
Biography

My Top Ten Puritan Authors

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The most common question I have received from lovers of Puritan literature over the last four decades is, "What are your favourite Puritan authors?" Here is my answer.

ONE: Anthony Burgess (died 1664): My favourite Puritan to read recently has been Anthony Burgess, vicar of Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire in England, from 1635 to 1662. In my opinion, he is the most underrated Puritan of all time. I once asked Iain Murray why Burgess was not included in the nineteenth-century sets of the works of the best Puritans; he responded that Burgess was the greatest glaring omission from those reprints.

In fifteen years (1646–1661), Burgess wrote at least a dozen books based largely on his sermons and lectures. His writings reveal a scholarly use of Greek and Latin quotations while reasoning in the plain style of Puritan preaching. He was a cultured scholar and experimental preacher who produced insightful, warm, devotional writings.

Burgess's best and largest work, *Spiritual Refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion* (1652–54)—was published in two volumes of 1,100 pages. The first volume, subtitled *A Treatise of Grace and Assurance*, contains 120 sermons; the second, subtitled *A Treatise of Sin, with its Causes, Differences, Mitigations and Aggravations*, contains 42 sermons.

Burgess masterfully separated the precious from the vile in *The Godly Man's Choice*, based on thirteen sermons on Psalm 4:6–8. His detailed exegesis in his 145-sermon work on John 17, his 300-page commentary on 1 Corinthians 3, and his 700-page commentary on 2 Corinthians 1 are heartwarming.

TWO: Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679): For twenty years, my favourite Puritan writer was Thomas

Goodwin. Goodwin's 12-volume Works most recently reprinted by Reformation Heritage Books (12 vols.) is a treasure trove of experiential Reformed divinity at its best.

Goodwin's exegesis is massive; he leaves no stone unturned. His first editors (1681) said of his work: "He had a genius to dive into the bottom of points, to 'study them down,' as he used to express it, not contenting himself with superficial knowledge, without wading into the depths of things."

One does need patience to read Goodwin; however, along with depth and wordiness, he offers a wonderful sense of warmth and experience. A reader's patience will be amply rewarded.

Begin by reading some of the shorter, more practical writings of Goodwin, such as *Patience and Its Perfect Work*, which includes four sermons on James 1:1-5. This book was written after much of Goodwin's personal library was destroyed by fire (Works, 2:429-67). It contains much practical instruction on the spirit of submission. Then read *Certain Select Cases Resolved*, which offers three experiential treatises that reveal Goodwin's pastoral heart for afflicted Christians. Each of these deal with specific struggles in the believer's soul:

(a) "A Child of Light Walking in Darkness" encourages the spiritually depressed based on Isaiah 50:10-11 (3:241-350). The subtitle summarizes its contents: "A Treatise Shewing The Causes by which, The Cases wherein, and the Ends for which, God Leaves His Children to Distress of Conscience, Together with Directions How to Walk so as to Come Forth of Such a Condition";

(b) "The Return of Prayers," based on Psalm 85:8, is a uniquely practical work. It offers help in ascertaining "God's answers to our prayers" (3:353-429);

(c) "The Trial of a Christian's Growth" (3:433-506), based on John 15:1-2, centres on sanctification, specifically mortification and vivification. This is a mini-classic on spiritual growth.

THREE: John Owen (1616-1683): This author's sixteen volumes of works, seven volumes on Hebrews, and a book titled Biblical Theology, make up a learned library. The sixteen-volume set, includes the following:

Doctrinal (vols. 1–5). The most noteworthy works in these volumes are: On the Person and Glory of Christ (vol. 1); Communion with God (vol. 2); Discourse on the Holy Spirit (vol. 3); and Justification by Faith (vol. 5). Mastery of these works, Spurgeon wrote, “is to be a profound theologian.”

Practical (vols. 6–9). Especially worthy here are Mortification of Sin, Temptation, Exposition of Psalm 130 (vol. 6); and Spiritual-Mindedness (vol. 7). Volumes 8 and 9 comprise sermons. These books are suitable for the educated layperson and have immense practical applications.

Controversial (vols. 10–16). Noteworthy are The Death of Death in the Death of Christ and Divine Justice (vol. 10); The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance (vol. 11); True Nature of a Gospel Church and The Divine Original of the Scriptures (vol. 16). Several works in this section have historical significance (particularly those written against Arminianism and Socinianism) but tend to be tedious for a non-theologian.

Owen’s wide range of subjects, insightful writing, exhaustive doctrinal studies, profound theology, and warm devotional approach explain why I and

so many others regard his work with such high esteem. Owen may be wordy on occasion, but he is never dry. His works are invaluable for all who wish to explore the rich legacy left by one who is often called "Prince of the Puritans."

I was most influenced by Owen when I spent the summer of 1985 studying his views on assurance. The two books that influenced me most were Owen's treatment of Psalm 130, particularly verse 4, and his amazing Communion with God, which focuses on experiential communion between a believer and individual persons of the Trinity.

FOUR: Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758): A class at West-minster Theological Seminary, taught by Sam Logan, motivated me to read most of Edwards's two-volume works in 1983. His sermons convicted and comforted me beyond words. What a master wordsmith Edwards was!

More than sixty volumes of Edwards's writings have been published in the last fifty years. The two books that influenced me most were *Religious Affections*, which is often regarded as the leading classic in American history on spiritual life, and Edwards's sermons on justification by faith. Earlier, I

was greatly influenced by The Life and Diary of David Brainerd.

I was touched by Edwards's concept of "fittedness" throughout his writings and have often found that concept a great tool for leadership and decision-making.

Edwards grounded this concept in God: a God who is always fitting will guide His people to want to do what is fitting in each life situation to bring Him the most glory. Hence, we must ask of every decision we face: What is most fitting in God's sight according to His Word? What will bring God the most honour?

FIVE: William Perkins (1558-1602): Perkins's vision of reform for the church combined with his intellect, piety, writing, spiritual counselling, and communication skills helped set the tone for the seventeenth-century Puritan accent on Reformed, experiential truth and self-examination, and Puritan arguments against Roman Catholicism and Arminianism. Perkins as rhetorician, expositor, theologian, and pastor became the principle architect of the Puritan movement. By the time of his death, Perkins's writings in England were

outselling those of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Henry Bullinger combined. He “moulded the piety of a whole nation,” H.C. Porter said. Little wonder, then, that Perkins is often called the father of Puritanism.

Perkins first influenced me while I was studying assurance of faith for my doctoral dissertation. Ten years later, his *Art of Prophecy*, a short homiletic textbook for Puritan seminarians, helped me understand how to address listeners according to their various cases of conscience. My appreciation for Perkins has increased over the years. I am thoroughly enjoying spending more time reading his works as general editor with Derek Thomas on a ten-volume reprint of Perkins’s works, of which two volumes are now in print.

SIX: Thomas Watson (c. 1620–1686): Watson was my favourite Puritan after I was converted in my mid-teens. I read his *Body of Divinity* as a daily devotional. *His All Things for Good* was a wonderful balm for my troubled soul in a period of intense affliction in the early 1980s. His winsome writing includes deep doctrine, clear expression, warm spirituality, appropriate applications, and

colourful illustrations. I love his pithy, quotable style of writing.

SEVEN: Thomas Brooks (1608–1680): Brooks became my favourite Puritan writer in my late teens. *His Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices, The Mute Christian Under the Smarting Rod, Heaven on Earth: A Treatise on Assurance*, "The Unsearchable Riches of Christ" (vol. 3), "The Crown and Glory of Christianity" (vol. 4)—a classic on holiness consisting of 58 sermons on Hebrews 12:14—all ministered to me. Brooks's books are real page-turners. He often brought me to tears of joy over Christ and tears of sorrow over sin. His writings exude spiritual life and power.

EIGHT: John Flavel (1628–1691): With the exception of Jonathan Edwards, no Puritan divine was more helpful for me as a young minister preparing sermons than Flavel. His sermons on Christ's suffering also greatly blessed my soul. What lover of Puritan literature has not been blessed by Flavel's classics: *The Mystery of Providence, Keeping the Heart, The Fountain of*

Life, Christ Knocking at the Door of the Heart, and The Method of Grace?

NINE: John Bunyan (1628–1688): When I was nine years old and first experienced a period of conviction of sin, I read Bunyan's *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*. When I saw the book in my father's bookcase, I figured that since I had such a bad heart, that book must be for me!

More importantly, my father read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to us every Sunday evening after church. When he finished, he started over. I must have listened to that book fifteen times. From the age of fourteen on, I would ask questions about how the Holy Spirit works in the soul, about Mr. Talkative, the Man in the Iron Cage, the House of the Interpreter, and scores of other characters and matters. My father often wept as he answered my questions.

When I became a minister, I realized what a rare gift those sessions were. Forty years later, illustrations from Bunyan's great classic still come to mind while I'm preaching.

TEN: Thomas Vincent (1634–1678): When we find ourselves cold and listless, Vincent can help kindle the fire of Christian love. Just try reading *The True Christian's Love to the Unseen Christ* (1677) without having your affections raised to heavenly places and yearning to love Christ more. Let *The True Christian's Love to the Unseen Christ* be your frequent companion.

Only a handful of Vincent's writings were ever published, and of those, only six have been reprinted in the past fifty years. In addition to *The True Christian's Love to the Unseen Christ*, Vincent wrote *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture* (1673), a very helpful book for young people and children; and *The Good Work Begun* (1673), an evangelistic book for young people, explaining how God saves sinners and preserves them for Himself.

Three additional books by Vincent are more solemn treatises. They include *God's Terrible Voice in the City* (1667), an eyewitness account of London's Great Fire and Great Plague and an analysis of how God judges wickedness in a city; *Christ's Certain and Sudden Appearance to Judgment* (1667), which was also written after the Great Fire of London and was designed to prepare sinners for the great and terrible Day of the Lord;

and Fire and Brimstone (1670) was written to warn sinners to flee the wrath to come.

Vincent's works are uniquely refreshing. He used the English language in a captivating way to glorify God and strike at the heart of Christians. It is no wonder that Vincent's works were bestsellers in the eighteenth century.

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