

Preparationism

Introduction

Those who have read my writings know of my love for the Puritans whom I regard as great men of God, in general. They were not only devoted to God and to His Son, but they were men steeped in the word of God with a great ability to distil what it taught and pass it on to men.

To modern eyes their writing style is somewhat prolix. It is common, especially in John Owen, to find a paragraph that covers more than a page containing sentences that cover many lines. However, it is worth persevering because their writings are full of jewels.

The Puritans were also deeply concerned about conversion. They preached the Gospel with zeal and they cared about souls. However, it is here that there is a flaw in many Puritans. Some taught a doctrine called 'Preparationism' and it has found its way into modern churches, especially certain Grace Baptist churches.¹

Preparationism avers that one must avail oneself of the means of grace in order to facilitate conversion before regeneration has occurred. Thus one must pray, attend church services, listen to Gospel sermons until gradually one is convicted of sin, is illuminated about Christ and avails oneself of redeeming grace. It makes conversion a process, sometimes a lengthy process, that is prepared by good works.

This is a serious error; but when names as eminent as John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Richard Perkins and William Ames can be shown to teach this error, many Reformed people simply believe that the error must actually be true. Thus certain famous modern Baptist preachers teach exactly the same thing and carry much influence.²

Here I want to make a simple and brief examination of this without getting too technical.

What is the Gospel in essence?

Different people will offer different foundations of the Gospel as being the root issue. For example:

- Regeneration: but that is not conversion but something prior to it in divine terms.
- Faith: but many people claim to have believed when in fact it was merely assent and they are not true believers.
- Repentance: but repentance or contrition can be a dead work agitated by man.
- Calling on God: but many people mimic true calling on God, which are mere emotions.
- Receiving Christ: this is just a term for faith, see above.

There is something else that I believe is more crucial and always includes all the above. Furthermore, when this is absent even though the appearance of the above may be seen (such as belief) there is no real conversion.

¹ Notably Peter Masters in the London Metropolitan Tabernacle.

² For details on this see, Joel R Beeke & Paul M Smalley; 'Prepared by Grace, for Grace: the Puritans on God's ordinary way of leading sinners to Christ', Reformation Heritage Books, (2013), p1-2.

That factor is an inner yielding or submission to Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is a ceasing to be your own lord and submitting to the Lordship of God. It is turning from selfishness to turning to be utterly dependent upon God. This yielding includes a revelation of the glory of Christ; the sinner yields to someone he knows is God and master.

There are those today who ignore this matter completely in their Gospel presentation. Thus you have the 'Lordship controversy' in America where supposed evangelicals claim that a person can be saved but not necessarily submitted to Christ as Lord. I refute this completely. If there is no submission there is no salvation.

Thus the clear foundational factor in the Gospel acceptance is objective and subjective yielding to Christ and God. This is of the greatest import. When this occurs all the other items will occur as well (excepting regeneration which is prior and which cannot be seen – yielding is a fruit of regeneration).³

For a clear example of this note this famous case of conversion.

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us'. But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong'. Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom'. And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'. **Lk 23:39-43**

Was this thief saved? He certainly was because Jesus said that he would be with him in Paradise.

What is the key factor we see in this man that changed him? He submitted to Jesus, calling him Lord. Remember, this man yielded to the Lordship of Christ when all he saw was a prosecuted criminal hanging on a cross. A divine work had occurred in him (regeneration) that caused him to see that this hanging man was Lord and Christ. He also believed that Jesus was a king with a kingdom that he must be submitted to.

Now you can argue that this shows faith, and that is true, but the man said nothing about believing in Christ. There was no objective statement of belief in Christ, even as Saviour. The man simply asked to be remembered. He also showed faith in that he believed Christ would come with his kingdom. Nevertheless, the chief expression of his relationship with Christ was to call him Lord. He was yielding to Christ at the moment and faith, calling on God, repentance and receiving Christ were all going on at the same time because he submitted to Christ.

Yielding to Christ is the key factor in conversion. It underlies faith and repentance.

Without yielding there is no reason to believe in Christ. Without submission there is no purpose in repenting. Yielding comes first.

This is also proved in experience. How many times in the past few decades, have you seen people supposedly come to Christ and be told they were saved but they never really

³ To be clear on the foundations of conversion: the initial operation in man that starts objective salvation is regeneration; nothing happens until a person is born again. The most important heavenly factor is justification / adoption / definitive sanctification (which occur together), which follow faith. The most obvious objective features of conversion are faith and repentance, which follow regeneration. However, before faith and outward repentance occur there must be an inner yielding to God through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

submitted, bore no fruit, and later fell away? They could mimic faith. They could partially mimic repentance, but they didn't really yield.

Only those who yield to Christ's Lordship will bear fruit and obey Jesus' commandments.

Now this yielding can happen quite suddenly. Sometimes, like the thief on the cross, a person will suddenly be converted with little prior evidence that there was anything going on. Sometimes a person is converted so suddenly that they change from being a blaspheming sinner to a true saint within moments.

The conversion of Paul is a case in point. Paul changed from being a vile man that persecuted the church to yielding to Christ within seconds of seeing a vision.

And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads'. So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' Acts 9:5-6

Again it does not say that Saul (Paul) believed in Jesus, nor that he received Christ at that moment. What it says is that Saul called Jesus 'Lord' and asked what Jesus wanted him to do. He also yielded with trembling.

We know that Saul was converted at that moment because shortly afterwards Jesus called him 'mine'.⁴ Saul was a member of the body of Christ from the moment he submitted to Christ on the Damascus Road.

Again, no time for preparation. No intellectual teaching of the facts of the Gospel. No explanation about sin and the need for the blood of Christ for forgiveness. Saul simply yielded to Christ and made sense of it intellectually afterwards.

These cases, and many more, prove that there is no necessity for preparation. Yielding to Christ is the key matter.

This is why God, in the Old Testament, commanded people to 'turn'. Turning leads to repentance but first a person must turn. Turning is yielding; it is turning from being your own master to serving God. Turning (yielding) and repentance (changing your mind) are very closely connected. Yielding is submission to God; repentance is the decision to obey God and follow his directions in life.⁵ Yielding comes first.

What is taught by preparationists?⁶

In short it is that the Holy Spirit works on the hearts of unconverted sinners using the means of grace (the Bible, hearing sermons, prayer etc.) to slowly convict them of sin and the need for a Saviour. Their hearts are then prepared by the Spirit for faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus principles deriving from this are:

- Conversion is a process; sometimes a very slow process.
- God has an ordinary gracious way of working with all sinners as opposed to giving saving grace to the elect.

⁴ Acts 9:15, 'he is a chosen vessel of Mine'.

⁵ This is based on a change of mind, which is what the Greek word for 'repent' means.

⁶ For some of this I am indebted to the article: 'Is Puritan preparatory grace Reformed?' by Justin C Smidstra, *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, Vol 50. No. 1, November 2016.

- Preparatory grace (a bit like common grace or prevenient grace) is an antecedent work to regeneration.
- The development of this work is dependent upon the ‘improving’ of this grace, thus on the meritorious actions of men. Those who fail to improve (act upon) this grace fall away; those who do improve it are saved.
- Grace is commonly applied to men who turn out to be reprobates.

In this preparatory grace, God is constantly overcoming obstacles to faith in a totally depraved sinner and awakening a sense of guilt and sin and his need for forgiveness. Gradually the sinner is prepared for conversion and eventually believes and repents.

Doctrines weakened or denied by preparatory grace

- *Total Depravity*: Preparationists taught that though natural man is dead in sin he is not incapable of moral, rational, volitional activity (he has a soul); so far this is OK. But from this they taught that prior to receiving saving grace God performs preparatory acts in the heart of the natural man to prepare his depraved faculties for regeneration.
- *The state of man*: man is either dead in sins or alive to God; there is no other state. However, Preparatory grace posits another state in between the two, whereby a man is not fully depraved and is seeking God, but is not yet regenerated either.
- *Singular grace*: Preparationists teach that there are two types of grace i.e. one that prepares a sinner and one that saves.
- *Efficacious grace*: Preparationism teaches that there is a resistible grace when the Bible teaches that grace is irresistible.
- *It confounds the Ordo Salutis*:⁷ Regeneration is the foundation of salvation and conversion in a person. Preparationists put preparatory grace before regeneration.
- *It goes hand-in-hand with the Free Offer*: preparatory grace cannot exist without the Free Offer of the Gospel.⁸
- *Assurance*: if preparatory grace gives many of the benefits of regeneration (illumination, conviction of sin, loving Scripture, fearing God, seeking Christ etc.), how can a person tell whether he has experienced saving grace or preparatory grace? There is no way of knowing. This leads believers to fear that they are unregenerate.

Causes of these ideas

It is experience that drives these doctrines not theology or Biblical studies.

It is common to find, as the Puritans did, that many converts went through a period that seemed to be a preparation for conversion; indeed my own experience shows this. Often there will be days, weeks or even months whereby a seeking sinner goes through many difficulties and moral struggles until he finally yields to the Gospel. Some have called this period an ‘awakening’.

However, if we say that it is a special variant of grace doing this then we are on shaky ground. There is only one grace and that is the grace that comes to the elect to save and preserve. It is especially dangerous to suggest that this preparatory grace sometimes fails

⁷ The order of salvation. God’s decree involves: election, permission of the Fall, regeneration & calling, repentance & faith, justification, adoption & sanctification, perseverance, glorification. This is all founded upon the mystical union, the union of the elect in Christ established in eternity.

⁸ ‘The free offer of the gospel and preparation go together: the free offer reveals God’s willingness to save, and preparation makes men willing to heed the offer’; Beeke & Smalley, op. cit. p141-2. [The Free Offer is offering Christ as the Saviour of all men (including reprobates – denying election) based on a love of God for everyone (denying God’s attributes) and a universal atonement (denying Limited Atonement).]

and people are not subsequently converted. Then God has done something that failed – which is impossible.

The Reformed way to explain this preparatory period is that God has opened up the heart of a sinner through regeneration and the sinner is seeking his way until he finally submits his will and then experiences the gifts of faith and repentance. Often regeneration is immediately followed by conversion, but sometimes there is a noticeable gap between the two.

There is no Biblical evidence whatsoever for a grace that comes to sinners (including reprobates) to prepare them for a second wave of grace that saves.

Caveat

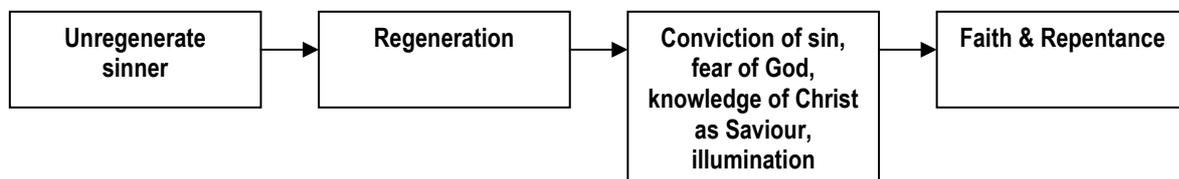
There has been a great deal of discussion, for and against, about the Puritan's application of this doctrine. Some have misrepresented the Puritans to make them say extreme things they did not say.⁹ The aforementioned book by Beeke & Smalley examines this in scholarly fashion.

Puritans that taught Preparationism were not closet Arminians or Amyraldians trying to bring in universalistic ideas.

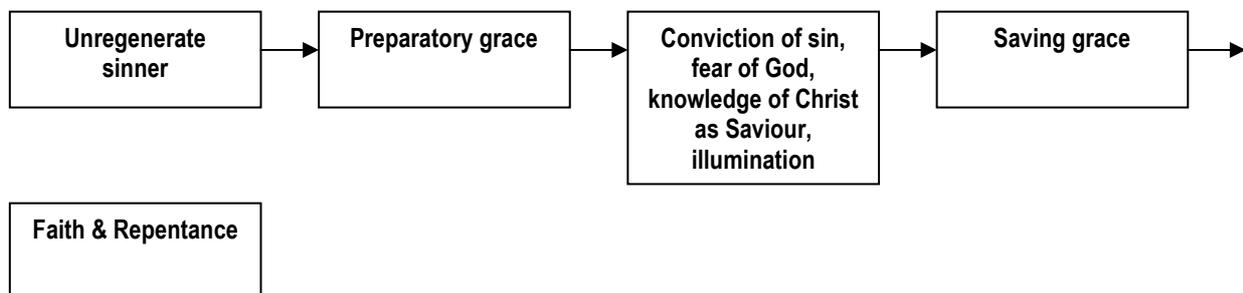
However, Beeke & Smalley are wrong to affirm that Preparationism is Reformed and Biblical.¹⁰ They speak from an American Reformed tradition that has lost its moorings in the main and is now Amyraldian, not Calvinistic. Preparationism is a perfect partner to Amyraldism.¹¹

Summary of the contrast between Preparationism and Reformed teaching

Reformed theology



Preparationism



⁹ Such as RT Kendall, Perry Miller, Norman Pettit. These aver that the Puritans distorted and worked against Calvin's actual teachings.

¹⁰ 'We authors believe that the doctrine of preparation generally received among the Puritans is Biblical, evangelical and Reformed (though we will point out cases where some individual Puritans have carried certain aspects of this doctrine beyond Biblical boundaries).' Beeke & Smalley, p7.

¹¹ Both have a hypothetical universalistic ethos: God loves everyone and desires the salvation of everyone and gives a common grace to help sinners come to the Gospel, even those reprobates that never believe. Amyraldism is a failed attempt to make God's decree less harsh by teaching a universal love and a hypothetical universal salvation, but in the end relying upon election. I.e. a mixture of Calvinism and Arminianism.

In simple terms, Preparationists confuse the work of the Spirit in regeneration with a preparatory grace that Scripture says nothing about.

What is grace?

Preparationists claim that the means of grace (e.g. reading the Bible, church fellowship or prayer) are vital gifts that can be utilised by sinners before regeneration. To clarify this we need to understand what grace is and who the recipients are.

Grace comes from the atonement of Christ, from the cross and is only for the elect and no one else. There is no such thing as common grace (see my papers on that); sinners cannot appropriate the blessings of God because they are under his wrath. Grace is only for the elect and is paid for by the blood of Christ.

Thus the first problem is that many of those seekers whom the Puritans claim were under 'preparatory grace' failed to be converted in the end. Thus grace was supposedly given from God through Christ to reprobate people. This is impossible. This alone ruins the apologetic for preparatory grace.

What does grace do?

First, it is the gift of Christ as Saviour. The beginning of all grace mediated to men is the gift of Christ.

Grace comes to the elect while they are still sinners and brings saving faith and repentance (conversion) after regeneration. Thus a person is born again by a free gift of God, illuminated by the Spirit and then given gifts to believe in Christ and repent (after yielding). All of this is saving grace.

Grace, meaning a free gift of loving-kindness,¹² is the provision of all the gifts from God necessary to be converted. The activation for giving these gifts to men is the blood of Christ, which is only given to the elect.

Once a person has been converted, then God's provision of grace (God's free gifts) enable a Christian to continue in God's ways and grow in holiness. Thus the gifts God gives include: the Bible, fellowship, the indwelling Spirit and prayer. These are sometimes called the 'means of grace'. These items, therefore, facilitate God's work in a believer.

Preparationists mistakenly appropriate these gifts given to elect believers to unsaved sinners.

Another mistake is to blaspheme the ministry of the Holy Spirit regarding the operation of grace.

Grace does not fall to earth in some random automatic form from a divine fiat. It is mediated by Christ as Saviour through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who brings the things of Christ to saints – and only saints.

¹² The term 'Free grace' is a nonsense phrase since it effectively means 'free free gift'. A better term is 'sovereign grace'. [More definitively, 'grace' = *charis*, that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech; good will, loving-kindness, favour. Theologically - the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues. (Sic. Thayer.)]

When men aver that the Holy Spirit actively ministers amongst unsaved men, including reprobates, giving them the ministrations of the means of grace, they go too far. The Holy Spirit does not actively minister God's blessings to unregenerate sinners, and certainly not reprobate sinners.

When the Spirit acts on an elect sinner, it is to give him saving grace and that sinner gets saved. The Spirit does not give sinners blessings reserved for saints.

Biblical statements denying Preparationism

You ... were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. **Eph 2:1-3**

A dead man cannot start making himself alive bit by bit. Neither can a man who serves Satan and fulfilling the lusts of the flesh slowly start reforming his life and turn to God. Neither can children of wrath turn to be people that God begins to favour.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? *Then* may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil. **Jer 13:23**

This is a clear statement that natural man cannot do any good work but only do evil. Preparatory grace includes the idea than sinful man, before regeneration, can do good works; indeed do many good works. In fact, Owen (see later) even claims that an unregenerate man can do spiritual works.

As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat *is* an open tomb; with their tongues they have practised deceit'; 'The poison of asps *is* under their lips'; 'Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness.' 'Their feet *are* swift to shed blood; destruction and misery *are* in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.' 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.' **Rm 3:10-18**

These verses utterly destroy any ideas about preparatory grace. Natural man cannot do a righteous work (Preparationism implies that they can, such as gaining spiritual illumination and praying). Natural man cannot understand spiritual things or even his own sin - Preparationism says that he can. Natural man cannot seek after God before regeneration - Preparationism says that he can. Natural man cannot do good - Preparationism says that he can. Natural man cannot fear God - Preparationism says that he can.

The sacrifice of the wicked *is* an abomination to the LORD. **Prov 15:8**

The LORD *is* far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous. **Prov 15:29**

The ploughing of the wicked *are* sin. **Prov 21:4**

All these verses deny the claims of Preparationism. Every work of the wicked (including apparently good works) are an abomination to the Lord. His religious works are an

abomination and his daily earthly works are also sin. Neither can the wicked pray and be heard by God. Until a person is regenerated, he cannot begin to please God, do anything good or be heard by God.

The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek *God*; *God is* in none of his thoughts. Ps
10:4

Another clear denial of Preparationism; natural man cannot seek for God. Man only begins to seek God when he has been regenerated.

Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'. Jn 3:3

Seeing the kingdom of God, or illumination, can only happen after being born again. All the premises of Preparationism are that an unregenerate sinner has a measure of illumination to see his sin, to see the need of a Saviour, to see the reality of God's law and to fear God. None of these things can occur until a person is regenerated.

We could continue this ad infinitum but this is sufficient. Preparationism is unbiblical.

Who taught preparationism?

All of these are great men and theologians who unfortunately erred in this matter. Their works are still worth study.

Richard Perkins [1558-1602]

Perkins was a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge and lecturer at Great St. Andrews, Cambridge. A famous preacher, pastor and theologian, he influenced many, including William Ames. His works are now being republished in several volumes for the first time since the Victorian period. He was a notable Puritan heavyweight who emphasised predestination against the ideas of Arminius and is considered as one of the founders of the tradition of English practical divinity. He was less strict and more moderate than some contemporary more schismatic non-conformists.

He was not weak on the Doctrines of Grace and did not tend to Amyraldism; in fact, he taught a double-predestination and was a supralapsarian. This makes his assertion of preparatory grace confusing. It seems his heart to win souls overpowered his intellectual attempt to justify the theology of this. Perkins laid the ground for the later development of preparatory grace.

In his first book of '*The Cases of Conscience*' where he analyses the components of salvation, Perkins states that there are two actions of God – two works of grace not one.¹³ The first is non-saving and preparatory; saving grace comes afterwards. This is very similar to Wesley's ideas on prevenient grace and the later common grace¹⁴ (though these did not automatically lead on to saving grace).

¹³ *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of the Conscience*, Cambridge University (1606), p50.

¹⁴ Modern ideas about common grace stemmed from the submissions of Abraham Kuyper [1837-1920].

The work of preparatory grace was to a) give the sinner the ministry of the Word; b) give cognisance of God's law and the guilt of sin; c) give problems that break down and subdue the will, often using fear of hell.

Perkins openly admits that reprobates may receive this preparatory grace (though he does not call it grace):

These four actions,¹⁵ are indeed no fruits of grace, for a reprobate may go thus far; but they are works of preparation going before grace.¹⁶

Perkins appeals to Acts 2:37, but only assumes that these people were unregenerate (they were not).¹⁷ He also refers to Gal 3:24, also presuming that unregenerate people are in view.¹⁸

William Ames [1576-1633]

Ames was a very popular theologian. He was chaplain to an English governor in Brill (Holland) and attended the Synod of Dort as an observer. He became professor of theology at Franeker in 1622 and rector in 1626, attracting students from all over Europe. He was an able polemicist and contested the Remonstrants and Romanists. He was most famous for his work, *'The Marrow of Theology'* which is still in print today and which is one of the most popular Christian books in history.

As a disciple of Perkins it was logical that Ames would also teach preparatory grace.

Ames emphasises that law must work in a sinner's heart before he can receive the Gospel. This became a strong feature of much later Puritan preaching, continuing even to modern preachers such as Francis Schaeffer. NT conversions do not always support this idea.¹⁹

But so that men may be prepared to receive the promises, the application of the law usually precedes, in order to uncover sin and lead to [a] ... sense of guilt, and humiliation in the sinner.²⁰

Ames avers that the Spirit works in the heart of the unregenerate sinner to expose sin, to arouse guilt for sin, to bring humility, to bring spiritual enlightenment and to lead him to seek forgiveness – all prior to regeneration. Actually all these things follow regeneration.

Ames is suggesting that the law has the ability to bring spiritual understanding to sinners when Scripture tells us that the law brings death and wrath.²¹

Like Perkins, Ames includes the reprobate in this work of grace:

The inward offer is a kind of spiritual enlightenment, whereby the promises are presented to the hearts of men, as it were, by an inner word. This is sometimes and in a certain way granted to those who are not elected.²²

¹⁵ The sinner seeing God's law, his own sins and trying to fix them etc.

¹⁶ Perkins; *Cases of Conscience*, p51.

¹⁷ These men were 'pricked in their hearts'; i.e. regenerated.

¹⁸ In fact, Paul's point in Galatians is to show that the period of the Mosaic Law prepared the way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

¹⁹ E.g. the thief on the cross, Saul of Tarsus, Lydia of Thyatira, Zacchaeus.

²⁰ Ames; *The Marrow of Theology*, Baker (1997), p158 (number12); formerly 'The Marrow of Sacred Divinity'.

²¹ Rm 4:15, 7:5, 8:2.

²² Ames; op. cit., p158, no. 14-15.

Repentance, so far as it comprises the care, anxiety, and terror connected with the law, precedes faith in order of nature, as a preparing and disposing cause, and is even found in the unregenerate. ... Repentance is likely to be known before faith.²³

This is unorthodox. Repentance is a gift from God that follows regeneration. Ames accepts that but also adds that there is a real repentance that precedes and prepares for regeneration. His position is contradictory and confusing.

Unlike Perkins, Ames emphasised that this preparatory work was a form of grace.

In his influential treatise, *Theological Disputation on Preparation*, Ames affirmed a number of points:

- The unregenerate sinner can experience dispositions that tend to conversion.
- The effects of preparatory grace on the sinner precede regeneration.
- These dispositions are the work of the Spirit in sinners before regeneration.
- Impediments to faith are removed.
- Understanding of God's will is given.
- Understanding of Christ's redemption is given.
- The sinner ceases to find pleasure in sin.
- The fear of God is developed.
- Certain things are conferred on the sinner, such as illumination and the horror of sin and a desire for redemption.²⁴

In these propositions Ames contradicts Scripture and evangelical standards which strongly emphasise that unregenerate man can do no spiritual good whatsoever, including repent, believe, or understand God's view of his sin. In other words, he here denies total depravity.

It is amazing that Ames was a staunch opponent of Arminianism since many of these claims are basically Arminian in nature.

Thomas Goodwin [1600-1680]

Goodwin was a Reformed Congregational theologian like Owen. He was initially a Fellow of St Catherine's and vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. He moved to London in 1634 but was driven to Holland in 1639 by persecution, where he pastored a church. He returned to London when the Long Parliament began and gathered a church. He was one of the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly. In 1649 he was appointed chaplain to the Council of State and in 1650 he was president of Magdalen College, Oxford. He enjoyed the confidence of Oliver Cromwell. He was a leader of the Savoy Assembly in 1658. After the Restoration he moved to London to pastor a church. His works were published between 1682-1704 and are continually reprinted.

Goodwin's ideas on preparatory grace are found in his book, *The Work of the Holy Ghost in Our Salvation*. Goodwin also believed that the Spirit performed works in the unregenerate sinner to aid conversion as the groundwork of salvation.

Rather than describe preparation in many stages of associated works, Goodwin saw only three:

- Conviction of sin.
- Conviction of righteousness (i.e. seeing Christ).

²³ Ames; op. cit. p160, no. 31, 34. [This is not true repentance however.]

²⁴ Quoted in Beeke & Smalley, p264-5.

- Conviction of judgment.²⁵

Like other Puritans, Goodwin teaches that the Spirit convicts unregenerate sinners by means of preaching the law with power so that man is humbled before a holy God. Regeneration follows this process. Goodwin's preaching emphasises that man must be abased, humbled and his pride demolished before a man can see his need of salvation.

Again the problem here is that the doctrine of Total Depravity affirms that man cannot be broken until he is first regenerated.

John Owen [1616-1683]

One of the giants of Puritanism.

A Congregationalist and Reformed theologian educated at Queens' College, Oxford; he pastored small churches in Essex from 1643. In the Civil War he accompanied Cromwell to Ireland and Scotland as his chaplain. After the war he was appointed Dean of Christ Church, Oxford and then vice-chancellor. He assisted in the Savoy declaration (1658) and began writing his many books. He was ejected in 1660 and led house churches, becoming one of the national leaders of Nonconformity. He then pastored a church in London. His published works have been continually reprinted.

Owen's preparationism can be found in his book, '*A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*'. Like others, he saw preparatory grace as a work of the Spirit prior to regeneration. In fact he has a whole chapter on this.²⁶

First, in reference unto the work of regeneration itself, positively considered, we may observe, that ordinarily there are certain previous and preparatory works, or workings in and upon the souls of men, that are antecedent and dispositive unto it. But yet regeneration doth not consist in them, nor can it be educed out of them.²⁷

Thus there are operations of the Spirit that dispose a sinner towards regeneration but before regeneration. In his typical style, Owen uses complex legal language in prolix arguments to try to avoid the charge of weakening Total Depravity. Essentially he is saying that preparatory grace is the formation of a material disposition to bring about in man something new; i.e. saving grace. However, he insists that preparatory grace is not a dose of saving grace that disposes a person to receive more saving grace (as in Semi-Pelagian and Roman Catholic prevenient grace).

So preparatory grace fits a person to receive saving grace, but is not saving grace. Anything favourable from God to sinners is grace so what is the preparatory grace that the Scripture says nothing about? Owen is confused here.

In fact Owen affirms what is close to meritorious works when he says that sinners, due to the preparatory work of the Spirit internally, avail themselves of listening to sermons, reading the Bible and changing their thinking, which are required of man in order to receive regeneration.

There are some things required of us in a way of duty in order unto our regeneration, which are so in the *power of our own natural abilities* as that nothing but corrupt prejudices and stubbornness in sinning do keep or hinder men from the performance of them.²⁸

²⁵ See Goodwin; op. cit. *Works*, vol. 6:361.

²⁶ CHAPTER 2; 'Works of the Holy Spirit preparatory unto regeneration'. This covers 17 pages.

²⁷ Owen; op. cit. *Works*, Vol 3. P283. CD Rom version.

²⁸ Owen; op. cit. p284.

These things are required of us in order unto our regeneration, and it is in the power of our own wills to comply with them.²⁹

Essentially, in a long-winded way, Owen is saying ‘*God helps those who help themselves*’. God’s word says the opposite; man’s will has no power to self-determination before regeneration; no man seeks good; no man seeks God.

Owen goes so far as to teach that there are internal spiritual effects from preparatory grace:

Secondly, There are certain *internal spiritual effects* wrought in and upon the souls of men, whereof the word preached is the immediate instrumental cause, which ordinarily do precede the work of regeneration, or real conversion unto God. And they are reducible unto three heads: —

1. *Illumination*;
2. *Conviction*;
3. *Reformation*.

The first of these respects the mind only; the second, the mind, conscience, and affections; and the third, the life and conversation.³⁰

The idea that an unregenerate sinner can have spiritual illumination sufficient to know revealed doctrines of truth, ‘as a light super-added to men’s minds that man could never conceive alone’ (sic), destroys the doctrine of Total Depravity: ‘the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor 2:14).

The convicting work of preparatory grace is equally unorthodox. Owen claims that sinners can be brought to humility before God, knowing the guilt of their sin and expressing legal contrition and grief for it, leading to confession of sins. All of this is the work of the Spirit in regeneration not preparation.

Owen claims that preparatory grace enables an unregenerate sinner to begin a reformation of his character; that is, to live according to God’s law. This is a flat denial of Biblical statements.

One could ask the question, if preparatory grace does so many powerful things to the sinner, why does he need regeneration since all the effects of being born again are hereby attributed to preparatory grace.

Others

Other famous Puritan teachers of preparatory grace include: John Norton and William Guthrie. In fact, many aspects of Preparationism are found in most of the Puritans, though some taught moderate forms while others taught extreme forms.

New England Puritans

Several of the New England Puritans took the ideas of preparatory grace even further than the English Puritans. In fact, after the moderate Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards [1703-

²⁹ Owen; op. cit. p285.

³⁰ Owen; op. cit. p286.

1758] a substantial decline in doctrine occurred so that by the time of the New Divinity,³¹ and Newhaven Theology³², New England Calvinism had been thoroughly Arminianised.³³

The basis of New England theology was following the precise reasoning and philosophy of Edwards, particularly his practical and ethical concerns, not his Calvinism.³⁴ Edwards had combined his rationalism and speculative theology with a strong personal devotion and commitment to Calvinism. His followers however, continued his philosophical and rational methods but not his orthodoxy. The New England schools thus advocated a series of errors compounding each other, such as: mediate imputation, the natural ability of the human will (denial of moral inability), man's active participation in regeneration and a universal atonement. These errors contributed to the development of Charles Finney's extreme Semi-Pelagianism.³⁵

For more details on this decline see my paper, '*The end-time erosion of justification by faith*'.

This is not Reformed

I have already explained that this teaching is not Biblical. It runs contrary to the doctrines of grace, and especially Total Depravity. Yet these Puritans that started this idea were Reformed theologians. We must see now that this is not Reformed.

The Westminster Standards were composed in 1646 at the height of British Puritanism with many of the Assembly's participants being Puritans, including some teaching Preparationism. Yet the Westminster Standards say nothing whatsoever about Preparationism; indeed they speak negatively about the base ideas of Preparationism.

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.³⁶

Reformed doctrine avers that man's will is bound in sin and totally inclined to evil. This statement alone denies Preparatory grace.

³¹ *New Divinity* arose out of the ideas of Edward's friends Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), and Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) who introduced the governmental view of the atonement. Further deterioration continued under Timothy Dwight (1752-1817, Edward's grandson and President of Yale College). The power of reason and human will became prominent thus diminishing man's depravity, alongside a new emphasis on law-work.

³² Nathaniel Taylor (1786-1858) took the rationalistic erosion yet further and initiated what became known as *New Haven Theology*. This taught that man has the power of free-will and self-determination.

³³ Say with E A Park [1808-1900]. Within a hundred years of Jonathan Edward's death in 1758, the strong Calvinism that had permeated New England had fallen into a theology of works-righteousness.

³⁴ In fact Edwards is known in America more for his philosophy.

³⁵ Oberlin Theology is closely connected to the teachings of revivalist Charles Finney and the ideas arising from New Divinity. He taught many serious errors tantamount to Pelagianism, They include: Moral Government (Grotianism); man's ability to repent without grace; denial of imputation of Adam's sin; denial of election; denial of the effectual call; the drawing of God was the human persuasion of Gospel preachers; man's ability to create a new heart (self-regeneration, regeneration is only a change in the will); denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers; thus a denial of Biblical justification; perfectionism; sanctification was the continuation of holiness by human effort.

³⁶ Westminster Confession, 9.3, 'The doctrine of Free Will'.

By this sin [Adam's sin], they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.³⁷

If all man's faculties are wholly defiled than how can they be improved before regeneration? How can man start reaching towards God, gaining illumination or reforming his life according to God's law? Man is dead in sins and cannot start making himself alive.

Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess; and, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.³⁸

Note that there is no mention here of 'Preparatory grace'. The 'common operations' of the Spirit are the works of providence to keep the earth turning and men alive. Some Reformed theologians include the ideas of restricting the depravity of man and sin to stop world genocide.

Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.³⁹

This is virtually a statement designed to contradict Preparatory grace. Works done by unregenerate sinners cannot make a man prepared or able ('meet') to receive the grace of God; indeed these works are sinful.

All Reformed standards treat these issues in the same way and we need not look at any more. If the very confession that Puritans were most involved with denied Preparationism, then there is no credal base for Reformed theologians to teach Preparationism. However, since some Preparationists refer to the Canons of the Synod of Dort for support I will give one quote demolishing Preparationism:

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor dispose themselves to reformation.⁴⁰

This head of doctrine goes on to condemn heretics that teach that unregenerate men are not destitute of powers unto spiritual good, that they can hunger and thirst after righteousness and life and become broken and contrite in spirit. The teachings of Dort destroy Preparationism.

Another issue: Sandemanianism

We have discussed this matter elsewhere so I need only mention this in passing.

³⁷ Westminster Conf. 6:2.

³⁸ Westminster Conf. 10.4.

³⁹ Westminster Conf. 16.7.

⁴⁰ Canons of the Synod of Dort, III/IV.3.

Sandemanians (or Glasites)⁴¹ deny that a person can be saved immediately based upon little interaction with Biblical doctrine. Thus, logically, they would be forced to deny the conversion of the thief on the cross and Saul. They insist that saving faith is only an intellectual belief in the resurrection of Christ. In a way they teach a sort of intellectual preparation before a man can assent to the Gospel.

Again there are a number of modern Baptist groups that hold this teaching, which is really a demand for an intellectual acceptance of the Gospel with a minimising of any emotional or volitional factor.

This contradicts my contention that that vital feature of conversion is yielding to God, not intellectual assent of certain facts. Sandemanians deny the full effects of Total Depravity.

Conclusion

Preparationism shows what happens when even godly, bright, pastors went too far in trying to assist people come to faith. At the end of the day, conversion is a sovereign matter that cannot be channelled into some system or methodology.

Yes it is helpful for any man to read the Bible. Yes it is helpful for men to be searched by God's law and see their shortcomings. Yes the Holy Spirit guides seeking people and brings them to desire Christ. Who could speak against such things?

However, laying down a methodology that all people are expected to go through this in some humanly organised system is not acceptable. The Holy Sprit is sovereign and deals with sinners in his way through regeneration. Our job is to preach the truth, preach the Gospel, demand that people repent, demand that people believe in Christ and explain that hell awaits those who fail to trust in Christ.

The process of the heart being awakened is between the sinner and God and this happens in a multitude of ways. We do not rest at telling a man to read the Bible, to pray or to hear a good sermon or to consider the law; we tell a sinner that God commands them to repent and believe in Christ.⁴²

To suggest that there is a new form of grace that brings many of the effects of regeneration to people who are not born again is unbiblical and heretical. To teach that there is a state between Total Depravity and being made alive to God is unorthodox.

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⁴¹ Based on the theology of Robert Sandeman [1718-1771] and his father-in-law John Glas, who were Scottish Calvinists.

⁴² Acts 17:30, 'God ... now commands all men everywhere to repent'. Jn 20:31, 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name'. Mk 1:15, 'Repent, and believe in the gospel'.