

Puritan Preaching: “The Plainer, the Better”¹

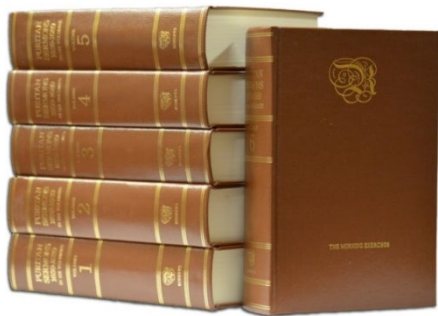
Mark Minnick

Introduction

1. Primary Sources for Studying Puritan Preaching²

First: Their _____.

The Morning Exercise at Cripplegate (1659-1689)³



St. Giles Without Cripplegate



(Note: Since the mid 1950s there have been over _____ Puritan titles reprinted. Some are commentaries or essays, but most are series of sermons.)

The Puritan Paperbacks series, printed affordably and attractively by Banner of Truth for over sixty years (1961. . .); sixty-two titles presently.

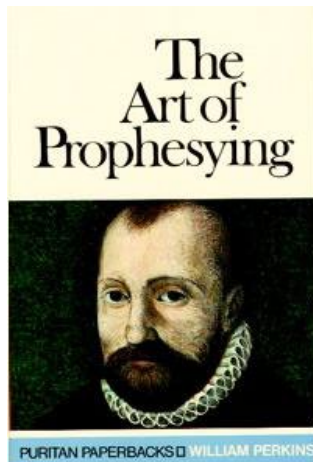


¹ William Perkins' contention (see page 3).

² Some secondary sources are Hughes Oliphant Olds', "The Puritans," *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 4:251-329, two chapters on "Puritan Preaching" in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, by Joel Beeke and Mark Jones (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), and Joel Beeke's, "The Preaching of the Puritans," two sermons delivered at the 2009 Expositor's Conference, Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, Mobile, Alabama (available at SermonAudio.com).

³ The six volumes contain over 150 sermons preached by 75 Puritans, mostly at St. Giles in London. Some of the more well-known names were Richard Baxter, Stephen Charnock, Thomas Manton, John Owen, Matthew Poole, and Thomas Watson. Though of uneven quality, the sermons provide an unparalleled anthology of the kind of preaching that was common among the Puritans during the last decades of their influence.

Second: William Perkins' (1558-1602), *The Art of _____* (1606)⁴



--Its significance.

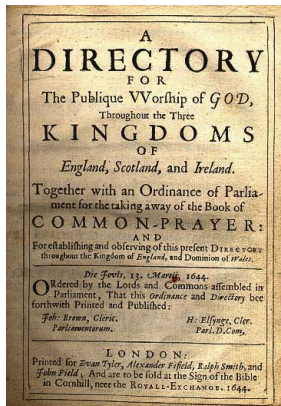
--Perkins is called the “father of Puritanism.”⁵

--Following the Reformation, *The Art of Prophecy* (published in Latin; 1592) was the first English publication on homiletics.

--What Perkins meant by *prophecy*.

_____ the Word is prophesying in the name and on behalf of Christ (7).

Third: The _____, “Of the Preaching of the Word,” in its *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1644).⁶



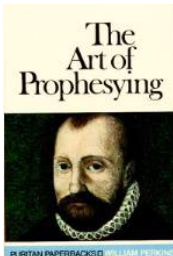
The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruption; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation (Westminster Larger Catechism; in answer to Question 155).

⁴ All subsequent quotations will be from the revised edition done by Banner of Truth (1996).

⁵ See Joel R. Beeke and J. Stephen Yuille, “William Perkins, the “Father of Puritanism,” *The Works of William Perkins* (1631; rpr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1:ix-xxxii. Eleven editions of his works were printed in England by 1635, at least fifty editions of his works were printed in Germany and Switzerland in the 17th century, and over one hundred eighty-five editions of his individual or collected works were printed in Dutch. Stephen Yuille’s, “The Quest for Assurance in William Perkins,” is an audio recording helpfully introducing Perkins and his theology within his historical context (available at <https://www.gccministries.org/conferences-miscellaneous/episode/2014-08-23/the-quest-for-assurance-in-william-perkins>).

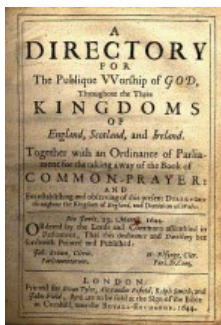
⁶ For an informative, inspirational account of the formulation of the *Directory*, see Iain Murray’s, “The Directory for Public Worship,” in John L. Carson and David W. Hall, eds., *To Glorify and Enjoy God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 169-191. Mark Dever and Sinclair Ferguson have published two messages on the ways in which the Puritans preached in accordance with the *Directory* (see *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2008).

2. The Distinctive Genius of Puritan Preaching: the _____ style.



*It is a by-word among us: It was a very plain sermon: and I say again, **the plainer, the better.***⁷

*There is a carnal and human kind of preaching, which nowadays takes place, wherein nothing is so much regarded as the vaunting of wit, memory, and learning, by fine contrived sentences, multiplicity of quotations, variety of allegations of fathers, schoolmen, and other learning, but herein is no _____ nor compassion to the poor soul. ... The truth is, God will have His word delivered, “not in the enticing speech of man’s wisdom, but in the plain evidence of the Spirit and of power” [1 Cor. 2:4].*⁸

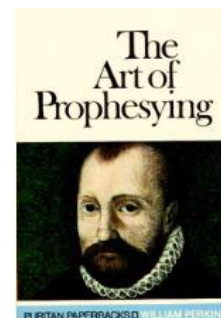


*Plainly, that the _____ may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect; abstaining also from an unprofitable use of unknown tongues, strange phrases, and cadences of sounds and words; sparingly citing sentences of ecclesiastical or other human writers, ancient or modern, be they never so elegant (381).*⁹

The “Plain Style”

The Preparation

Preparation has two parts: the interpretation of the meaning of the passage, and the appropriate division of it for orderly exposition (25).



⁷ Galatians, in *The Workes of the Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ. . . William Perkins* (London: John Legate, 1631), 2:222. Bold emphasis mine.

⁸ “An Exposition of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount” (1608), *Works*, 1:201.

⁹ All quotations of the *Directory* will be from “The Directory for the Publick Worship of God,” *Westminster Confession of Faith* (rpt., Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 379-381.

1. Interpretation

Scripture has only _____ sense, the _____ one (26).

This rule is to be followed: If the _____ meaning of the words agrees with the circumstances of the passage, then the natural meaning is the _____ meaning (30).

The principle interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit (26).

John Owen (1616-1683) wrote, “I intend *fervent and earnest prayer* for the assistance of the Spirit of God revealing the mind of God, as in the whole Scripture, so in particular books and passages of it. ... The practical neglect of this duty is the true reason why so many that are skillful enough in the *disciplinary means of knowledge* are yet such strangers in the true knowledge of the mind of God”



“Shall we think it strange for a Christian, when, it may be after the use of all other means, he finds himself at a loss about the true meaning and intention of the Holy Spirit in any place or text of Scripture, to betake himself in a more than ordinary manner unto God in *prayer*, that he would by his Spirit enlighten, guide, teach, and so reveal the truth unto him? Or should we think it strange that God should hear such prayers, and instruct such persons in the secrets of his covenant? God forbid there should be such *atheistical* thoughts in the minds of any who would be esteemed Christians!

Yea, I must say, that for a man to undertake the interpretation of any part or portion of Scripture in a solemn manner, without *invocation of God* to be taught and instructed by his Spirit, is a high provocation of him; not shall I expect the discovery of the truth from anyone who so proudly and ignorantly engageth in a work so much above his ability to manage. ... This, as was said, is the *sheet-anchor* of a faithful expositor of the Scripture, which he betakes himself unto in all difficulties; nor can he without it be led into a comfortable satisfaction that he hath attained the mind of the Holy Ghost in any divine revelation.¹⁰

¹⁰ John Owen, *SUNESIS PNEUMATIKH OR The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word* (1678), in *Works* (1850-1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 4:201, 202, 204-205.

2. Division

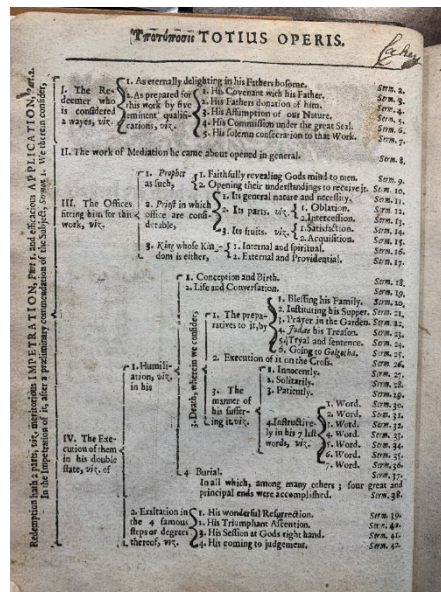
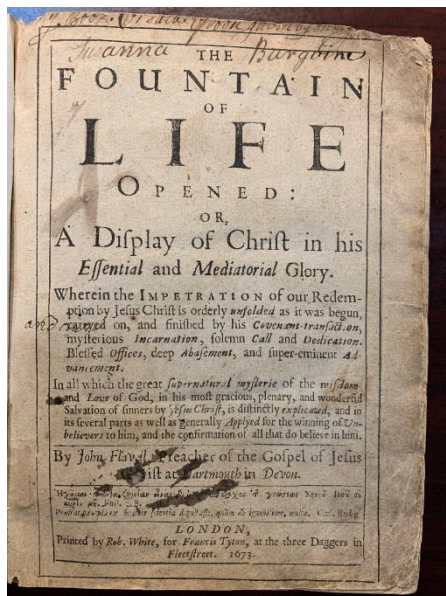
Now we come to consider the right ‘cutting’, or ‘dividing’. . . Right cutting is the way in which the Word is enabled to edify the people of God: ‘Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing [or cutting] the word of truth’ (2 Tim. 2:15). . . There are two elements in this: (i) resolution or partition, and (ii) application (48).

Resolution or partition is the unfolding of the passage into its various doctrines. . . Sometimes the doctrine is explicitly stated in the passage. . . On other occasions a doctrine not specifically stated is correctly drawn from the text because, in one sense or another, it is implied in what is written (48, 49).

Application is the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people of the congregation (54).

The Preaching

(Note: For an example of the characteristic Puritan approach to the plain style of preaching, we’ll use a sermon by John Flavel (c. 1627-1691). It is the first message of forty-two, on the subject of, *Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory*. Under the title, *The Fountain of Life*, the sermons were first printed in 1671. They are reprinted as volume 1 of the 6 volumes of Flavel’s *Works* published by Banner of Truth.



1. The *plain style* _____ the Text in a Certain Way.

Let the introduction of his text be brief and perspicuous drawn from the text itself, or context, or some parallel place, or general sentence of scripture. . . looking diligently to the scope of the text, and pointing at the chief heads and grounds of doctrine which he is to raise from it (379).



The former verse contains an apology for the plain and familiar manner of the apostle's preaching, which was not (as he there tells them) with excellency of speech, or of wisdom; i. e. he studied not to gratify their curiosity with rhetorical strains, or philosophical niceties. In this he gives the reason, "for I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ," etc. The meaning is not, that he simply despised, or contemned all other studies and knowledge; but so far only as they stand in competition with,

or opposition to the study and knowledge of Jesus Christ. And it is as if he should say, it is my stated, settled judgment; not a hasty, inconsiderate censure, but the product and issue of my most serious and exquisite inquiries.

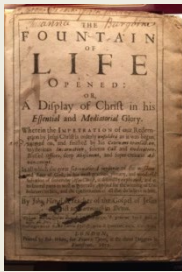
After I have well weighed the case, turned it round, viewed it exactly on every side, balanced all advantages and disadvantages, pondered all things that are fit to come into consideration about it; this is the result and final determination, that all other knowledge, how profitable, how pleasant soever, is not worthy to be named in the same day with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This, therefore, I resolve to make the scope and end of my ministry, and the end regulates the means; such pedantic toys, and airy notions as injudicious ears affect, would rather obstruct than promote my grand design among you; therefore, wholly waving that way, I applied myself to a plain, popular, unaffected dialect, fitted rather to pierce the heart, and convince the conscience, than to tickle the fancy. This is the scope of the words, in which three things fall under this consideration.

First, The _____ of his doctrine, to wit, *Jesus Christ*. . . Christ shall be the centre to which all the lines of my ministry shall be drawn. . .

Secondly, We have here that _____ or consideration of Christ, which he singled out from the rest of the excellent truths of Christ, to spend the main strength of his ministry upon; and that is, *Christ crucified*. . . There is, therefore, a great emphasis in this word, *and him crucified*.

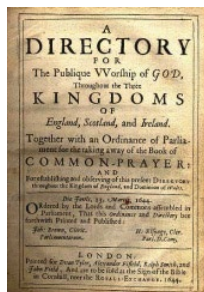
Thirdly, The _____ in which he discoursed this transcendent subject to them is also remarkable; he not only preached Christ crucified, but he preached him assiduously and plainly. He preached Christ frequently. *“And whenever he preached of Christ crucified, he preached him in a crucified style.* This is the sum of the words; to let them know that his spirit was intent on this subject, as if he neither knew nor cared to speak of any other. All his sermons were so full of Christ that his hearers might have thought he was acquainted with no other doctrine. Hence observe. . .

2. The *plain style* then stated the text’s _____.



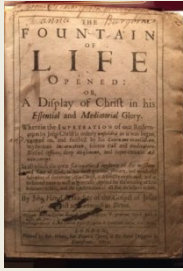
Doctrine: *That there is no doctrine more excellent in itself, or more necessary to be preached and studied, than the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*

3. The *plain style* then _____ & _____ that doctrine.



The arguments or reasons are to be solid, and, as much as may be convincing. The illustrations, of what kind soever ought to be full of light, and such as may convey the truth into the hearer’s heart with spiritual delight (379-380).

If any doubt obvious from scripture, reason, or prejudice of the hearers, seem to arise, it is very requisite to remove it, by reconciling the seeming differences, answering the reasons, and discovering and taking away the causes of prejudice and mistake (380).



The truth of this proposition will be made out by a double consideration of the doctrine Christ.

First, Let it be considered and then these lovely properties with which it is naturally clothed, will render it superior to all other sciences and studies.

1st, The knowledge of Jesus Christ is the very marrow and kernel of all the scriptures: the scope and centre of all divine revelations: both Testaments meet in Christ. The ceremonial law is full of Christ, and all the gospel is full of Christ: the blessed lines of both Testaments meet in him. . . This argues the unspeakable excellency of this doctrine, the knowledge whereof must needs therefore be a key to unlock the greatest part of the sacred scriptures. . .

2dly, The knowledge of Jesus Christ is a fundamental knowledge; and foundations are most useful, though least seen. The knowledge of Christ is fundamental to all *graces, duties, comforts, and happiness.*

(1) It is fundamental to all graces: they all begin in knowledge; Col. 3:10, "The new man is renewed in knowledge." . . . II Pet. 3:18, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour." See how these two, grace and knowledge, keep equal pace in the soul of a Christian; in what degree the one increases, the other increases answerably.

(2) It is fundamental to all duties; the duties as well as the graces of all Christians are founded in the knowledge of Christ. Must a Christian believe? That he can never do without the knowledge of Christ. . . Would a man exercise hope in God? That he can never do without the knowledge of Christ, for he is the author of that hope. . . And as you cannot believe or hope, so neither can you pray acceptably without a competent degree of this knowledge. . . O then, how indispensable is the knowledge of Christ to all that do address themselves to God in any duty!

(3) It is fundamental to all comforts: all the comforts of believers are streams from this fountain. Jesus Christ is the very object of a believer's joy. . . Take away the knowledge of Christ and a Christian is the most sad and melancholy creature in the world.

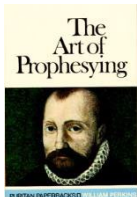
Lastly, This knowledge is fundamental to the eternal happiness of souls. . . . If it is life eternal to know Christ, then it is eternal damnation to be ignorant of Christ: as Christ is the door that opens heaven, so knowledge is the key that opens Christ.

3dly, The knowledge of Christ is profound and large: all other sciences are but shadows; this is a boundless, bottomless ocean; no creature hath a line long enough to fathom the depth of it. . . It is in the studying of Christ as in the planting of a newly discovered country. At first men sit down by the sea-side, upon the skirts and borders of the land; and there they dwell, but by degrees they search farther and farther in the heart of the country. Ah, the best of us are yet upon the borders of this vast continent.

Secondly, Let us _____ this knowledge with all other knowledge, and thereby the excellency of it will farther appear.

4. The *plain style* then gave _____ and _____ of the Doctrine.

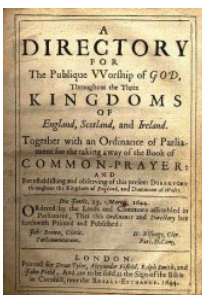
*The Puritans brought into their preaching both the learning of the study and the practicability of the market-place. Their sermons savoured of close meditation in the closet and no less close observation in the street.*¹¹



Application is the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation (54).

There are basically seven ways in which application should be made, in keeping with seven different spiritual _____ (56-63).

1. *Those who are unbelievers and are both ignorant and unteachable.*
2. *Those who are teachable, but ignorant.*
3. *Those who have knowledge, but have never been humbled.*
4. *Those who have already been humbled.*
5. *Those who already believe.*
6. *Those who have fallen back.*
7. *Churches with both believers and unbelievers.*



He is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to _____, by application to his hearers: which albeit it prove a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant; yet he is to endeavor to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the

¹¹ Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 2nd ed. (Haywards Heath Sussex: Carey Publications, 1979), 20.

thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God (380).

1. _____ of false doctrines.

2. Exhortation to duties.

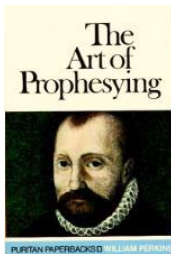
3. Dehortation, reprehension, and publick admonition.

(Note: This was to enlarge upon the nature and greatness of sin, warning of its danger, and giving ways to remedy and avoid it.)

4. Comfort.

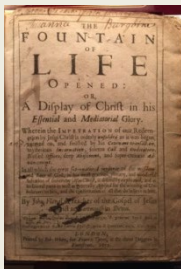
5. Notes of _____.

(Note: Giving standards by which the hearers can examine themselves to see whether they are conformed to the doctrine.)



Whenever possible the minister should include himself in his reproofs. In this way his preaching, teaching and counselling will be expressed in a mild and gentle spirit (cf. Dan. 4:16-19; I Cor. 4:6; Gal. 2:15) (65).

These different kinds of application can be employed with respect to every sentence in Scripture (65).



The **use of all this I shall give you in a few inferences**, on which I shall not enlarge. . .

Inference 1. The sufficiency of the doctrine of Christ, to make men wise unto salvation. Paul desired to know nothing; and indeed, nothing else is of absolute necessity to be known. A little of this knowledge, if saving and effectual upon thy heart, will do thy soul more service than all the vain speculation and profound parts that others so much glory in. **Poor Christian,**

be not dejected because thou seest thyself out-stripped and excelled by so many in other parts of knowledge. If thou know Jesus Christ, thou knowest enough to comfort and save thy soul. Many learned philosophers are now in hell, and many illiterate Christians in heaven.

Inference 2. If there be such an excellency in the knowledge of Christ, let it humble all, both saints and sinners, that we have no more of this clear and effectual knowledge in us, notwithstanding the excellent advantages we have had for it. **Sinners,** concerning you I may sigh and say with the apostle, 1 Cor. xv 34. "Some have not the knowledge of Christ, I speak this to your shame." This, O this is the condemnation. And **even for you that are enlightened** in this knowledge, how little do you know of Jesus Christ, in comparison of what you might have known of him? . . .

Inference 3. How sad is their condition that have a knowledge of Christ, and yet as to themselves it had been better they had never had it! Many there be that content themselves

with an unpractical, ineffectual, and merely notional knowledge of him; of whom the apostle saith, "It had been better for them not to have known," 2 Pet. ii 21. It serves only to aggravate sin and misery; for though it be not enough to save them, yet it puts some weak restraints upon sin, which their impetuous lusts breaking down, exposes them thereby to a greater damnation.

Inference 4. This may inform us by what rule to judge both ministers and doctrine. Certainly that is the highest commendation of a minister, to be an able minister of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the Spirit, 2 Cor. iii 6. He is the best artist, that can most lively and powerfully display Jesus Christ before the people, evidently setting him forth as crucified among them; and that is the best sermon, that is most full of Christ, not of art and language. . .

Inference 5. Let all that mind the honour of religion, or the peace and comfort of their own souls, wholly sequester and apply themselves to the study of Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Wherefore spend we ourselves upon other studies, when all excellency, sweetness, and desirableness is centered in this one? . . . These things which singly ravish and delight the souls of men, are all found conjunctly in Christ. O what a blessed Christ is this! whom to know is eternal life. From the knowledge of Jesus Christ do bud forth all the fruits of comfort, and that for all seasons and conditions. . . . O then study Christ, study to know him more *extensively*. There be many excellent things in Christ, that the most eagle-eyed believer hath not yet seen: Ah! 'tis pity that anything of Christ should lie hid from his people. Study to know Christ more *intensively*, to get the experimental taste and lively power of his knowledge upon your hearts and affections: . . .

Inference 6. Lastly, Let me close the whole with **a double caution**; one to ourselves, who by our callings and professions are the ministers of Christ; another to those that sit under the doctrine of Christ daily.

First [to ministers], If this doctrine be the most excellent, necessary, fundamental, profound, noble, and comfortable doctrine, **let us then take heed lest, while we study to be exact in other things, we be found ignorant in this.** Ye know it is ignominious, by the common suffrage of the civilized world, for any man to be unacquainted with his own calling, or not to attend the proper business of it: it is our calling, as the Bridegroom's friends, to woo and win souls to Christ, to set him forth to the people as crucified among them, Gal. iii 1. to present him in all his attractive excellencies, that all hearts may be ravished with his beauty, and charmed into his arms by love: . . .

Secondly, Let us see that our knowledge of Christ be not a powerless, barren, unpractical knowledge: O that, in its passage from our understanding to our lips, it might powerfully melt, sweeten, and ravish our hearts! Remember, brethren, a holy calling never saved any man, without a holy heart; if our tongues only be *sanctified*, our whole man must be damned.

Thirdly, Let us take heed that we withhold not our knowledge of Christ in unrighteousness from the people. O that our lips may disperse knowledge and feed many. Let us take heed of the napkin, remembering the day of account is at hand. Remember, I beseech you, the *relations* wherein you stand, and the obligations resulting thence: Remember, the great Shepherd gave himself for, and gave you to the flock; your time, your gifts are not yours, but

God's; remember the pinching wants of souls, who are perishing for want of Christ; and if their tongues do not, yet their necessities do bespeak us, as they did Joseph, Gen. xlvii 15. . . .

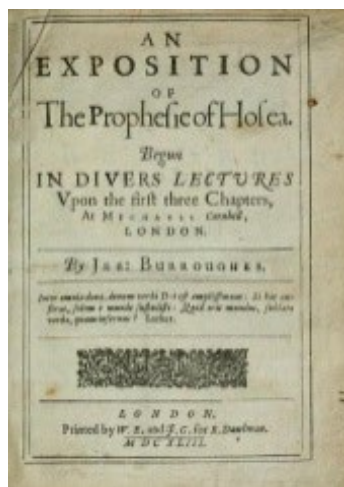
Secondly, To the people that sit under the doctrine of Christ daily, and have the light of his knowledge shining round about them.

First, take heed ye do not reject and despise this light. This may be done two ways: **First,** When you despise the means of knowledge by slight and low esteems of it. Surely, if you thus reject knowledge, God will reject you for it, Hos. iv 6. It is a despising of the richest gift that ever Christ gave to the church; and however it be a contempt and slight that begins low, and seems only to vent itself upon the weak parts, in artificial discourses, and untaking tones and gestures of the speakers; yet, believe it, it is a daring sin that flies higher than you are aware, Luke x 16. "He that despiseth you, despiseth me; and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me." **Secondly,** You despise the knowledge of Christ, when you despise the directions and loving constraints of that knowledge; when you refuse to be guided by your knowledge, your light and your lusts contest and struggle within you. O it is sad when your lusts master your light.

Secondly, Take heed that you rest not satisfied with that knowledge of Christ you have attained, but grow on towards perfection. It is the pride and ignorance of many professors, when they have got a few raw and indigested notions, to swell with self-conceit of their excellent attainments. And it is the sin, even of best of saints, when they see (*veritas in profundo*) how deep the knowledge of Christ lies, and what pains they must take to dig for it, to throw by the shovel of duty, and cry, *Dig we cannot*. To your work Christians, to your work. . .

Concluding

Jeremiah Burroughs (1600-1646)



*Plain preaching is the best teaching; it is the best way to convince and convert men, and if plain, familiar preaching will not work, certainly by dark mysterious teaching it will never be effective. ... That is the best preaching which sets forth things to the life and makes them as plain as if they were written with a sunbeam.*¹²

¹² *Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea* (London: W. E. and J. G., 1643), 591.

Robert Bolton (1572-1631) went up to Oxford at the age of twenty and soon distinguished himself as a first-rate scholar. He was chosen by the faculty to be one of the prize students modeling public debate before King James, when his majesty visited the University. But he had no concern for his soul. His passions were cards, plays, godless swearing, and wicked friends. Consequently, he *hated all good men, especially those odiously stigmatized by the name of puritans.*¹³



Visiting Cambridge one year about commencement time, he heard that **William Perkins** was to give an address. Curious to hear the celebrated preacher, Bolton attended the meeting, but afterwards arrogantly criticized the preacher as, *a barren empty fellow, and a very mean scholar.*

However, through the efforts of an excellent personal worker, Thomas Peacock, Bolton fell under such deep conviction of sin that for many months he lost his appetite and could hardly sleep. His earliest biographer described what was taking place: *The Lord ran upon him as a giant, taking him by the neck, and shaking him to pieces.*

At the age of thirty-five Bolton was soundly converted. Almost immediately he determined to enter the ministry. He became known for his authoritative and awakening preaching, charity to his parishoners, and devotional habits that included praying six stated times a day, twice in secret, twice with his wife, and twice with the entire family. And of Perkins, whose plain preaching style he had formerly despised, he now said that the old Puritan was *as learned and godly a Divine as our Church hath for many years enjoyed.*¹⁴

¹³ Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (1813; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 2:390.

¹⁴ Edited from, *Mr. Bolton's Last and Learned Worke of the Foure Last Things* (London: George Miller, 1639), 1-15. Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/mrboltonslastlea00bolt/page/n17/mode/2up>