

**An Interview with Paul M. Smalley about his co-authored book *Prepared by Grace, for Grace: The Puritans on God's Ordinary Way of Leading Sinners to Christ*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013, 297 pp., paperback.**

**Interviewed by Brian G. Najapfour**

Brother, congratulations on your well-researched co-authored book with Dr. Joel Beeke. I am confident that *Prepared by Grace, for Grace* is destined to be a standard work on the subject.

*Thank you, Pastor Najapfour. We hope that by God's grace the book will be useful.*

Here are some of my questions for you about your book:

**1. Could you please briefly define the following terms as used in your book? I think defining these terms will help the readers of this interview better understand your discourse.**

**a. Reformed, Puritan, & evangelical.**

Reformed refers to the stream of Christianity beginning with sixteenth-century Reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin, and defined by adherence to confessions such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Standards.

Puritanism was a movement of British Christians from the 1560s through about 1700 that emphasized applying the biblical doctrines rediscovered in the Reformation to one's personal life, family, church, and nation.

The Reformers (including Reformed and Lutheran Christians) called themselves "evangelicals" in the sixteenth century because God has restored to the church the biblical gospel ("evangel") of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone according to Scripture alone for the glory of God alone. The term continues to be used today.

**b. Doctrine of preparation (Is this doctrine biblical? How is it different from the so-called preparationism?)**

The doctrine of preparation is the idea that God's general way of bringing sinners to Christ is to awaken them to a sense of their spiritual need before they trust in Christ to save them. Preparationism is really a term used to accuse someone of legalism based on the idea that sinners can (or must) work themselves up to a level of spirituality in order to be prepared for salvation. The doctrine of preparation is biblical, as long as we remember that God works in a variety of ways with various people. Christ came not to save people who think that they are righteous, but people who by the Holy Spirit's

conviction know they are sinners (Luke 5:32). Preparationism is unbiblical, for sinners are born again by grace alone, and justified by faith alone (Gal. 2:16).

**c. Conversion (Is it a one-time event or a process? How is it distinct from regeneration?)**

Regeneration is the miraculous event where God brings a person from spiritual death to spiritual life by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:5; Titus 3:5). Conversion is the experience and process of change where a person turns from his former beliefs and practices that were against God towards the Lord. Conversion can be viewed narrowly to refer to the first motions of faith and repentance, or more broadly as a process, and in its broadest sense it includes a lifelong process of change. Regeneration takes place in a moment, but that moment may not be easily recognized by a person for the Spirit's work is mysterious (John 3:8).

**d. Legal repentance & evangelical repentance**

Legal repentance is the outward change of behavior based on guilt over sin and fear of God's punishment. Evangelical repentance is a saving grace from God, in which a sinner out of a true sense of the evil of his sin, taking hold of God's promise of mercy in Jesus Christ, does with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it to God, with sincere intention and working to perform a new obedience.

**e. Legalism & antinomianism**

Legalism is resistance against Christ the only Mediator by putting something in his place as our Prophet, Priest, and King. It has many forms. It can involve adding anything to Christ's Word as the standard for true belief, obedience, or worship (against Christ as our Prophet), adding anything to Christ's obedience and death as our justification and righteousness before God (against Christ as our Priest), or adding anything to Christ's power as the effective cause of our sanctification (against Christ as our King).

Antinomianism, which means being against God's law, is actually a form of legalism. It may replace obedience to Christ's laws with an unbiblical mysticism. Or it may reject Christ's power to save all in union with him not only from the condemnation of their sins, but also the reigning power of their sins. Either way, Antinomianism tries to use Christ as an excuse not to follow Christ's Word by Christ's power.

**2. In the minds of the Puritans what is God's ordinary way of causing sinners to come to the point of believing in Christ alone for salvation? Were the Puritans united in their view of the doctrine of preparation for saving grace?**

After researching the views of many theologians on this subject, Dr. Beeke and I concluded that the Puritan tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was united around a belief in preparation for conversion. In every case we examined, the Puritans taught that before God

brings a person to saving faith in Christ, he works a conviction of sin and humbling sense of one's inability to save himself. Even when a Puritan writer critiqued another Puritan's view of preparation, the difference was in the details, not the core doctrine. We also discovered that in cases where scholars have thought a Reformed writer was attacking preparation, in fact the writer was attacking the Roman Catholic view, not that shared among the Puritans.

**3. Why do you think pastors should spend time studying the doctrine of preparation? How is this doctrine important to the ministry?**

I would not make this doctrine central to pastoral ministry and the life of the church, for that place belongs to the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, the doctrine of preparation is important, especially for those called to preach, teach, and counsel the Word. If you are planning to preach a message especially to the lost, should you speak only of God's love and Christ's grace, or should you also speak of God's law and man's violation of the commandments? If a person comes to you for counsel because he is experiencing a sense of guilt and fear of damnation, what do you say to him? Do you tell him to brush it off as unhealthy or inconsistent with God's love? Do you tell him that if he feels guilty and cleans up his life then he must already be saved? These are the kinds of practical questions that the doctrine of preparation addresses, for it teaches us that the condemning power of the law to produce guilt and fear is helpful in evangelism, but in itself cannot save. Only the gospel is the instrument of saving faith. Preparation also helps us to appreciate (and pray for) the work of the Holy Spirit even before regeneration, for it is the Spirit who convicts of sin (John 16:8). Thus the doctrine honors the triune God.

**4. On page 7, you state with your co-author, "Though we affirm the fundamentals of the Puritan doctrine of preparation, we do not always agree with the details of each Puritan's way of working out the implications of this doctrine." In what areas do you disagree with the Puritan doctrine of preparation? And please name some Puritans with whom you are not comfortable as far as this doctrine is concerned.**

The most significant area of disagreement would be the idea that a person must experience such a level of humbling over his sins that he is *content to be damned* by God if God so chooses. It seems that Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepard taught this, but it was rejected by the mainstream of Puritanism. The Bible nowhere teaches such a thing. We must acknowledge that God could in all justice damn us to hell for our sins, but that is far from being content to be damned. Rather, we should long for salvation. Another concern is that some Puritans such as Hooker may have become *imbalanced* in their preaching, emphasizing the guilt and fear of preparation so strongly and so long that they temporarily obscured the free offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We always want to urge sinners to come to Christ immediately and not seek any other qualification than the gospel call itself. There are also other theological caveats and qualifications that we make about the Puritan view of preparation in the last chapter of the book. However, we were encouraged to find that most Puritans had a very biblical and balanced approach to evangelism. Hooker himself said, "The Lord proclaims his mercy openly, freely offers it, heartily intends it, waits to communicate

[share] it, lays siege to the soul by his long sufferance: there is enough to procure all good, distrust it not: 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.”

**5. What projects are you currently working on?**

I am editing the second volume of *The Works of William Perkins*, his exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. That is a very satisfying project, for it is full of gospel truth and was written by a premier Reformed and Puritan author. I am also working with Dr. Beeke on another co-authored book, *The Holy Fear of John Bunyan*. Bunyan’s life and teaching on the fear of the Lord are remarkably beautiful and God-honoring, and so the research has strengthened my soul, and I hope it will do the same for others.