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A Pervasive and Self-Effacing Spirit: John Cotton's Chief Contribution to Puritan Spirituality

Nathan Tarr

This article argues that Cotton's adoption of the plain style of preaching was rooted in a doctrine of Scripture that acknowledged the need for God to give his Spirit to the hearers. His manner of preaching was thus consciously shaped by what he came to believe about the way in which the Spirit worked through the word.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the recent claim by Gregory Selmon that John Cotton's (1584–1652) emphasis on the Spirit, particularly in the application of Christ's work to the believer, has been "under-appreciated" though it stands as "his greatest contribution to Puritan spirituality."[1] I engage this paradox by suggesting that the very feature constituting the significance of Cotton's pneumatology contributes to its under-appreciation, namely his emphasis on the Spirit rarely took the form of a dedicated exposition.[2] Instead, Cotton's understanding of the Spirit's work leavened his response to the theological and pastoral crises he encountered across forty years and two continents of ministry. To put it another way, Cotton spoke often of the Spirit, but always in a pastoral dialect and with a Trinitarian accent.[3] His pneumatological emphasis aimed at providing the believer with the "sense" of the blessings

[1] Gregory Selmon, "John Cotton: The Antinomian Calvinist" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008), 255. He writes, "Perhaps Cotton's most important but under-appreciated contribution to early New England theology was his emphasis on the Holy Spirit." And again, "Cotton's consistently high emphasis on Christology and the importance of the Spirit's application of that work to the individual were his greatest contributions to Puritan spirituality" in Selmon, "John Cotton," 64.

[2] I have in mind the kind of "dogmatico-practical exposition" of the work of the Spirit described by B.B. Warfield in his "Introductory Note" to Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), xxxv, xxviii. Regarding the Antinomian Controversy, Michael Schuldiner suggests another reason for its under-appreciation, namely that Cotton's view of the Spirit's role "lost in the debate" of 1638. His reassessment of this "unpopular" view through the lens of its re-emergence in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is helpful. See Michael Schuldiner, *Gifts and Works: The Post-Conversion Paradigm and Spiritual Controversy in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts*, NABPR Dissertation Series 8 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 10.

[3] See for example John Cotton*: A Briefe Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1654), 250.

received from God in Christ.[4] Therefore, when treating topics as varied as regeneration and assurance, the sacraments and church polity, or Christian humility and obedience, the Spirit was vitally present but submerged; serving an intentionally pastoral effort integrated within a self-consciously Trinitarian framework.[5] This explains why Selmon can discuss the importance of Cotton's pneumatology using "theology" and "spirituality" interchangeably. It also suggests how Cotton's varied theological efforts, perhaps of only moderate significance individually,[6] can coalesce into a substantial influence on Puritan spirituality.[7] To the extent Selmon is correct, therefore, we have in the Holy Spirit a key by which to map the dominant contours of Cotton's project as well as judge his impact.

Given the nature of Cotton's pneumatology, where the Spirit is all-pervasive but self-effacing, one profitable way to discern his emphasis would be to survey pivotal moments across Cotton's ministry life with the aim of highlighting the Spirit's role in the subject matter of each crisis. Pivotal moments included in this survey should be Cotton's early shift to the plain style of preaching, his endorsement of non-separating Congregationalism in the middle of his ministry, as well as his role in the

[4] For Cotton, it is through the testimony of the Spirit that we "are able to comprehend the height, and depth, length, and breadth of the love of God toward us" in Christ. See John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life: Or, Sundry Sermons on Part of the Fifth Chapter of the First Epistle of St. John* (London: 1651), 236.

[5] This should chasten Nutall's suggestion that "the fact that the centre of reference in Puritan piety was the Holy Spirit was bound to have [a deleterious] effect upon Puritan Christology." See Geoffrey Nutall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 144. Nutall has failed to recognise what Cotton would have learned from his spiritual father Richard Sibbes, namely "[t]he more the free grace and love of God in Christ alone is made known to the church, the more Spirit there is; and again back again, the more Spirit the more knowledge of Christ; for there is a reciprocal going of these two, the knowledge of Christ and the Spirit." See *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862–1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 4:214.

[6] Though surely Emerson's conclusion that "as a theologian he has little importance" goes too far. See Everett Emerson, *John Cotton* (New York: Twayne, 1965), 132.

[7] Selmon, "John Cotton," 12, argues, "within Cotton's system, the aim of all theology was godly living" and therefore his "true importance for Puritanism lies in his particular expressions of how to apply accepted Reformed thought to the Christian life." This coheres well with McGrath's definition of Christian spirituality as "a set of beliefs" expressed as "a way of living," in Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1–5.

Free Grace Controversy.[8] Here I will focus on Cotton's adoption of the plain style of preaching as an early crisis precipitated by his conversion under the exemplary ministry of Richard Sibbes. What is significant for our purposes is not Cotton's adoption of the style *per se*, but his conviction concerning the Spirit's work in illuminating Scripture that undergirds it.[9] Specifically, as the preacher forsakes ornamentation and plainly "opens" God's Spirit-breathed words, that same Spirit is given to work efficaciously in the hearers. This intermingling of the plain word with the power of the Spirit became a hallmark of Cotton's preaching, as it was with Puritan preaching in general.[10] I seek to identify the pneumatological roots of this conviction in Cotton's ministry in three steps. First, I present his conversion and subsequent homiletical crisis of 1612. Second, I examine his earliest extant sermon series, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*. Finally, I conclude with a systematic distillation of Cotton's view of the Spirit's relationship to Scripture in the preaching event.

"God Gives his Holy Spirit"

In 1612, Cotton was preparing to preach at St. Mary's, Cambridge, as he had done to increasing acclaim over the previous three years. This

[8] Selmon's dissertation takes this project part way up by making the argument that Cotton's theology was shaped by his early contention against Arminianism in England. Selmon's treatment is so thorough concerning Cotton's view of the Spirit's work in regeneration that I do not include Cotton's early combat with Arminianism among my selected "crises." Paul Schaeffer, *The Spiritual Brotherhood: Cambridge Puritans and the Nature of Christian Piety* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 267, includes a constructive engagement with Selmon's overall argument in a lengthy footnote.

[9] The fact of this conversion is a staple of the Cotton story, but its significance is rarely treated. See for example Selmon, who passes over this transition in one sentence. This section attempts to take seriously the suggestion of Norman S. Grabo, "John Cotton's Aesthetic: A Sketch," *Early American Literature Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (1968): 4–10, that Cotton "gave a uniquely good deal of attention to the question of the relation of form to the spirit or power it configured."

[10] Edward H. Davidson, "John Cottons's Biblical Exegesis: Method and Purpose," *Early American Literature* 17, no. 2 (1982): 133, argues that Cotton's "scriptural exegesis is representative of the mood and temper of the first generation of Puritan migrants." Lisa M. Gordis, *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), agrees, describing Cotton as the most consistent practitioner of the hermeneutical and homiletical methods taught in William Perkins' manual *The Arte of Prophesying*.

particular preparation was unique, however, because Cotton would enter the pulpit for the first time as a converted man. Ever since his funeral sermon for Robert Some in 1609, Cotton's reputation had risen both as a scholar and a preacher. Concurrently, however, his soul suffered increasing doubts concerning his salvation. These doubts were introduced through the preaching of William Perkins, who insisted that Cotton's orthodoxy and reformer's zeal were but shifting sand in the issue of salvation. He was not saved, according to Perkins, "until he had *felt* … the Spirit quickening his heart and illuminating his conscience."[11] It was through availing himself of the counsel of Richard Sibbes, in whose hand the doctrine of double predestination ministered humility and hope rather than despair, that Cotton came to a spiritual apprehension of his own election.[12] Both the Spirit's gracious agency and the believer's resultant "sense" of salvation are clear in the record of Cotton's conversion:

> The grace of God made him a thoroughly renewed Christian, and filled him with a sacred joy, which accompanied him unto the fullness of joy forever.[13]

Such an evangelical humility and hope as he experienced under Sibbes' preaching now became Cotton's own homiletical aim; a commitment that immediately raised the question of sermonic style. His reputation had traded on a style adorned for academic acceptance. These elegant words proved empty, however, since Cotton had come to see that "their divinity proveth humanity."[14] Sibbes, on the other hand, preached in the plain

[11] Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 31. Emphasis original.

[12] Ziff, *John Cotton,* 29–31. See also Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 40–41.

[13] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 1:255. Notice the way these two themes continue and intensify in Mather's account of Cotton's experience of assurance the following year: "And it was remarkable that on the very day of his wedding to [Elizabeth Horrocks], he first received the assurance of God's love to his own soul, by the Spirit of God, effectually applying his promise of eternal grace and life unto him … for which cause he would afterwards often say, 'God made that day, a day of double marriage to me!'" Cotton was married on July 3, 1613.

[14] Cotton explained his view of the difference between the two styles in a letter prefixed to Arthur Hildersham's *Lectures upon the Fourth of John* (London: 1629): "When scholars furnish themselves with store of other writers, besides the Scriptures, and being little conversant in the Scriptures … their divinity proveth

style, the very style a younger Cotton had given as reason to avoid the lectures of William Perkins.[15] But if it was plain, it was also "profitable," speaking not only "to the brain" but "to the conscience" of the hearer by the power of the Spirit. Cotton now found Sibbes' apologetic for an unadorned delivery to best explain his own experience under the preached word: "When the love of God in Christ and the benefits by Christ are laid open in preaching of the Gospel to us, God gives His Holy Spirit."[16] Through Sibbes' approach to Scripture the Spirit had indeed been given and had spoken to Cotton's conscience. He had tasted what he would later teach in his popular catechism; "Q: How do we come to have part and fellowship with Christ in his death and resurrection?" And the answer, "By the power of His word and Spirit."[17] It is in the plain preaching of the word, the "Gospel ministry" Cotton identifies in his catechism, that the Spirit works to brings us to Christ and keep us in Him. His own experience now compelled him to assert that "the plain style was the saving style."[18]

Thus, while it meant humiliating himself and scandalising the fellows, Cotton resolved to preach in the manner he was now convinced matched the matter of his subject.[19] If what his audience required was a work of the Spirit, he would preach in a way that honoured and invited the

humanity, and their ministry speaketh to the brain, but not to the conscience of the hearer. But he that diggeth all the treasures of his knowledge and the ground of religion out of the Scriptures, and maketh use of other authors, not for ostentation of himself, nor for the ground of his faith, but for the better searching out of the deep wisdom of the Scriptures, such a one believeth what he teacheth, not by an human credulity from his author, but by a divine faith from the Word." Cited in Emerson, *John Cotton*, 35.

[15] Cotton avoided Perkin's lectures both for the "troublesome experiences" of soul-searching Perkins' Calvinism was designed to lead him into, as well as the plainness of their style. See Ziff, *John Cotton*, 21–28.

[16] Sibbes, *Works*, 1:23–24.

[17] Cited in Emerson, *John Cotton*, 128.

[18] Ziff, *John Cotton*, 32.

[19] Thomas Allen, Prefatory epistle to John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London, 1655), 34, gives us a glimpse into the wrestling match Cotton endured, as he heard the story from Cotton himself: "He, being according to his course to preach before the University and scholars in Cambridge, had a great conflict in himself about the composing of his sermon, *viz*. whether after the plain and profitable way, by raising of doctrines, with propounding the reasons and uses of the same, or after the mode of the University at that time, which was to stuff and fill their sermons with as much quotation and citing of authors as might possibly be. On the one side 'twas suggested to him that if he should not go the former way, he should not be faithful to the Lord in seeking His glory, but his own &c. And on the other side, if he should not show

Spirit's work. He now conceived of his preaching task "under the solemn conviction that he was an instrument of the Holy Spirit."[20] As such, his role was first to experience faith, and then to articulate that experience in words "dug out of the Scriptures," words that invited others into his experience by exposing them to the Spirit's power. This conviction was confirmed that afternoon as John Preston confessed "it has pleased God to speak effectually unto [my] heart by that sermon."[21]

"A Mighty Power in the Scriptures Preached"

Cotton's understanding of the work of the Spirit in preaching is further developed in his sermon series on 1 John 5:12 entitled *Christ the Fountaine of Life*. This series was both one of his earliest to be preached (1610s), and one of his last to be published (1651). The fact that he did not heavily revise the manuscript for publication suggests he maintained the course charted here throughout his preaching ministry.[22] In this section I trace the flow of Cotton's thought through three sermons toward the end of this sixteen-sermon series where he explicitly treats the relationship between the preached word and the power of the Spirit in the life of a believer.

In sermon ten, Cotton argues from the qualities observed in natural life to their spiritual analogue in order to assist his congregation in discerning whether they have Christ, and life in him. He comes first to the quality of warmth, stating "wherever there is life, there is warmth." Extending this to the realm of salvation, "the presence of the Spirit of grace … makes a man fervent and warm."[23] Notably, the communication of this spiritual warmth to the soul of a man comes through the Scripture. Cotton takes the report of Luke 24:22 and the burning heart of the Emmaus disciples as Jesus spoke Scriptures to them, "to show you that

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his learning, it would not only be a disparagement unto himself but also unto the College."

[20] Ziff, *John Cotton*, 108.

[21] John Norton, "Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh: The Life and Death of Mr. John Cotton," in *John Cotton: The New England Way*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, Library of American Puritan Writings vol. 12 (New York: AMS Press, 1983), 14.

[22] Charles Hambrick-Stowe, "Christ the Fountaine of Life," in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics,* ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 71, suggests that "Cotton would not have felt his manuscripts from the 1610s or 1620s [of *Christ the Fountaine*] needed updating on these topics when they were published in 1651." He also suggests a date in the late 1610s for the sermon's genesis.

[23] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 144.

there is power in the Word to convey such a measure of the Spirit of grace to the Hearers."[24] Furthermore, Scripture's power to convey the life-giving Spirit is wielded by the preacher as the text is "powerfully applied to the soul." [25] Cotton closes this sermon inviting us to test ourselves as to whether we have warmth, and thus have Christ. While he does not here recommend a remedy if we discover ourselves to be cold, his prescription has been built in to the beginning of the sermon, and emerges explicitly in sermon twelve.

In his twelfth sermon, Cotton takes up John's identification of "those who believe," asking the question, "how does one come to believe on the name of the Lord Jesus?" The first answer Cotton gives is that the words of Scripture "bring men on to salvation." This is John's expressed conviction; "I have written these things unto you … that you may believe."[26] But more must be said. This book, which brings men on to believe, is the sword of the Spirit. Therefore, the process by which we come to be saved must be "the scope [i.e. responsibility or realm of agency] of the Spirit of God in Scripture."[27] But neither does Cotton stop here at the Spirit working through the biblical text. He highlights the preaching of this word as releasing the Spirit's power. These Scriptures "have ever yielded matter to the ministers of the gospel, to preach and expound to the people, that by preaching they might bring on men to salvation."[28] In a curious argument, Cotton produces apostolic itineraries as evidence that the mere reading of Scripture, for all the good it can do, cannot beget faith. This work of begetting faith, he says, "is the principall scope of preaching."[29] By overlaying the scope of the Spirit with the scope of preaching, both rooted in the Scripture unto the begetting of faith, Cotton directs us to the faithful pulpit for our help.

Sermon thirteen continues this line, arguing that the same "marvellous power in Scripture" that brings us to believe now sustains our growth and supplies any defects in our faith.[30] For the maturing believer, Scripture is profitable "whether preached or read, or heard, or conferred upon, or meditated upon."[31] But preaching remains preeminent: "there is a

[24] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 145.
[25] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 145. Here the influence of Sibbes and other "doctors of the soul" is clearly seen.
[26] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 177.
[27] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 180.
[28] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 180.
[29] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 181.
[30] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 193.
[31] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 198.

mighty power in the Scriptures preached." This efficacy is only released, however, when the Scriptures are rightly dispensed; a reminder that again ties the power of the Spirit through the word to the manner in which it is proclaimed.[32] The foil Cotton installs for the faithful minister is an "uncharitable and sacrilegious" Papist, who locks up the Scriptures in Latin so that the people "do not understand what is read to them."[33] This high and foreign style, which makes ignorance "the Mother of Devotion," is the antithesis of a godly teacher, who offers the word plainly, in such a way that the Spirit "draw[s] on those that are believers to believe."[34] Cotton strove to style himself after this faithful shepherd.

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[32] Cotton ends his sermon with a call to ministers: "Since therefore God has given you His Word, and shed abroad the water of His Spirit to run through every line of Scripture, so that the more you shall read and hear … the Scripture, the more you shall find the life of faith increased in you." It was the duty of the faithful Puritan minister to open the Scripture, line upon line, and let God's people drink at this source.

[33] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 205–206.

[34] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 200. It is instructive to note that Cotton's catechism, perhaps his most intentional exercise in the plain style in terms of both form and content, brackets the section on coming to faith and Christian obedience, unique for its consistent reference to the work of the Spirit, with the preaching of the word. See John Cotton, *Milk for Babes* (London, 1646), cited in Emerson, *John Cotton*, 128–129

> Q: How does the ministry of the Gospel raise you up out of this lost estate?
> A: By teaching me the value and the virtue of the death of Christ and the riches of His grace to lost sinners, by revealing the promise of grace to such and by ministering the Spirit of grace to apply Christ and His promise of grace unto myself and to keep me in Him.
> Q: How does the Spirit of grace apply Christ and His promise of grace unto you and keep you in Him?
> A: By begetting in me faith to receive Him, prayer to call upon Him, repentance to mourn after Him, and new obedience to serve Him.
> Q: What is faith?
> A: Faith is the grace of the Spirit whereby I deny myself and believe on Christ for righteousness and salvation.
> Q: What is prayer?
> A: It is a calling upon God in the name of Christ by the help of the Holy Ghost, according to the will of God.
> Q: What is repentance?
> A: Repentance is a grace of the Spirit whereby I loath my sins and myself for them and confess them before the Lord and mourn after Christ for the pardon of them and for grace to serve Him in newness of life.
> Q: What is the newness of life and obedience?

"The Spirit will Speak Scripture to You"

In the fifth sermon of *Christ the Fountaine*, Cotton develops the idea that "those who have the Son have the Spirit of the Son."[35] An implication of the Spirit uniting us to Christ is that we come to "have the offices which the Sonne hath."[36] When he comes to the office of prophet, Cotton announces that accordingly we "discern many secret, hidden mysteries and meanings of the Holy Spirit in Scripture."[37] Furthermore, this "prophetical spirit" is for the purpose of teaching others in the ways of God. Significantly, Cotton terms this having of the Spirit a "point of special use for our direction in a Christian course."[38] In this third section I synthesise Cotton's understanding of the Spirit's relationship to Scripture, showing that as Scripture is opened in the Puritan fashion, these mysteries are unfolded to God's people through the illumination of the Spirit.[39]

The Unity of Scripture

Following the reformers, the Puritans held that the books of Scripture formed a thoroughly integrated text. In his *Arte of Prophesying*, William Perkins assisted a generation of non-conforming ministers, including John Cotton, in discovering the "Summe" of the Scripture as Christ performs the substance of the gospel promises made in the Old Testament. This single message, Perkins argued, was a thread woven throughout the whole to accomplish the consent of all of its parts.[40]

Viewing Scripture as a divinely unified composite drove Puritan hermeneutics to privilege the text. The univocal nature of Scripture

A: Newness of life and obedience is a grace of the Spirit whereby I forsake my former lusts and vain company, and walk before the Lord in the light of His Word and in the communion of the saints.

[35] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 59.

[36] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 61.

[37] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 62.

[38] Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, 59.

[39] For discussion of the role of preaching in Puritan spirituality more generally see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–64. See also Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciples in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 116–123.

[40] William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying. Or a Treatise Concerning the Sacred and Onely True Manner and Methode of Preaching,* trans. Thomas Tuke (London, 1609), 736. Cotton came under Perkins' direct influence at Cambridge, though his manual was widely used.

meant that the meaning of any single part was discerned in concert with the whole. Thus the hermeneutical focus came to rest on inter-textual exegesis. As the era's authority on all phases of biblical interpretation, Perkins can serve as a helpful representative.[41] The meaning of each passage is found not only by examining the immediate context (what Perkins calls "the circumstances of the place propounded") but also by collating other biblical texts that carry verbal or thematic parallels ("the comparing of places altogether").[42] The heuristic range of this "altogether" was canonical.

Cotton held this unity of Scripture in such high regard that he argued in his *Ecclesiastes* that God had every word of every book in mind before Moses received, "In the beginning."[43] And this conviction did indeed cause him to privilege the text.[44] In her examination of his sermons, Lisa Gordis compares Cotton's exegesis to a "full and efficacious reading."[45] Her stress on *reading* is meant to contrast the appropriation of a passage to support a predetermined doctrinal purpose with Cotton's goal to "open" the text of Scripture by explicating what was already there. To achieve this end, his sermons, which pay "extremely close attention to the biblical text," are conscientiously structured using Perkins' method of immediate context and wide-ranging collation.[46] Thus Cotton's voice in the sermon is muted and the testimony of Scripture is marshaled from the whole counsel of God to explain the sense of the text under discussion.

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[41] Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis," 120.

[42] Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying,* 737.

[43] John Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practicall Observations upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1654), 14. He terms this biblical dynamic a "synchrony."

[44] It is a slight misnomer to speak of "the text" of Scripture since Cotton did not operate with any single version. Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 25–26, and Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis," 121, include helpful discussions of the way the Authorised Version was gradually replacing the Geneva Bible over the first half of the seventeenth century. Not only was Cotton able to draw on multiple English translations, he was also an accomplished Hebraist and maintained his proficiency in Greek. His sermons and writings evidence a man able to take his own advice and work most often from his own translations.

[45] Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 37.

[46] Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 45–53, helpfully revisions the detractions Cotton has often received for his "digressions" in light of what it was the Puritans set themselves to do in their preaching work. It is perhaps because they are not genial critics, appreciating the construct of the Puritan sermon on its own terms, that Emerson and Ziff are both "baffled" by Cotton's popularity as a preacher.

His *Canticles* (1642) can serve as an example.[47] Cotton's commentary on the first eight verses of chapter one alone has over one hundred intra- and inter-textual cross-references listed in the margin. The pace does not flag as the commentary proceeds.

The Illumination of Scripture

If the reformers agreed that the Spirit had inspired a text so fully and perfectly integrated that it could serve as its own interpreter, they also agreed that the Spirit must now illuminate our minds if we are to understand its message. Calvin asserted that though "the Word of God is like the sun" we are blind to its truth "unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it."[48] Perkins agreed on our need for Spirit-enabled reading, arguing that only the elect, who had received the Spirit, could "discerne the voyce of Christ speaking in the Scriptures."[49] This imagery of the Spirit unstopping ears and granting "e[y] e-sight" suggests that it was not sufficient merely to say that Scripture interprets Scripture. It is the Spirit who serves as "the principall interpreter of Scripture," leading the reader through a sequence of collated texts and thus directing the way each in turn is to be understood.

Edward Davidson contends that this principle of Spirit-enabled reading "goes far to explain the paucity of exegetical methods" developed during the Puritan century.[50] The preacher is almost wholly passive, "yeelding" to the inspiration of the Spirit.[51] Lisa Gordis nuances this view, arguing that there was as much "Arte" as there was "Prophesying" in a Puritan sermon, though the former was minimised to avoid giving the impression that the preacher could make God's Word clearer than He could.[52] Both are correct, however, to maintain that the commitment to

[47] John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the Whole Book of Canticles, or Song of Solomon Lively Describing the Estate of the Church in All the Ages Thereof, Both Jewish and Christian, to This Day …* (London, 1642).
[48] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.ii.34.
[49] Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying,* 734, 737.
[50] Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis," 121.
[51] The language is Calvin's, cited in Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis," 124. Davidson explains that as "one verse yields to another, leads to another, forms a sequence with others … a reader does not reason or interpret on his own. Rather, he allows himself to be directed and to follow the leadings, the comparisons, analogies, and sequences."
[52] Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 24.

collation discussed above is driven by a desire to admit the interpretive work of the Spirit.[53]

Though Cotton took "lawful delight" in studying some twelve hours a day, he agreed that even the most erudite understanding of Scripture is vain without spiritual light. Only the Spirit can "tell you what use you are to make of such a Scripture."[54] To this end he exhorted his congregation, at least those who were saved and could avail themselves of the Spirit's assistance, not to "be afraid of the word *Revelation*."[55] This encouragement was circumscribed by all the caveats required by a Puritan view of mediate prophesy, such as the warning not to "look for any revelation out[side] of the Word; for the Spirit comes in the mouth of the Word and the Word in the mouth of the Spirit."[56] Nevertheless, by Cotton's account, "hearing the voice of the Spirit in the words of the scriptures was not only permissible; it was a necessary part of efficacious reading."[57]

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[53] Schaefer, *The Spiritual Brotherhood,* 270, describes the Puritan pattern of piety as holding "that the Bible revealed that truth, Reformed divinity explained it, the godly minister expounded it, and the Holy Spirit brought it home to the hearts of the elect through the illumination of the Word."

[54] John Cotton, *A Practical Commentary upon the First Epistle General of John* (London, 1656), 197.

[55] John Cotton, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1671), 177. Original emphasis.

[56] See Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 775. Cotton also urged suspicion of "all Revelations in which the Word of God is silent" for "the Spirit of God will speak Scripture to you: when he comes, he will not bring a new Gospel, and new Revelations; but he alwaies speaks in the Word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is given unto us … rest not therefore in any assurance, nor revelation, unless thou hast a word for it."

[57] Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 171. Gordis quotes from his *Examination* to demonstrate that revelations "dispensed … in a word of God and according to a word of God" were both possible and positive. "Though the word revelation be rare in common speech and we make it uncouth in our ordinary expressions, yet notwithstanding, being understood in the scripture sense I think they are not only lawful but such as Christians may receive and God bear witness to it in his word, and usually he doth express it in the ministry of the word and doth accompany it by his spirit, or else it is in the reading of the word in some chapter or verse and whenever it comes it comes flying on the wings of the spirit."

The Plain Sense of Scripture

The Puritans disparaged the *quadriga*, the medieval technique of teasing allegorical, anagogical, and tropological meanings from the literal sense of a passage.[58] Their aim was to elevate "the one true and natural sense of everie place, which is the literal sense."[59] This literal sense was held to be the correct, single, and stable meaning of the text under consideration.[60]

The question now became identifying the best means by which to arrive at this literal sense in a way that honoured both the inter-textual nature of Scripture and the inspired leading of the Spirit. The reformers answered by defining the correct meaning as "that which the holie Ghost principally intendeth."[61] This is the Puritan re-definition of the "spiritual sense," illumination given to the regenerate that allows for a flexibility of signification within the literal sense.[62] What Scripture means in a given place is determined by what the Spirit intended to communicate in that place, which sometimes may seem "surprisingly un-literal."[63] Once again,

[58] Charles L. Cohen, "Two Biblical Models of Conversion: An Example of Puritan Hermeneutics," *CH* 58, no. 2 (1989): 184. Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 20, notes that "the word 'literal' itself was a polemical term, marshaled against the pattern of fourfold interpretation prevalent in medieval exegesis."

[59] Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying,* 728. Perkins called for "the device of the fourefold meaning of the Scripture" to be "exploded and reiected" and italicised his assertion that "*There is one only sense, and the same is the literal*" (737).

[60] For a helpful discussion of the "literal" meaning see Charles J. Scalise, "The 'Sensus Literalis': A Hermeneutical Key to Biblical Exegesis," *SJT* 42, no. 1 (1989): 45–65. See also Beeke, *A Puritan Theology*, 33–34.

[61] Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying,* 731. This implies that to a graciously enabled reader, "the minde and meaning of the H Ghost" were knowable. Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying*, 738.

[62] Tooman, "Of Puritans and Prophets," 223, summarises the Puritan view, "Holy writ is dense with signification." Cohen, "Two Biblical Models of Conversion," 184, notes their commitment to unpack this density meant that "they did not narrow this real connotation down to a single, exclusive sense. Instead, they expanded the literal meaning by ferreting out the multiple significances of a passage." Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 20–21, shows Luther's discomfort with the adequacy of the term "literal," as well as his allowance for "hidden meanings … called mysteries" that were revealed by the Spirit. She also shows Perkins expand his definition of the literal sense to include the three other means of interpretation: "An allegorie is onely a certaine manner of uttering the same sense. The Anagoge and Tropologie are waies, whereby the sense may be applied."

[63] Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 21. She gives an example from Luther's treatment of the golden spears in Solomon's temple, where their clear light convinces the adversary "that the word of God stand alone and need not the explanation of man."

regenerate readers are led to this proper meaning through a collation of other passages.[64]

John Cotton stood squarely in this tradition and worked to hold the text in highest regard while being willing to follow "the motions of the Spirit" to arrive at its God-ordained meaning.[65] Contrary to some perceptions of his exegesis that construe him as shackled by a Ramist system, Davidson argues convincingly that Cotton proved capable of devising "his own method of exegesis" and "continued throughout his life to explicate the Scriptures in whatever way best suited the text and the meanings that should be brought forth."[66] This sensitivity yielded an exegetical corpus full now with analogy, now with typology, and occasionally even a highly technical philology. Cotton's wide-ranging gifts were consistently deployed in pursuit of the sense principally intended by the Spirit.

The opening of his *Canticles* (1642) provides a good example of this sensitivity. In laying out his interpretive approach, Cotton notes that to take the images of the Song as actual expressions of Solomon's affection for Pharaoh's daughter, that is, to take them literally, would be "absurd and monstrous." Some have tried, but it is a "vain conception." Though the indicative statements in the text might identify his beloved's eyes with "fish-pooles" or compare her nose "to a Tower," this cannot be admitted as the plain sense. What then does the Spirit principally intend in this place? The aim of the Spirit must be to "sweetly, and shortly, and lively" describe the estate of the Church towards Christ in every age.[67] Unfolding this plain sense, therefore, is the aim of the plain-style preacher.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that, precipitated by his own conversion experience, Cotton's adoption of the plain style was rooted in a doctrine of Scripture that acknowledged the need for God to give his Spirit to the

[64] This carries the assumption that "the minde and meaning of the Holy Ghost" were in fact knowable. It also brings context and the analogy of faith to prominence as guards against drawing "any doctrine from any place." It was precisely such a charge that was levelled against Cotton's reading of the Song. See Jeffrey A. Hammond, "The Bride in Redemptive Time: John Cotton and the Canticles Controversy," *The New England Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (1983): 91–93.

[65] Cotton, *A Briefe Exposition with Practicall Observations upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes*, 34.

[66] Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis," 125.

[67] Cotton, *Canticles* (1642), 5.

hearers. His manner of preaching was thus consciously shaped by what he came to believe about the way in which the Spirit worked through the word. That is, because of the Spirit's involvement in unifying, illuminating, and intending the sense of Scripture, a preaching style that allowed Scripture to speak most plainly, would be the form most powerfully attended by the work of the Spirit.[68]

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[68] In an observation that both explains how closely the Spirit and Word are tied together in the Puritan view of preaching, and has significant implications for how we view Cotton's comments in during the Antinomian Controversy, Selmon, "John Cotton," 128, argues that "within the realm of Christian experience, the witness of the Word would be synonymous with the witness of the Spirit."