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Thomas Hooker And The Doctrine Of Conversion

by Iain H. Murray

Part 1: Beholding the Majesty of God¹

Among the multitude of Puritan books which have survived the 17th Century *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan has often been regarded as one of the few which can be called uncontroversial. It is an incorrect judgment, for Part I of Bunyan's classic, published in 1678, describes the process by which Pilgrim became a Christian in terms which are by no means acceptable to all Christian traditions. One last-century preacher, H. H. Almond, went as far as to declare that 'There is not an instance in the New Testament of a convert made after the manner of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, driven to distraction, dreaming hideous dreams, and uttering lamentable cries'.² While we question the fairness of this representation, it has to be accepted that Almond does identify the fundamental issue, namely, the nature of a true conversion experience. Plainly, Bunyan saw conversion as no simple, easy event, no single step from unconcern to immediate assurance of salvation. Much more was involved. When Pilgrim left the City of Destruction, crying, 'What shall I do to be saved?' there was, Bunyan narrates, 'a very wide field' to cross, and a 'slough of despond' to be met, before he came to the wicket gate. Even with that gate passed, Christian – as we now see him to be – had further to go before he obtained the joy of assurance. Of course, Bunyan did not intend his leading character to be the model of every conversion experience, yet the

¹ Reprinted by permission from the Banner of Truth Magazine, Issue 195, December 1979, pp 19-29.

² The Contemporary Pulpit, Vol 3, 1885, 223.

opening pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress* undoubtedly reflect a general consensus of Puritan teaching on the subject of conversion.

For the existence of this consensus Bunyan was not responsible. It was established before he was born, and in 1628, the year of his birth, the advocates of a distinctively Puritan view of conversion were already spread across England. Among their number none was more influential than Thomas Hooker, late Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and in that year lecturer and curate at St Mary's in Chelmsford, Essex. At the outset it should be said that in divinity Hooker was an all-rounder. His *Comment Upon Christ's Last Prayer in the Seventeenth of John*, 1656, shows that he was far from being absorbed with the threshold of Christian experience, while his *Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline*, 1648, reveals him as an equal of all the great divines who so fully debated the subject of ecclesiology in that period. The preacher whom Cotton Mather calls 'the Light of the Western Churches' was far from being a man of one subject. Nonetheless, Thomas Hooker's overriding interest was evangelistic or with what was then called 'the application of redemption'. Certainly the doctrine of conversion was the focal point of the many books under his name which flowed from the printing presses of London in the 1630's and 40's and it was appropriate that the following words by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye should preface the work which contained Hooker's definitive treatment of this theme: 'It hath been one of the glories of the Protestant Religion that it revived the Doctrine of Saving Conversion . . . But in an eminent manner, God cast the honour hereof upon the Ministers and Preachers of this Nation, who are renowned abroad for their more accurate search into and discoveries hereof'.³

Like so many other Puritan leaders, Hooker's spiritual life began at Cambridge whither he went in 1604. Born at Markfield, Leicestershire, on July 7, 1586, Hooker, at nineteen, was three years older than the average entrant when he matriculated at Queen's College on March 27, 1604. Whatever the reason for this circumstance it was not backwardness, for the same year he won a scholarship (perhaps from the grammar school at Market Bosworth, Leicestershire) which secured a free-place in the University and raised his status from that of a 'sizar' to that of a 'scholar'. At the same time, it seems, he transferred from Queens' to Emmanuel, a college which was then only twenty years old.

³ 'To the Reader' in Hooker's *The Application of Redemption*, 1657.

To join Emmanuel in 1604 was hardly shrewd policy. Sir Walter Mildmay's foundation of 1584 was already noted by the authorities in church and state as a nursery of Puritans, and the new king, James I, had let it be known that the Puritans were a 'sect insufferable in any well-governed commonwealth'. Laurence Chaderton, Master of Emmanuel, had come back from the Hampton Court Conference in that same year 1604, with the news that the monarch who spoke of Rome as 'our Mother Church' was not going to give any countenance to those who appealed to Scripture for further changes in the Church. For a while Emmanuel might pursue its own quiet reformation, but with the death of William Perkins (the University's foremost Puritan preacher) in 1602, with the representatives of the Puritan school at the Hampton Court Conference all over fifty years of age, and with a measure of persecution already apparent, the prospects were not promising.

In fact, however, the brightest days of Puritan and evangelical advance in Cambridge were still to come. While Hooker studied for his B.A. in 1608, he saw the sparks which formerly 'did fly abroad into all corners of the kingdom'⁴ under Perkins' ministry, continue to fly under three preachers, who like Perkins, were all Fellows at Christ's College – Thomas Taylor, Paul Baynes and William Ames. Between 1608 and 1610 all three were silenced in succession but not before their spirit was multiplied in others. Baynes was the instrument in the conversion of Richard Sibbes. Sibbes, in turn, was used in the awakening of John Cotton, and one of the first-fruits of Cotton's ministry was John Preston – a student filled with ambition to shine at court when 'Mr Cotton's sermon so invaded him that Kings and Courts were no such great things to him'.⁵

One could wish that the anecdotes which survive concerning the conversion of other Cambridge men included Hooker but in his case we hear nothing of the preachers or of the books which influenced him. There is reason to think that his conversion may not have fallen into the more usual pattern. Hooker was no spiritually-careless, ambitious career-man before his conversion. That he was an orthodox and religious member of his College may be concluded from the fact that his evangelical experience came after he was made a Fellow of Emmanuel in 1609, for intellectual abilities alone would scarcely have secured him such a position in those days. Others no doubt regarded him as a Christian in 1609, a view which Hooker himself

⁴ The phrase is that of Samuel Clarke, first biographer of some of the Puritans, and a student himself at Emmanuel.

⁵ Thomas Ball, *Life of Dr Preston*.

may well have shared. How long it was after his appointment that, in Mather's words, 'It pleased the Spirit of God very powerfully to break into the soul of this person' is not known. What is on record is that his distress under 'the Spirit of bondage' was intense, that he could not allay it by the principles which he was already teaching to others, and that his chief help came from a young sizar, Simeon Ash, who was his servant in the College. Night and day, in his trouble, Hooker clung to the promises of Scripture and with a certainty born of experience he would later counsel others, 'That the promise was the boat which was to carry a perishing sinner over into the Lord Jesus Christ.'⁶

Hooker saw all the many memorable events which were to occur in Cambridge during these years: the expulsion and banishment of Ames in 1610; the lectureship held by Sibbes at Trinity Church from 1610 to 1615; the rise of Preston, made a Fellow at Queens' in 1609 (the same year as Hooker's appointment at Emmanuel) and destined to be 'the greatest pupilmonger in England'; the departure of John Cotton (another Fellow of Emmanuel) to Boston, Lincs, in 1612; the increasing hostility of the University's Vice-Chancellor, Samuel Harsnett, to the Puritans – these things were certainly all matters of conversation within Emmanuel. The reputation of Emmanuel entertained in high places was to sink yet lower with the royal visit of James I to the University in March 1615. With new gravel spread on the roads and fresh paint decorating the fronts of colleges, 'pious Emmanuel was conspicuous by her refusal to adorn herself for the occasion'. Few of Emmanuel's students were likely to be among the 2000 who gathered at Trinity to see the plays put on for His Majesty's entertainment.

But if Emmanuel faced cold from without there was for many the warmth of a spiritual brotherhood within. On their deathbeds a number of Emmanuel's men were to recall the Christian fellowship of their Cambridge days and joyfully anticipate its renewal. Samuel Stone, a contemporary of Hooker's at Emmanuel – who died at far-off Hartford, New England, in 1663 – declared at the end, 'Heaven is the more desirable, for such

⁶ Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America (Magnalia Christi Americana)*, 1852, vol. 1, 334 (Reprinted, Banner of Truth, 1979). In these pages I am chiefly indebted to Mather's short biography, supplemented by information supplied by George H. Williams in *Thomas Hooker, Writings in England and Holland, 1626-1633* (eds. G. H. Williams, N. Pettit, W. Herget and S. Bush, Jr) Harvard Theological Studies XXVIII, Harvard Univ. Press, 1975. This valuable source I will refer to as HTS in subsequent notes.

company as Hooker, and Shepard and Baynes, who are got there before Me'.⁷

Made Master of the College in 1584, Laurence Chaderton remained Master until 1622, having lived to see the fulfilment of Sir Walter Mildmay's original hope. 'Sir Walter, I hear you have erected a Puritan foundation,' Queen Elizabeth had said to Mildmay. 'No Madam,' was the response, 'far be it from me to countenance anything contrary to your laws: but I have set an acorn which, when it becomes an oak, God alone knows what will be the fruit of it'. Chaderton, though his service continued for near forty years, never lost that original vision. William Bedell, another Fellow of Emmanuel, spent 'seventeen years under that good father Dr Chaderton, in a well-tempered society' and he found it none too long.

Hooker had under him not a few of England's future spiritual leaders.⁸ In his case, as in others, it was true that 'a preacher in the University doth *generare patres*, beget begetters'. Hooker's 'storm of soul', says Mather, 'had helped him unto a most experimental acquaintance with the truths of the gospel', and from the first 'he entertained a special inclination to those principles of divinity which concerned the application of redemption'. Many notes of his preaching upon that subject as a College catechist, says the same writer, 'were transcribed and preserved'.

The circumstances which led to Hooker's departure from Cambridge about the year 1618 are unknown. It may well have been due to the increasing restrictions upon Puritan preaching which were being imposed in the University. Certainly he had no intention of settling down to a mere academic life. Perhaps he discussed the matter with John Dod – an older Fellow of Emmanuel, nicknamed 'Faith and Repentance' by his enemies – and if so, Dod would have emphasized the same point as he did to John Preston on another occasion when he declared that 'English preaching was like to work more and win more souls to God' than divinity professorships. Dod, at any rate, seems to have been responsible for Hooker's first curacy at Esher in Surrey. The patron of that parish, a certain Francis Drake, had called for Dod's help, particularly with regard to his wife's spiritual distress which others had been helpless to relieve. Dod, in turn, recommended

⁷ Mather, 1, 435. Similarly, John Wilson, 'I shall ere long be with my old friends, Dr Preston, Dr Sibs, Dr Taylor, Dr Gouge, Dr Ames, Mr Cotton ... in the kingdom of God', *Ibid.*, 313.

⁸ Westminster divines at Emmanuel in Hooker's time, or soon after, included Stephen Marshall, Anthony Burgess, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Bridges, Simeon Ash, Sidrach Simpson and Anthony Tuckney.

Hooker and between them the two men saw the once despairing Joan Drake wonderfully prepared for heaven before her death in 1625. Significantly the first title of Hooker's to appear in print was to be *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn Unto Christ* (1629).

Late in 1625, or early in 1626, Hooker moved to Essex, taking with him his wife, Susannah, formerly woman-in-waiting at the Drake's home, where he had resided on going to Esher. Between 1626 and 1629 they were to lose two daughters in infancy.

Hooker's appointment in Essex was as lecturer and curate at St Mary's in Chelmsford. In part he may have been drawn to East Anglia by the presence of friends. Mather mentions his indebtedness to Alexander Richardson who 'lived a private life in Essex' after leaving Emmanuel, and also says that he wanted to be near to John Rogers of Dedham whom he esteemed 'the prince of all the preachers in England'. But the chief claim of the busy market-town of Chelmsford upon Hooker was its spiritual need – 'wanting one to "break the bread of life" unto them.'

The influence of sermons is not to be measured by their quantity. Hooker's four years in Essex, when he was in his mid-forties, were to have a formative influence in the spiritual history of that county. 'If any of our late preachers and divines came in the spirit and power of John Baptist,' wrote Goodwin and Nye, 'this man did'. Nor did Hooker simply awake the indifferent and shake the careless. There was outstanding fruitfulness. In the words of Mather: 'There was a great reformation wrought, not only in the town, but in the adjacent country, from all parts whereof they came to "hear the wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" in his gospel, by this worthy man dispensed'. The Holy Spirit 'gave a wonderful and unusual success unto the ministry wherein he breathed so remarkably.'

Liveliness was Hooker's first characteristic in preaching - 'a liveliness extraordinary', says Mather, 'life in his voice, in his eye, in his hand, in his motions'. And, while acknowledging that a part of this belonged to Hooker's personality, he adds that such was the nature of this vigour, 'being raised by "a coal from the altar"', that 'it would be a wrong unto the good Spirit of our God if he should not be acknowledged the author of it.'

Coupled with this there was a remarkable boldness. Whether Hooker was visiting his home-county of Leicestershire, or preaching in Rogers' pulpit at Dedham – addressing a people rich in spiritual privileges – or evangelizing in Chelmsford, he flattered no one. Once on a fast day in Chelmsford, when

the judges in their circuit were present in a vast congregation, Hooker alluded plainly in his prayer to the marriage of Charles I to the Catholic Henrietta Maria, beseeching God to lay his Word upon the heart of the King – ‘an abomination is committed . . . Judah hath married the daughter of a strange god; the Lord will cut off the man that doeth this’ (Malachi 2.11-12).

Giles Firmin, another Puritan, commenting on the words, ‘Moses endured, as seeing him who is invisible’, makes this reference to Hooker: ‘What cares Moses for all the pleasure and honours in Pharaoh’s Court? he slightes them; what cares he for the wrath of the King, “though it be as the roaring of a lion” [Prov 19.12]. Moses makes nothing of him; he (as one said of Mr Thomas Hooker, a man so awed with the majesty and dread of God) ‘would put a king in his pocket’.⁹ It was declared in a later generation of George Whitefield that he ‘preached like a lion’. The same was true of Hooker.

The content of Hooker’s preaching in those all-too-short years at Chelmsford will occupy us in due course, it remains for us now to sketch the outline – for little more is known – of the rest of his life.

The rigour with which Puritan preachers were dealt with at this period depended largely upon the attitude of the bishop in whose diocese they were found. In Leicestershire it appears that Hooker was silenced as early as 1619. At Chelmsford he came under the Bishop of London, George Montaigne, who, hearing him preach on one occasion, confined his remarks to advice ‘not to meddle with the discipline of the Church’. But when William Laud, arch-opponent of the Puritans, succeeded Montaigne in 1628, Hooker’s continuance at Chelmsford was soon in doubt. There were many clergy in Essex who had been made uncomfortable by his ministry and who were ready to act as informers against him to their new Bishop. One such man, Samuel Collins, Vicar of Braintree, was particularly involved in supplying Dr Arthur Duck, Laud’s chancellor, with news of Hooker’s activities and influence. Writing to Duck on May 20, 1629, concerning the question what should be done with Hooker, Collins advised against the harshest punishment because the consequences of such action might ‘prove very dangerous’, for ‘all men’s ears are now filled with the obstreperous clamours of his followers’. At the same time Collins urged that Hooker would not be silenced if he was merely suspended from his

⁹ *The Real Christian*, 1670, 38.

lectureship – a course of action which Laud followed with other Puritans. Thomas Hooker, Collins wrote, was no ordinary man:

‘If he be suspended . . . it’s the resolution of his friends and himself to settle his abode in Essex, and maintenance is promised him in plentiful manner for the fruition of his private conference which hath already more impeached the peace of our church than his public ministry.¹⁰ His genius will still haunt all the pulpits in the country where any of his scholars may be admitted to preach. There be divers young ministers about us . . . that spend their time . . . in conference with him . . . and return home . . . and preach . . . what he hath brewed . . . Our people’s palates grow so out of taste that no food contents them but of Mr Hooker’s dressing. I have lived in Essex to see many new ministers and lecturers, but this man surpasses them all for learning and some other considerable parts, and . . . gains more and far greater followers than all before him.”¹¹

Hooker’s removal from the country, Collins believed, was what was needed. His letter concluded with this significant plea: ‘And now I humbly crave your silence, and that when your worship hath read my letter none may see it, for if that some in the world should have the least inkling hereof, my credit and fortune were utterly ruined.’

Hooker’s movements during 1629 cannot be clearly traced. There are glimpses of him visiting Leicestershire, and also Lincolnshire where at Sempringham Castle (the home of the Earl of Lincoln) he met with John Cotton, John Winthrop and other Puritans, to discuss both the new colony in Massachusetts and the evangelization of its native Indian population. In June, 1629, he was in London to appear before Laud. Samuel Collins reported from Braintree on June 3, ‘All men’s heads, tongues, eyes, and ears are in London, and all the countries about London taken up with plotting, talking, and expecting what will be the conclusion of Mr Hooker’s business . . . It drowns the noise of the great question of Tonnage and Poundage’.¹²

It must have been a surprise to Collins when Laud’s action against Hooker went no further than threats. The Vicar of Braintree already knew that

¹⁰ It appears that Hooker led a monthly ministers’ conference.

¹¹ This letter and other quotations which follow for the year 1629 are from manuscripts now among the Calendar of State Papers Domestic. They are printed, in part, in *Annals of Evangelical Nonconformity in Essex*, T. W. Davids, 1863, 15 off.

¹² The tax of tonnage and poundage, levied upon merchants by the King without the consent of Parliament, was one of the issues which at this time brought to a head the crisis of relationship between the House of Commons and Charles I. In March, 1629, Charles dissolved Parliament and for eleven years attempted to rule without it.

threats would be useless and so it proved. John Browning, the anti-Puritan Rector of Rawreth, complained to Laud on November 3, 1629, that ‘Mr Hooker doth even still to this present continue his former practices. May it therefore please your lordship,’ he continued, ‘grant us the help of your honourable authority, if not to the suppressing and casting out (as we hope) such an one from amongst us, yet at least to the defending us who live in obedience’. Browning promised that if Hooker were suppressed he would use the weight of his influence to counter the re-action of those ‘over much addicted to hearing the Word (as they call it)’. Knowing Hooker’s danger, forty-nine beneficed clergy in Essex, of opposite stamp to Browning, petitioned Laud for the continuance of the lecturer at Chelmsford, holding ‘Mr Thomas Hooker to be for doctryne, orthodox, and life and conversation as honest, and for his disposition peaceable, no ways turbulent or factious.’

Before long, it seems, Laud did suspend Hooker but, as Collins had anticipated, it was not enough. At a new home at Cuckoos Farm in Little Baddow, some five miles from Chelmsford, the Puritan leader both continued his regular conferences with other ministers and started a school with the aid of a young convert from his ministry – John Eliot, the future pioneer missionary among the North American Indians. The outcome was inevitable. On July 10, 1630, an ecclesiastical court, sitting at Chelmsford, cited Hooker to the ecclesiastical Court of High Commission in London. In view of the absolute power and savage procedures of that Court, Hooker chose instead to leave the country for the Continent. Had he not done so he might well have died in prison in London along with Sir John Eliot, one of the leaders of the ‘Puritan faction’ in Parliament.

Yet it does not appear that Hooker hastened his departure from England. ‘The Earl of Warwick now became his friend,’ writes T. W. Davids, ‘and concealed him for some time at “Old Park”.’ The date of Hooker’s final sermon in Essex is not known but its contents have largely survived, being published subsequently under the title, *The Danger of Desertion*. The text was Jeremiah 14.9, ‘And we are called by thy Name, leave us not’. Even in the imperfect notes (taken by two of his hearers) which have survived we can sense something of what this farewell meant to both preacher and hearers. From the application of the sermon we take the following:

I am an importunate suitor for Christ. Oh, send me not sad away I What are you resolved of ? Are you willing to enjoy God still, and to have him dwell with you? Well, look to it, for God is going, and if he do go, then

our glory goes also. And then we may say with Phinehas' wife, [*I Sam* 4.22] 'Glory is departed from Israel'. So glory is departed from England; for England hath seen her best days and the reward of sin is coming on apace, for God is packing up of his gospel because none will buy his wares. God begins to ship away his Noahs which prophesied and foretold that destruction was near; and God makes account that New England shall be a refuge for his Noahs and his Lots, a rock and a shelter for his righteous ones to ran unto; and those that were vexed to see the ungodly lives of the people in this wicked land shall there be safe.¹³ Oh, therefore my brethren, lay hold on God, and let him not go out of your coasts! He is going! Look about you, I say, and stop him at the town's-end, and let not thy God depart! Oh, England, lay siege about him by humble and hearty closing with him, and although he be going, he is not yet gone! Suffer him not to go far, suffer him not to say, 'Farewell, or rather fare-ill, England!'

Now God calls upon thee, as he did sometime upon Jerusalem, [*Jer* 6.8] 'Be thou instructed therefore', O England, 'lest my soul depart from thee, and lest I make thee desolate like a land that none inhabiteth . . .' This is our day of atonement. This present day is ours. We have nothing to do with tomorrow. We are at odds with God, and this is the day of our reconciliation. This is the day wherein we are to make our peace with our God! Let us labour, therefore, to prevail with God, and, that we may not lose his presence, do as the spouse in Canticles 3.1, She sought him, but she could not find him, yet she gave not over, but she followed him till she found him. So our God is going, and shall we sit still on our beds?

Would you have the gospel kept with these lazy wishes? Oh, no, no! Arise! Arise from off your downy beds, and fall down upon your knees, and entreat God to leave his gospel to you and to your posterity! Shall we, by our sins, disinherit our infants and posterity of such a blessing? Shall we bereave them of the gospel, which is, or should be, the life of their lives, and so have them brought up in superstition? No, no! Lord, we cannot abide this. Oh, give us neither wealth nor any other blessing but thy gospel! This is our plea, Lord. And when we have found God, then let us bring him home to our houses, and there retain him, that so he may be our God, and the God of our posterity. We will cry, 'Lord, have mercy upon us'. Oh, my beloved, carry God home with you I Lay hold on him. Let him not go. And let him be a father to you, and to your posterity!"¹⁴

¹³ The sailings of the Puritan-inspired Massachusetts Bay Company had begun in April, 1629.

¹⁴ Two slightly different versions of Hooker's sermon from the pen of the note-takers were published separately, one in 1641 and another in 1657 in *XXIX Choice Sermons* of William Fenner to whom this sermon was erroneously ascribed. No doubt Fenner – also an Essex Puritan

June 1631 found Hooker in the Netherlands, his wife and children meanwhile being cared for, it seems, on the Earl of Warwick's estate at Great Waltham. Two things marked Hooker's stay in the Netherlands, first his harmonious assistantship to the exiled Scots minister, John Forbes, who ministered to English-speaking merchants in the Prinsenhof Church at Delft, and, second, his meeting and friendship with the great William Ames, whom he had last seen in Cambridge in 1610. If Ames remembered the young Fellow of Emmanuel he certainly found him now to be a different man. Cotton Mather records Ames' assertion that 'though he had been acquainted with many scholars of divers nations, yet he never met with Mr Hooker's equal, either for preaching or for disputing'. These were memorable words in a generation of men who were not given to praising one another.

In March, 1633, or thereabouts, Hooker left Delft for Rotterdam and appears to have made a short visit to England to ascertain both for himself and Forbes the prospect in New England. It may well have been shortly before that visit that he wrote to John Cotton (in hiding in England), advising him that he saw no cause to encourage fellow countrymen to settle in the Netherlands and going on to speak of his own perplexity in knowing the guidance of God:

My ague yet holds me. The ways of God's providence, wherein he has walked towards me in this long time of my sickness and wherein I have drawn forth many wearyish hours under his Almighty hand (Blessed be his Name!), together with pursuits and banishment which have waited upon me, as one wave follows another, have driven me to an amazement, his paths being too secret and past finding out by such an ignorant, worthless worm as myself. I have looked over my heart, and life, according to my measure, aimed and guessed as well as I could, and entreated his Majesty to make known his mind, wherein I missed. And yet methinks I cannot spell out readily the purpose of his proceedings, which, I confess, have been wonderful in miseries and more than wonderful in mercies to me and mine.

Probably Hooker's visit to England decided his mind as he met and conferred with old friends. The emigration to New England of which he had spoken publicly in 1631 was quickening in pace. A number of his Essex hearers and converts were already at Mount Wollaston in Massachusetts

minister – was one of the note-takers and therefore the MS of the 1657 version was in his hand. The sermon is reprinted in HTS, from which we quote, 245-47, with slight abridgement.

Bay by August 1632, being known as ‘Mr Hooker’s company’. Others were ready to leave. These former hearers pressed him to join them, and to bring Samuel Stone with him as an assistant. When ‘aged and holy Mr Forbes’, as Mather calls him, heard the hopeful news when Hooker returned to the Netherlands he nevertheless decided to stay in the land where he was to die in 1634. In the early summer of 1633 Hooker was back in England, experiencing escapes from arrest which were not due to any lack of effort on the part of the authorities. At length with his wife and their children, with John Cotton, Samuel Stone, and some 200 others they sailed from the Downs on the Griffin in July, 1633. ‘None but Mr Stone was owned for a preacher at their first coming abroad,’ writes Mather, ‘the other two delaying to take their turns in the publick worship of the ship till they were got so far into the main ocean that they might with safety discover [reveal] who they were.’

Forty-eight years old when he arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 4, 1633, Hooker and Stone first served the church formed at Newtown (Cambridge) and then, in July, 1636, removed to Hartford where, in due course, the new colony of Connecticut was formed beside the river from whence it took its name. Differences in opinion between Hooker and some of the leaders in Boston undoubtedly contributed to the decision to remove further from the Bay. These differences did not concern the doctrine of conversion or the fundamentals of the gospel; on these things Hooker ever remained in union with his brethren; they had to do rather with the political policy in Massachusetts. The counsel which prevailed in Boston, influenced by the assumption that at various points a Christian state should follow the Old Testament theocracy, restricted suffrage to church members and was ready to deal with differences of religious opinion by force of law. Hooker saw the error in this thinking. Along with all Puritans, ‘Hooker held that the care of the Church was the first duty of the magistrate, and that civil laws for the support of a chosen Church were salutary for both Church and State. But,’ writes Sanford H. Cobb, ‘he never attempted to blend the two together’.¹⁵ The existence of greater religious liberty in Connecticut is directly attributable to the man whom Mather calls ‘the chief instrument’ in its beginning.

His wisdom on the state and church issue was not to be the principal thing for which Hooker was to be remembered after his death in July, 1647. As with Paul, the chief commendation of his ministry, was supplied by the men

¹⁵ The Rise of Religious Liberty in America, 1902, 239-45.

and women who had become ‘the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God’. In the opinion of Winthrop, noted in his journal, at the time of the passing of New England’s ‘Luther’: ‘The fruits of his labours in both Englands shall preserve an honourable and happy remembrance of him forever’. This brings us back, then, to the subject of conversion and to the preaching which was the instrument of drawing many to Christ. We have already noted how Samuel Collins, Laud’s informer, warned that even with Hooker silenced in Chelmsford ‘his genius will still haunt all the pulpits in the country’. What that ‘genius’ was, in respect to the preaching of the gospel, it remains for us to consider.

Part 2: The Approach to Hooker's Thinking¹⁶

Before we come to Hooker's teaching on conversion there are some general considerations, relevant to his whole framework of thought, which need to be stated.

In the first place, it has to be understood that at the time when Hooker began his ministry the general spiritual conditions in England were not the effect of Puritan preaching. The Puritan ministry had never been anything more than a minority in the Church of England. Even in Cambridge, Thomas Goodwin, as an unconverted student, entering the University in 1613 and disliking the 'plain and wholesome' sermons of Richard Sibbes, had no problem in finding more agreeable preachers. 'The University in those times', he writes in his Memoir, 'was addicted to a vain-glorious eloquence'. It was 'the flaunting sermons' of the University church of St Mary's which set the standard 'of high applause in the University'. In this mode of preaching, Goodwin reports, 'the wits did strive to exceed one another' and 'Dr Senhouse of St John's, afterward made bishop', excelled them all.¹⁷ Such preaching, in contrast to that of the Puritans, was the best way to preferment and it explains why – as Hooker found in Essex – a biblical ministry so often drew the opposition of fellow clerics. The truth is that there were two radically different understandings of Christianity to be found within the English Church. Bishop Neile felt the difference in 1627 when, after hearing John Preston preach, he sneeringly remarked that he spoke 'as if he was familiar with God'. This is a fact too often forgotten by modern writers though it was clear enough in the 1620's. No one would have dreamed of going to hear Bishop Laud at St Paul's, London, 'to get a little fire', as men said who went to hear John Rogers at Dedham.¹⁸ No one

¹⁶ Reprinted by permission from the Banner of Truth Magazine, Issue 196, January 1980, pp 22-32.

¹⁷ 'Memoir of Thomas Goodwin', Works of T. Goodwin, vol 2, 1861, pp lxiv, liii. Goodwin's son also quotes his father as saying: 'In my younger years, we heard little more of Christ than as merely named in the ministry and printed books. I was diverted from Christ for several years to search only into the signs of grace in me'. To the present writer it is extraordinary that these words should be quoted as though they were a criticism of *Puritan* preachers in Cambridge. As his Memoir makes clear, it was by the aid of that representative Puritan preacher, Richard Sibbes, that Goodwin was helped to preach Christ more clearly, *Ibid*, lxviii and lxxi.

¹⁸ Oliver Heywood, in his 'Life and Death of John Angier', says: 'Mr John Rogers, of Dedham, was a prodigy of zeal and success in his ministerial labours; it was wont to be said, "Come, let us go to Dedham to get a little fire"', *Whole Works of O. Heywood*, 1827, vol 1, 521.

would have exhorted Harsnet or Senhouse, as they mounted their Cambridge pulpits to ‘Let it be hot’, as Hooker once urged Simeon Ashe.

The religion to be found in the majority of parishes in England was not therefore the product of sustained Puritan influence. Consequently, most of the early 17th Century Puritans had to give first priority to changing what they found in the congregations in which they settled. Their sermons did not come to their hearers’ ears like the accustomed tones of the church bell. They were different and one fundamental reason for the difference was the Puritan conviction that the prevalence of *nominal* Christianity was then the foremost hindrance to *real* Christianity. To evangelize those without was not the need of the hour for all the people were already church-goers, all were ‘believers’, and all were ‘gospellers’. Since the accession of Elizabeth the whole population, a few excepted, had lived under the form of the Church which Parliament had so suddenly made ‘Protestant’ in 1559. Thus, in theory, Christianity was universal. In reality, to use the words of Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, it was religion learned ‘through the mere efficacy of education, laws and customs’. The faith most commonly to be found in the parishes of England was only the temporary faith of the ‘stony-ground’ hearers of Christ’s parable; it was a religion akin to that of Nicodemus before his new birth.

Such was the assessment which in the 1620’s governed the Puritans’ understanding of England’s need. East Anglia had probably received more of the gospel than any other part of the land except London, yet at Dedham John Rogers often thought it necessary to warn his hearers on this point. By true faith, he says,

the believer particularly applies Christ to himself truly, and so lives by him a true sanctified life, which this temporary faith falls short of. Therefore let us beware, and not trust to it, the rather because most of the people of England be deceived herewith, and go no further. Yea, most of the people be of the worse temporaries, only believing the Word of God to be true, and professing it, because law enjoins them so to do; but see how they live after their own lusts, and therefore have no true faith, which purifieth the heart. And this would be seen if any alteration of religion should come, as sheep flee from before a dog, so most of these would turn from the Gospel to the Mass, as they did in Queen Mary’s time.¹⁹

Quotations of similar nature could be multiplied. At Broughton, Northamptonshire, Robert Bolton, also referring to temporary faith,

¹⁹ *The Doctrine of Faith*, 5th Edition, 1633, 10-11.

believed that ‘This faith deceives thousands, because they think it sufficient for salvation!’²⁰ When Richard Baxter went to Kidderminster, Shropshire, in 1640, and tried the knowledge of his people ‘to discern what they thought of the essentials of Christianity, and of the things that Christ hath made necessary to salvation’, he discovered ‘multitudes that come all their lifetime to Church . . . so ignorant that it’s hard for scholars to believe it, that have not tried. And we have found that multitudes of them will be brought to learn over all the words of the Catechism that never consider or understand the sense, much less the power and practice of what their tongues recite.’²¹

Thomas Hooker fully shared in this evaluation: ‘Most of the people, who lived in the bosom of the Church and profess the faith’, he believed to be ‘formal gospellers’, and he refers to this situation as ‘notorious to all the English world’.²²

It is impossible to do any justice to the burden of Hooker’s preaching in Essex between 1626-29 without taking this understanding of the state of the people into account. We may disagree with that understanding – as many of the anti-Puritan clergy did, believing that it caused men needless scruples and distress – but at least it should be recognised that it throws important light upon the question why Hooker and his brethren preached as they did. They meant to trouble mens’ consciences; they meant to shake their empty assurance; and they persisted in it with much personal cost. Sometimes, as Hooker once reminded his congregation in New England, the result of this preaching was that the very patrons who had introduced them into their curacies turned against them:

Many a formal wretch hath at great cost and charges laid out himself and estate to bring a faithful preacher to a place; and when the soul saving dispensation of the Word hath discovered his falseness and laid open the cursed haunts of the carnal heart, shook his hopes, and beat all the holds he had of the goodness of his estate, and battered them before his eyes . . . if he cannot cunningly undermine the man, he would rather leave the place than live under the ministry.²³

²⁰ *The Saints Self-Enriching Examination*, 1634, 70.

²¹ *An Apology for the Nonconformists Ministry*, 1681, 22.

²² Preface to William Ames, *A Fresh Suit Against Human Ceremonies in God’s Worship*, 1633, Reprinted in *Harvard Theological Studies*, xxviii, 1975, 361.

²³ *The Application of Redemption*. The Ninth and Tenth Books, 1657, 421.

Secondly, it needs to be said that there was general agreement among the Puritans on the question how the influence of nominal Christianity should be counter-acted. Ultimately they knew that it depended upon the Holy Spirit – in whose power they put their faith – yet they also understood that the Spirit used the truth and that preachers must use ‘undeniable evidence of reason out of the Word’. Accordingly the two main subjects which dominated Hooker’s Chelmsford sermons were, first, the true nature of a saving conversion and, second, the Christian life set forth as a life which knows ‘the power of godliness’. With these two themes he judged that a formal Christianity was least comfortable and he pressed both upon his startled hearers.

To the first of these subjects – conversion – we must turn later. At this point we want simply to underline how his emphasis upon the Christian life as a life of godliness or holiness fits into the general framework of his thought. Finding this theme of godly behaviour prominent in a series of Hooker sermons on 2 Timothy 3.5 (‘Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof’), George H. Williams alleges that Hooker’s ‘moralism’ stands in contrast to the evangelicalism of the reformers: ‘Hooker’s treatise turns out to be a comprehensive scriptural defence of precisely that kind of moralism or works – righteousness once pilloried by Martin Luther in his proclamation of justification by faith alone.’²⁴

This is wholly to misunderstand Hooker. In the sermons of which Williams speaks Hooker is not dealing with how men obtain the grace of God but rather with the way in which that grace will show itself in the life of those who are Christians. Those comfortable Chelmsford hearers who thought that their profession of religion was enough to prove its reality are the people to whom he is speaking:

Sound godliness always shows and discovers itself where it is in the life and conversation of him that hath it. For it is not a mere fancy as some think. And they think when we talk of godliness and inward moving, etc, – ‘What’, say they, ‘will you have us saints and angels?’ – as if godliness were some secret thing that never saw the sun. The Apostle doth professedly oppose these, and say they are real things, and it is really in your hearts that have it, and it doth not keep close,²⁵ but appears and discovers itself in a holy conversation outwardly.

²⁴ H.T.S., 8.

²⁵ ‘Close’, i.e. shut up, hidden or secret.

In Psalm 45.13 the text saith: 'The king's daughter is all glorious within', and that is not all, but 'her clothing is of gold'. The king's daughter is the church of God. The saints that God hath soundly humbled and powerfully converted, they are the daughters of God; they are sanctified and purged, and the image of God is stamped upon them. And what is their raiment outwardly? It is of gold. They have golden speeches, golden conversations, not dirty, filthy conversations as the wicked have . . .

Objection: But you will say: 'We do not discommend holiness, but it is this hypocrisy that we disallow. God forbid that we should speak against holiness.'

Answer: Give me leave to reply: first, that which thou seest them want, labour thou for, and that which is good in them, labour thou to take up.

Thou that sayest, 'Those are sermon-hunters, yet they will cozen and lie and the like', dost thou speak against hearing the Word and praying in families? 'No. Oh, but this cozening, dissembling!' Why then, take thou that is good, sanctify thou the Lord's day, and pray thou in thy family, show thy holiness outwardly and be thou also inwardly sincere. But thou that hatest the form of godliness, it is a sign thou hatest the power of godliness!

Use: For reproof: it condemns the opinions of a great company of carnal professors that brag of their good heart when in the meantime they have base lives. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked'. This is an idle conceit of thine own carving and coining, a thing that the saints of God never found, a thing that the Scriptures never revealed. No, no, if grace be inwardly, it will show it outwardly!

You would think a man were beside himself that should tell you of a sun that did never shine or of a fire that did never heat. This would be a strange sun and a strange fire. So it is a strange kind of imagination thou hast!

Should thou see a body lie on the bed, and neither sense in it nor action proceeding from it, you would say it is dead, it lives not. So in this case. If faith work not, it is a fancy, it is an idle, foolish, carnal presumption. Why, faith purifies the heart and works by love; faith is mighty and powerful, and faith is operative and effectual. Therefore thou that thinkest thou has a holy heart and never showest it in thy course, it is a foolish delusion of thy heart.

Use: For exhortation: if you desire any evidence to your souls or testimony to your hearts that God hath wrought grace in you, then show it in your lives. Express the virtues of him that hath called you from death to life!

The Lord saith, 'Be ye holy as I am holy', not in affliction only, but 'in all manner of conversation' [1 Pet 1.15]. Mark, he doth not say, 'Have good minds only and honest hearts', but 'in all manner of conversation'. Be holy in buying, selling, travelling, trading, etc. God's saints should be so holy in their lives, as men should say: 'Surely there is a holy God; see how his servants are holy. There is a righteous God; see how righteous his servants are'. Away therefore with those idle, sottish policies of a company of carnal persons in the world that are directly opposite to the power of godliness.

There is a generation of politicians in the world that count it a point of great wisdom for a man to conceal his religion to himself. And the phrase is among men, 'Keep your holiness and your hearts to yourselves' . . . In these men's conceits Christ should have wanted wisdom when he commanded peremptorily, Matthew 5.16, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works'. He doth not say, 'Hide your light in your soul and keep your hearts to yourselves'. No, no, but 'Let it shine forth!'²⁶

Hooker, then, opposed real godliness to nominal Christianity yet it should be noted that in doing so he does not merely treat holiness as a means to an end, namely as a sign of conversion and an evidence of justifying faith. Holiness is much more than that: much more than a phase about which the young convert needs to concern himself. Holiness is the *end* itself. It is the grand purpose of redemption. Regeneration commences in man the restoration of the true purpose of his existence, namely to please God and to be like Him. The Christian will put nothing before Christ – not even his hand or his eye [Mark 9:43,47]; he shuns sin and in holiness he has found already the beginnings of the element which is the happiness of heaven. To be perfectly holy is the destiny for which he longs. 'Wherein consists my good, or what is my happiness?' asks Hooker. 'Is it not to please God, to be one with him, and happy in so being; should I carry this proud, stubborn, rebellious heart to heaven with me, heaven would be a hell to me.'²⁷ The Christian in this world is necessarily a pilgrim and a sojourner because nothing here can satisfy his desire for the full and sinless enjoyment of God.

In the third place, Hooker's position on the subject of assurance of salvation needs to be understood. Because he sought to engender doubt in

²⁶ *The Carnal Hypocrite*, first published in *Four Learned and Godly Treatises*, 1638, 94-100. (Originally preached c. 1626) and reprinted in H.T.S., from which I quote, pp 94-100.

²⁷ *The Application of Redemption*, 1657, 371.

the many who had no true grounds for confidence in their Christian profession it is possible to draw the conclusion that he viewed the state of doubt as preferable to a state of assurance. But that is decidedly not Hooker's view. It was precisely because he was concerned that men should have true assurance that he warned against the false. Nor did he teach that true assurance was a rare thing, scarcely to be attained by Christians themselves. On the contrary, assurance, he says ought not to be a problem for a Christian:

It is such a childish heedlessness that a man should ever be at a loss for his spiritual estate; as though one should live in his possessions, and if he go but a mile out of the town, and the day grow foggy, he cannot tell where he is though he be upon his own ground; when a man should be able to fetch and find his evidences at midnight, as Paul [2 *Tim* 1.12], 'I know whom I have trusted', so Job when it was midnight with him in his temptations and desertions he could say then, Job 19.25 'I know that my Redeemer liveth', He is a Redeemer and he is mine, and though I am a dying man, yet he lives . . . By a holy and blessed kind of boldness you should challenge and use all those good things of the gospel which Christ hath purchased and estated upon you, they are your own, and you may be bold with your own.²⁸

He goes further and argues that because assurance is so important to the well-being and the comfort of a Christian it is the great thing which the Devil would work against and discourage:

The hope of salvation is made the helmet of a Christian; so the Apostle, [1 *Thess* 5.8] . . . Well-grounded evidence and assurance of God's love in Christ is, as it were, the head, and the highest top of a Christian's comfort, hope is the helmet . . . The Devil who ever fights at the head, labours to shake our assurance and comfort, and if he can dash a man's hopes by despair, he kills him dead by despair . . .²⁹

These two quotations come from Hooker's New-England sermons yet the truths they contain were equally clear in his Essex ministry as is shown by his first published work *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* (1629). In this, the most frequently reprinted of Hooker's writings, he powerfully demonstrates that the main cause why some Christians do not believe that they are Christ's is because they come to him the wrong way.

²⁸ *The Application of Redemption*, Books 1-8, 109.

²⁹ *The Application of Redemption*, Books 9-10, 33.

Christ has to be received according to the condition in his promises and that condition is that men 'Buy without money' [*Isa 55:1,2*]:

This is the condition that God offers mercy upon. 'Buy wine and milk', that is, grace and salvation, 'without money', that is, without sufficiency of your own. If a man should go running up and down to borrow money before he come to buy, he may famish before he come; so the Lord offers Christ's mercy and salvation, and saith, 'Come take it without money'. And we run up and down to borrow money of prayer and duties and power against corruption; but you may be starved before you buy if you go this way to work.

Therefore make God's commodities no dearer than God himself makes them; for this is the cause why many a poor soul is kept from coming to the promise. 'Oh', saith one, 'if I were able to master my sins and distempers as such a one can do, then I would believe!' This is to bring money . . .

Were it not a wonderful great folly if some great king should make love to a poor milkmaid, and she should put it off and refuse the match till she were a queen; whereas, if she will match with the king, he will make her a queen afterwards. So we must not look for sanctification till we come to the Lord in vocation; for this is all the Lord requires of thee: to see thy sins and be weary of them, and be content that the Lord Jesus shall reveal what is amiss and take it away, and that the Lord should give thee grace . . . Get grace and get all. Strengthen this and all is strong. Want this and want all. Once get this and you need not seek for wisdom; for faith will make you wise to salvation. And you need not labour for patience; for faith will make you patient and faith will bring holiness with it to purge you; for faith brings all grace. Now the saints of God endeavour with much pains to get grace and to subdue their corruptions, but yet they are feeble and weak therein because they take not the right way.³⁰

'Satan makes it his chief work', he says again in these early sermons, 'to grieve and terrify' Christians, and yet believers are so provided for that they should 'go singing and rejoicing and triumphing up to heaven'. If they do not so their failure is far from being excusable:

It is a marvellous great shame to see those that are born to fair means, I mean the poor saints of God that have a right and title to grace and Christ, yet live at such an under-rate . . . It is a shame to see some live, and husband not that estate they have. They live as if they had it not, so full of want, so full of care, so full of pride, so weak, and so unable to master

³⁰ Quoted from H.T.S., pp 183-185.

their sins. Whereas the fault is not in the power of faith, nor the promise, nor in the Lord; for God doth not grudge his people of comfort, but would have his people live cheerfully and have strong consolations and mighty assurance of his love. And therefore the text saith, ‘rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice’ [*Phil* 4.4]. And so [*Heb* 6.18], ‘God hath sworn; that by two immutable things, wherein it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolations’. Nay, the Lord rejoiceth in the prosperity of his servants, and therefore hath richly provided for you, that you may rejoice. And in not doing so, we offer a great deal of wrong to the Lord and his promises, and bring an ill report upon that grace and mercy of his. And we hereby also open the mouths of the wicked, and make them say, ‘Oh, these precise people talk of quiet and contentment, and joy in the Holy Ghost! There is great talking of these things, but we could never see it yet’. O brethren, it is a great shame! Are the riches and revenues of faith so great, that a Christian may live like a man all his days? Let all the drunkards and malicious wretches against God laugh and be merry; yet they cannot see one of those days that a poor saint can.³¹

So speaks Thomas Hooker on the subject of assurance. Doubt and uncertainty were the very last things which he would condone as virtues. And we are not lacking testimony to the fact that he exemplified in his life what he taught. At his death, in 1647, Mather reports, he expired ‘with a smile in his countenance’, and in ‘the glorious peace of soul which he had enjoyed without any interruption for near thirty years together’.³² A lodger in the Hooker’s home in their Essex days was John Eliot – later to be the evangelist to the Indians of New England – and he never forgot the degree of Christian love and joy which he met there: ‘To this place I was called, through the infinite riches of God’s mercy in Christ Jesus . . . When I came to this blessed family I then saw, and never before, the power of godliness in its lively vigour and efficacy’.³³ Of Eliot, also, it was to be said in future years, ‘he was one who lived in heaven while he was on earth.’

Notwithstanding all this, Hooker’s ministry has frequently been held up by a school of modern writers as a ministry which was chiefly productive of gloom and uncertainty. He was, it is said, so pre-occupied with sin and with false experience that the impression which he made on his hearers was more

³¹ *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*, 1845 edition, 117-18.

³² *Magnalia*, 1, 350. John Rogers, the other great ‘Boanerges’ of East Anglia, was of a similar spirit, professing that ‘it is the cheerful Christian that glorifies God and commendeth his ways unto men’ (Quoted by Giles Firmin, *The Real Christian*, 1670,68).

³³ *Magnalia*, 1, 336. Similarly Eliot spoke of ‘much presence of Christ’ among the Christians who continued to recognize Hooker as their pastor after he was silenced at Chelmsford.

legal than evangelical. ‘Hooker offered assurance’, writes Norman Pettit, ‘only as a final reward for prolonged self-scrutiny and doubt . . . he deliberately fosters an attitude of doubt, so that no man can claim to be regenerate without embarking on a process that is harsh, tedious, and long.’³⁴

This charge is false. The only justification to which it can appeal is that the greater part of Hooker’s printed sermons from the Essex years is searching and awakening rather than consoling and comforting. From the standpoint of Scripture, it might be argued, the proportion was out of balance. But even that is far from self-evident.³⁵ For one thing we do not have all his sermons. For another, it is clear that he had himself weighed the possibility that he was excessively strong in one area of truth. Nathaniel Ward, a ministerial acquaintance, once told him that he was making the marks of true godliness the same for the beginnings of the Christian life as for the mature Christian, and commented, good-humouredly, ‘Mr Hooker, you make as good Christians before men are in Christ, as ever they are after.’³⁶

But Ward also put his finger on something which is usually omitted by those who quote the statement just given, ‘He told Hooker the reason why he thought God let him thus preach, because he saw he had not long to stand, and so should do his work all at once. That, perhaps, was the nub of the problem. At Chelmsford Hooker’s work was large and his time short. In the crowded pews of St Mary’s his hearers ranged from the ‘secure’ to the broken-hearted, with each class requiring different remedies. Many of them, in their ignorance of true godliness, were too ready to believe that they were Christians; others, having been smitten with deep conviction of sin were so ready to distrust themselves that they failed to see what grace had already done for them. The latter were the ‘Mrs Drakes’ of the church to whom he had given such close attention during his first Esher curacy. Hooker certainly felt the problem of trying to deal with these separate needs at once³⁷ and not least because, as Ward also understood, the end of his liberty

³⁴ In H.T.S., 137.

³⁵ It has to be remembered that Hooker did not preach sermons for *printing*. He authorised none of the flood of sermons, consisting of hearers’ notes, which publishers competed to print in the 1630’s. Some of these sermons, it should be said, are as rich in consolation, as anything ever published in the English language, for example ‘The Soul’s Justification’, eleven sermons on 2 Corinthians 5.21.

³⁶ Giles Firmin, *op. cit.*, 19.

³⁷ His sermons not infrequently show him distinguishing between his hearers as he administered warning or comfort.

was an ever-present possibility. While he sought to show the ‘doubting Christian’ how to distinguish himself from the self-confident professor, he was aware of the danger that the searching of the latter might distress the former. The ‘temporary believer’ needed a sight of his own heart, the doubting Christian’s trouble, as he often told him, was that he looked at his own heart far too much. Here, clearly, was a tension and a tension which is always present where there is anything of a true spiritual awakening. As Hooker considered it, the one course of action which was not open to him was to moderate the strength of his alarm to the unconverted, nominal Christian. For reasons already stated, he saw that it was not doubt and despair which was the commonest peril among his hearers but presumption – ‘a sin more frequent, and if it be possible, more dangerous . . . It is as true here, I beseech you observe it, as they said “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands”: despair hath slain his thousands, but presumption his ten thousands; that men may swear, and lie, and cozen, and break all commands, and yet hope to be saved! They hope Jesus Christ will save them, and yet oppose Christ. This is that which hath slain many thousands among us; and they are few that have not split upon this rock.’³⁸

The fact is that God did own this awakening preaching. In a number of Puritan parishes, and notably in East Anglia, the 1620’s were times of powerful revival. Strong conviction of sin was no rarity and it is true that many broken-hearts were not immediately comforted. Yet that was not due to the incapacity of the spiritual guides. Referring to the 1620’s Mather writes, Hooker ‘grew famous for his ministerial abilities, but especially for his notable faculty at the wise and fit management of wounded spirits . . . he now had no *superior*, and scarce any *equal*, for the skill of treating a troubled soul’.³⁹ Nonetheless, this was not Hooker’s main work in his Chelmsford sermons.⁴⁰ It surely requires a considerable degree of opinionatedness, these 350 years later, for anyone to assert that it ought to have been and that Hooker misjudged his scriptural duty and his calling.

The best way to understand why Hooker thought and preached as he did is to give credit to the assessment of those who knew him. The fullest

³⁸ *The Poor Doubting Christian*, 1845 edition, 57. This reproduces the text of the edition of 1646, published by Luke Fawne. Six editions preceded the 1646 edition, with variations in the contents. After 1646 the Fawne text became standard, with the first American edition, it seems, appearing at Boston in 1743.

³⁹ *Magnalia*, 1, 334.

⁴⁰ In private, however, as at Esher, Hooker probably gave much time to attending to this need. It was not for nothing that he had already acquired his reputation for helping troubled souls.

comment on ‘the balance’ of his ministry is from the pens of two of his contemporaries at Cambridge, Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, who a quarter of a century after his Essex ministry was over, wrote their introduction to his posthumous work, *The Application of Redemption*. ‘Perhaps’, they say, he urged too far and insisted too much on conviction preceding saving conversion – ‘a man may be held too long under John Baptist’s water’ – but if it was so (for they do not positively assert that it was), the reason was not the preacher’s legal spirit. On the contrary, they say, his was a ‘raised knowledge of Christ and God’s free grace’, being himself ‘highly raised, both in faith and communion with Christ’. The reason lay in the necessity for a change in the prevailing spiritual conditions – the need which Hooker saw, ‘to rectify those that have slipt into profession, and leapt over all both true and deep humiliation for sin, and sense of their natural condition’. With that judgment on the need of the times Goodwin and Nye plainly agree and as they looked back on the 1620’s they could not but see the hand of God in sending the ministry of such a man at that hour:

As when among the Jews, religion had run into factions and parties, and the power of it thereby was well-nigh lost; God then set down John Baptist, a sour and severe preacher, and urger of the doctrine of repentance, and preparative humiliation for sin, of whose ministry it is also said, [*Luke* 1.16-17]: ‘That many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord, their God. And he shall go before him (namely Christ) in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’. The meaning whereof is, he came to restore the doctrine of saving conversion, and in that point to bring and reduce the children of the Jews back again unto the same principles and ways (necessary to salvation) by which the fathers, and all the renowned saints of the Old Testament had been brought in unto God . . . So what know we, but that God (in some lesser proportionate correspondency) may have had this in the eye of all wisely designing providence to set out this great author’s works and writings (amongst the labours of others also) upon this very argument, to bring back, and correct the errors of the spirit of professors of these times . . . However, this we may say, That if any of our late preachers and divines came in the spirit and power of John Baptist this man did.

Part 3: 'God's Most Mysterious Work'⁴¹

'The almighty power of God in the conversion of a sinner is the most mysterious of all the works of God, it shakes the hearts of the ablest divines upon earth.'⁴² 'In these secrets and depths of God's spiritual dispensations with the souls of men, we must learn to be wise to sobriety, and adore the ways of God which are too wonderful for us. It's of our natural birth David speaks [*Psalm 139*], "I am fearfully and wonderfully made", much more may it be said of our new birth . . .'⁴³

So Hooker writes and his words explain why he saw the true preacher as *both* an evangelist and a divine. Conversion is too deep a subject to be preached without being studied and too glorious to be studied without being preached. Both activities belong together. And no preacher has rightly considered the mystery of the application of the gospel to the souls of men who does not find himself taxed to the utmost in making its profundities simple to others. 'The hidden mysteriousness of the manner of the Spirit's work in the truth of it, is so hard to discern', he writes again, 'that to make any approach so as to discover the way of God, and to undermine an error entrenching thereabout, is more than ordinarily difficult.'⁴⁴

In his own day, as we have seen, Hooker was indeed credited with a large measure of that wisdom which the Scriptures attribute to 'him that winneth souls'. The one-time fellow of Emmanuel spoke to the conviction of his hearers and, in Mather's phrase, 'angled many scores of souls into the kingdom of heaven.' Yet while seventeenth-century hearers understood him, it would seem that many of this century's writers on the Puritans do not – or, at least, if they do, then a considerable change has to be made to his reputation as a gospel preacher. Hooker, a modern school of critics unite to say, was a legalist who directed men more to duties and to their own abilities than to Christ.

Such a charge could scarcely be alleged with no grounds at all and what those grounds are we shall see in due course. For the present let us notice how Hooker can portray conversion in some of its simplest features.

⁴¹ Reprinted by permission from the Banner of Truth Magazine, Issue 197, February 1980, pp 12-18.

⁴² *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, p 137.

⁴³ *Ibid*, Bks 9-10, p 380.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, Bks 1-8, p 33.

Conversion occurs, he says, as men look directly to Christ made known in the promises of the gospel, and this they cannot do too soon. ‘The promise requires no more of a man but that he should come to take it’⁴⁵ ‘For the Covenant of grace is this, Believe and live . . . faith is nothing else but a going out of the soul to fetch all from another.’⁴⁶ ‘To be wining to be severed from sin,’ he says, ‘is the very door of grace and the gate of heaven’⁴⁷ Because Christ is offered freely to all who hear the gospel, it is, he argues, ‘ever sinful’ for a man to plead that a sense of sin unfits him for this mercy ‘when he may take it, and it is offered to him.’⁴⁸ God is always ready to receive the very worst who looks to Jesus Christ:

God does justify a poor sinner, not for anything he has, not for anything he does. If a man could weep out his eyes in sorrow, if a man could hunger and thirst for Christ, more than for his daily bread, God would not justify a sinner for all these things. How does God then justify a man? Why, he justifies a sinner for what Christ has done for him; the surety has paid it, and he accounts it ours . . .⁴⁹

True preaching, he believed, not only reveals the willingness of preachers that men should be converted; much more, it demonstrates the earnestness of Christ himself who speaks by his Word and Spirit:

The Lord not only offers it freely that we might be encouraged, but heartily intends it, yea, entreats it earnestly that indeed we might be persuaded. He not only commands the sinner to come, but if he go away, Mercy pursues him; if yet he seems to withdraw himself, Mercy lays holds on him, will not leave him, but weeps over him, kneels down before him, and begs importunately at his hands his own reconciliation with the Lord, [2 Cor 5.17], ‘The Lord by us doth beseech you to be reconciled’, the ministers proclaim it, but God professes it; they desire men, and God in them beseeches and entreats to be reconciled . . .

If yet the sinner will not come, the Lord, still out of his long sufferance, waits for his amendment and repentance. [Isa 30.18], ‘He waits to be gracious’ and travails, as it were, in expectation of the return of a sinner, [Jer 13.27], ‘Oh Jerusalem wilt thou not be made clean?’ As a woman in travail, Oh when will the good hour come? Oh! consider this, Is it not a shame for you to suffer the Lord Christ to meet with you at every turn, to

⁴⁵ *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* in Harvard Theol. Studies, op. cit., p 183.

⁴⁶ *The Soules Humiliation*, 1638, p 127.

⁴⁷ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, p 335.

⁴⁸ H.T.S. p 161.

⁴⁹ *The Soules Exaltation*, 1638, pp 117-118.

follow you from place to place, to attend upon you, in the seas where you have sailed, upon the shores where you have landed, in the houses where you dwell, to pursue you in the fields, to hang his pardons at your doors, and to kneel to you at your bedsides, when you lie down, and when you awake. Oh! when will it once be? Let this be the last day of sinning . . . See how the Lord sends by the prophet and pleads with them, and puts them beyond all appearance of any pretence: ‘Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die Oh ye house of Israel?’ [Ezek 33.11], ‘Have ye any reason to desire or endeavour your own destruction, against your own reason, your own good, my will? why will ye die? . . .’

He freely invites, fear it not, thou mayest be bold to go: he intends it heartily, question it not: yet he is waiting and wooing, delay it not therefore, but hearken to his voice.⁵⁰

Hooker saw the above as essential features in evangelistic preaching .and yet these truths alone by no means say everything which needs to be said about conversion. There are profounder elements still to be introduced and to these we now turn.

1. In conversion the human will is unswervingly hostile to Christ until it is renewed by the secret power of God. The will of the unregenerate man can turn in any direction except to Christ and to holiness. Certainly the man willing to believe the promises of God shall be saved but since the Fall such willingness was never found in any natural man:

The will of a natural man is the worst part about him. The worst thing he has, the greatest enemy he has, is his own heart and will. It is the corrupt will of a man that keeps him under the power of his sins, and keeps him off the power of an ordinance that would procure his everlasting good. I speak it the rather to dash that dream of wicked men, when they do ill, and speak ill, yet (say they), ‘my heart is good’. No, truly, if thy life be naught, thy heart is worse. It is the worst thing thou hast about thee ... the deceitfulness of the heart is above all; the masterfulness of the heart is beyond all that we can conceive. A man may discern a man’s life, ‘but the heart is desperate deceitful, who can know it?’ The will of man is uncontrollable, it will stand out against all reasons and arguments, and nothing can move the will except God work upon it.⁵¹

It has often been argued that to preach inability can be no part of evangelism as it must effectually paralyse any endeavour on the part of

⁵⁰ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, pp 360-3.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, Bks 1-8, p 328.

those who hear the message. But for Hooker anyone who so reasoned was displaying a seriously defective view of what, the gospel is intended to accomplish. If man only needed a change of status in the sight of God only needed to receive forgiveness – then silence about the real condition of the human will might be permissible but this is not all that man needs. To be saved his nature also must be renewed, his heart must be changed, and the sinful state of man’s will is one chief evidence of that necessity. To hide the real condition of man’s will is to ignore the foremost reason why regeneration is indispensable.

Hooker believed that the Scripture is clear in asserting what regeneration does. It is the act of God which, implanting a new principle of spiritual life, produces a new understanding and a new will, so that the person who is the subject of this act may truly be called ‘a new creature’. It is also an act of sovereign and almighty power, ‘wrought irresistibly, not issuing from the liberty of our choice, and therefore it is brought about by the irresistible impression of the work of the Spirit’.⁵² In regeneration ‘the soul behaves itself merely passively, and is wrought upon by an over-ruling power’.⁵³ Just because the rebirth does not lie in man’s control, it may occur in circumstances altogether unexpected and surprising:

Here lies the excellency of the wonderful mysteriousness of that work, that it prevails most powerfully for the good of sinners when they do most of all oppose it: when men seem to be riveted in their wretched courses, when there is many times no probability, nay, not appearance of any possibility in reason that ever they should receive any spiritual good, as being so opposite against it; and yet suddenly, and that by very weak means (many times) the Lord Christ most effectually applies the Word and work of his grace to their souls.⁵⁴

But the ‘mysteriousness’ does not end here. In the regenerate man himself the act of God by which he is renewed is so ‘secret and unsearchable’, involving as it does his sub-conscious being, that he can by no means tell with certainty *when* it occurs. Regeneration is not instantly recognizable either to observers or to a man’s own consciousness. Referring to the proposition, ‘All that are new born know the time of their new birth’, the Puritan Giles Firmin asked, ‘What divine, that did deserve the name of a

⁵² *Ibid*, Bks 9-10, p 395.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, Bks 1-8, pp 77-8.

gospel-minister, did ever deliver such a doctrine?’⁵⁵ Certainly while regeneration *itself is* hidden, its effects are known, yet the speed with which these become observable in the consciousness of a convert is subject to wide variations.

2. To state the act of God in regeneration is not to state the whole of conversion. From the side of God more is done to men than takes place at the moment of renewal, and on the human side there is a necessary process of activity. Conversion is not begun and concluded at the actual point of regeneration. Were that the case then in conversion man would be only *passive* and acted upon by God. But the Puritans held that the Scriptures require us to believe that *both* divine and human activity occur in conversion, and they asserted that unless the two things are rightly correlated the presentation of the gospel is bound to be seriously distorted. The real crux of the case against Hooker is that he got the correlation wrong. If, it is said, all depends upon Christ, then there is nothing for man to do but ‘believe.’ Indeed Familist and Antinomian opponents of Puritan teaching, such as Saltmarsh, went even further and spoke of Christ as ‘repenting’ and ‘believing’ for us. It was this kind of teaching which led Anthony Burgess to complain that it ‘makes God’s converting of a man to be as when a physician pours down his potion into the sick man’s throat, whether he will or no.’⁵⁶

This Antinomian view-point Hooker and his brethren held to be fundamentally wrong and their proof was ready to hand in the commands and exhortations which Scripture addresses to men with respect to their salvation. The Christ who preached that none can enter the kingdom of God until he is ‘born of the Spirit’ [*John* 3.5-8] also preached, ‘Repent ye and believe the gospel’ [*Mark* 1.15]; ‘Strive to enter in at the strait gate

⁵⁵ *The Real Christian*, p 13. Increase Mather in his Preface to Solomon Stoddard’s *A Guide to Christ*, quotes the Puritan William Pemble, ‘To tell the month, day, or hour, wherein they were converted, is in most converts impossible; in all, *of exceeding difficult observation*; tho’ I deny not but the time may be in some, *of sensible mark*’. ‘That eminent man *of* God, Mr Baxter,’ Increase Mather continues, ‘relates that he was once at a meeting *of* many Christians, as eminent for holiness as most in the land, *of* whom divers were ministers *of* great fame, and it was desired that every one *of* them would give an account *of* the time and manner *of* his conversion, and there was but one *of* them all that could do it. And (says he) I aver from my heart, that I neither know the day, nor the year, when I began to be sincere.’

⁵⁶ *Vindiciae Legis: or, A Vindication of the Moral Law*, 1647, p 100. See also the same author’s *The True Doctrine of justification*, 1654, p 123, where he speaks of what Saltmarsh ‘absurdly affirmed’.

[*Luke* 13.24]; ‘Labour . . . for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life [*John* 6.27]; and ‘Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple’ [*Luke* 14.33]. The same note runs through Scripture. Men are to ‘Cease to do evil’; they are to seek, to pray, to hear, to flee, and when they fail to do so it is held against them, ‘They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God’ [*Hosea* 5.4]. Thus Paul also preached that men ‘should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance’ [*Acts* 26.20]. When the gospel is presented to the unconverted, to quote Thomas Chalmers, ‘It ought not to restrain the energy of his immediate doing, that he is told how doings are of no account, unless they are the doings of one who has gone through a previous regeneration. This ought not to keep him from doing. It should only lead him to combine with the prescribed doing, an earnest aspiring after a cleaner heart, and a better spirit than he yet finds himself to have.’⁵⁷

One clear deduction which the Puritans drew from the above texts was that in conversion God deals with men as responsible moral agents and acts suitably to their nature. They are not ‘stocks and stones’ but intelligent beings with minds and consciences which have to be affected by the truth if they are to be converted. Thus ‘the means of grace’ (preeminently the Word of God) are given to men and to these they must respond: in the words of the Westminster divines, ‘that we may escape his wrath’, God ‘requireth of us repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and the diligent use of the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation’.⁵⁸ ‘Ordinarily’, writes John Owen, ‘God, in the effectual dispensation of his grace, meeteth with them who attend with diligence on the outward administration of the means of it.’⁵⁹

Given this conviction it is not surprising that the sermons of Hooker and of his brethren abound in exhortations to action: men are to humble themselves, repent, pray, believe and obey the truth. They so preached not because of any belief in human ability but because they saw it to be God’s command and knew that God himself worked with the truth. ‘Though all that thou canst do, can neither prepare thee for grace, nor purchase grace for thyself, yet the means through divine institution are mighty; God by

⁵⁷ On this whole subject see Chalmers’ valuable letter to the inhabitants of Kilmany on ‘The Duty of Giving an Immediate Diligence to the Business of the Christian Life’ in his *Works*, vol 12, pp 71-120.

⁵⁸ The Larger Catechism, Q. 153.

⁵⁹ *Works*, Goold edit, vol 3, p 231.

them can work effectually'.⁶⁰ Their conviction that their hearers would not savingly respond until God renewed them, rather than lessening the earnestness of their evangelistic preaching, gave it true hope. The mind and will have to be brought into activity and God is at hand to do that which is impossible with men. So Hooker writes, 'This consent [to Christ] is not of ourselves, though not without ourselves . . . The will does consent or will, but does not make itself to consent, but is so by another.'⁶¹

Notwithstanding Puritan clarity at this point, the modern critics allege that in exhorting men to duty, and appealing to their minds, they were reviving the idea of human ability in salvation. Thus Perry Miller claimed to have found deviation from true 'Calvinism' in the sermons of John Preston where, he says, 'conversion is not prostration on the road to Damascus, but reason elevated'.⁶² Norman Pettit lays the same charge against Sibbes and Hooker. Sibbes, he thinks, 'was by far the most extreme in terms of the abilities he assigned to natural man'.⁶³ R. T. Kendall repeats the claim with reference to Hooker: 'Many people who have taken the time to wade through Thomas Hooker's long sermons have been astonished that Hooker imputed to the natural, unregenerate man an extraordinary ability to take the initiative in seeking grace'.⁶⁴ Arguing from precisely the same basis, Lazer Ziff finds Thomas Shepard to be a 'legalist' and the proof which he offers is this: 'Shepard argues that in His offices on behalf of man Christ "did not believe and repent . . . for us", but that these are "personally required" of man.'⁶⁵

It is noteworthy that these criticisms are not made on the basis of opinions unknown to the Puritans: they rest precisely on the same grounds as the Antinomians themselves urged three centuries ago. And, as the Puritans saw, at the root of that error lay a defective and one-sided definition of conversion. Although passive at the instant of regeneration that instant is a

⁶⁰ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 306. The instrumental use of means, he says elsewhere, 'meets directly with that vain conceit of the Familists, "Doth the Lord do all the work? it seems then a man may sit still and do nothing, nothing is required of us, there is nothing for us to do".'
Ibid, Bks 1-8, p 133.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, Bks 9-10, pp 393-5.

⁶² *The New England Mind*, 17th Century, p 200.

⁶³ *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life*, 1961, 73.

⁶⁴ *The Influence of Calvin and Calvinism upon the American Heritage*, Annual Lecture of the Evangelical Library, 1976, p 14. The thesis is further developed in the same author's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 1979.

⁶⁵ *The Career of John Cotton*, 1962, p 122n.

point in a process in which, before and after regeneration, man is active. As has been said, the convert is passive in regeneration but not about it. Further, because the convert himself is not conscious of the moment of regeneration there is no stage in the process of conversion when his own activity is to be suspended.

Conversion, for the Puritans, had indeed a far larger element of profundity and mystery in it, than was allowed by the Antinomians. Modern writers criticize the Puritans for making a 'simple' subject needlessly complex but the true explanation of their criticisms may lie in the words of Dr John Duncan, 'I believe that the Puritan age had a depth that we know nothing about'.⁶⁶ Certainly Duncan states the 'Puritan' definition of conversion exactly when he writes: 'Conversion is a great work of man under the mighty power of the Holy Ghost: a divine work upon a rational being having an understanding, will, and affections.'⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Life of John Duncan*, David Brown, 1872, p 415.

⁶⁷ *Recollections of John Duncan*, A Moody Stuart, 1872, p 196.

Part 4: The Way to Christ⁶⁸

We have seen the general answer of the Puritans to the question, ‘What need is there for a man to do anything in his conversion if he can only become a Christian by the sovereign power of God in making him a new creature?’ It is that in conversion man is also active, and that this activity is required by the commands and promises of Scripture. Regeneration does not give men the truth by which they are saved, it gives them rather the capacity to believe and obey the truth made known by the Word of God, and thus Scripture, as a means of grace, is also vital to conversion. Men’s sinful inability to respond savingly to the gospel does not relieve them of the obligation to use those means which the Spirit of God makes effectual in ‘convincing and converting sinners’.⁶⁹

But this general answer must be looked at in more detail, for, as the words just quoted indicate, the means of grace have a general role to play in conversion both before as well as after the point of regeneration. Although the unregenerate man is spiritually dead, this does not mean that he is incapable of any reaction to Scripture. His mind and conscience may be reached by the truth: indeed it is the preacher’s business to see that they are so reached, because until they are there will be no conviction of sin, and without conviction of sin there will be no subsequent conversion. If repentance means turning one’s back upon sin, and if conversion entails turning from sin to holiness, no one is going to see the need for such a change who has not first felt sin to be a burden. Faith is more than reason but it is not irrational. It is a response to truth, and where faith is not the act of a person who understands his need of the saving power of Christ it is not scriptural faith. ‘First truths’, says Hooker, ‘come to the understanding to be judged, before they be delivered up and presented to the heart to be believed. Psalm 9.10, “They that know thy name will trust in thee”. “This is eternal life to know thee”, John 17.3. And 2 Peter 1.3, “Through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour”. For a blind, hood-winked faith is the faith of apostates and papists, of deceivers and devils, but not the faith of God’s elect.’⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Reprinted by permission from the Banner of Truth Magazine, Issue 199, April 1980, pp 10-21.

⁶⁹ cf *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q.89.

⁷⁰ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, 36.

There must, then, be a knowledge which prepares the way for faith and that knowledge consists, in the first instance, of the recognition of the need for a Saviour. Without such a conviction, men, far from being in a state of readiness to believe, treat the gospel as meaningless, for it proposes remedies for a sickness from which, they suppose, they do not suffer. Only a changed view of their real condition will show men their need to respond. ‘They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick’ [Mark 2.17]. It cannot be conceived, writes John Rogers of Dedham, ‘how a man should believe in Christ for salvation that felt not before himself in a miserable state, and wearied with it, desired to get out of it into a better.’⁷¹

Such is the thinking which lay behind the Puritan belief that evangelism must proceed from the starting point that men are careless and unprepared. ‘It is incident to all men naturally’, says Hooker, ‘to have a slight apprehension of sin’, and ‘so long as sin is unseen, Christ will be unsought’. The reason men did not respond to the invitation to the wedding feast, in Christ’s parable, was that they were not ‘hunger-bitten’, they were not conscious of their miserable state nor of ‘the need they had of supply from those rich provisions of a Saviour’. The reason for the change in the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost was not that they had not heard of Christ before but that they had not been *convicted* before: ‘They were pricked in their heart and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ [Acts 2.37]. Commenting on this text Hooker writes:

A true sight and sense of a man’s sinful condition sets men upon the search, awakens men out of that senseless security in which they were buried, makes them look about them, puts them upon the serious consideration of their own spiritual condition, not long before they had scant thought whether they had souls to be saved, or sins to be pardoned, or mercy to be looked after, they never put it to the question what they could say or shew for heaven, but now they begin to think with themselves what they are.⁷²

So it is with many. Before they were convicted

they never saw need of reading, hearing, prayer, seeking and enquiry; but now when they find themselves besieged with sins and plagues, heaven frowning, hell gaping, their consciences accusing, and themselves dropping down to the grave, and their souls to hell, they think it high time, and more than time to bestir themselves, to do what they can, and to cry for

⁷¹ *The Doctrine of Faith*, 1633, pp 66-7.

⁷² *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 560.

help and direction in so desperate distress and danger. ‘The whole need not the physician’, therefore they do not send, nor yet are they willing to receive, nor care to enquire, or take any physic. But when the disease grows fierce, and life is in danger, then they post out messengers, send far and near for a physician, search every bush, enquire of every man what might be good, what have you found? What would you advise?⁷³

In the instance of Acts 2, while the agent in conviction was the Holy Spirit the instrumental means was the truth preached and Hooker found the same pattern repeated throughout the New Testament. As Paul reminds the Christians at Rome, they had not first known the Holy Spirit as ‘the Spirit of adoption’ but rather as ‘the Spirit of bondage’: ‘The Spirit of bondage is required which may let in the light of the Law into the mind, and set on the power of it mightily upon the consciences of sinners, and so dazzle their eyes, and daunt their hearts with the dreadfulness of their sins, Romans 8.15, “You have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear”.’⁷⁴ Fear produced by the law was the Spirit’s first work.

Christ’s ministry exemplifies the same truth. For lack of conviction of sin, writes Hooker,

the woman of Samaria manifested such saucy impudency and peremptory boldness in her conference with our Saviour . . . but when our Saviour laid his hand upon the sore, and let the light shine in her face, and points to the vileness of her practice, ‘Thou hast had five husbands, but he whom thou now hast, is not thy husband’, she then becomes sensible of his sovereign wisdom., and her own wretchedness [*John* 4.18-20]. So it was with Paul, when the Lord met him going to Damascus persecuting the saints, he saw not the sinfulness of his course, and therefore was senseless in it. ‘Saul, Saul’, says Christ, ‘why persecutest thou me? . . .’ When he understood the evil of his way, then he stood trembling and astonished, saying, ‘Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?’ [*Acts* 9.5,6].⁷⁵

Men under conviction of sin, Hooker taught, generally pass through two stages, first, contrition., and second, humiliation. By the first, ‘God brings the sinner to a sight of himself and his sin’ so that he sees ‘an absolute necessity of a change, and therefore thinks thus with himself, If I rest thus, I shall never see God with comfort’. At this point the man begins to change his life and practices, and begins to use seriously ‘all the ordinances of God’,

⁷³ *Ibid*, pp 562-3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p 40.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp 35-6.

yet all his endeavours only reveal more clearly the real state of his heart and his helplessness to change anything more than the external. At length, having looked ‘to himself and his self-sufficiency, and finding no succour there, he falls down before the Lord and begs mercy, and yet he sees himself unworthy of mercy, without which he must perish. He has nothing, and he can do nothing to merit it’.⁷⁶ This is humiliation and its consequence is well described by another preacher and theologian of the same school as Hooker although he wrote 200 years later. Speaking of the feelings of an individual in the experience of humiliation, Archibald Alexander of Princeton writes:

He has come to the end of his legal efforts; and the result has been the simple, deep conviction that he can do nothing; and if God does not mercifully interpose, he must inevitably perish. During all this process he has some idea of his need of divine help, but until now he was not entirely cut off from all dependence on his own strength and exertions. He still hoped that, by some kind of effort or feeling he could prepare himself for the mercy of God. Now he despairs of this, and not only so, but for a season he despairs, it may be, of salvation – gives himself up for lost. I do not say that this is a necessary feeling, by any means, but I know that it is very natural, and by no means uncommon, in real experience. But conviction having accomplished all that it is capable of effecting, that is, having emptied the creature of self-dependence and self-righteousness, and brought him to the utmost extremity – even to the borders of despair, it is time for God to work. The proverb says, ‘Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity’: so it is in this case; and at this time, it may reasonably be supposed, the work of regeneration is wrought, for a new state of feeling is now experienced . . .⁷⁷

Hooker had much personal knowledge of people under conviction of sin and his writings reveal a number of guide-lines which governed his own thinking and practice as a physician of souls. In looking at these his thought will be further clarified to us.

1. Although Hooker believed that contrition and humiliation, as outlined above, are common in the experience of converts he was careful to present no stereo-typed pattern with which all experience must be made to conform. In the words of Anthony Burgess, one of his contemporaries, who was also a student at Emmanuel, Cambridge, ‘We read in the Scripture of

⁷⁶ *The Soul’s Humiliation*, 1638, pp 131-2.

⁷⁷ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (1844) 1967 reprint, p 19. Like Hooker, Alexander was familiar with the powerful work of the Spirit in revivals. His work is one of the most valuable of 19th-Century volumes on experimental Christianity.

different conversions of men to Christ, and therefore we must not limit God to one way'.⁷⁸ Hooker left room for much variation. God deals, he says, 'in divers manners with divers sinners'. The time element, for one thing, is very variable. Conversion does not have to be a protracted process:

Sometimes the Lord suddenly sets on the blow, and pierceth the soul through at one thrust. Sometimes at one sermon, maybe in the handling of one point, nay some one sentence, or some special truth, the Lord is pleased to arm it and discharge it, with mighty power and uncontrollable evidence, that it astonishes and shivers the heart of the sinner all in pieces."⁷⁹

While Cotton Mather in his *Memoir of Hooker* gives specific examples of sudden conversions under his ministry, Hooker himself only refers to the phenomenon as something with which his New-England hearers were all familiar:

How often have we heard it and known it in our own country! The Lord hath sent a minister to see the country, and visit his friends, and it has been the day whereon he has been pleased to visit the heart of many a careless ignorant creature, who came idling as to a May-game, or Morris dancing, and dropped into the assembly, and the Word hath laid hold on him before he, has been aware of it; how often hath the loose prodigal come to riot it at the Fair and Market, and been drawn in to hear beyond his purpose, cross his desire, and wished himself out of the place, and yet hath heard that before he departed, which hath been a word of life and peace unto his soul, for which he saw cause to bless God to all eternity! Matthew he is sitting at the receipt of custom, minds how to take money, Peter and James are casting a net into the sea, to see how to make provision for themselves; Christ calls them to himself, and so to an interest in grace and glory, when they had not so much as thought that way.⁸⁰

Further, while Hooker certainly agreed with John Owen that, in its substance, a previous conviction of sin is 'found in all that sincerely believe',⁸¹ he was also careful to say that the degree of the sense of sin is as variable as the length of time. He did not require men to be able to cry, as he could once do with Job, 'Terrors are turned upon me: they pursue my soul as the wind'. In the case of Lydia, God 'melted her heart kindly',⁸² and

⁷⁸ To the Reader, *Spiritual Refinings*, Part II, A Treatise of Sin, 1654.

⁷⁹ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 372.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, pp 289-90.

⁸¹ *Works*, Goold edit, vol 5, p 77.

⁸² *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*, 1643, p 168.

she is representative of a class of converts. With some, Hooker argues, God's manner in bringing them to a sense of sin, 'is sweet and secret, and works insensibly upon the spirits of such who do receive it, when and how it seems best to his infinite wisdom, whose ways are indeed past finding out.'⁸³ In this connection he especially instances infants and those who, brought up in godly homes, come to know God savingly in their youth; Joseph, Samuel and Josiah being quoted as examples.

Hooker was a master of the use of illustration and two which he uses in this connection are as follows:

You must know, how ever this work is wrought in all for the substance of it, yet in a different manner in the most . . . Two men are *pricked*, the one with a pin, the other with a spear; two men are cut, the one with a pen-knife, the other with a sword: So the Lord deals kindly and gently, with one soul, and roughly with another.'⁸⁴

And again, he represents the unconverted man as locked up behind a door of unbelief which must be opened, but, as in ordinary life, there is more than one way of dealing with the problem of a lock: 'A man may pick the lock, or break the lock; open the door and lift up the latch gently, or else unhinge it with violence and noise [so] that all the house, and all the town may hear, but it's opened both ways.'⁸⁵

Any idea that conviction of sin should cover a certain time, come in a set manner, or reach a certain degree, is not to be found in the Puritans.

2. Hooker and his brethren considered it vital that those who are 'awakened' and labouring under conviction of sin should not be treated as *already saved*.⁸⁶ Conviction of sin, even when attended by manifest evidence of the Spirit of God speaking to the conscience, is no evidence of a saving conversion. The rich young ruler was 'very sorrowful' but he was not converted [*Luke* 18.23]. Felix 'trembled' under the Word of God but he did not become a Christian. The New Testament gives clear indication of general or common operations of the Holy Spirit which can be experienced by the unregenerate man. Gospel hearers may be 'made partakers of the Holy Ghost' and taste 'the good word of God and the powers of the world

⁸³ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 374.

⁸⁴ *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*, p 166.

⁸⁵ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 360.

⁸⁶ 'Remember', says R. M. M'Cheyne, 'you are not saved because *you* have got a sight of your sins. It is not every awakened sinner that is a saved man', *A Basket of Fragments*, p 202.

to come' [*Heb* 6.4-5] and yet they may never experience the 'things that accompany salvation' [*Heb* 6.9].

Thus when a person comes under conviction, what results from that conviction is by no means a foregone conclusion. Any one of three different conditions may follow in the experience of an awakened person:

(i) Conviction may be lost or thrown off, as Herod at last threw it off under the preaching of John the Baptist. 'Thus', writes Hooker, 'Millions of men perish, go within the view of Canaan, and never possess it'.⁸⁷ It is, he says again, 'a dangerous and desperate mistake' to get no further than 'a legal reformation . . . and here millions perish'.⁸⁸ Speaking of the same point, a century later, Jonathan Edwards writes in his *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, 'In times of great reviving of religion . . . it is as with the fruit trees in the spring; there are a multitude of blossoms, all of which appear fair and beautiful, and there is a promising appearance of young fruits; but many of them are of short continuance; they soon fall off, and never come to maturity.'

(ii) A person may get the burden of conviction off his back by a false belief that he has received Christ. 'Out of self-love to self-ends' the sinner may 'catch at that comfort and supply' of which he hears in the gospel, imagine he is converted, and thereafter 'in a blind kind of boldness' he pretends 'to hang upon Christ and free mercy'.⁸⁹ This is the stony-ground hearer of the gospel of whom Jesus says, he 'heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself' [*Matt* 13.20-21]. Some in this category will later fall away from their Christian profession under trials. Others will remain in the church having the form of godliness without the power: in the words of John Owen, 'they become walking and talking skeletons in religion – dry, sapless, useless, worldlings.'⁹⁰ Describing this same group, Robert Bolton says, they 'hold on in a plodding course of formal Christianity all their life long, and at last depart this life like the foolish virgins.'⁹¹

The frequent warnings of Scripture, and their own experience, led the Puritans to believe that there is indeed danger of men making a premature

⁸⁷ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 368.

⁸⁸ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, p 195.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p 90.

⁹⁰ *Works*, vol 3, p 241, in his valuable chapter, 'Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory unto Regeneration.'

⁹¹ *Instructions For a Right Comforting Afflicted Consciences*, 1640, p 306.

and unsound profession of faith. Many, writes Hooker, are ‘still-born, not “begotten again to a lively hope”, [1 Pet 1.3]. They heal themselves before God heals them, make application before sound preparation; not that they can apply too soon, if they apply truly; but they think they do apply when they neither do nor can.’⁹²

(iii) In the third instance there are those in whom conviction of sin is accompanied with, or followed by, the experience of the saving power of God in regeneration.

3. The fact that the awakened sinner is unable to change his own heart, and the danger that he may depend upon his own efforts for acceptance with God, must not be allowed to weaken his obligation to *act*. There are things to be *done* if he is to be converted. Reading, hearing, repenting, praying and believing are not duties from which a man is excused until he is regenerate. Hooker, for example, presses man’s responsibility to humble himself, at the same time holding out the comfort of Christ’s promise:

The Lord hath promised to come into our souls if we humble them, and make them fitting to entertain his Majesty; therefore sweep your hearts, and cleanse those rooms, cleanse every sink, and brush down every cobweb, and make room for Christ; for if thy heart be prepared and divorced from all corruptions, then Christ will come and take possession of it.⁹³

Wrenching these words from their context, they might be quoted to prove that Hooker taught that men may fulfil conditions which qualify them to receive grace, that is to say, if men do so much then Christ will do the rest. Nothing could be further from his thought. Rather he was preaching in the full conviction that God’s regenerating work, which alone gives spiritual life will never be found without repentance on the human side and, therefore, this knowledge also enabled him to say that when men truly repent and humble themselves they will be sure, in due course, to come to the conscious knowledge of salvation in Christ. His system of theology may sometimes be kept in the background but it never ceases to have a controlling influence upon his understanding.⁹⁴

⁹² *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 449.

⁹³ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, p 201.

⁹⁴ Hooker would have been in full agreement with the words of a modern reformed theologian who writes: ‘The causal priority, of regeneration is no excuse for our unbelief ... To argue that we should not repent and believe until we are regenerated is to introduce confusion into the relations that regeneration sustains to our responsibility. We never know that we are regenerated until we

Many other passages could be quoted from Hooker in which he throws the same strong emphasis upon what men must do. The duty of prayer is a case in point. John Bunyan says that as Christian approached the wicket gate he saw written above it the text, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you'. 'He knocked, therefore, more than once or twice'. Precisely the same counsel is found in Hooker and yet he never presented prayer as something which, when done, secures salvation. On the contrary, men are to use this means of grace in the consciousness of their own helplessness. Inability and duty are *both* to be emphasised. Thus after a section in a sermon where he has been declaring human inability Hooker proceeds:

You will say, 'What shall I do?'

Come and bring thy soul into God's presence, lay thyself down in his sight, and tell the Lord that thou art a traitor, and which is worse, thou canst not but be so; that's thy misery; make known all the base abominations of thy heart and life before the Lord, and all that crossness and opposition that thou findest in thy soul to Christ and his grace, beseech him to take away the treachery and falseness of thy heart, beseech him that he would do that for thee that thou canst not do for thyself . . . tell him that he said, 'he will take away the heart of stone' [*Ezek* 36.26] and that it is not in thy power to put it away, and therefore leave thy soul there, beseeching him to make known himself as a God hearing prayers, pardoning sins, and subduing iniquities; plead the Covenant of Grace, and the promises of it, that all is freely, and firstly, and wholly from himself, that he must *make .us his people*, he must make us humble and broken-hearted; look to Jesus Christ, and beseech him that 'hath the keys of Hell and Death', that he would unlock those brazen gates and doors of thy heart [*Rev* 1.18].⁹⁵

4. The recognition that in a true conversion the time element is not under human control is a further guideline in Hooker's thought. There is no saying how soon or how 'late' in the process of conviction of sin regeneration will occur. Conviction does not *cause* regeneration: it does no more than reveal to the sinner his need. The illumination necessary for him

repent and believe. The gospel of grace addresses itself to our responsibility in the demand for repentance and faith. just as the unknown purposes of God are not the rule of our conduct nor the grounds upon which we act, so the inscrutable operations of God are not the rule or ground of our action, but his revealed will. The rule for us in every case is the revealed will presented to our consciousness, not his mysterious operations below the level of consciousness. Our belief, our knowledge that we have been regenerated is never the ground upon which we exercise faith in Christ, even though the fact of regeneration is always the source from which issues the exercise of faith and repentance'. *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol 2, 1977, p 199.

⁹⁵ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 450.

to see savingly the relation between that need and Christ can be given by God alone: hence, in Paul's words, faith is 'not of yourselves: it is the gift of God' [*Eph* 2.8]. Further, while regeneration always brings illumination (and therefore what Hooker calls 'the habit of faith') its effects may be so gradual in the conscious experience of the convert that a truly regenerate person may remain for some time more conscious of sin than of forgiveness. As we have noted earlier, the Puritans did not find in the New Testament the idea that every believer knows the *time* of his rebirth. Because of this Hooker understood that there are often gospel hearers who, in their own eyes, are still outside of Christ, whereas in reality their experience is already saving if they did but know it. They are 'poor doubting Christians' who have not realized that the *truth* of grace can exist where there is not the full assurance which comes from the *strength* of grace.

So, to adopt the illustration in Bunyan's allegory, the distance between the 'city of destruction' and the 'wicket gate' of the rebirth, is variable for every Christian. For no two people is the time of the journey identical. The breadth and depth of 'the slough of despond' will not be the same, neither will be the length of the journey between 'the wicket gate' and the assurance which comes, as Bunyan rightly says, from 'the sight of the Cross'.

The strength of the Puritans' conviction at this point is a reflection of their conviction of the supernatural nature of a true conversion. If conversions can be programmed, standardized, and stereotyped, they are not the same conversions as are to be found in the New Testament. Certainly the Puritans believed that pastors are to be diligent in aiding men to Christ and to assurance, but insensitivity as to what the Spirit alone can do, 'slightness' in searching men's consciences and hastiness in healing them, were dangers which they identified with a superficial view of conversion.

Critics of the Puritans, who generally do not seem to understand that grace and assurance cannot be induced by preachers, nor received in such fashion by hearers, have often reserved their severest remarks for the length of time which some converts needlessly, as they think, suffered in concern for their souls in the 17th Century. They assume that no good can belong to such experiences. But, while accepting the truth that there are some forms of a 'sense of sin' which are neurotic rather than biblical, the Puritans believed that benefit can result to the soul who is made to feel much earnest care for salvation. Richard Baxter gives testimony on this point. In his youth he was kept 'for many years' in doubt over his spiritual condition which made him

have ‘more care of my salvation than my nature was easily brought to’. One chief cause of his doubt about his salvation was:

Because I could not distinctly trace the workings of the Spirit upon my heart in that method which Mr Bolton, Mr Hooker, Mr Rogers, and other divines describe! Nor knew the time of my conversion, being wrought on by the fore-mentioned degrees. But since then I understood that the soul is in too dark and passionate a plight, at first, to be able to keep an exact account of the order of its own operations; and that preparatory grace being sometimes longer and sometimes shorter, and the first degree of special grace being usually very small, it is not possible that one of very many should be able to give any true account of the *just time*⁹⁶ I when special grace began, and advanced him above the state of preparation . . . I understood at last that God breaketh not all men’s hearts alike.⁹⁷

Baxter does not blame his slowness to come to a settled assurance upon the authors whom he names; on the contrary when a man came to censuring these practical divines he regarded it as a bad sign of his spiritual condition. So he tells us of a man who was once his friend, and once ‘unwearied’ in reading these authors, who at length came to rail against them, complaining ‘that such as Bolton were too severe and enough to make men mad’. But this change of judgment, Baxter notes, was preceded by a change of life, ‘and the last I heard of him was that he was grown a fudier and railer at strict men’.⁹⁸ Our present purpose, however, is to note the *benefits* which Baxter gained from his long struggle under conviction of sin.

(1) It made me vile, and loathsome to myself, and made pride one of the hateful sins in the world to me . . . (2) It much restrained me from that sportful levity and vanity which my nature and youthfulness did much incline me to . . . (3) It made the doctrine of redemption the more savoury to me, and my thoughts of Christ to be more serious . . . (4) It made the world seem to me as a carcase that had neither life nor loveliness . . . I had a desire before to have attained the highest academical degrees and reputation of learning, and to have chosen my studies accordingly; but sickness and sollicitousness for my doubting soul did shame away all these thoughts as fooleries and children’s plays (5) It caused me first to seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and most to mind the one thing needful; and to determine first of my ultimate end . . .⁹⁹

⁹⁶ i.e., the exact time.

⁹⁷ *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or Richard Baxter’s Life and Times*, 1696, pp 6-7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p 4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.5.

Baxter's period of soul-trouble was no worthless experience, rather it had not a little to do with his later usefulness. And the fact that not a few men eminent in the service of Christ have been brought through similar trials at the beginning of their spiritual lives underlines the same lesson. In the path Baxter walked, Luther and Hooker – to name but two – had gone before him and many were to come after, including John Wesley¹⁰⁰ and George Whitefield. If C. H. Spurgeon, in the last century, was to be referred to as a Puritan born out of due time, it was in part because he also had been trained by God in a school of experience which left him with no casual views of sin. In a moving chapter in his *Autobiography* he records:

For five years as a child there was nothing before my eyes but my guilt . . . Wherever I went, the law had a demand upon my thoughts, upon my words, upon my rising, upon my resting. What I did, and what I did not do, all came under the cognizance of the law. I seemed as if I was a sinner, and nothing else but a sinner . . . Was there ever a bond-slave who had more bitterness of soul than I, five years a captive in the dungeons of the law, till my youth seemed as if it would turn into premature old age? . . . When God the Holy Ghost first quickened me, little did I know of the precious blood which has put my sins away, and drowned them in the depths for ever. But I did know this, that I could not remain as I was; that I could not rest happy unless I became something better, something purer than I was; and, oh, how my spirit cried to God with groanings – I say without any exaggeration – groanings that could not be uttered! I tried a long time to improve myself, but I never did make much of it; I found I had a devil within me when I began, and I had ten devils when I left off. Instead of becoming better, I became worse . . . Then I laboured to believe. It is a strange way of putting it, yet so it was. When I wished to believe, I

¹⁰⁰ Wesley's experience was remarkably similar to much that Hooker taught on the place of conviction of sin. In Wesley's case the struggle 'continued above ten years' and before its conclusion on the day of his 'conversion' (May 24, 1738) he could write, 'How am I fallen from the glory of God! I feel that I "am sold under sin". I know that I deserve nothing but wrath, being full of all abominations, and having no good thing in me to atone for them, or to remove the wrath of God'. But Wesley dated his 'conversion' on his assumption that saving faith is something 'which none has without knowing that he hath it'. In fact, what Wesley gained in May, 1738, was *assurance* ('an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine') and he later came to see that he had no business to conclude he was unregenerate prior to that date. Referring to this, his biographers Coke and More, note that 'many years after' Wesley acknowledged that he had previously been 'in a state of salvation as a servant, but not as a child: and that he had a measure of faith, but not the proper Christian faith' (*The Life of John Wesley*, 1822, pp 142-168). 'Many', says Jonathan Edwards, 'are, doubtless, ready to *date* their conversion wrong, throwing by these lesser degrees of light that appeared at *first* dawning, and calling some more remarkable experience they had afterwards, their conversion.'

found I could not. It seemed to me that the way to Heaven by Christ's righteousness was as difficult as by my own, and that I could as soon get to Heaven by Sinai as by Calvary. I could do nothing, I could neither repent nor believe. I fainted with despair, feeling as if I must be lost despite the gospel, and be for ever driven from Jehovah's presence, even though Christ had died.¹⁰¹

And again, Spurgeon writes:

I used to hear a minister whose preaching was, as far as I could make it out, 'Do this, and do that, and do the other, and you will be saved'. According to his theory, to pray was a very easy thing; to make yourself a new heart, was a thing of a few instants, and could be done at almost any time; and I really thought that I could turn to Christ when I pleased . . . But when the Lord gave my soul its first shakings in conviction, I soon knew better . . .¹⁰²

None of these writers is recommending that anyone should covet the degree of conviction which they experienced but they certainly believed that in Spurgeon's words, 'a spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavoured with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him that hath had it'. And they also believed that it is infinitely better to rest in the truth that the time element in conversion is in God's hands than to look to the false comfort of the 'theory' which Spurgeon came to recognize as a delusion.

Certainly no one can be a safe physician of souls who dispenses with this principle which we have stated as a fourth guideline in Hooker's thought.

¹⁰¹ *C. H. Spurgeon: Autobiography*, vol 1, 'The Early Years', 1973, pp 56-71.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p 49.

Part 5: Objections and Conclusions¹⁰³

From what we have already considered it is clear that foremost in the thought of Hooker and his brethren was an insistence that where there is a readiness of heart to find all comfort in Christ it will invariably be preceded by an awareness of need. Christ delivers those who know themselves to be lost, and ministers should therefore begin, they argued, where God begins and preach *for* the conviction of their hearers before they anticipate their conversion. In the words of John Rogers:

None can prove or show precedent that faith was wrought in an instant at first, without any preparation going before: nor can it be conceived how a man should believe in Christ for salvation that felt not before himself in a miserable state and, wearied with it, desired to get out of it into a better. As the needle goes before to pierce the cloth, and makes way for the thread to sew it, so is it in this case.¹⁰⁴

According to this understanding, men, generally, do not become Christians in a moment; rather they pass through a process of experience and the precise point at which they are savingly renewed is hidden from them.

We have already noted the inaccuracy with which several modern authors have depicted this Puritan view of conversion. For believing in the necessity of conviction of sin prior to faith in Christ, Hooker and his school are dubbed ‘preparationists’, with a sense given to that word which the Puritans themselves would have disowned. Thus Norman Pettit writes: ‘By preparation they meant a period of prolonged introspective meditation . . . The preparationists maintained that contrition and humiliation were not in themselves saving graces but preliminary steps, and that while God takes away all resistance, this cannot be done without man’s consent’.¹⁰⁵ Pettit represents the Puritans as teaching the need for a preparation which arouses and induces a willingness to a co-operation with God and finally to ‘consent’ to Christ.

It is surprising, on the very face of it, that this representation of what the Puritans were supposed to mean by ‘preparation’ has not been more seriously questioned. For one thing, the ability of unregenerate men to co-operate with God in order to conversion is expressly denied by the 39

¹⁰³ Reprinted by permission from the Banner of Truth Magazine, Issue 206, November 1980, pp 9-21.

¹⁰⁴ *The Doctrine of Faith*, 1633, pp 66-7.

¹⁰⁵ *The Heart Prepared*, pp 17-8.

Articles, yet the many watchful opponents of the Puritans in the Church of England never attempted to claim that Puritan evangelism was contravening the words of Article 10: 'The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God'. Nor did these same opponents ever charge the Puritans with putting the Arminian gloss upon that Article, namely, that although man does not have 'natural strength' God gives sufficient grace to all men to enable them to be converted if they will. The truth was that none opposed the Arminian error of general grace more vigorously than the Puritans. Arminian doctrine, Hooker asserts, is 'deeply dangerous' for it teaches 'that if we do what we can, and improve the natural abilities we have, and the means we do enjoy, God will not deny to give us the grace supernatural we want'.¹⁰⁶ Its effect is 'to make man share with God in his work'.¹⁰⁷ Hooker emphatically did not teach that God cannot 'take away all resistance' without man's 'consent'!

But although there are *prima facie* reasons for questioning the way in which modern writers have sought to present Hooker's thinking there are two points at which the criticism of his evangelism may appear to have some weight unless something is said.

In the first place, it is claimed that Hooker was insufficiently evangelical because *he put something before Christ*. Instead of calling men immediately to Christ, and to his grace, he required something else first – something, it is said, which turned the attention of men away from Christ to themselves. Men were called, says Pettit, 'to prepare the heart for salvation ... Rarely did Hooker preach . . . without exhorting the unconverted to prepare for Christ.'¹⁰⁸

Three things can be said by way of reply:

(1) Hooker held that no more conviction of sin is necessary than that which shows a man his need of Christ. Where that need exists, no one should delay in going to him. The problem is that for all men by nature the need does *not* exist and neither can it exist while pride, ignorance and self-righteousness are the dominant principles in the human heart. Far from

¹⁰⁶ *The Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, pp 299-300.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p 387. Again, in his *Comment Upon Christ's last Prayer*, 1656, p 213, Hooker shows how the 'delusion' that 'God gives sufficient grace and power to all men, to be saved if they will', is 'fully dashed' by the truth that all the elect are given by the Father into the sure care of Christ in order to their salvation.

¹⁰⁸ *Op cit.* p 2 and p 101.

putting obstacles between men and Christ, the Puritans knew that the obstacles were already there and they addressed themselves to them precisely because these are the things which keep men from Christ. Identifying the form which the obstacle took in one man, Jesus declared, ‘How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God’ [Luke 18.24], upon which Hooker says to one who thinks that conversion is easy, ‘Either Christ is deceived or thou art mistaken’.¹⁰⁹ Preparation for faith is necessary because men must be taken off the things to which they presently trust. ‘The way to make the soul lean upon Christ is to pluck away all other props; for the last thing that we come to is the promise, and if we could find good anywhere else we would never go to Christ.’¹¹⁰

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the real cause of the modern objection to the Puritan’s emphasis on the need for conviction of sin lies in an unwillingness to accept the testimony of Scripture on the natural man’s condition in relation to God. The gospel does not find men in a state of readiness to believe on Christ. Before such readiness occurs something first must be done to them by the Word and power of God [John 5.44; 6.42-44].

Certainly, had the Puritan preachers stopped at conviction of sin they could deservedly be charged with being unevangelical, but they so preached in order to lead men to Christ. So Hooker affirms:

It is not properly our unworthiness, but our pride and haughtiness that hinders us from coming to Christ; for we would have something in ourselves, and not all from Christ ... We must not look too long, nor pore too much or unwarrantably upon our own corruptions, so far as to be feared or disheartened from coming to the riches of God’s grace; for this is an everlasting truth, that whatsoever sight of sin unfits a man for mercy, when he may take it, and it is offered to him, that sight of sin is ever sinful, though it have never so fair a pretence of sorrow and deep humiliation ... It is fit and we ought to see our sins, but stay not too long here; see thy sins thou must, but not be settled there to be kept from Christ. That sight of sin which doth not drive a man to Christ for mercy is ever sinful. See thy sins thus:

First, see thy sins till thou see them odious and loathsome.

Secondly, till thou see an utter insufficiency in thyself to help thee.

¹⁰⁹ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-103 p 346.

¹¹⁰ *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn Unto Christ* in H.T.S., p 177.

Thirdly, till thou hast seen an utter and absolute necessity of Christ to succor thee, and then away to the throne of grace, and dwell no longer on thy sins; for there is pardon enough to remove the guilt that sin hath brought upon thy soul; there is power enough to make thee master thy corruptions. Indeed, every soul should say thus: 'It is true, Lord, my sins are many and great, for I have departed from thee, Lord. And shall I go from God and persist in evil? God forbid.'¹¹¹

(2) In response to the charge that Hooker put Christ at the end rather than at the centre of a saving conversion it has also to be pointed out that the Puritan leader spoke of the person of Christ in both a particular and in a broader sense. In the particular sense Christ comes after preparation, that is to say, the relief and the comfort which is in the Saviour is not experienced by men at the outset of their spiritual experience. But it is no less true that in a broader sense Christ is directly and immediately involved as the author of *every* part of a true conversion. It is Christ who gives efficacy to the Word of God preached. Quoting Christ's words in John 10.16, 'I have other sheep, that are not of this fold, and those I must bring', Hooker says, 'He sends and succeeds all officers and ordinances'.¹¹² So, in a true sense, it is Christ who arrests and convicts the thoughtless and, again, it is Christ 'by the irresistible power of his Spirit' who changes the heart so that men are 'fitted' for faith and comfort. Everything which the Christian has, Hooker never tires of saying, is owing to Christ! Thus after describing the experience of conversion in the life of an individual, he summarizes:

When Christ hath fitted him for mercy, he will give it to him: and when he hath given him grace, he will maintain it, and increase it and then quicken it, and crown it, and perfect it in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. And lastly, he will glorify himself in all these. Here is a right Christian indeed, that expresseth Christ in all. Christ preparing, Christ giving, Christ maintaining, and increasing, and Christ quickening, and Christ crowning.¹¹³

¹¹¹ *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn Unto Christ* in H.T.S., pp 156-163.

¹¹² *A Comment Upon Christ's last Prayer*, p 331, a section in which Hooker is expounding the truth that Christ has 'an immediate dispensation and execution of *all* power over *all* creatures, for the bringing home of his elect'. Christ's personal activity with the means of grace is constantly emphasized in Hooker's writings together with the certain fulfilment of his purpose: 'He, by an invincible and irresistible power, breaks in upon the rebellious heart of a sinner, and brings him home unto himself. "No man comes to the Father, but by me".'

¹¹³ *The Soules Humiliation*, pp 132-33.

The claim that Hooker preached ‘preparation’ rather than Christ himself suggests both a slight reading of his writings plus an utter misconception of the work of Christ in the application of redemption.

There is, in the second place, another general charge against Hooker’s teaching, namely, that he rendered it very difficult for men to be sure of their conversion. Does not any teaching which encourages self-examination induce uncertainty? it is asked. And if it is possible for men, out of a mere temporary conviction of their need, to ‘believe’ and yet not be saved, how can any be sure that their faith is genuine?

In reply, a distinction must be made at the outset between an individual’s assurance of his *own* conversion and assurance which he may have respecting the conversion of others. Concerning the first, Hooker taught that there may be certainty of assurance, but on the second that there is no *infallible* way whereby the professed conversion of others can be recognized. The point needs to be made because there have been those in subsequent church history who have tried to identify true converts in terms of the degree of their preparatory conviction, as though the likelihood of a person being a genuine Christian increases in proportion to the sense of sin and fear of judgment which they experienced prior to their profession of faith. But while Hooker would certainly have rejected any Christian profession which lacked a sense of sin he was also ready to assert that the *strength* of conviction is no sure guide by which to judge the professed conversion of others. Giles Firmin gives us a piece of his wisdom in the following anecdote:

I remember Mr Thomas Hooker, at a meeting of about forty ministers, put that question, What rules they would go by in admission of members into churches? Will you go by the narration of the work of God upon them in conversion? Or will you look at the frame wherewith they make their narration? One, saith he, comes and makes his narration with many tears; another he tells you plainly what God hath done, but he cannot shed tears as the other, but yet proves the better Christian, said he. To say no more, tears are common to hypocrites, and no infallible signs of soundness of grace.

The truth is that there is no sure way whereby the professed conversion of others can be recognized. If God had given such a certain means of recognition then it would have been used by the churches of the apostolic age, but that is not what we find. Rather in the New Testament church itself people were admitted whose profession of saving faith had later to be called

into question. Of such the Apostle John says, ‘They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us’ [*I John* 2.19].

For the Puritans this fact underlined the peril in any kind of evangelism which proclaims a man to be a Christian as soon as some spiritual change appears. ‘Don’t quickly give approbation to professors’, Hooker warned his fellow ministers. Again:

Be not suddenly confident of the cure. Let men be probationers in our apprehensions, let them proceed in a fearful and painful way to make proof of the inward disposition of their hearts by their outward practices in a constancy of an holy conversation. As Solomon said of Adonijah, *1 Kings* 1.52, ‘Let him shew himself a worthy man’. This creating of professors, making men Christians by our applause and approbation ... proves the bane of their souls ... Therefore as John Baptist told them, if indeed you purpose ‘to flee from the wrath to come, bring forth fruits of amendment’ [*Matt* 3.8], such as will carry weight, and fetch up the scales as it were, and undoubtedly evidence the work of grace.¹¹⁴

Hooker would certainly have been appalled at the speed and ease with which evangelicals today claim to be sure that others have been converted!

This is not, however, the point to which objection is usually made in Hooker. The objection has to do with an individual’s assurance of his own salvation and the manner in which that assurance is obtained. Hooker, it is said, dismisses faith in Christ as the basis for assurance and instead makes men look to their own works and sanctification – a procedure which is bound to lead to protracted doubt and uncertainty. But this is, once again, a misrepresentation of Hooker. Certainly he rejects the position of those who think that ‘if they can but say they believe’ then ‘Christ must comfort them, cannot but save them’, yet at the same time he teaches that *true* faith ought to carry assurance with it. Assurance, as noted earlier, is not identical with saving faith, for that would make it impossible for a man to be regenerate unless he was assured, and yet every true believer may have assurance because that assurance rests not in himself but in the promises of Christ which faith *alone* receives. Faith, Hooker teaches, is the supreme grace, all other graces follow it and are strengthened by it, because it is faith which receives all from Christ. Therefore to delay exercising faith in the promises of grace until our attainments in sanctification give evidence upon which to base our hope is to destroy the foundations of assurance. ‘It’s Satan’s

¹¹⁴ *The Application of Redemption*, Bks 9-10, p 356.

policy’, writes Hooker, ‘to make the saints be at a loss when they look for pardon and grace, and peace and comfort within themselves and then to look to Christ, and so they lose their labour and look in vain, but we should look up to Christ “the author and finisher of our faith” [*Heb* 12.1]. “God hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings”, but it is “in Christ” [*Eph* 1.3]. In him these blessings are contained, by him dispensed, and from him received . . .’¹¹⁵ These words come from one of Hooker’s New England sermons but they form the premise of his first published work, *A Poor Doubting Christian Drawn Unto Christ* (1629). In that treatise Hooker demonstrates, as quotations given earlier indicate, that assurance of our justification does not begin with evidence of our sanctification.

If Hooker had only said this he would no doubt have escaped the criticism which has been made against him. But he said more because the New Testament itself requires more. While there is a degree of assurance implicit in faith, this assurance may be neither full nor certain because much weakness can co-exist with faith, indeed faith itself in its beginnings is in ‘spawn’— to use one of Hooker’s words – rather than in ‘full perfection’. According to Puritan thinking, believers did not commonly have a full or infallible assurance of their salvation from the very time of their conversion. Christians should recognize, Hooker urges, that assurance exists in degrees. A weak assurance, which goes with weak spiritual experience, is not to be despised. Addressing a troubled young Christian he says:

‘Do not reject the evidence which God reveals to thee for thy good ... Do not, I say, reject it. And because thou hast not that comfort that thou wouldst therefore thou wilt have none at all. It is not properly because thou canst not, but because thou wilt not receive the promise ... The measure of mercy which God hath already showed thy soul is incomprehensible, and yet because you cannot have what you would, you will have nothing at all. As a man that hath the law on his side, and his estate settled on him, yet because his evidences are not written in great huge letters, and in large paper, he throws them all away; so you have no grace because you have not so much as you would have . . .’¹¹⁶

This same truth concerning measures of grace, and of fuller degrees of assurance, Hooker employed to urge upon all Christians the duty of higher attainments in the knowledge of Christ. Assurance, at its centre, means knowing Him. It belongs to the context of Philippians 3.13: ‘This one thing

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Bks 1-8, p 94.

¹¹⁶ *A Poor Doubting Christian* in H.T.S., pp 172-3.

I do, I press forward after the mark, the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'. 'Still we should look at him, that we may have him, and enjoy him. This should be the mark we should aim at, the goal we should run for ... Look at all graces as either they lead to Christ or come from Christ, or else they will lose their life and sweetness, and we shall lose the comfort of them, unless we look at them thus, either as they bring us to Christ by the power of his Spirit, or as they come from Christ by his Spirit inhabiting in us.'¹¹⁷

Hooker's overriding concern was to show that assurance belongs to the realm of personal, spiritual experience. And if that experience is real (whatever its degree of strength), it is owing to the work of the Spirit of Christ. True assurance, by definition, is not self-made. The person who can 'take' his assurance whenever he wills from the promises of Scripture is dangerously mistaken. just as certainly as true conviction of sin comes by the personal agency of the Holy Spirit, so does assurance, and the measure in which it is given is in the hands of God:

Complain not of delays, but wait, for God hath waited for you long; and therefore if he make you wait for peace of conscience and assurance of his love, the Lord deals equally and lovingly with you, and as shall be best for you. God gives what, and when, and how he will; therefore wait for it.¹¹⁸

And this sense of dependence upon God does not diminish as assurance is given. 'The best of the saints, men of choicest graces, and best abilities, as touching the right apprehension of the mysterious deeps of God's fatherly mercy, they live merely upon a daily dependence, while they have a day to live in this world'.¹¹⁹ To know God in Christ is the 'greatest trade' of saints in heaven and it is lifelong work for the Christian upon earth:

This is the end of all ordinances, the scope of our praying, hearing, preaching, attendance upon all duties: we preach for this, ye pray for this, that when all the churches meet together we may come to the unity of the faith, and the acknowledgement of the Son of God . . .¹²⁰ The lesson is marvellous large, we had need be dayly learning and yet we shall never come to the end of it, before we come to the end of our days. As men who travel in the main ocean, they see nothing but water, and yet see neither side nor shore, brim nor bottom, and there is more water to be seen ...

¹¹⁷ *The Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-8, p 105.

¹¹⁸ *The Doubting Christian*, H.T.S., p 158.

¹¹⁹ *Christ's Last Prayer*, p 489.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, p 381.

when we know yet there is something still beyond our knowledge, as Ephesians 3.19, 'That we know the love of Christ, that passeth knowledge'.¹²¹

It is true, however, that while Hooker taught that the believers first assurance is not founded upon any personal and inward attainments in grace, he also taught that any on-going concern for assurance, and any profession of 'infallible assurance', which is unaccompanied by holiness of life represents a departure from biblical Christianity. For him the essence of the difference between a true and a temporary believer is that the Christian has received a new nature which cannot be satisfied without Christ himself. The temporary believer may seek Christ for pardon, forgiveness and joy but the regenerate person wants more, he wants the rule of Christ and the holiness of Christ; he wants Christ for sanctification as well as for justification. 'There is no better argument in the world that thou hast an interest in Christ than this', says Hooker, 'thy taking of the Lord Christ as Saviour wholly and as a husband'. The person who thus rests on Christ will certainly know a growth in grace: 'If thou hast a true sight of the glory of Christ, it will make thee a heavenly and glorious Christian. It will make thee like the Christ thou seest in part, and hereafter in perfection: then in full measure but here in some truth.'¹²²

Assurance, then, is not based upon the believer's holiness and yet holiness and obedience are essential New Testament tests of the soundness of any Christian profession. Not to press those tests upon professing Christians is to ignore what the Bible treats as a necessity, and yet to press them and not to make personal grace the basis of the Christian's comfort is one of the most difficult of all the duties of a faithful pastor. Hooker was well acquainted with the difficulty and it was the Christ-centredness of his preaching which prevented his emphasis upon godliness from descending into legalism. To the end of his days, as at the beginning, he was, above all else, an 'importunate suitor for Christ'.

The emphasis of these articles has been a defence of Hooker's teaching; it ought not, however, be this teaching which is on trial but rather those religious sentiments which have made preaching far less disturbing to the unconverted than it was in the Puritan era. Apostolic Christianity, as depicted in the New Testament, shows us men who knew what it was to have consciences smitten with 'the spirit of bondage', men who could speak

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p 489.

¹²² *Ibid*, p 380.

of ‘knowing the terror of the Lord’ because they feared ‘him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell’. For them the gospel was a message presented against the background of ‘the wrath of God revealed from heaven’. These same concerns were clearly in evidence in the 17th Century; conviction of sin was then no theory but a *felt* experience and discriminating preaching on assurance was therefore a necessity. Assurance of salvation is never a problem to those who do not know what their sins deserve!

In the last century, however, the whole understanding of the doctrine of conversion underwent a major reconstruction. It became generally believed that men are at once ready for the benefits of the gospel, that conversion should be regarded as instantaneous, and that everyone who professes Christ may also immediately ‘claim’ the assurance which the promises of Scripture offer. The sure result of this teaching was a general departure of conviction of sin and a disappearance of all ‘sloughs of despond’. It introduced a type of experience which guaranteed ‘joy’ but did not secure holiness and greater spirituality. Superficial evangelical religion became the order of the day and when its professors were subject to trial they too often abandoned it. In the words of Spurgeon: ‘Those young fellows who never felt conviction of sin, but obtained their religion as they get their bath in the morning, by jumping into it – these will as readily leap out of it as they leaped in.’¹²³

A Scottish writer in 1910, speaking of the last period of general revival in the British Isles – the revival of 1859 – gave this recollection and contrast: ‘Then, the one deep dominant note was an overpowering sense of sin. The sense of sin is not found in anything like the same degree today ... Some years ago the *British Weekly* stated that: “An agonizing sense of sin was

¹²³ *Lectures to my Students*, Second Series, 1877, p 47. There is a critical allusion to Thomas Hooker in one of Spurgeon’s early sermons (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1863, p 531) but the words, written when Spurgeon was still in his twenties, do not suggest that he had any first-hand acquaintance with ‘the American, Thomas Hooker’, to whom he attributes a book on ‘qualifications for coming to Christ’ and says that he, and some other Puritans, ‘preached repentance and hatred of sin as the warrant of a sinner’s trusting to Christ’. But it is clear that when Spurgeon was older he increasingly emphasized the very warning which Hooker was concerned to give. ‘Sometimes we are inclined to think that a very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing’, he wrote in *The Sword and the Trowel* in 1882 (p 545). ‘The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised, and consequently a religion is run up before the foundations are dug out. Everything in this age is shallow. Deep-sea fishing is almost an extinct business so far as men’s souls are concerned.’

dying out of English Christianity". We fear it is also rapidly dying out of Scottish Christianity, if it has not already done so.'¹²⁴

The Puritan contention that it is God's usual way of saving sinners to convict them before converting them is a key to the interpretation of this whole situation. Men need to know the condition *from which* it is necessary for them to be saved before they are shut up to faith in Christ. Hooker and his brethren did not discount the possibility that some true conversions may seem to occur swiftly and with little apparent trouble of soul, but they did deny that this was the biblical norm.

It is sometimes argued against the Puritan view that if the re-birth is the direct and supernatural act of God, then such an act requires no preparation. But that argument overlooks the truth that while regeneration is God's work alone, he has made the instrumentality of the Word an indispensable part of conversion and that the Word is to be preached to alarm, to search, and to humble hearts which are by nature careless and indifferent. 'Cause the house of Israel to know their abominations' [*Ezek* 16.2] is the scriptural principle if men are to be prepared for Christ. In the words of Increase Mather, 'It is the duty of ministers to preach such things to sinners as are proper to work this preparation'.¹²⁵ When such preaching as awakens and disturbs the conscience is set aside, the Puritans knew that in time a belief in the very need for conversion would be lost. Nothing gave them greater concern than the existence of ministers who are 'slight in searching' and 'hasty to heal'.

They viewed such men as a peril in the church, encouraging people with false hopes, the successors of those who, declared Ezekiel, put up a wall with untempered mortar – 'her prophets have daubed them with untempered mortar' [*Ezek* 13 and 22.28]. Unfaithful preachers, writes Robert Bolton:

apply Jesus Christ and the promises to souls as yet not soundly enlightened and afflicted with sight of sin, and sense of God's wrath; to consciences never truly wounded and awakened ... Daubers, who serve Satan's craft in this kind, and all those who dispense their ministry without all spiritual discretion and good conscience, are a generation of dangerous men ...

¹²⁴ *Reminiscences of The Revival of '59 and The Sixties*, Aberdeen, 1910, xii-xiii. One eye-witness writes: 'The inquirers were for the most part characterized by a pungent sense of sin, and a solemn dread of the wrath of God, and when through grace they passed from death unto life, there was a marvellous outburst of joy and song', p 66.

¹²⁵ In *Preface of A Guide to Christ*, Solomon Stoddard, p xvii.

conducting poor blinded souls, merrily, towards everlasting misery, and setting them down in the very midst of bell, before they be sensible of any danger, or discovery of their damnable state. Great men they are with the men of this world who desire impossibly to live the life of pleasure in the meantime, and yet at last ‘to die the death of the righteous’. They have ready at hand mercy and pardon, heaven and salvation for all comers, without so much as a desire to put any difference, or divide ‘the precious from the vile’. Hear how they are branded in the Book of God; calling them, *Pillow-sewers* under mens’ elbows [*Ezek* 13.18]. That being laid soft and locked fast in the cradle of security, they may sink suddenly into the pit of destruction, before they be aware: *Criers of peace, peace*, when no peace is towards them [*Jer* 6.14]. *Men-pleasers* [*Gal* 1.10]. *Preachers of smooth things* [*Isa* 30.10] which kind of men, the greatest part, and all worldlings wonderfully applaud.¹²⁶

There is much in Hooker to precisely the same effect. Speaking, for instance, on the doctrine that ‘A plain and powerful ministry is the ordinary means to prepare the heart soundly for Christ’, he asserts that there is ‘plainness of preaching’

when sin and sinners are set out in their native and natural colours, and carry their proper names, whereby they may be owned suitable to the loathsomeness that is in them, and the danger of those evils which are their undoubted reward: a spade is a spade, and a drunkard is a drunkard, etc, and if he will have his sins, he must and shall have hell with them. It’s Satan’s policy to smut and disfigure the beautiful ways of godliness and the glorious graces of the Spirit, with the soot and dirt of reproaches and base nicknames: sincerity, he terms ‘singularity’; exactness, ‘Puritanism’ and ‘hypocrisy’. Contrariwise, when he would cast a veil over the ugly and deformed face of vice, and graceless courses, he is forced to lay some false colours of ‘indifferency’, ‘delight’, and ‘pleasure’; drunkenness is ‘good-fellowship’ and ‘neighbourliness’; covetousness comes masked under the vizard of ‘frugality’ and ‘moderation’; cowardliness is trimmed and decked up in the robes of ‘discretion’, and ‘wariness’.

If ministers will not be the devil’s brokers and followers, their manner of proceeding must be expressly contrary. When they come to preach, they must make sin appear truly odious and fearful to the open view of all. Those secret swipes and witty jerks and nips at sin, at which the most profane are pleased but not reformed, are utterly unsavoury and unseeming to the place, the person, the office, of the messenger of the Lord

¹²⁶ *Op cit*, pp 151-53. To follow this way, he says elsewhere, ‘will make people curse us hereafter, though it please them for the present.’

of hosts. What! A minister a jester! O fearful! To make the pulpit a stage to play with sin when he should terrify the conscience for it? The Lord abominates the practice. He that knows and fears the Lord should abhor it with detestation. Thus plainly dealt Elias with Ahab, 1 Kings 18.18: 'It's thou and thy father's house that have troubled Israel, because ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed Baalim'. So also with Israel, 1 Kings 18.21: 'How long will you halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him'. As if he should have said, 'Away with this patching in profession; either a saint or a devil, make something of it'. This is down-right dealing. And thus plainly John the Baptist who had the same spirit dealt with Herod. He doth not beat the bush, and go behind the door to tell him his faults, and mince the matter with some intimations, but he speaks out, Matthew 14.4, 'It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother Philip's wife': either thou must not have that incestuous harlot, or thou must not have grace and glory 1 Thus again he dealt with the Sadducees and Pharisees when he saw them come to his baptisms. He says to them, Matthew 3.7, 'Oh ye generation of vipers, who hath fore-warned you to flee from the wrath to come'. As if he should have said, 'Eggs and birds, parents and posterity, you are a race of venomous and poisonous wretches. What? a proud Pharisee to listen to the simplicity of the doctrine of grace, is it possible? If in sincerity and good earnest, you purpose to embrace the doctrine of truth, bring forth then fruits worthy of amendment of life', verse 8.¹²⁷

When all has been said which can be said against this type of preaching, the fact remains that decay and decline have always marked the Church when she has ceased to recognize the necessity of conviction of sin. For Hooker it was axiomatic that lasting success in God's work is only to be expected as we follow God's method. 'As God deals, so we may deal as the safest way and most likely to find success.'

It was not for the first time that this view was eclipsed in the last century. Precisely the same thing had happened in the later 17th Century when the anti-Puritan divinity of the Caroline divines came into vogue, bringing with it just such results as the Puritans had feared. When John Owen published his *Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in 1674, he observed how 'a generation of new divines' was in the ascendancy who denied the need for that preparatory conviction formerly taught 'by many learned and faithful ministers of the gospel' . . . who 'had a useful and fruitful ministry in the world, to the converting of many unto God'. 'But we', he continues, 'have

¹²⁷ *Application of Redemption*, Bks 1-9, pp 210-12.

lived to see all these things decried and rejected ... all conviction, sense of and sorrow for sin; all fear of the curse and wrath due unto sin; all troubles and distresses of mind by reason of these things are “foolish imaginations, the effects of bodily diseases and distempers, enthusiastic notions, arising from the disorders of men’s brains” . . . and the whole doctrine concerning these things is branded with novelty, and hopes expressed of its sudden vanishing out of the world.’¹²⁸

In New England those who denied any need for a preparatory work were slower in gaining influence but in 1714 Solomon Stoddard spoke of the existence of such teaching as ‘a very dark cloud’. ‘If this opinion should prevail in the land, it would give a deadly wound to religion, it would expose men to think themselves converted when they are not.’¹²⁹

In the early 18th Century, conviction of sin and conversions did become far less common in the English-speaking world and it is a striking fact that it was a return to the searching, applicatory preaching of the Puritans in the 1730’s which heralded the Great Awakening. John Eliot, friend of Hooker and missionary to the Indians, lived to be an old man. Before he died a youth named Nehemiah Walter became his colleague in 1688. In 1740 this Nehemiah Walter had also become an old man when he heard another youth named George Whitefield preach in New England. Walter’s response to that preaching was to declare with joy, ‘This is *Puritanismus redivivus*’ – Puritanism revived!¹³⁰

The truth is that just because the searching preaching of Thomas Hooker was in essence biblical, this type of preaching has re-appeared in all periods of spiritual awakening. Archibald Alexander, who was converted in Virginia in the beginnings of the Second Great Awakening, wrote in 1844, ‘As far as I know, the opinion of the necessity of legal conviction has generally prevailed in all our modern revivals.’

Although in some periods such preaching may indeed almost vanish from the earth it always re-appears and again the cry is heard from multitudes, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ So it must be, for the Spirit of the Lord is not straitened.

¹²⁸ *Works*, vol 3, pp 234-5.

¹²⁹ *A Guide to Christ*, p xii.

¹³⁰ *Journals of George Whitefield*, 1960 reprint, p 461.

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