

The SBJT Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Tom J. Nettles, Kelly M. Kapic, Tom Schwanda, Ryan Kelly, and Ian Hugh Clary have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: FROM A BROAD HISTORICAL perspective, what benefits do you see for modern Christianity from Puritanism?

Tom J. Nettles: "By their fruits you shall know

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them," said Jesus. A candid examination of the fruit of Puritanism points to it as one of the most beneficial and perennial fruit-bearing trees in the Christian forest. The problems that it retained as a bilious hangover from the medieval Christianity are abundantly clear. It did not escape the state-churchism of so-called Christendom entirely and consequently some Puritan writings and actions showed an overly confident zeal that godly political structures would aid in establishing the Kingdom of God. Moreover, they

sought to justify repression of certain religious opinions by law and, in some instances, even believed that physical repression served a gospel

purpose. These hangers-on of the medieval synthesis, however, were not endemic to the doctrinal and experiential power of Puritanism and when historical development, specifically the Act of Uniformity in 1662, rendered their political ambitions a moot point, their true genius flourished.

What self-corrective resided within Puritanism? The logic of seeking a pure local church disciplined by standards of regeneration developed into arguments for *liberty of conscience* and a believers' church. Thomas Helwys, a Puritan layman, argued for believers' baptism only and liberty of conscience in *The Mystery of Iniquitie* prodding Puritans to give up the remnants of Antichrist and adopt the gospel logic of their own theology. Helwys died in the effort but rang a bell that still sounds. Christopher Blackwood, another devotee of Puritanism, did the same in *The Storming of Antichrist* when he said that the two errors still in need of correction were infant baptism and repression of conscience. Roger Williams, Puritan to the core, found the intolerance of Massachusetts Bay antithetical to the deep emphasis on divine

sovereignty in salvation, total depravity, effectual calling, and the effectual sacrifice of Christ for his people so zealously embraced by him and his Puritan friends. In *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* he championed liberty of conscience as the true implication of this theology. Eventually, by 1639, Williams adopted a Baptist ecclesiology as the only view of church life consistent with the new covenant way of recognizing and gathering together the people of God.

Puritanism provided the matrix from which *Baptist life* emerged. Small pockets of Puritans became convinced that their goal of reforming Anglicanism was impossible to attain. The Church of England had its ordinances and its ministry from Rome, they observed, and thus were impossible for the foundation of a pure church. This led to Separatism which led to forming the church of baptized believers only. The theology and the experience of grace promoted by Puritanism formed the earliest self-identity of Baptists. One cannot read the works of John Smyth, John Spilbury, William Kiffin, Benjamin Keach, Hercules Collins and others without seeing the conscious indebtedness to their Puritan friends even while they differed with them on the ecclesiological development of their theology. Samuel Pearce, that great promoter of missions, when writing of unity and love made a certain point by affirming, "But we must unite with the great Dr. Owen." Looking at the confessional and catechetical history of Baptists shows their purposeful identification with the doctrinal, and much of the ecclesiological, framework of Puritanism.

Baptist understanding of *worship* arose from the Puritan discussions of the regulative principle developed from the views of Zwingli and Calvin. While not providing an absolutely uniform understanding of the practice of corporate worship, they did have ongoing efforts to remove the superfluous and non-warranted elements on the basis of a common authority. Their discussions could be of much benefit to us today, employing, as Horton Davies wrote, "the sufficiency of Scripture as a

directory for worship." The alarm of the pure traditionalist and the destabilizing impact of "contemporary" worship practices might be minimized and brought to center by consistent reference to a common authority.

Another salutary influence of Puritanism is in the *Christ-centeredness* of theology. As John Owen pointed out, the post-lapsarian, ante-deluvian theology was all built on a covenant promise centered on the certain victory of a redeemer over Satan and the effects he wrought through tempting Eve. In the revealed promise of Gen 3:15, Christ is pre-figured, and Owen added, "This is He about whom this saving Word of God or evangelical promise was uttered." No group was more intense about the pre-eminence of the covenant of grace than were the Puritans; their insistence on this provides a hermeneutical framework unveiling the beautiful coherence of Scripture and within which all of Scripture may be understood. In addition, for the Puritans a true Christian orientation to the practice of theology was emphasized. The methods by which one may be seen as a master of secular arts, sciences, and philosophies will not do for the true theologian. As Owen wrote, "If you wish to be adept in this spiritual wisdom, you must daily cultivate a holy communion with God in the mystery of His gospel through the merits of Jesus Christ, and you must know by experience the power and efficiency of saving truths."

Puritan doctrine undergirded the most thorough and God-centered *spiritual awakenings*. Puritanism was the power behind the revival preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. A view of religious experience that can produce such irreplaceable and transcendently valuable works as *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* and *Religious Affections* and *Charity and its Fruits* and *The Nature of True Virtue* must be considered as among the most elevating and ennobling mental and spiritual phenomena of human history. Puritan views of conversion, assurance, and sanctification promoted an awakening theology of the purest sort that insinuated its influence into

American culture and thought in ways beyond full observation.

The influence of Puritanism on *preaching* also is powerful. Spurgeon, the “Prince of Preachers,” revealed his indebtedness to the Puritans in manifold ways. His knowledge of their literature and the fascinating distinctions in their personal writings, experiences, and styles of ministry was remarkable. From Bunyan to Owen and myriads in between, Spurgeon was aware of the literature and the peculiar spiritual benefit of each writer. His own preaching ministry was an unceasing torrent of Puritan insights into doctrine, conversion, holiness, evangelism, pastoral theology, and pastoral ministry. Not by the unfolding of any one Puritan in particular, but by his absorption of their entire manner of life and ministry, Spurgeon dominated the evangelical pulpit of the last half on the nineteenth century. Light a candle to any of his thousands of printed sermons and soon the fragrance of Puritanism will fill the room. The modern recovery of interest in Puritans as spiritual guides is due in large part to one of the most earnest and influential preachers of the twentieth century, Martin Lloyd-Jones. A theology that can produce such pulpit giants as these is well worth a serious investment of our own time.

Finally, they were masters of the *spiritual life*. A couple of days spent with Packer’s *A Quest for Godliness* and Joel Beeke’s *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* will be a transforming experience. Not only do subjects like meditation, conscience, commu-

nion with God, prayer, worship, assurance, cultivation of holiness, and profitable use of the Lord’s day take on peculiar importance but the experiential power of justification, atonement, the inspiration of Scripture, and total depravity gives depth to one’s daily walk in the Spirit. In Puritanism we find all these things—and more—wed with intellectual power, rigorous theological insight, pastoral faith-

fulness, and humble submission to the triune God.

SBJT: What are some encouragements and also cautions you might give to folks who want to read the Puritans?

Kelly M. Kopic: One of the most surprising and encouraging signs I see within evangelicalism is the rediscovery of the importance of learning from history. There are signs that more and more evangelicals are reading authors from all periods of church history, and not merely the trendy writers of today. For example, interest in Patristic texts is booming, as North American Christians are finding that the theological questions and pastoral struggles of those early centuries remain relevant in our day.

Yet even more than these ancient leaders of the Church, the Puritans are drawing the attention of evangelicals. Names such as John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, John Bunyan, Thomas Goodwin, Richard Sibbes, Richard Baxter, and Thomas Boston are not only better known now, but also more widely read. Publishing houses are printing more and more quality republications and new editions of these and other Puritan authors. Furthermore, thoughtful monographs and pastoral books growing out of engagement with Puritan classics are arriving off the press far more regularly now, thus adding to our knowledge and appreciation for what this particular expression of Protestantism has to offer in the story of Christian spirituality.

With this in mind, let me offer just a few words to encourage people to read these faithful masters. Here are just a few samples of what you will discover—or be reminded of—as you read the Puritans.

The glory of God’s justifying and freeing grace in Christ by his Spirit. The best of Puritan writings continually remind their readers of sinful humanity’s plight before the holy God. This acknowledgment of painful human sinfulness gives them an extraordinary appreciation for God’s radical grace. We are often tempted to downplay human sin in order to highlight God’s love, but the

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Puritans argued that you actually misunderstand or pervert God's love if you neglect to understand the depth of human rebellion against God. But with that understanding, the wonder of the divine humiliation in the coming of the Son and the cost of the cross become gloriously unnerving. We are set free in God's love and grace as embodied and secured in Jesus Christ. Such discovery of the grandeur of redemption is experienced only in the power of God's life-giving Spirit.

Don't pit human agency against divine sovereignty. It is always a struggle for believers to hold together the biblical truths of the Lord's sovereign rule and also the responsibility of human actions. We tend to pit sovereignty and responsibility against one another, and, depending upon one's preference, we choose which perspective resonates most deeply with us. But the best of the Puritan authors refused to choose, instead holding up the tension found in scripture. Thus, at times it is uncomfortable to hear them emphasize the importance of human response and work, while at other times they lean so heavily upon divine governance of this world that it can almost sound like our actions are irrelevant. Each emphasis can slip into its characteristic fatal flaw, either by letting human responsibility lead to a form of "works righteousness" or by letting divine sovereignty induce a stoic fatalism. But at their best, Puritans preserve human dignity as well as confidence that God can be trusted as the Sovereign Lord. Such a paradoxical perspective reflects the mood of scripture and remains hugely relevant for our own day. The Puritans can help us recapture this dynamic truth.

Take human psychology seriously as you engage in pastoral care. Puritan pastors were known as physicians of the soul. Their great concern was for the spiritual health of their congregants. One of the ways they ministered to their people was by spending time with them, often in their own homes, talking and praying over the kitchen table. They listened and heard the particular struggles and personalities of their people. Consequently, they entered into the pulpit as informed

preachers, able to apply the word faithfully to those God gathered. They did not try to make every sermon hit everyone in the congregation equally, but they consciously aimed to make sure they spoke in ways that were relevant to everyone in the congregation over the course of a period of time. In this way they slowly counseled the whole congregation through their sermons. This included speaking in ways that made sense to the different dispositions that one discovered in the congregation. Some parishioners struggled with melancholy, others with a lack of passion for Christ, and still others were beset with nagging doubts. By knowing their people Puritan leaders discovered how best to apply God's word to their lives.

Before I conclude, however, let me also add a brief note of caution as you read the Puritans. I mention these because through the years I have witnessed believers who discover the Puritans sometimes end up struggling with one of the following.

Don't let sobriety and introspection replace your zeal for life in God's Kingdom. The Puritans took their faith as seriously as possible, and this is wisdom. However, sometimes this also resulted in an overemphasis on self-reflection and somberness, driven by unending introspection. Yes, Leland Ryken is correct to argue that the Puritans were not as grave as they are sometimes presented. But there is a lingering spirit of self-analysis that one learns from the Puritans. This can be helpful to better learn the complexity of your own heart, but it can also become paralyzing. Far too often I have read of Puritans weighed down unnecessarily with doubts and lack of assurance. While I can't argue it here, I believe that one of the reasons so many Puritan authors became such able spiritual directors is because they were dealing with some of the mess that this tradition itself fostered.

Don't try to recreate the seventeenth century. It should be obvious, but I must mention it. Far too often I find that when Christians begin to drink deeply from the well of Puritanism, they end

up trying to re-inhabit the seventeenth century. Consequently, this tends to make them detached and incredibly judgmental of our own day. The result is marginalization, not for the sake of the gospel, but because one is trying to import a distant past into the present. No, it is far better to be critical readers of the Puritans, even those we most respect. We do not need to dress or talk like them in order to grow from their insights. Learn as much as you can, be as challenged as possible, but also recognize they speak to us from a foreign time and culture. They offer brilliant contributions but also unexpected blind spots. Take up, read, delight, but also remember that they also had the blind spots of their own time.

There is far greater diversity among the Puritans than people realize. Even in this brief forum, I have spoken of “the Puritans,” as if that represents a monolithic group. In truth, there is far greater breadth and disagreements among the Puritans than most people know. If one reads any scholarly treatments of this movement, you quickly discover that it is hard to even come up with an agreed upon definition of “puritanism.” They had all kinds of theological, political, and ecclesial disagreements among them. Our selective republication of puritan works probably lends itself to this misperception, since we tend to publish the works that resonate with our perspective,

and neglect the ones that don’t. Even someone like Richard Baxter is far more complicated than contemporary readers tend to know. For instance, though people know him for his famed work, “The Reformed Pastor,” they don’t often realize the fierce disagreements that Baxter and Owen had because they are unaware of so many of Baxter’s more controversial writings. They don’t know this because those writings are not reprinted. In truth, Puritanism is not a monolithic movement, but it is a tree

with various branches reaching out in different directions and blossoming at various stages.

In the end I pray that far more pastors and lay-people become familiar with the theological and pastoral wisdom offered by the Puritans. Time spent learning from some of these masters can change people’s lives—I have seen it happen time and again. But we learn from them not as impeccable gurus, but as wise fellow journeyman who took careful notes as they walked the path ahead of us. Let us praise God for the breathtaking vistas of God’s glory they recorded for us, and let us learn from some of their own struggles along the way.

SBJT: Isaac Ambrose is not a household name among evangelicals. Who is he and why is he important for us to know today?

Tom Schwanda: The Puritans are experiencing a resurgence of interest, at least in some circles today. While the names of Richard Sibbes, John Owen, and Richard Baxter, among others, are likely to be known, others have not received much attention. Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664) falls in this second category. This is unfortunate since he has much to teach the contemporary church. Ambrose was raised in Lancashire, England, and educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, in preparation for his ministry in the Church of England. He served as one of the King’s preachers. This was a select group of four itinerant preachers who were originally charged with preaching the Reformation doctrines in a region that was strongly Roman Catholic and, therefore, quite resistant to the Protestant emphasis on grace. After serving briefly in two smaller congregations Ambrose became the pastor at St. Johns Church, Preston, in c.1640. He remained there until c.1657 when he moved to the more obscure location farther north in Garstang. Ambrose actively participated in the efforts to establish Presbyterianism in his region and experienced the common resistance and struggles of being a nonconformist minister including being ejected from his pulpit by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. Early sources often recognize Ambrose’s

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unusual practice of taking an annual month-long retreat in the woods each May. Even though he was married and had three children he would retire to review his diary, study Scripture, and meditate upon various aspects of his life and ministry. Ambrose is best known today for his massive work *Looking Unto Jesus* that traces the life of Jesus Christ from his incarnation until his second coming. Another significant work is *Media* that examines the use of spiritual disciplines in the process of sanctification.

Why does Isaac Ambrose matter today? There are at least three specific lessons that he offers. First, union with Christ is central to his theology. Although many Protestants affirm the importance of union with Christ as the beginning of a person's relationship with God, contemporary Evangelicals rarely understand this as fully as Ambrose did. The result is that we tend to focus upon the forensic theme of justification with little regard for the relational dimension and fellowship with God. This neglects, as Ambrose contended, a proper theology of union and communion with Christ that he and other Puritans often called spiritual marriage. Not only does Jesus save and forgive a person's sins, he also draws that individual into a deepening intimacy with the Trinity. Therefore, Ambrose declares, "Union is the ground of our communion with Christ; and the nearer our union, the greater our communion" (*Looking Unto Jesus* [1658], 913). The contemporary church would greatly benefit from expanding its understanding of union with Christ to include the full doctrine of communion or spiritual marriage with Christ. This would increase the opportunity for enjoying the relational intimacy that Jesus offers to all who will embrace it. That would further enable people to join with Ambrose in declaring, "Oh it's an happy thing to have Christ dwell in our hearts, and for us to lodge in Christ's bosom! Oh its an happy thing to maintain a reciprocal communication of affairs betwixt Christ and our souls!" (*Looking Unto Jesus*, 40).

Second, Ambrose can guide Christians in

developing a biblical theology of Christian experience. There is incredible spiritual hunger today and unfortunately many people gravitate to any experience that is appealing without discerning its integrity or soundness of doctrine. Ambrose recognized the critical importance of integrating the cognitive or head knowledge with the affective or heart knowledge. Clearly, he would be alarmed to discover the growing tendency among some sections of the evangelical church to reduce or even ignore the importance of Scripture or over emphasizing the intellect to the neglect of the affections. The structure of *Looking Unto Jesus* vividly illustrates Ambrose's approach. As he explores each dimension of Jesus' ministry he first establishes the biblical foundation for it and then employs soliloquy, or preaching to one's self, to stir up the affections so as to experience that aspect of Christ's life. This is further reinforced by the familiar emphasis within Puritanism of Word and Spirit. God graciously speaks to us through the objective truth of Scripture and guides us in understanding it through the subjective experience of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Ambrose reminds readers, "if the Spirit of Christ come along with the Word, it will rouse hearts, raise spirits, work wonders" (*Looking Unto Jesus*, 723).

Recovering a contemplative piety is the third insight from Ambrose. According to him contemplation is "soul recreation" in which a person is continually looking at or beholding Jesus and therefore, one of the significant ways in which a person can enjoy God. Ambrose's conviction was that heavenly meditation was one of the primary spiritual practices for cultivating one's relationship with God. *Looking Unto Jesus* confirms the obvious importance of this for Ambrose and perhaps that book's popularity was due in part to people's hunger to learn how to meditate on heaven. Moreover this desire for heaven was not an escape or withdrawal from the many dangers the English Puritans faced in the seventeenth-century. Rather, since they had entered into spiritual marriage with Jesus they intensely desired the consum-

mation of what they had already tasted in part on earth. Therefore, the practice of looking unto Jesus or heavenly meditation was a contemplative expression of love and grateful gazing upon Jesus. Further, for Ambrose contemplation was Word-centered, Christ-focused, Spirit-empowered, and God-glorified. Perhaps the recovery of Ambrose's contemplative piety today faces its greatest challenge in the Western world where people are so attached to their earthly possessions that the prospects of heaven are not that compelling. Therefore, Ambrose can direct readers to "get we into our hearts an habit of more heavenly-mindedness, by much exercise, and intercourse, and acquaintance with God, by often contemplation, and foretaste of the sweetness, glory, and eternity of those mansions above" (*Media* (1657), 55).

Clearly Isaac Ambrose matters today just as he did in the seventeenth-century because he can guide the way to a more robust and experiential faith that emphasizes both the intellect and affective dimensions of piety and creates a relationship of intimacy that takes great delight and enjoyment in God.

SBJT: John Owen has been referred to as "Prince of the Puritans." Why? What was unique, if anything, about his contribution to the movement?

Ryan Kelly: I suppose I should start with a rather picky point. Though "Prince of the Puritans" is a common way to refer to John Owen today (a quick search of the web demonstrates this well), I have

not yet been able to determine exactly who first referred to Owen in this way. It is the subtitle of Andrew Thomason's biography of Owen—at least in today's reprints (*John Owen: Prince of the Puritans* [Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2004]). But in the 1850s, when it was first written to be included in *The Works of John Owen*, it was simply named "The Life of Dr. Owen,"

and in no place did it use this lofty title. It may be C. H. Spurgeon's commendation of Owen that comes closest. "It is unnecessary to say that he is the prince of divines," Spurgeon wrote of Owen in 1867 (*Commenting and Commentaries* [London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867], 103). While there was certainly high praise for Owen long before this, apparently it is Spurgeon's language that has given birth to this moniker, which today is oft-repeated and never footnoted.

Nevertheless, wording aside, there have been many claims to Owen's eminence, from his own day to the present. And that is the point of the question: is it accurate to assign more prominence to Owen among the many other great saints of his time?

In many ways, Owen was not that unique for his day. This is not simply playing the contrarian. It is important to emphasize that he was one of many "hotter sort of Protestants;" one of many who bemoaned that the church in England was still "halfly reformed." Owen's theology was certainly not unique, but was one representative within the broader movement of Reformed Orthodoxy. Many of his contemporaries had similar influence—some with even more political clout and others with seemingly more effective preaching. It is also necessary to note that Owen had his critics. Many of these critics, not surprisingly, strongly disagreed with his theology. But he also faced some disparagement for his persona: some thought he was too overbearing, too stern; and many more thought his knee-high leather boots and cocked hat were far too ostentatious for a university Vice-Chancellor. Even today, he's as famous (or infamous) for his long and lumbering writing style as much as almost anything else—a reputation that Owen seems to have garnered even in his own day.

All of that being said, I do think there are at least three ways in which Owen was particularly important for his time and in the church since.

(1) His literary output was unique for its volume, diversity, and importance. The sheer mag-

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nitude of material Owen produced is staggering, especially when we today consider that it was under candlelight, with quill pen, and alongside many competitions for time and concentration (e.g., civil war, poor health, family deaths, persecution, ecclesiastical-political leadership, running an almost decimated Oxford University, etc.). His *Works* stretch twenty-three volumes in the still-in-print Banner of Truth edition, twenty-four volumes in the 1850-55 edition. A few of Owen's contemporaries produced a similar amount of writing, such as Thomas Manton whose works reach twenty-two volumes, but, in the case of Manton, the majority of his works are published sermons. Owen's *Works* contain two volumes of Parliamentary sermons, but ten-fold are the significant works of polemics, doctrinal treatise, practical theology, and one massive commentary on Hebrews with over 1,000 pages of prefatory material and 2,500 pages of commentary (vols. 17-23 in the Banner edition). This and several other works have proven to be unique contributions to the church. His several works on Reformed spirituality have become somewhat movement-defining (vols. 1, 2, and 4). Abraham Kuyper thought that Owen's massive work on the Holy Spirit (vol. 3) was unparalleled. Of course, even those who disagree with Owen's view of particular redemption know that it is unavoidable to interact with the standard-bearer, *The Death of Death* (vol. 10). Owen attempted at least one work on the nature and structure of theology. This Latin work, *Theologoumena Pantadapa* (1661), is sadly not included in the Banner edition of *Works*, though there is a paraphrastic English translation (*Biblical Theology* [Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994]). There are certainly some forgettable sections (one that defends the inspiration of the Masoretic vowel points); it is nevertheless an important and often overlooked representative of seventeenth-century "Federal Theology"—a biblical-historical model of theological organization. In short, the enormity, variety, and effect of Owen's work stands out in his day—or any day for that matter.

(2) Owen was a prominent figure in the very "Puritan-esque" times of England's Revolution and Restoration. He preached to Parliament the day after the King was executed for treason. With the King out of the way, the army and Parliament leaned heavily in the Puritan-direction; thus, the 1650s looked to be an unprecedented time to implement many Puritan ideals. Owen enjoyed a unique relationship with Oliver Cromwell, functioning as a leading advisor to the Lord Protector on the complex and ever-changing ecclesiastical-political climate. Indeed, Owen was one of only a handful to construct several legislative proposals for settling a state church during the Protectorate—one that would be healthy, godly, effective, and uncoercive. All the while, Owen was both Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and Dean of one of its leading colleges, Christ Church. For almost a decade, Owen had the charge of restoring order and glory to England's oldest university. He was also increasingly a leading figure of the growing movement of Congregational churches in England (and America). This leadership became more apparent and more needed when in 1662 the Independents were ejected from their churches and forbidden to preach publicly. Many Puritans, like John Bunyan, suffered years of imprisonment. Though Owen preached and conducted house meetings during these days, he did not face similar persecution (likely because of the already well-established respect he had broadly earned). But Owen did not take such freedom for granted: he constantly pleaded for the release of his imprisoned brethren, wrote many defenses of Reformed non-conformity, repeatedly appealed to the King for liberty, and gave financial aid to many persecuted Puritans and their families. In these latter days, he was offered the presidency of Harvard and the pastorate of the highly-esteemed First Congregational Church of Boston, but he turned them down to remain in his diverse, needed work in England. Therefore, it is an understatement to say that Owen had his fingers in many pies. Whether literary, pastoral, theological, political, academic/

educational, or social, his efforts were indeed diverse and he held a prominent place in each. He was not just a “jack of all trades,” but more like a “master of many.” And, whether the Puritans were “in season” (Revolution) or “out of season” (Restoration), he was not only faithful but prominent.

(3) The influence of Owen’s life and writing is also quite telling. He has not enjoyed the notoriety of a Luther, Calvin, or Edwards, but it is difficult to think of any contemporary of Owen who has had a broader and longer lasting influence. A few, such as Thomas Goodwin, were indeed very significant in the mid-seventeenth-century, but they have not had the same impact on the centuries to follow. Conversely, Owen has been the focus of approximately 30 books and dissertations over the last 20 years. Four significant scholarly works on Owen were published in 2008 alone. More than a few scholars have a major academic work on Owen in process. And, of course, he’s not just of interest to scholars. His practical writings are as widely enjoyed as ever, thanks in part to the modern, unabridged versions edited by Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor (*Overcoming Sin and Temptation* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2006] and *Communion with the Triune God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2007]). Owen’s stock seems to be rightly on the rise, further confirming Spurgeon’s commendation of more than a century ago.

SBJT: How did James Ussher reconcile his Puritan convictions with loyalty to the Anglican Church?

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Ian Hugh Clary: If the name James Ussher (1581-1656) is familiar it is likely due to his chronological conclusion that the world was created in 4004 BC. While some may sneer at such calculations, the fact that his date was accepted amongst a host of others offered across Renaissance Europe is a testimony to Ussher’s importance as an historian. Before answering

the question of his ecclesiological convictions it is worth reflecting for a moment on Ussher’s life.

Born in Dublin, Ussher studied at the city’s newly-chartered Trinity College where he received a Puritan education. In 1607, after obtaining a Bachelor of Divinity he became lecturer of theological controversies at his *alma mater*, expending much of his energy rebutting Jesuit challenges to Protestantism. His first publication in 1613 defended the succession of the Church of Ireland. Throughout his career Ussher maintained a prolific scholarly output, even when engaged in political affairs later in life. In the nineteenth-century his *Works* were collected and published in seventeen volumes. His interests ranged from theology, patristic and British history, biblical chronology, textual criticism, and church government.

A number of his writings retain a level of influence. In 1615 he was a key member of the Convocation that drafted the Irish Articles, a Calvinistic statement of faith that sought to supplement England’s Thirty-Nine Articles. Of them John Murray said, “[T]he covenant theology of the Irish Articles laid the foundation for the superstructure erected by the Westminster Divines.” Ussher also collected a common-place book known as *A Body of Divinity* (1645) of which A. A. Hodge claimed, “[H]ad more to do in forming the Catechism and Confession of Faith than any other book in the world.” The nineteenth-century biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot called Ussher’s work on the letters of Ignatius of Antioch “critical genius”—Ussher had determined the veracity of six of the seven letters of the middle recension.

Ussher was not an ivory-tower theologian but was involved in the affairs of the church. He quickly moved up the ecclesiastical ladder becoming Archbishop of Armagh in 1625 making him Primate over the Church of Ireland. Ussher saw his role in terms of setting the Irish Church apart from its English sister. However, due to his *jure divino* (by divine law) political philosophy Ussher sided with the crown during the Civil Wars. In spite of this, his standing amongst the Reformed

orthodox kept him within the purview of the Puritan Parliament, who sought to win him to their cause. While maintaining cordial relations, Ussher declined offers to attend the Westminster Assembly deeming it an unlawful gathering. When Charles I was executed in 1649, Ussher fainted at the site of God's anointed put to death. During the Interregnum Ussher put his polemical pen to rest and returned to biblical chronology, an interest since student days at Trinity. His final theological testimony is the justly-famous *Annals of the World* (1650-54).

Before considering Ussher's Puritanism in relation to his office in the Established Church, some clarification is in order. First, the word Puritan is widely debated. In the twentieth-century a number of scholars argued that Puritanism was distinct from "Anglicanism." The work of Patrick Collinson, however, has shown that a Puritan was a "hotter sort of Protestant," distinguished more by godly zeal than denominational affiliation. The definition presupposed here understands the Puritan as one who reacted against medieval forms of worship by seeking further reform of the church; was zealous for evangelism and discipleship; stood in the stream of catholic theology while maintaining the maxims of the Reformation; and, strove to magnify God in his or her life through personal holiness. Second, there has also been some debate as to whether Ussher was a Puritan. In *The Irish Puritans* (Darlington, 2003), Crawford Gribben argued that Ussher was, while Alan Ford is not as committed in his *James Ussher* (Oxford, 2007). Yet, if Collinson's statement about Puritans as Protestants of a hotter sort is true, and the definition above stands, then there is no reason to see why Ussher is not suited to the name. This is relevant to our discussion in that Collinson rightly sees little to distinguish a Puritan from the Established Church because many Puritans conformed. Ussher's Puritanism is not any more incongruous to his episcopalianism than Richard Sibbes' or John Preston's. The question relative to Ussher's context is how he related to Protestantism of a dif-

ferent ecclesiological stripe. This can be answered in terms of his ecclesiastical politick and writings.

As Primate, Ussher maintained a "don't ask, don't tell" policy when it came to exiled Presbyterians ministering in the Church of Ireland, especially the Ulster Plantation. He did not require strict conformity to the forms of liturgy that had been established in England. The Irish Church was desperate for good clergy, and the influx of Scottish Presbyterians provided much needed support. Ussher's operating principle was toleration and he was open to receive their services. After the arrival of Laudian agents in Ireland Ussher's program would dissipate, but his mediating ecclesiology would continue to be expressed.

After the 1641 Uprising in Ireland, Ussher found himself exiled in England. The climate of debate there had much to do with ecclesiology and Ussher was appealed to by conformist and non-conformist alike. As a mediating position, Ussher developed what he called "reduced episcopacy" in *The Reduction of Episcopacy* (1656). In it Ussher maintained the role of bishops, yet combined them with ministerial synods; a presbyterian-episcopal reconciliation of sorts. He based his argument on patristic ecclesiology. Ultimately Ussher's views were not adhered to which contributed to a further rise in nonconformity after the Restoration and finally the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

So brief an introduction as this gives at least some indication that while Ussher did not compromise his beliefs, he nevertheless sought to incorporate differing views within the bounds of orthodoxy. He was what one may call a congenial man of conviction. There is much to learn from James Ussher, yet scholarship on him is minimal. Further explorations of his historiography, his interpretation of the Pelagian controversy, his text-critical genius, to name a few, would be welcome in the slowly growing Ussherian corpus.