered worship, placing a greater

22. Clarkson, "Hearing the Word," 441.

23. Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Reverend Thomas Boston* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 1980), 2.427–443.

24. This same focus is taken up in a later generation by Gardiner Spring, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, in his short publication entitled, *A Plea to Pray for Pastors*. Gardiner Spring, *A Plea to Pray for Pastors* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1991).

priority on personal Bible study and private meditation and prayer. Though the Puritans regarded private worship as of great importance, they were careful to subordinate it to the primacy of the gathered church in worship. A good example is David Clarkson's sermon on Psalm 87:2 entitled, "Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private."²⁵ Clarkson gives many reasons to prioritize the Lord's Day gathering: the Lord is more glorified in public worship than private, and God manifests himself more clearly in that setting than to individuals alone; public worship is more edifying than private, and it is a better safeguard against apostasy; public worship is the best means of procuring the greatest blessings and avoiding the greatest judgments, and indeed the Bible contains more promises for public than private worship. Especially in the highly individualistic, pragmatically-driven context of the twenty-first century West, Clarkson's admonition is deeply needed. Perhaps contemporary Christians cannot be blamed for overly prizing their quiet times and marginalizing the centrality of sitting week by week under biblical preaching with God's people if their pastors have failed to follow Clarkson's good example and teach them the central importance of public worship. The corporate gathering of believers is truly an indispensable need in order to prepare Christians in every age for listening to sermons and maximizing their profit for the hearers' souls.

At the same time, Christopher Love demonstrates great pastoral wisdom by cautioning his congregation against thinking of worship attendance or sermon hearing as more important than it actually is. Yes, these are vital, God-given means of grace. However, they themselves are not the means to heaven. They are not Christ. Just as a door to a palace may be prized as the portal to luxury, a person would be thought mad to sit next to the door for hours, admiring it as if it were the luxury itself. Love writes, "You must make your duties your way, not your Christ" (Love, 147).

A final point of Puritan pastoral wisdom in preparation for hearing sermons comes from Jonathan Edwards, who addresses the importance of church leaders and parents impressing upon covenant children from

the youngest ages the necessity of church attendance. From painful pastoral experience in Northampton, Edwards knew firsthand the effects of covenant children who grow into religiously lazy and contemptuous teenagers and young adults. Therefore, he impressed upon the children and young people under his care the vital nature of church attendance, careful listening to sermons, and a vigilant watch over their own souls. He writes,

If you ever would be much in grace, you must begin early. If you begin late, you will have so much the less time to increase in grace.... God can give abundance of grace in a moment, but yet those that begin early are under much the greatest advantages to abound, and generally are the most eminent.... Those that are converted late are under disadvantages. They will have sin to fight against that has been greatly strengthened by long custom.²⁶

RESPONSIBILITIES WHILE THE SERMON IS HEARD

If the Puritans emphasized the importance of preparing one's heart and life *prior* to hearing the sermon, their suggestions are even more extensive for listening to the sermon itself. To begin with, Richard Baxter suggests the importance of wakefulness and mental alertness. He writes, "Set yourselves to it, as for your lives: be as earnest and diligent in attending and learning as you would have the preacher be in teaching. If a drowsy, careless preacher be bad, a drowsy, careless hearer is not good" (Baxter, 474).

Thomas Boston agrees, teaching that diligent attention to the word, rather than to other things and people present at church, is indispensable to benefiting one's soul from the sermon.²⁷ He taught that one must listen carefully "as to a matter of the greatest weight, keeping the mind off other things in the time, and bending it wholly unto the word" (Boston, 2.430). Boston goes on to detail three specific practices which assist one's focus during the sermon: listening with intentional gravity and composure, resolved to shut out distractions; committing to understand what is preached, and keeping one's mind awake toward that end throughout the entire message; and maintaining the constant goal of better knowing the mind of God so as to be transformed by it (Boston, 2.430–431). Christopher Love adds to this by pointing out some important examples from Scripture of the blessing gained by those who listened to the word attentively. Drawing special attention to the example of the returning exiles who stood to listen to the word read (Neh. 8:3) and interpreted (v. 8) from

25. Clarkson, "Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private," in *The Practical Works of David Clarkson* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 187–209.

26. Edwards, "Profitable Hearers of the Word," 276.

27. William Ames concurs, writing, "The receiving of the word consists in two parts: attention of mind and intention of will. Ames, 254. Thomas Senior also sounds this note about the importance of attentive listening in Thomas Senior, "How We May Hear the Word with Profit," in *Puritan Sermons 1659–1689*, ed. James Nichol (Wheaton, IL: Richard Own Roberts, 1981), 2:47–71.

early morning until midday, Love suggests that modern Christians should be reproved who have trouble sitting down to listen to a sermon for less than an hour (Love, 143)! David Clarkson also gives wise advice about staying focused during the message. He writes, “Wanderings, roving of mind, will, affections, senses, caused by the cares of the world and lusts of the flesh; carefulness of other things makes [one] careless of the word.” From the vantage point of the preacher, he points out that “it is hard to hit a moving object, a bird in flight; as well, to as much purpose, sow the waves in a tempest, or cast seed upon branches tossed with the wind, as preach to a distracted, wandering hearer” (Clarkson, 437).

Baxter, further, suggests carefully noting what he calls the “design and drift” of the message. In contemporary terms, he would direct one to follow the sermon outline, or if this has not been provided, to carefully listen so as to discern the sermon’s main divisions in order to make the listening event manageable and memorable. Much in many sermons may be worth forgetting, according to Baxter, so the listener should “mark those things which are of greatest weight and concernment to your souls” (Baxter, 474). In a similar vein, Jonathan Edwards challenges his hearers to listen with a view toward “fighting against that sin that most easily besets you,”²⁸ and Clarkson encourages his hearers to zero in on those truths in the message which are “more seasonable than others.”²⁹ Specifically, the latter counsels the habit of turning over in one’s mind the particular ways in which the point being preached intersects with one’s past, present, and future life. For instance, pondering its relevance in the past often stirs up emotions of holy regret for sins committed or thankfulness for grace received. In the present one is equipped to make immediate changes and demonstrate Christian graces. Regarding the future, the listener should prepare his soul with the wisdom of the word being preached for whatever providences God may bring his way. Clarkson thoughtfully adds a fourth category: “possible.” He writes, “You hear [in the sermon] some grievous sin threatened, you are not guilty of it, but it is possible you may be; the seeds of that sin are in you. Therefore it is useful to make you watchful and dependent upon Christ, and sad for the sinfulness of your nature.”³⁰

Regular attendance at the same church, Baxter points out, is also helpful because one can become familiar with a given preacher’s method and style, which greatly assists the listener week by week to follow the sermon, and move from understanding to application. Additionally, listeners help themselves by employing memory-enhancing note-taking techniques during the message, including

numbering points and writing down key words, themes, and the main argument of the sermon.³¹

Prayer while listening to preaching is also encouraged by Richard Baxter (Baxter, 474). Specifically, he wanted his hearers to pray Ephesians 1:18–19, that through his preaching, their hearts might be enlightened, that they might know the hope to which God called them, the riches of his glorious inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of his power to those who believe. Praying during preaching should focus on the Spirit’s use of the preaching event—praying for the preacher and for oneself—not for other people or concerns which might distract from the words being spoken. Clarkson adds that an incentive to pray while listening arises from the holy ambition every Christian should have when the word is opened: to be satisfied only in gaining more of God’s holy presence. Other benefits of listening to preachers, including being entertained, emotionally moved, or morally reformed, should be subordinated to the one great ambition that should drive Christians to church: encountering the glory of God.³²

Thomas Boston wisely impressed upon his congregants their need to sit under the preached word with the right attitude and affections of the heart (Boston, 2.432–433). Particularly, if a Christian’s heart is not in a posture of love for God in the sermonic moment, the word will not have its full effect. Therefore, Boston challenged his friends to come to church committed to receiving the word in the same way that a maiden receives a letter from her lover. Boston pointed to the negative example of the unbelievers cited by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 who perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. In contrast, Christians can anticipate spiritual blessing when they actively listen with hearts that love the truth. Mixing his metaphors, Boston uses two common images to picture what Christian love for God’s proclaimed truth should be to one’s affections: “We should lay it up as a precious and enriching treasure; as a thing that we are in hazard of losing, and being robbed.... [As] you are traveling through the wilderness: lay up the word as the traveler does his directions for the way” (Boston, 2.433).

Boston goes on to detail the postures of heart and mind which will most bless the Christian hearer. First,

28. Edwards, “Profitable Hearers of the Word,” 277.

29. Clarkson, “Hearing the Word,” 442.

30. Clarkson, “Hearing the Word,” 442.

31. Baxter, 474. Baxter also suggests to the pastors reading his *Directory* that they will assist their hearers much by employing alliteration to the main points of their sermons. In this regard, the shepherd of Kidderminster was ahead of his time.

32. Clarkson, “Hearing the Word,” 442.

each should listen representatively, as one dubbed an ambassador of Christ commissioned to go forth and recount to the world the word preached. He should listen efficaciously, for just as the Lord promises not to let his word return void when it is sent (Is. 55:11), so his people must not allow the word to fall without effect on their hearts. He must listen reverentially, for God the great King of Kings speaks when his word goes forth, and he must also be diligent to listen understandingly. Boston connects the pastoral dots, and notes that if Christians had tried harder to understand his Sunday sermons, more of his hearers would have come to him during the week with questions about the Bible and about their own souls. Finally, the Christian should listen believingly. Picking up the imagery of Psalm 143:6, Boston says that Christians should come to church "...as the dry and gaping ground, ready to drink it in" (Boston, 2.441).

Samuel Annesley adds that one of the most important practices while listening to preaching is guarding oneself from the distracting, discouraging activities of the devil. Since biblical preaching is a frontal assault against Satan's power in the soul and the world, he is very active to try to render the sermonic hour of no account for believers. Consequently, Annesley counseled his flock to be wise to the hindrances Satan was known to throw their way to keep them from the blessings of the word. Using a creative rhetorical method common among Puritan divines, Annesley offers a hypothetical dramatic conversation between a mature Christian, who has arrived at church to listen to a sermon and Satan, who has arrived to talk him out of listening:

Satan: Why art thou so solicitous for thy soul? Thou mayest be saved without all this ado. It is more than needs.

Christian: No, Satan! All I can do is too little, did not Christ undertake for me. But I will not do the less for Christ's doing so much.

33. Annesley, 191–194. John Newton would agree, writing that "in the peculiar turn of their preaching, there is a great variety.... Some are more happy in alarming the careless, others in administering consolation to the wounded conscience. Some are set more especially for the establishment and confirmation of the Gospel doctrines; others are skillful in solving casuistical points; others are more excellent in enforcing practical godliness; and others again, having been led through depths of temptation and spiritual distress, are best acquainted with the various workings of the heart, and know best how to speak a word in season to weary and exercised souls." John Newton, "On Hearing Sermons," in *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 1:218–219.

Satan: All thou doest is to no purpose: thou shalt be damned at last.

Christian: Should it be so, I would rather serve God for nothing, than thee for all thy flattering, lying promises.

Satan: Spare thyself, poor soul!

Christian: Be gone, Satan! I will parley with thee no longer.... By the grace of God, I will make Christ my pattern; and therefore, Satan, say thy worst, and do thy worst. Through Christ, I defy thee (Annesley, 186–187).

Annesley adds that such a self-conscious stand against the devil not only arms the believer to listen well to the message, it reminds him of Satan's certain defeat and strengthens his soul with a reminder of Christ's soon and total victory. He writes, "Christians, if you can through grace make Satan himself, against his will, help you to profit by the word, this will raise your souls beyond what is ordinary, both for grace and comfort." (Annesley, 186–187).

An additional note of listening wisdom comes from Samuel Annesley concerning how a Christian should regard his pastor during the sermon if he wants to benefit most from it. He must first remember that Jesus Christ alone is the Good Shepherd and deserves a Christian's heart allegiance, not a mere man. In addition, every believer should be supportive of the preacher God has seen fit to give him, but each one should be careful not to so support or promote his pastor that a party spirit and bias against other good ministers develops. Christians should also take care not to flatter or falsely ingratiate themselves to their pastor, for he may then be particularly tempted to overlook or gloss over challenging exhortations from the Bible, which would do them good, for fear of offending his flattering hearers. Finally, Annesley remarks that a Christian benefits from his pastor's sermons most by graciously overlooking his homiletical shortcomings and stirring up feelings of thankfulness for his pastor's areas of homiletical strength. In this way, a Christian guards his heart against inadvertently taking the posture of an armchair critic, and, rather, serves to bless and promote his pastor's ministry.³³

Perhaps the most important contribution to Puritan wisdom on this topic comes from the London preacher John Newton in his advice to Christians about how to get the most out of a patently poor sermon. He issues the challenge that what really matters most in a sermon is not its keen, winsome, or creative presentation, but, rather, the biblical doctrine the text seeks to

convey. Therefore, even when sermonic delivery seems poor, hearers are responsible to focus on the theological truths rising from the text and seek to be edified by them. Newton cautions hearers that what may be perceived as deficient preaching may boil down to deficient hearing. He remarks,

Perhaps you thought too highly of the man, and expected too much from him. . . . Perhaps you neglected to pray for him; and then, though he might be useful to others, it is not at all strange that he was not so to you. Or possibly you have indulged a trifling spirit, and brought a dearth and deadness upon your own soul; for which you had not been duly humbled, and the Lord chose that time to rebuke you (Annesley, 224–225).

Newton additionally reminds his readers that preaching involves great challenges, demonstrated in the fact that a given sermon focuses on a single text, yet the preacher is expected by many to present a theologically balanced message. Consequently, not a few ministers have been condemned by their hearers as antinomian one week and legalistic the next. Hearers would do well, says Newton, to allow the preacher to preach the text before him with clarity and boldness, and not hold him on any given Sunday to perfect balance. Most important to Newton is that believers come not as critics to the worship service, but come with thankful hearts that God in his grace has seen fit to send them a herald of the gospel at all, be he ever so weak in his sermonic gifts (Annesley, 225).

RESPONSIBILITIES AFTER THE SERMON IS HEARD

All endeavors to prepare and then listen well are in vain unless the Christian responds to what he has heard in a full-orbed and godly manner after the sermon comes to a close. This the Puritans well understood. Consequently, they gave careful directions for ongoing application.

Thomas Boston mentions several practices intended to help hearers hold on to the benefit of a sermon after it is done, including meditation, conversation, and practical action. Like the righteous man in Psalm One who “meditates on the law of the LORD day and night,” Christians who ruminate over the preached word after leaving church will receive ongoing blessings (Boston, 2.433). Such meditation Boston compares to agricultural harrowing of the spiritual seed sown during the sermon, referencing Jesus’ command in Luke 9:44 to “Let these words sink into your ears.”³⁴ Says Boston,

“This is the way to guard the word, that it may not slip away” (Boston, 2.433). He also encourages hearers to talk with one another about the sermon after they leave the church, and so stir one another’s minds and hearts up further on what was preached. “The repeating over again of the Lord’s word, has sometimes had a relish with it, more taking than at its first coming to the man” (Boston, 2.433). Third, and most important according to Boston, the truths of the sermon must be practiced and assimilated into the hearer’s daily life. He supports this point with James 1:25, “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

Similarly, Samuel Annesley makes some suggestions for best applying the message after one leaves a worship service (Annesley, 182–183). First, deeply consider the truths preached. He counsels Christians to imitate the cow which chews her cud repeatedly and for a long time after first taking the food in. Through such thoughtful consideration, the believer is able to separate in his mind the sermonic wheat from the chaff, and put forth extra energy to applying the truths which touch most personally on his own situation. Second, rather than being satisfied with mental growth, Annesley told his congregation to add (a good) or subtract (a bad) practice in their lives. Just as physical exercise is of no true value to the body if it is only mentally learned, so in the spiritual realm concrete action—particularly a new habit or pattern of action—is needed. Third, a believer best benefits from a sermon if he ensures afterwards that his response not only pleases himself, but actually pleases Christ. Responding to biblical preaching in a merely self-pleasing manner may equal nothing more than self-reformation, and respectable pagans do that. Instead, a Christian should not be satisfied that he has rightly applied a sermon until he has a clear sense of having, above all others, pleased the Lord whose word was proclaimed.

William Ames focuses on the heart of the believer, challenging him to stir up or maintain a posture of love toward Christ long after the sermon ends. Just as listening to the sermon must be joined to love in the heart, echoing the sentiment of Psalm 119:97, “How I love thy law!”, so afterwards the Christian should work hard to nurture and apply that feeling of Godward love. Only

34. Although harrows are ordinarily used to break up and smooth out the ground in preparation to receive seed, here Boston is referring to the action of covering over the seed with soil, still called “harrowing the seed” today in the U.K. He likens meditation on the sermon to a farmer’s use of a harrow to protectively blanket what has been sown.

then, says Ames, will a godly person have the internal drive to let the message of the sermon transform him (Ames, 256).

The Westminster divines, in their publication of the Shorter and Larger Catechisms, speak to one's application of the word preached as well. Larger Catechism question 160 reads, "What is required of those that hear the Word preached?" Its answer concludes, "It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they . . . meditate, and confer on it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives."³⁵ Of Shorter Catechism question 90, "How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?" the answer ends, "... lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives." To which Thomas Watson comments, "If you would have the word work effectually to your salvation, make it familiar to you. Discourse of what you have heard when you come home. . . . One reason why some people get no more good by what they hear, is that they never speak to one another of what they have heard; as if sermons were such secrets that they must not be spoken of again" (Watson, 378).

Watson goes on to note the proper attitude needed to apply sermons. He criticizes those who come away from church nit-picking the sermon, who, as he says, "instead of judging themselves, judge the word" (Watson, 378). George Whitefield makes a similar point in counseling his hearers to be personally circumspect in terms of application, rather than focusing on a relative or neighbor they believe needed the sermon most. Just as the disciples asked Jesus at the Last Supper, "Lord, is it I?" regarding the prediction of his forthcoming betrayal, so Christian hearers should ask, "Lord, is it I?" regarding the point of the sermon. As Whitefield writes, "[W]e are apt to wander too much abroad; always looking at the mote which is in our neighbor's eye, rather than at the beam which is in our own."³⁶ Christopher Love agrees that one's attitude following the sermon is most important, for it dictates his actions. Therefore, he counsels quick obedience to what was preached. "Be

willing to submit to it, and, if you had ten thousands necks, to lay them all under the obedience of the Word" (Love, 146). Earnest prayer after the sermon is also needed, writes Watson. The listener should beg God to accompany the word with blessed effects in his heart and life (Watson, 378). Richard Baxter adds a final attitude which should color how a Christian responds to a sermon. Remember, he writes, that life is short, and one never knows how many days of life he has left. Consequently, a believer should think about and apply with great seriousness every sermon he hears as if it were the last of his life (Baxter, 475).

Understanding the Serious Nature of Hearing Sermons

It is impossible to read Puritan literature and not conclude that they wrote, spoke, and lived with a sense of great seriousness. Titles of their works such as *Gospel Fear*,³⁷ *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*,³⁸ and *The Fear of God*³⁹ make clear the seriousness with which Puritan divines took their calling, especially that of serious spokesman for God. Gospel preaching brought hearers face to face with the prospect of heaven or hell, eternity in joy or damnation. Consequently, it comes as no surprise to find Puritan teaching on the subject of how best to listen to sermons marked by a very serious note.

Christopher Love alerts his hearers to the serious nature of rightly responding to preaching by reminding them that the devil is very active before, during, and after the worship service, seeking to steal away the beneficial word (Love, 140–142). In order to make his point, Love quotes the Puritans' favorite text for teaching their congregations how to hear well: Luke 8:18, "Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away." In Love's view, it is the devil who threatens to "take away" even the small spiritual blessing one has if he fails to carefully apply the gospel word proclaimed. Therefore, serious diligence is required to guard oneself from Satan before, during, and after the sermon.

Second, Love highlights the seriousness of hearing sermons when he writes, "You must take heed how you hear because, if you do not, the Word will not only be ineffectual to you, but will do you a great deal of hurt" (Love, 141). All the warnings, admonitions, comforts, and doctrines one hears during a sermon, if not taken seriously and applied, will one day come back as painful evidence testifying against him. Therefore, one should listen with great seriousness. Thomas Watson seconds

35. *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 314–315; emphasis added.

36. George Whitefield, "Directions How to Hear Sermons," in *The Works of George Whitefield* (Oswestry, Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2000), 5:424.

37. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Fear: Developing a Tender Heart that Trembles at the Word of God* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publishers, 1997).

38. Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners* (Hong Kong: Forgotten Books, 2012).

39. John Bunyan, *The Fear of God* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publishers, 1999).

Love's sentiment when he gives his own warnings to those who refuse to take sermon listening seriously. He writes,

If the word preached be not effectual to men's conversion, it will be effectual to their condemnation. The word will be effectual one way or the other; if it does not make your hearts better, it will make your chains heavier.... Dreadful is their case who go loaded with sermons to hell (Watson, 379).

Samuel Annesley, in his sermon "How to Give Christ a Satisfying Account of Why We Attend the Ministry of the Word," heads one of his sections, "Those that propose a good end, must call themselves to a strict and severe account, how that end is obtained or lost." He argues that though a lax hearer of the word may be able to give some account of what he's heard, this is in some respects worse than none at all, "for by a shuffling account you do but as it were bribe God's officer (natural conscience) to respite you from time to time, till death surpriseth you with a summons to give up your account to Christ himself" (Annesley, 176). In other words, listening to biblical preaching, but failing to take it seriously, amounts to one of the most destructive forms of self-deception.

Annesley goes on to illustrate his point with four metaphors: First, sermon listeners are like students who must give their teacher an account of what they've learned. Just as foolish students will receive poor marks on their report cards, foolish listeners will reap the ill fruit of their laziness on the Day of Judgment. These listeners are also like household servants who must give an account of their stewardship to their master when he arrives home from a journey (cf. Mt. 25:14–30). Annesley says that though earthly servants have a financial incentive to work well for their masters, Christians have a far greater incentive, since both master and servants are driven by the same, grand end: the glory of Christ and the extension of his kingdom. Therefore, the sermonic hearer who has little interest in furthering Christ's glory and kingdom by applying the sermon should be warned, for his actions testify against his belonging to Christ. A third metaphor is of a debtor to a creditor. Says Annesley, "We are so far sinfully indebted to the justice of God, that unless we be discharged upon our Surety's payment, we must be imprisoned with devils unto eternity" (Annesley, 177). The debt a Christian owes God should drive him to the most conscientious and serious sermonic hearing. Finally, believers must give an account to God as a convicted criminal must

to a judge. If for every idle word spoken people will one day be called to account (Mt. 12:36–37), how much more will they be called to account for every word of God they heard and ignored.

Thomas Boston added his voice to the Puritan leaders who emphasized the seriousness with which sermons are to be heard by detailing four types of hearers who are in particular danger because they consider biblical preaching a light and unimportant thing. Irreverent hearers are those who "[are found] sleeping, others gazing hither and thither, altogether careless and inattentive.... Their bodies are present, but their hearts are gone; they are the idols that have eyes but see not" (Boston, 2.442). Supercilious and disdainful hearers are in great danger as well, for they judge the words of the Judge but refuse themselves to be judged by it. Third, those Boston calls "ignorant and stupid" hearers ought to take special care, for it is not merely their ignorance which marks them, but their lack of desire to learn of the things of God. Their callousness to biblical truth testifies to the emptiness of their souls, and the immanency of their judgment. Lastly, unbelieving hearers fail to recognize the serious nature of listening well to sermons, fortified as they are by their false beliefs which explain away and ignore godly truth. Like King Ahab, they may give lip-service to God when it suits their needs, but beneath such words is no true, lasting foundation of faith.

Finally, David Clarkson drives home the serious nature of sermonic listening perhaps more than any of his Puritan brothers. He reminds those who attend Christian worship but listen poorly and irreverently that it is the words of the gospel preached that they have heard which will condemn them on the Last Day. Clarkson paints a graphic picture of how Christ will recount at the final judgment all the words of life that were spoken to them, but which they spurned and ignored. He writes, "At the Day of Judgment, an account of every sermon will be required, and of every truth in each sermon.... The gospel, at the last day, if neglected, will plead you inexcusable."⁴⁰

Clarkson wanted his congregation to understand the holy nature of the worship service, and in particular the sermon through which Christ speaks to sinners needing his salvation. He called congregants not merely to keep watch over their own serious respect for sermon hearing, but to love each other enough to hold one another accountable and reprove those who are most lax. Clarkson did not simply hold up sermon hearing as one

40. Clarkson, "Hearing the Word," 434.

good option among many uses of time, but rather insisted that it is an ugly sin to marginalize it. He writes, “If it be a duty to hear well, it is a sin not to hear. If it be a sin not to hear right, it is a great sin not to hear at all” (Clarkson, 434).

David Clarkson closely argues his point by explaining three ways in which not hearing sermons or failing to listen with reverent seriousness is sinful. First, it equals contempt for God and Christ. He illustrates this by saying,

If a great king should send an ambassador to a poor, impotent man lying on a dunghill, a stranger, an enemy to him, to offer reconciliation, to adopt him, to make him heir of his kingdom, if this wretch should refuse to hear him, would it not . . . exasperate him? So it is here; the Lord sends [preachers] to us lying in our blood, poor, blind, etc. Mercy slighted, turns into the greatest fury.

Second, says Clarkson, any who fail to listen to God now, he will fail to hear in their time of distress, in spite of their many importunate prayers. Those who most enjoyed listening to their mute gods in this life will be cut off from the sweet voice of God for eternity. Bitter is the irony. As he says, “If you [at the end of your life] cry [to God] for pardon, the Lord will stop his ears; you heard not him in health, life, and he will not then hear you.” Third, Clarkson challenges Christians thoughtfully to consider “the state of the damned.” (Clarkson, 435). During this life they had opportunity to approach the light of God’s truth, to bask in its warmth through the good sermons available to them, and be changed by it. Instead, they chose to hide in the shadows, loving the darkness of sin over the light of life (cf. Jn. 3:19–21). Consequently, death forever will be their lot. To awaken his congregation to the seriousness of sermonic listening, Clarkson writes, “Lay your ear to hell, and hear those forlorn creatures cry out against this sin, as that which has damned them, sunk their souls in endless miseries. . . . Alas, it is too late, the day of our visitation is shut up in eternal night” (Clarkson, 435–436)!

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the great concern which Puritan pastors had for their parishioners to make every effort to enjoy maximum profit from the sermons they heard. The Christian’s blessing gained from good sermonic listening begins with a clear understanding of himself as a fallible human on several levels. First, as every sermonic listener is naturally fallen, he needs to

guard against the debilitating effects of his sinful flesh in opposing the word preached. The Puritans highlighted the crucial role of faith in the hearing process, as well as the need for God’s grace to counteract the deadening effects of the flesh and to create real faith in the heart. Finally, the Puritans were quick to point out the blessings available to their hearers if they would listen well.

Most of the instruction found in Puritan writings about how to listen beneficially to biblical preaching is very practical, highlighting how a listener should prepare his heart and life *before* attending worship, what suggestions to follow *as* he listens to the message, and how best to respond *after* the sermon ends. The pastoral genius of the Puritans is recognized in their very detailed method of preaching and writing, employing first the exposition of a biblical text, then doctrinal instructions rising from the text, followed by “uses” or points of practical application, and finally “objections” which were carefully answered. Through the framework of this method, Puritan listeners and readers were given minutely detailed instructions regarding how to think, feel, speak, and act toward biblical preaching.

The serious nature of listening to biblical preaching is a special element of Puritan instruction on this topic, as has been observed. The Puritans approached all of life from a Godward, eternal, and serious perspective. The tone of warning shot through Puritan writings, especially regarding how their congregants should prepare for, listen, and respond to biblical preaching, has been clearly demonstrated in this survey of authors and preachers.

Though a brief resurgence of this topic has been afoot for the past decade or so, one quickly discovers how relatively small the modern contribution is compared to the depth and breadth of the Puritan works examined in this paper. In contemporary times when worship and sermon listening is often seen as an optional extra or, worse, as a spiritual commodity to be bought and sold, it is no wonder that the seriousness with which the Puritans looked upon biblical preaching is rare. Their voices were never more needed in Christ’s church than today. In many quarters contemporary Christianity is marked not by holy seriousness, but by irreverent levity; not by admonitions to faithfully attend worship, but by spiritual substitutes for it; not by detailed instruction on how to profit most from listening to biblical preaching, but by license to sit as judge and critic of the preacher. Indeed, a robust recovery of Puritan instruction on how to listen to sermons profitably may be the most potent antidote to so much of what ails Christ’s church today. ■