

THE PURITANS ON ORIGINAL SIN

John Isherwood

We must first define what we mean by the term ‘Puritan’. Daniel *Neal’s History of the Puritans* (1737) tended to see them as a homogeneous group—but this is far from the case. The term has been used for Episcopalians who wanted to see less Popish worship but remained loyal to the form of government of the Church of England, for those who wanted the national Church to change to a presbyterian form of government and for those who could see no mending of the Church and advocated separation and non-conformism. Historical purists would confine the term to those Anglican clergy who called for the renewal of the Church on the more austere principles of Continental Reformers such as Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli, both of whom taught in England as Regius professors in Edward VI’s reign—Bucer at Cambridge and Martyr at Oxford. The Puritans’ first manifesto was at the beginning of the Vestarian Controversy of 1565, entitled *A brief discourse against the outwarde apparell*. The word ‘puritan’ was first used in a pejorative sense to describe such men in about 1563/4. Later, it was to be used both for the Separatists and for those who, though not advocating separation from the Church, yet wanted it to become Presbyterian. Such was the wish of Thomas Cartwright, Lady Margaret Professor at Cambridge University. In the Spring of 1570, lecturing on Acts of the Apostles, he called for an end to bishops. He was ejected from his chair and fled to Geneva.

Are there common features for the term ‘puritan’? At least four characteristics can be cited which would be true of the vast majority of those who have been dubbed ‘Puritans’.

1. Simple worship with little ceremony or ritual.
2. Almost a sacramental view of expository preaching.
3. Rigid regulation of church members’ behaviour and piety.
4. A Calvinist theology undergirding one’s whole outlook (though even here, at least one Arminian, John Goodwin, has been called a Puritan).

Puritanism began in reaction to the demands of the Act of Uniformity of 1559, and ended, as a distinct feature of English church life, with the ejection of nearly 2000 Puritan clergymen who would not conform to the Act of Uniformity of 1662.

In this paper I have chosen four representatives from within this period to examine their views of original sin. All four were immensely popular writers and preachers and so can fairly safely be taken as the voice of Puritanism on the doctrine. These are:

William Perkins (1558-1602); John Owen (1616-1683); Thomas Watson (1620-1686) and John Flavel (ob. 1691).¹

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE PURITANS' VIEW OF ORIGINAL SIN.

The use of *in quo* in Romans 5:12

Puritans invariably used the Geneva Bible and its translation of Romans 5:12 in their exposition of the doctrine of original sin, in keeping with the Augustinian view of original sin as coming on all people through humanity's incorporation with Adam as its head and representative. Following the Geneva Bible, and therefore Calvin—who himself followed Augustine, 'Ambrosiaster', Ambrose, Cyprian and others—the Puritans believed that the Greek of Romans 5:12 should be translated *in quo omnes peccaverunt*, 'in whom all have sinned'. The Authorised Version translates as 'for that'. The Geneva Bible translated from the Latin, 'Wherefore, as by one man sinne entered into the world, and death by sin and so death went over all men in whom all men have sinned...', to which a footnote was added, 'From Adam, in whom all have sinned, both guiltinesse and death (which is the punishment of the guiltinesse), came upon all.' This may be compared to the Authorised Version (1662), 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'.

John Owen, aware of the AV rendering, still decides for 'in whom'. In his *Vindiciae Evangelicae*² he argues that even if you accept the AV translation, the truth of original sin is still taught, especially if taken in the context of the whole chapter. Certainly, the rendering 'in whom' suits the Calvinist position well as it emphasises original sin as culpability rather than as weakness or a bias inherited from Adam. Man is born culpable, and therefore under God's wrath, and it is by God's mercy and sovereign grace that some are elected out of this culpable mass

¹ **William Perkins** (1558-1602): Educated, Christ College, Cambridge—fellow to 1595. Patristic scholar. Lecturer at Gt. St. Andrews, Cambridge to his death. Sympathetic to Presbyterianism. Theological writings: *A Golden Chaine* (1590). Wrote on predestination and covenant theology. His writings on predestination caused Arminius to reply. **John Owen** (1616-1683): Educated, Queen's, Oxford. First parish, Fordham in Essex-1643. A moderate Presbyterian. In his next parish formed a gathered congregation. 1651- Cromwell appointed him Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. 1652-57 - Vice-Chancellor of Oxford. Chief architect of the Cromwellian State Church. Ejected from Christ Church in 1660; became a nonconformist pastor. Writings: *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, 1655(?), and *Display of Arminianism*, 1642. **Thomas Watson** (1620-1686): Educated, Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Rector of St. Stephen's Walbrook, London; ejected, 1662. Preached in conventicles until the Declaration of Indulgence (1672), when he licensed Crosby Hall, London for preaching. Writings: *Body of Divinity* (1692). **John Flavel** (ob 1691): Educated, University College, Oxford. Curate, Diptford, Devon. Ejected, 1662. Nonconformist. Helped to promote union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians in Devon.

² Owen, John, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, Oxford 1655(?), 147.

to be forgiven and obtain salvation. Earlier, and more optimistic, Christian teaching finds no place in the Puritan theology of original sin.

All mankind is in the loins of Adam

This identification of the whole of humanity with Adam, and therefore with his sin, is further argued from the concept of all mankind being in the loins of Adam, a concept given cogency by the translation 'in whom'. John Flavel has a catechism in which he answers the question, 'How can we be guilty of Adam's first sin?' His answer is, 'because Adam sinned not only as a single but also as a public person and representative of all mankind'. The next question is, 'How else came we under this guilt?'; and the answer, 'we are guilty of his sin by generation for we were in his loins, as treason stains the blood of the posterity or parents' leprosy their children.'³

Thomas Watson similarly expounds this view: 'All of us sinned in Adam because we were part of Adam'. When asked how it was that when one of the angels sinned the other angels did not fall also, Watson replies that the cases are different. In man's case each individual is linked to Adam when he fell: 'When he sinned, we sinned'. As poison is passed from a fountain to a cistern, so Adam's sin, called by Watson his concupiscence, passed along to all future people.⁴ The sense of the solidarity of the human race is very strong in the Puritans as far as original sin is concerned, though when it comes to the ultimate destiny of man, there is a sharp divide caused by God's decree not to save all of this same mass of humanity.

In his *Display of Arminianism*,⁵ Owen faces this issue of the culpability of all mankind in Adam by insisting that Adam's voluntary sin is imputed to us. 'We were all in him (Adam) and had no other will but his'; and, again, 'As in him we sinned, so in him we had a will of sinning'. 'The scripture is clear that the sin of Adam is the sin of us all, not only by propagation and communication, but also by imputation of his actual transgression unto us all, his singular disobedience being by this means made ours'. Owen stresses the parallel between the imputation of the sin of the first Adam to all men and the imputation of the righteousness to believers of the last Adam, Christ:

Sicut ex Adamo in omnes redundavit Sic Christo per unum Adami-Christi.

Just as from Adam judgement abounded to all men unto condemnation by one transgression of Adam, so from Christ the grace of God abounded to all unto the justification of life by one righteous act of Christ. As Puritan theology stressed the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, this model is apt for

³ Flavel, John. *Works of John Flavel*, Vol 6 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 171f.

⁴ Watson, Thomas. *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 142-143.

⁵ Owen, John. 'Display of Arminianism', *The Works of John Owen*, Vol 10, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 73f.

them, particularly as the New Testament does see Christ as the second, or last, Adam in whom the effects of the Fall are reversed.

There was no following of the parallelism completely here, in that all (literally all) mankind fell by Adam's transgression but the *all* who benefit from the righteousness of Christ is not literally all mankind but only those who are in Christ. Yet the point is strongly made that God does not damn men for the imputed sin of Adam but for each person's voluntary act in him.

The place of original sin in the Puritan view of salvation and the nature of the church.

Sometimes the Puritans in their writings answer the objection that it was immoral for God to condemn people for what was not their own act, and apart from the general response that we are not to question God's authority, and that whatever God did was of necessity right. The view is generally held that because Adam sinned voluntarily, all mankind voluntarily sinned in him, wilfully rebelling, and that this rebellious nature is proved by the fact of experience that we do not naturally want to do God's will. Unlike the Catholics, the Puritans held that original sin must be repented of as being our voluntary act, as well as an inherited stain. But it must be noted that Owen says original sin is not *just* a question of the imputation of Adam's sin to us, but it has an inherent guilt of its own.

This strong assertion of the solidarity of the human race in the sin of Adam which the Puritans found in the doctrine of original sin is important, not only for their soteriology, but also for their ecclesiology. Their aggressive rejection of Arminianism and Separatism arose from their dread of Rome (which they felt Arminianism moved towards), but equally from their dread of individualism and the breaking up of their coherent system of salvation. They wanted to assert that man has no say at all in his salvation and what better doctrine could they have for this purpose than one which held that even as each person came into the world he or she came with a debt that they could not pay?

But, for their ecclesiology the doctrine of original sin is important, too. The church is composed of wheat and tares; only God knows who the elect are. This being so, the visible church must not be separated from society which must acknowledge God's rule in the world. All the Puritans we are considering were clergy of the Established church, and though some were forced out into non-conformism, the spirit of Puritanism adhered to the Calvinistic concept of the godly State. The medieval view of the integration of Church and Society is very much a part of Puritan ecclesiology—the doctrine of original sin strongly asserts this solidarity of all men.

Original sin and concupiscence

Concupiscence, which Watson uses to describe Adam's sin, is a great Puritan and Augustinian term. What did the Puritans mean by it? Watson sees it as the

positive effect of original sin. Not only does original sin, negatively, deprive us of our original righteousness, it also, positively, contaminates us as beauty is turned into leprosy. It is a defect as well as a contamination; as a horse that is lame cannot go without hobbling, so men cannot go straight in their walk before God. Watson lists the effects of concupiscence on our lives. It stops us worshipping God, it mars our duties ('we cannot write without blotting'), it sets our wills in rebellion against God, and spoils our judgement of what is right. This concupiscence is always at work in us and is the cause of actual sin in our lives.⁶

Original sin and the image of God in Man

Does this mean that there is no image of God left in Man after his fall in Adam? Unlike the medieval Schoolmen, who taught that Man's fall was from supernature to nature, the Puritans taught his fall was from nature to subnature. George Whitefield, the eighteenth century preacher in the Evangelical Revival and ardent disciple of the Puritans, would berate his crowd in the open air by telling them they were all but half-beast, half-devil without Christ. Yet this is not what the majority of Puritans held. The Puritans of the period we are considering followed Calvin in holding that although man was totally fallen in Adam, yet, somehow, some good things remained in human nature, even though those good things could not restore man to God. William Perkins asserts that original sin corrupted men's faculties—not their substance, but only their faculties—yet, even so, man is left with certain notions of good and evil, and a general awareness of God and morals. He has, in natural things, a free choice, but is impotent to do good, desiring and willing only evil.⁷ John Owen puts it this way: Man in his fallen condition has yet 'some weak and faint expressions of good and evil, reward and punishment', even though he is spiritually 'dead, blind, alienated from God, ignorant, dark and stubborn'.⁸

The escape from original sin

This corruption, inherent in all people by the propagation of original sin, is with us until we die. Thomas Watson taught that grace subdues sin but does not wholly remove it—as a tree is cut down, but the stump remains. We are dead to the guilt of sin as believers and the love of sin is crucified (Romans 6:11). But grace cannot expel sin from our lives completely, and we are only finally freed from its power at death. Because original sin *is* each man's own transgression, then damnation awaits all upon their birth. The only hope of escape is by regeneration in Christ which is granted only to the elect.⁹ Perkins, in *A Golden*

⁶ Watson, *A Body of Divinity*.

⁷ Perkins, William. 'A Golden Chaine', *The Works of William Perkins*, ed Ian Breward, (South Courtenay Press, 1970), Ch 12, 'On Original Sin'.

⁸ Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, 136.

⁹ Watson, *A Body of Divinity*.

Chaine (1590), writes: ‘Reprobates are either infants or men of riper age. In reprobate infants the execution of God’s decree is this: as soon as they are born, for the guilt of original sin and natural sin being left in God’s secret judgement unto themselves, they dying are rejected of God forever.’ Old reprobates are those who were called, had temporary faith and then fell away or who were never called at all.¹⁰

Puritan theology tied together the doctrines of original sin and reprobation. Original sin meant that all people are born damned, but it is clear some arrive at true faith; these are the elect and are destined for salvation; those who do not arrive at true faith remain where they were before, damned by original sin, a sin which they actually sinned in Adam. The fact that they did not believe shows that God had not elected to lift them out of their sin and no injustice can be levelled at God for the reprobate are responsible for their sins. All this from the ‘in quo’ of Augustine.

Infant baptism and original sin

If all are born in original sin, how can elect infants be freed from it? The answer comes with the Puritans’ strong attachment to infant baptism. The vast majority of Puritans were paedobaptists and belonged to the established church, even though many were forced out of it by holding to their reforming views. Even when forced out, Puritan clergy did not become Anabaptists.

John Owen’s doctrine of infant baptism went like this.¹¹ Infants are made for and are capable of eternal glory or misery.

1. All infants are born in a state of sin wherein they are spiritually dead and under the curse.
2. Unless they are regenerated, they must all perish.
3. Infants who die in infancy have the grace of regeneration, ‘and consequently as good a right unto baptism as believers themselves’.
4. But, infant baptism is only proper for children of believing parents (or at least one parent) who, by definition, are in covenant with God.
5. What about infants who die without baptism, ‘the ordinary means of waiving the punishment due to this pollution?’ Owen believes that God saves such infants
 - a. by their godly parents lives through the covenant God has made with them and their ‘seed’,
 - b. by his grace of election whereby even infants of unsaved parents may be saved.

¹⁰ Perkins, Chapter 53.

¹¹ Owen, ‘Of Infant Baptism and Dipping’, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol 16, 258f.

Owen resorts to natural justice in arguing that God must deal with children of parents in covenant, for infants themselves are not capable of doing good or evil. He draws on 1 Corinthians 7:14 and Acts 2:38-39 to present this point, and argues that Genesis 17:9-12, the covenant of circumcision, prefigures the covenant of infant baptism. Perkins speaks of infant baptism as engrafting a child into Christ, being washed with water in the name of the Trinity.¹²

Federal theology and original sin

Covenant (or federal) theology is central to a Puritan exposition of the doctrines of grace. The earliest expression of covenant theology is found in William Tyndale, who drew heavily on Luther and Calvin's doctrine of covenant, and it is taken further by Puritans such as Perkins. The footnote in the Geneva Bible to Genesis 9:9 ('Beholde, I even I, establish my covenant with you and your seed after you') reads:

The children which are not yet borne, are comprehended in God's covenant made with their fathers.

In their concept of covenant the Puritans contrasted two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are seals of the new covenant God has made with believers through Christ. One enters into the new covenant by repentance and faith (or, in the case of infants, by baptism). In the old covenant, Perkins maintains, man offers something to God; in the new, he only receives. He writes:

Mankind is fully redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ—so that now, for all such as repent and believe in Christ Jesus there is prepared a full remission of all their sins, together with salvation and life everlasting.¹³

Infants can enter this covenant because of the faith of their parents.

So, then the faith of the parents maketh those their children to be accounted in the covenant, which, by reason of their age, do not yet actually believe.¹⁴

Scriptures used to teach original sin

The Puritans used some dozen or so main scriptures to back up their doctrine of original sin:

New Testament: John 3:3, 3:6; Acts 22:16; Romans 5:12, 5:18-19; 7:18; 1 Corinthians 7:14; 15:22; Ephesians 2:3; 1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:5; Revelation 21:27.

Old Testament: Genesis 2:17; Job 14:4; Psalm 51:5

¹²Perkins, 'A Golden Chaine', Ch 33.

¹³Ibid, Ch 21.

¹⁴Ibid, Ch 33.

The pastoral use of the doctrine of original sin

The Puritans were nothing if they were not practical in their theology and they make their doctrine of original sin have bearing on the counsel pastors should give to the godly. Most Puritan writers were practical pastors.

Watson sees original sin as being allowed by God to remain in us to give us the opportunity for grace to triumph over evil. ‘...[T]hough grace cannot expel sin it can repel it’. Moreover, the distress it causes us makes us long for heaven.¹⁵

Flavel learns from the doctrine of original sin that it should help us to bear patiently the miseries we see in our children and face their deaths without murmuring. It also teaches humility and provokes parents to seek the conversion of their children ‘who draw sin from them’, and it teaches us the necessity of regeneration.¹⁶

Pastors could counsel their flocks to avoid Adam’s sin which had such dire consequences for the whole human race. Owen saw Adam’s sin to be in pride or infidelity.¹⁷ Watson has a long list of sins which he sees in Adam’s transgression: unbelief, ingratitude, discontent, pride, disobedience, curiosity, wantonness, sacrilege, presumption, and murder (for in his sin Adam murdered his posterity.)¹⁸

God’s will and the doctrine of original sin

At the heart of Puritan theology is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God from which all follows and their doctrine of original sin is related, as everything else is, to that. As all Puritans believed the elect were predestined by God’s sovereign will to salvation, so Man’s fall into sin in Adam, the original sin by which he is condemned, was also ordained by the permissive will of God. Cryptically Perkins writes:

For we must not think that man’s fall was either by chance, or God not knowing it, or barely winking at it, or by his bare permission, or against his will: but rather miraculously, not without the will of God, and yet without all approbation of it.¹⁹

There you have the one question on which even Puritans did not dare to speculate. Certainly God could in no way be the author of sin, but equally, sin, and original sin, could not be done without his will. They are content, and so must we be, to inquire no more.

¹⁵Watson, *op cit*, 147.

¹⁶Flavel, *op cit*, 173.

¹⁷Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, 133.

¹⁸Watson, *op cit*, 140-142.

¹⁹Perkins, ‘A Golden Chaine’, Ch 11.