

**'THAT SECRET REFRESHMENT:
THE LIFE OF OLIVER CROMWELL (1599-1658)**

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In 1654, when the Puritan divine John Owen (1616-1683) was having his treatise on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints published he included with the manuscript that was sent to the printer, Leonard Lichfield (1604-1657), a letter that he wished to be placed at the head of the book. The letter was addressed to Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) and a portion of it ran thus:

In the midst of all the changes and mutations which the infinitely wise providence of God doth daily effect in the greater and lesser things of this world, as to the communication of his love in Jesus Christ, and the merciful, gracious distributions of the unsearchable riches of grace, and the hid treasures thereof purchased by his blood, he knows no repentance. Of both these you have had full experience; and though your concernment in the former hath been as eminent as that of any person whatever in these later ages of the world, yet your interest in and acquaintance with the latter is, as of incomparable more importance in itself, so answerably of more value and esteem unto you. The series and chain of eminent providences whereby you have been carried on and protected in all the hazardous work of your generation, which your God hath called you unto, is evident to all. Of your preservation by the power of God, through faith, in a course of gospel obedience, upon the account of the immutability of the love and infallibility of the promises of God, which are yea and amen in Jesus Christ, your own soul is possessed with the experience. Therein is that abiding joy, that secret refreshment, which the world cannot give.¹

Owen here touches upon two critical aspects that need to be taken into account in any evaluation of the life of Oliver Cromwell: his remarkable rise to political power and his inner walk with God. In what follows we begin with Cromwell's conversion, the foundation of what Owen calls "that secret refreshment" Cromwell enjoyed all of his life after he embraced God's offer of salvation in Christ. We then look at Cromwell's convictions regarding God's providence, which under girded his own understanding of his rise to power. Then we look at three aspects of his rule over the English nation: his promotion of heart-religion, his attempt to secure genuine liberty of conscience, and finally, his desire to establish a godly government.²

**"One beam in a dark place": A spirituality rooted in
conversion**

Oliver Cromwell was born in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, in East Anglia, on April 25, 1599, the only surviving son of a gentleman, Robert Cromwell, who, in turn, was the younger son of a knight, Sir Henry Cromwell. Despite these connections to the gentry Cromwell's early years were spent on the fringes of East Anglian landowners. British historian John Morrill has convincingly shown that Cromwell's status in 1640 when the alarms of civil war began to sound in England was much

humbler than has generally been assumed.³ His social links appear to have been with what was called the "middling sort," urban merchants and working farmers. Exemplifying these connections is his marriage to Elizabeth Bourchier in 1620, the daughter of a successful London fur-dealer.⁴ Moreover, Cromwell had significant financial problems during this period as well as being somewhat sickly. In the words of Morrill, he "spent the 1620s and 1630s in largely silent pain at his personal lot and at the drift of public affairs."⁵ That such a man with little rank or standing would rise to the historical prominence that he later occupied is, even to the jaundiced, secular eye of many modern historians, nothing short of amazing. To Cromwell, it was only explainable by the sovereign hand of God.

As for the role of Christianity in his upbringing, it used to be assumed that he had received a thoroughly Puritan education at the hands of Thomas Beard (d.1632), the local schoolmaster.⁶ In fact, as Morrill has now shown in some detail, Beard was the very antithesis of the Puritan pastor: a covetous man who lived in a grand style, with little interest in what was important to the Puritans, namely the ongoing reformation of the Church of England.⁷ Nor is there any clear indication that his parents were strongly inclined towards Puritanism.⁸ What we do know with certainty is that between 1628 and 1634 Cromwell underwent an evangelical conversion that would be the dominant influence over the rest of his life.⁹

Thankfully, we are not in the dark about the immediate impact of this conversion, for Cromwell discussed his experience in a letter to his cousin, Elizabeth St. John, in 1638.

[T]o honour my God by declaring what he hath done for my soul, in this I am confident, and I will be so. Truly, then, this I find: That he giveth springs in a dry and barren wilderness where no water is. I live (you know where) in Mesheck, which they say signifies *Prolonging*; in Kedar, which signifies *Blackness*: yet the Lord forsaketh me not. Though he do prolong, yet he will I trust bring me to his tabernacle, to his resting-place. My soul is with the congregation of the firstborn, my body rests in hope, and if here I may honour my God either by doing or by suffering, I shall be most glad.

Truly no poor creature hath more cause to put forth himself in the cause of his God than I have had plentiful wages beforehand, and I am sure I shall never earn the least mite. The Lord accept me in his Son, and give me to walk in the light,—and give us to walk in the light, as he is the light! He it is that enlighteneth our blackness, our darkness. I dare not say, he hideth his face from me. He giveth me to see light in his light. One beam in a dark place hath exceeding much refreshment in it:—blessed be his name for shining upon so dark a heart as mine! You know what my manner of life hath been. Oh, I lived in and loved darkness, and hated the light. I was a chief, the chief of sinners. This is true; I hated godliness, yet God had mercy on me. O the riches of his mercy! Praise him for me;—pray for me, that he who hath begun a good work would perfect it to the day of Christ.¹⁰

What is unmistakable about this Scripture-saturated text is that it records an unforgettable event. We are not told how, but Cromwell came to see that at the core of his being was darkness and a love of sin. So great was this love for sin that he found Paul's words in 1 Timothy 1:15 the most apt description of his state: he was "the chief of sinners." Cromwell's use of this phrase should not be taken to imply that he led the unrestrained life of a libertine before his conversion, for which there is no evidence." But nor is it mere hyperbole. In the light of God's goodness and the riches of his mercy, Cromwell can but view his pre-conversion life as a sinkhole of sin.

In what is an otherwise fine study of Cromwell's faith, *J. C. Davis* makes the curious assertion that "Cromwell's private religious thinking and devotion are sparsely documented."¹² This is hardly the case, as is evident from many of his letters and speeches. These written texts reveal that his conversion gave him a profound understanding of God. For Cromwell, he is both a "great and glorious God," who alone is "worthy to be trusted and feared,"¹³ and also a Father who is "merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin."¹⁴ These attributes were in full display in God's covenantal work of salvation in the death of Christ for sinners. The covenant that God makes with Christ for the elect is a unilateral covenant in which God "undertakes all, and the poor soul nothing."¹⁵ The sovereignty of God in salvation thus becomes the sinner's place of rest, not only at conversion, but for the rest of his or her life. As Cromwell tells his son-in-law, Charles Fleetwood (c. 1618-1692), in 1652:

[S]hall we seek for the root of our comforts within us; what God hath done, what he is to us in Christ, is the root of our comfort. In this is stability; in us is weakness. Acts of obedience are not perfect, and therefore yield not perfect peace. Faith, as an act, yields it not, but as it carries us into him, who is our perfect rest and peace; in whom we are accounted of, and received by, the Father, even as Christ himself. This is our high calling. Rest we here, and here only.¹⁶

Three years later he can again write to Fleetwood, and tell him that his salvation consists in this one thing: that "God is bound in faithfulness to Christ, and in him to us; the covenant is without [i.e. outside of] us, a transaction between God and Christ." Thus, despite daily "sins and infirmities," Cromwell, like all other believers, can "have peace and safety, and apprehension of love, from a Father in covenant, who cannot deny himself."¹⁷

Cromwell has various ways of describing the experience of entry into and standing fast in this covenant. In his letter to Elizabeth St. John cited above, he uses the imagery of illumination: God converting the heart by giving light and so dispelling spiritual darkness. In other texts he can talk of the light of God's countenance being better than life.¹⁸ Alongside this imagery of light, Cromwell also uses the images of heat and flame. Writing to his daughter Bridget in 1646, he tells her to "press on" after Christ and "let not husband, let not anything cool thy affections." He expresses the hope that Bridget's husband, his close confidant and fellow soldier Henry Ireton (1611-1651), will in fact be used to "inflare" her love for Christ.¹⁹

In other texts, the imagery is drawn from the realm of sense and taste. In a 1655 letter to Charles Fleetwood, for example, he depicts the activity of the enlightened soul as "leaning upon the Son, or looking to him, thirsting after him, embracing him."²⁰ He is convinced that those who have "tasted that the Lord is gracious" will be "pressing [on] after [the] full enjoyment" of him.²¹ Finally, in one of the most moving expressions of his faith, Cromwell sums up what conversion means for the believer. It gives the believer a lifelong passion to enjoy God in heaven. Writing to his brother-in-law, Valentine Walton (died c. 1661), to inform him of the death of Valentine's son during the Battle of Marston Moor, he tells him that the Lord has taken his son "into the happiness we all pant after and live for."²²

"We follow the Lord who goeth before": Cromwell's spirituality of providence

In the letter from John Owen that was cited at the beginning of this talk Owen made mention of the providential ordering of Cromwell's life. As Owen told Cromwell: "The series and chain of

eminent providences whereby you have been carried on and protected in all the hazardous work of your generation, which your God hath called you unto, is evident to all.²³ Now, this belief in divine providence was the bread and butter of the Puritanism of Cromwell's day. For instance, the early Stuart Puritan Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) could state on the basis of Matthew 10:28-29 that God's "providence extends to the smallest things, to the sparrows and to the hair of our heads; he governs every particular passage of our lives."²⁴ Similarly Cromwell could urge Robert Blake (1598-1657) and Edward Montagu (1625-1672), key naval commanders in the Cromwellian government, to rely wholeheartedly on God's providential care. It will be salutary, Cromwell writes, for them to submit all of their

affairs to the disposition of our All-wise Father; who, not only out of prerogative, but because of his wisdom, goodness and truth, ought to be resigned unto by his creatures, and most especially by those who are children of his begetting through the Spirit. Indeed all the dispensations of God, whether adverse or prosperous, do fully read that lesson. We can no more turn away the Evil, as we call it, than attain the Good.²⁵

Here, Cromwell is not so much discounting the place of human endeavours and abilities, as seeking to inculcate distrust in them and total reliance on God's sovereign out-working of his purposes in every moment of time. As Cromwell had written to Richard Maij or (1604-1660), the father of one of his daughters-in-law: "Truly our work is neither from our brains nor from our courage and strength, but we follow the Lord who goeth before, and gather what he scattereth."²⁶

This passage from Cromwell's letter to Maijor was written in the midst of Cromwell's campaign in Ireland, undertaken in 1649 and 1650 to prevent an invasion of England by Irish troops loyal to the future Charles II. It reflects another key aspect of Cromwell's providentialism, namely, the conviction that often God reveals his providential will in military victory. Thus, after the Battle of Marston Moor in 1644, Cromwell wrote to his brother-in-law, Valentine Walton, that the victory was "a great favour from the Lord." He thus could urge Walton, "Give glory, all the glory, to God." Likewise, after the other major parliamentary victory in the first phase of the Civil War, the Battle of Naseby in June, 1645, Cromwell told William Lenthall (1591-1662), the Speaker of the House of Commons: "this is none other but the hand of God; and to him alone belongs the glory."²⁷

Cromwell's overall conviction about the sovereignty of God in all human affairs is certainly biblical and worthy of imitation. Yet, would we want to say that God is always on the side of the victors? Does victory always indicate God's approval? I suspect that few Reformed Christians today would be prepared to give an unequivocal yes to these questions.²⁸ It strikes this writer that a more biblical perspective is one that Cromwell expressed near the end of his life when, in the spring of 1657, it was suggested to him that he restore the monarchy in his person and become King Oliver I. After much prayer and apparent indecision, he rejected this offer. During his struggle to discern what exactly God wanted him to do, he said: "who can love to walk in the dark? But Providence doth often so dispose."²⁹ This statement is a clear assertion of God's sovereign involvement in every event of an individual's life and the history of a people. But it is also a recognition that those who confess this providential sovereignty are not always able to discern the exact path it is taking.

"To honour my God either by doing or suffering": A spirituality of activism

As Cromwell sought to be a godly ruler in the aftermath of the English Civil War, he embraced three goals that gave further shape to his spiritual vision that we wish to consider. First, there was his desire to promote heart-religion, a vital Christianity in which substance and the Spirit were central, not form and church structures. And then, linked to this, he sought to create an environment where there might be genuine liberty of conscience.^x Finally, convinced as he was that righteousness exalts a nation, he sought to put in place a godly government.³¹

One of the first texts that enunciates Cromwell's belief that Christianity is to be a "Christianity of substance, of the heart and spirit" comes from Cromwell's military experience in the Civil War. Writing to William Lenthall a few days after his New Model Army had executed a victorious siege of the city of Bristol in 1645, he said:

Presbyterians, Independents, all have here the same spirit of faith and prayer; the same presence and answer; they agree here, have no names of difference: pity it is it should be otherwise anywhere! All that believe, have the real unity, which is most glorious, because inward and spiritual, in the Body, and to the Head. As for being united in forms, commonly called Uniformity, every Christian will for peace-sake study and do, as far as conscience will permit; and from brethren in things of the mind we look for no compulsion, but that of light and reason.³²

For Cromwell all believers possess a genuine unity since each is indwelt by the Spirit of God. This unity is the one that ultimately matters in the light of eternity for it speaks of union with the head of the church, namely Christ. Cromwell is not prepared to say that unity in external matters such as forms of worship and church government, so-called uniformity, is meaningless. These are matters about which Christians should pray for light and with regard to which they need to discuss and reason together. But, in Cromwell's mind, they are not issues over which Christian brothers and sisters should divide.

Thus, when Cromwell was appointed Lord Protector in 1653, it is completely understandable that he sought to create a climate that would make room for the differences of conviction between professing Christians. Scholars differ as to the exact parameters of Cromwell's policy of religious toleration and all of the motives that guided him in this regard.³³ There is, however, little gainsaying the plain fact that Cromwell had a burning desire for an atmosphere of religious toleration that precious few in his day were willing to sanction. He deplored the bitterness with which Christians often assailed one another and hoped that "every one, instead of contending, would justify his form by love and meekness."³⁴ If unity between the various groups of Christians was not immediately possible, however, Cromwell was then convinced that a second best was liberty of conscience.³⁵

Like the rest of his fellow Puritans Cromwell was convinced that the main means of converting men and women to Christ was the faithful preaching of the Word. But he also hoped that godly government would help in this regard.³⁶ In the words of Ruth Mayers:

Cromwell mourned 'the dissoluteness in the nation' not simply because it contravened his personal morality, but because it offended the holy God, whose standards Scripture plainly set forth. At times, he grew weary of the burden of government and almost despaired of

'doing any good'. Yet the certainty that God alone could, and in his time would, impart genuine goodness enabled the Protector to overcome discouragements and persevere. Never did he lose the hope that 'men of honest hearts, engaged to God enlightened to know his Word' might by precept and example do much to convince the disaffected of their errors and stem the 'current of wickedness'.³⁷

Conclusion

What then is the legacy of Cromwell's life? Well, two things can be mentioned. First, in light of his emphasis on Christian unity it is somewhat ironic that his major spiritual legacy was the three denominations that emerged from the splintering of Puritanism in the latter half of the 17th century—the Presbyterians, Congregationalists (or Independents), and the Baptists, the so-called Nonconformists and Dissenters.³⁸ This was a process that he helped along by giving these various groups the freedom to develop their own convictions. Oliver Cromwell's spirituality thus made a lasting impact on the shape of the Reformed community in Great Britain.

Second, Cromwell's life, and here I quote again from Ruth Meyers,

shows that much may be achieved by dedicated Christians dependent upon God, zealous for his glory and guided by his Word. Godly rule may be a thankless task, a constant uphill struggle, in which perfection is unattainable and temptations are multiplied. But earthly governments cannot be neutral in the conflict between sin and righteousness. Their policies will tend to serve either the one or the other. The example of Oliver Cromwell shows that Christian withdrawal from politics on the ground that no good can be achieved is an abdication of God-given responsibility, which ensures the short-term triumph of ungodliness.³⁹ &fc>

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Endnotes

¹ *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (1654 ed.; repr. *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), XI, 5].

² Ruth E. Mayers, "Oliver Protector: A Godly Ruler?", *The Banner of Truth*, 434 (November 1999), 5-10.

³ "The Making of Oliver Cromwell" in his *The Nature of the English Revolution* (London/ New York: Longman, 1993), 118-147.

⁴ Barry Coward, *Cromwell* (London/New York: Longman, 1991), 10-12; Morrill, "Making of Oliver Cromwell", 119-123.

⁵ "Making of Oliver Cromwell", 118.

⁶ See, for instance, Robert S. Paul, *The Lord Protector Religion and Politics in the Life of Oliver Cromwell* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1955), 24-27.

⁷ "Making of Oliver Cromwell", 126-130. ⁹ to/d.,134.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-135. For the date, see Paul, *Lord Protector*, 38-41; Morrill, "Making of Oliver Cromwell", 134-135.

¹⁰ Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1,100-101. The best analysis of this text is Paul, *Lord Protector*, 37-38.

- 11 Morrill, "Making of Oliver Cromwell", 134.
12 "Cromwell's Religion" in John Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*
(London/New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1990), 187.
13 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1,358.
14 *Ibid.*, III, 29-30.
15 *Ibid.*
16 *Ibid.* Charles Fleetwood had married Cromwell's daughter Bridget in June 1652, about six months
after Bridget's first husband, Henry Ireton, had died. By the time that this letter was written,
Fleetwood had been appointed the Commander-in-Chief of the parliamentary army in Ireland.
17 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, III, 212-214.
18 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, II, 306.
19 *Ibid.*, 1,254-255. Henry Ireton was one of Cromwell's closest confidants, an important
parliamentary general and political theorist who played a vital role in most of the key battles of the
Civil War.
20 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*. III, 212-214.
21 *Ibid.*, 1,254-255.
22 *Ibid.*, 1,187-189
23 *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance (Works, XI, 5).*
24 *Of the Providence of God/The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862-1864
ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), V, 351. For this reference, I am indebted to
Blair Worden, "Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England", *Past & Present*, 109
(November 1985), 60, an article that has been very helpful in understanding Cromwell's
convictions about providence. Also helpful in this regard are H. F. Lovell Cocks, *The Religious
Life of Oliver Cromwell (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1960)*, 28-44, and Davis, "Cromwell's
Religion", 186-188,199-201.
25 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, III, 247. Robert Blake was a firm Puritan. As
Admiral of the Cromwellian Navy, he played a significant role in making the English navy an
extraordinarily powerful force. In his early years Edward Montagu appeared to be a firm supporter
of the more radical Puritans, namely, the Independents and the Baptists. By the 1650s this support was
waning. After Cromwell's death in 1658 and the rapid collapse of Richard Cromwell's government,
Montagu quickly switched his allegiance to the royalist cause. Thus it was he who brought Charles
II back from the Continent to England on board his flagship, the *Naseby*, later renamed the *Royal
Charles*.
26 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, II, 159-160.
27 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1,187-189,214-215. William Lenthall was the
Speaker of the House of Commons throughout what is known as the Long Parliament, which met
from 1640 to 1648. For further examples, see Worden, "Providence and Politics", 67-70,81-83.
28 See Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Puritan Spirit (London: Epworth Press, 1967)*, 130-136.
29 Cited *ibid.*, 134, n.1.
30 Davis, "Cromwell's religion", 190-191.
31 Ruth E. Mayers, "Oliver Protector: A Godly Ruler?", *The Banner of Truth*, 434 (November
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32 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 1,228.
33 See, for instance, Paul, *Lord Protector*, 324-333; Cocks, *Religious Life of Oliver Cromwell*, 45-63;
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ed., *The Impact of the Church Upon Its Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,
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Ecclesiastical History Society, 1984)*, 199-233; Davis, "Cromwell's religion", 191-199.
34 Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 111,179-180.
35 Davis, "Cromwell's religion", 198-199.
36 Mayers, "Oliver Protector: A Godly Ruler?", 9.
37 to/d.,10.
38 Coward, *Cromwell*, 176-177.
39 "Oliver Protector: A Godly Ruler?", 10.