

Preparationism As Taught By The Puritans

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When John the Baptist was asked who he was, he responded, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias" (John 1:23). He preached the necessity of contrition and repentance prior to identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. This testimony of John the Baptist is the basis for the Puritan doctrine of preparationism. The Puritans believed that this was the correct method of preaching. They believed that the soul needs to be prepared for the act of believing in Jesus. A sinner will not believe instinctively. Faith in Christ is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's operation in the heart.

Defining Puritan Preparationism

I need to begin by dismantling two misconceptions. When the Puritans speak of being prepared for regeneration and receiving the grace of God, we are prompted to think that the sinner is able to prepare himself for regeneration and to render himself fit for faith in Jesus Christ. Such a notion, however, is foreign to the Puritan tradition.

There is a distinction between how the Puritans and the theologians of the Dutch Further Reformation defined regeneration. The Dutch theologians define regeneration as the starting point of the life of grace; that is, at the initial moment of spiritual awakening and conviction. They view regeneration from God's perspective. The English theologians posit that regeneration occurs upon the initial act of faith in Christ. They view it from man's perspective, teaching that the Christian is born when a sinner believes for the first time. Therefore they view preparation for regeneration as preparation for believing in Jesus Christ.

When the Puritans refer to being prepared for regeneration and for receiving God's grace, they do not mean that a man can prepare himself. On the contrary! For the Puritans the term "preparation" communicates that man in his fallen state is entirely unfit and incapable of receiving God's grace and believing in Jesus Christ. He needs to be prepared for this.

When Jesus began to preach, He cried out, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This is the summary of the message of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. Man must return to God, must undergo an inner change, and must seek salvation in Christ. However, there must also be a work of God in him. He must repent and believe in Christ. That is how the Holy Spirit prepares the heart for the reception of salvation as it is in Jesus Christ.

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