Puritans and Spiritual Desertion

The progressive development of Puritan pastoral psychology

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Introduction
In his *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin addresses the pastoral reality of spiritual desertion:

Think with yourselves, what is the worst thing, next to the eternal loss of God, really and indeed, that can be supposed to befall this man. What worse than to have that cranny, through which he first espied that beam, to be as it were clean shut up, the ‘light of God’s countenance’ withdrawn; yea, all light and appearance to him of his own graces withheld and overclouded; the face of heaven so overcast with darkness that neither sunlight nor starlight appeareth to him, so as he hath no light; yea, further, finds his soul beset and besieged round with all the powers of hell and darkness, and the terrors of the Almighty shot into his soul? And he, thus quite left, walking in this darkness, is filled with strong fears and jealousies that God is not his God [...].

Although Goodwin articulates this problem succinctly in terms of human experience, he views spiritual desertion as that act whereby God withdraws his gracious influence to such an extent that the spiritual well-being of the believer will be seriously affected by it. As a consequence of this withdrawal the believer loses the experience of God’s presence and the comfort of spiritual graces like faith and love, which will seriously affect his assurance of salvation. There is an evident connection with human sin, for the expressions *terrors of the Almighty* and *wrath* are references to God’s punitive activity. Moreover, Goodwin posits that deliverance from this spiritual affliction can only come about by God’s grace and by faith.

In this article the view of several Puritan authors regarding spiritual desertion will be analyzed. The reason of this focus on Puritanism is that spiritual desertion belongs to the classic spiritual themes which received ample pastoral attention within this Reformed pietistic

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movement and whereby it most probably influenced similar Reformed circles in early modern Europe, first of all in the Netherlands.²

At the end of the sixteenth century, when the aspirations of the Presbyterian reformation of ecclesiastical structures had been impeded by Queen Elisabeth and her bishops, English Puritan preachers pursued a new internal reformation of individuals, of families, of the church, and of society.³ Employing a style referred to as practical divinity, they wished on the one hand to lead church members to conversion, and on the other hand to foster the spiritual progress of believers. As the authors of famous pastoral literature, which was commonly based on their sermons, these Puritan preachers pursued one and the same objective.⁴

Within their ecclesiological context, they apparently encountered serious-minded hearers who were wrestling with inner troubles being caused by moral failings as well as by the absence of spiritual enjoyment and of assurance. Puritan authors analyzed this inner turmoil in detail, connecting it to theological-spiritual notions such as sin, God’s providence, satanic activity, and spiritual pedagogy. They viewed these forms of spiritual trouble as spiritual trials, and thereby they wished to communicate that God is the One who governs all that people and believers experience spiritually, and that He is thereby pursuing his own pedagogical objectives. They also sought to move believers to a renewed spiritual surrender to God, while at the same time being desirous to encourage weak Christians by assuring them that notwithstanding their spiritual troubles and failures they were authentic believers.

Spiritual desertion was undoubtedly an important subordinate theme for the Puritans, but it does not represent the totality of their

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³ The recent study of Randall J. Pederson provides a historiographical and historical survey of English Puritanism as well as an attempt to solve the persistent issue of its definition (Unity in Diversity: English Puritans and the Puritan Reformation, 1603-1689, Leiden 2014).

thinking regarding spiritual suffering, for in this context they also address spiritual affliction and spiritual melancholy. As we observed in Goodwin’s *A Child of Light*, spiritual desertion is also being defined by the alternate term ‘darkness’. This classic spiritual metaphor makes clear that the withdrawal of both God’s felt presence and the supposed decline of faith and assurance means that there is a regression in the experiential knowledge of God and His grace. Other terms like ‘dryness’ and ‘deadness’ are used mainly to emphasize the lack of spiritual experience, whereas the related descriptions ‘dejection’ and ‘depression’ refer particularly to the negative psychological consequences of a decline of one’s spiritual health.

**Spiritual tradition**

The puritan analysis of spiritual desertion is rooted in a long spiritual tradition. While in the early church Origen (185-253/54) wrote about spiritual suffering, in the early Middle Ages it was Gregory the Great (540-604) who addressed this subject. Particular attention for this form of suffering became clear in their interpretation of the biblical book Song of Songs, wherein they applied the conjugal love to the mystical communion between God and the believer. The pattern of both the withdrawal and the return of the bridegroom, which is described in detail and with emotional language in the Song of Songs, they considered to be descriptive of God’s incomprehensible dealings with the believer, and the bride’s experience of God’s absence was therefore viewed as an illustration of spiritual desertion. Although this dark experience caused great inner turmoil, it was intended for the deepening of spiritual love as well as desire and so it acted as a preparation for the experience of God and contemplation.

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By his emphasis on spiritual experience Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1155) greatly influenced the history of Western spirituality. His *Sermones super Cantica* are a detailed description of the mystical marriage between Christ as the Bridegroom and believers as the bride. In the line of Augustine God’s grace gets absolute priority, but at the same time human effort also plays an indispensable role according to Bernard by his statement that God offers his grace to those who follow the path of love and long for deepening and contemplation. However, Bernard does not pay specific attention to spiritual desertion.8

Within the English mystical tradition, however, spiritual desertion was a specific theme in especially two fourteenth century writings: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the work of an anonymous author, and Walter Hilton’s (died 1396) *The Scale of Perfection* (between 1386 and 1396). The first work aims a synthesis of the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and that of Bernard. The monastic writer, who lived in Syria around 500 and presented himself as Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17: 34), developed a negative (apophatic) theology, wherein he emphasized that God is unknowable. Within his dialectical view of the relation between God and the world it is only possible to approach the hidden God by metaphors as ‘darkness’, ‘cloud’ and ‘silence’. Through this approach Dionysius had a considerable influence on thousand years of Western spiritual history. The writer of ‘The Cloud’ connects Dionysius’s mysticism of being with the love-mysticism of Bernard, so that God surprisingly does not any more appear as the unknowable God, but in the person of Christ as the bridegroom of the soul. The particular aim of the knowledge of God is by rising beyond the love to Christ to penetrate into the clear, spiritual love of God.9 Following *The Cloud*, Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection* connects negative theology with Christology and explains spiritual darkness as the distance to Jesus which is caused by sin. When the soul is willing to admit this and to loosen herself from wrong inner desires and worldly temptations, she will make the next step to live in the darkness of


not-yet-knowing and not-yet-seeing of God. But in this darkness instead of the unknowable God he discovers Jesus. Here, again the bridal mysticism of Bernard appears, because the mystical darkness of spiritual dying from the world is enlightened by the love-communion with Jesus. In this way the soul longs for experiencing something of the mysterious God.\textsuperscript{10}

The most famous sixteenth-century writing on spiritual desertion is \textit{The Dark Night of the Soul}, the most detailed work on this subject authored by the Spanish mystical writer St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). In this work several ‘dark nights of the soul’ are distinguished as very painful but necessary steps leading to a mystical marriage with the transcendent and hidden God.\textsuperscript{11}

It is not clear how far Puritan writings on spiritual desertion have been influenced by these late-medieval and early modern spiritual sources, because the authors of our study usually do not refer to pre-Reformation writings. Yet, it is very well possible that Puritan authors have borrowed from this classical spiritual reservoir. At the same time, Puritan authors developed a particular concept of spiritual desertion, which is shaped by the Reformed-orthodox emphasis on God’s grace.

\textbf{Methodology and the state of research}

One of the primary questions raised by this article is how Puritan writers define spiritual desertion, and what their spiritual objective is in addressing this pastoral issue. Related issues are also discussed, such as why this form of suffering occurs, what its consequences are, and the various ways in which pastoral solace is being offered.

This article will first of all focus on the early phase of the Puritan movement, when William Perkins laid the theological foundation for the Puritan view regarding spiritual desertion. Several decades later, the Puritan treatment of this pastoral and spiritual theme reached its zenith in the analyses of Thomas Goodwin and Joseph Symonds. Goodwin

discussed this subject in greater detail, combining Perkins’s theological perspective with giving more attention to the believer’s experience. Symonds brought the Puritan analysis of spiritual desertion into sharp focus by his very detailed discussion of its experiential ramifications. A sequential discussion of these three authors will yield the opportunity of examining the development in their Puritan interpretation of it, as well as describe the mature Puritan treatment of spiritual desertion.

A matter of special interest is the ambivalent position of this spiritual experience. Sometimes the experience of God’s absence was considered to be the consequence of God’s chastisement, and it was therefore deemed to be a reliable reflection of His dealings with the sinner. However, on more than one occasion the pastoral advice was given not to be misled by what one’s experience might communicate, presenting spiritual desertion as a foretoken of eternal destruction. Instead, one was counselled to trust God’s promise of salvation. Finally, the international influence exerted by the Puritan treatment of spiritual desertion will be addressed.

Since most Puritan writers were first and foremost preachers, the sources consulted for this article are primarily of a homiletical nature. Although we cannot easily trace what sort of changes preachers made when transitioning from a sermon to a book, it appears credible to deem Puritan writings on spiritual desertion on the whole as reliable renderings of the spoken word.\textsuperscript{12} This focus on published sermons means that personal writings like autobiographies and diaries are not included. Therefore, this article does not analyze the personal reaction of church members to the Puritan message about spiritual desertion, but rather concentrates on the message itself. Although a knowledge of both the reception and the application of religious ideas contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of its meaning, it is a matter of primary importance that such religious ideas be searched out as clearly as possible.\textsuperscript{13}

There are several ways in which the analysis of the Puritan view of spiritual desertion can be integrated in current research. Firstly, in recent years a growing interest in the significance of spiritual emotions within early modern European culture and spirituality has been emerging, as well

\textsuperscript{12} Arnold Hunt discusses in detail the process from sermon to print (\textit{The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640}, Cambridge 2010, 117-87).
as within Reformed Protestantism. Instead of distrusting spiritual emotions, Reformed Protestants increasingly focused on the significant role experience has within the context of pastoral guidance and the development of spiritual life.\(^{14}\) Included within the emotional context of experience are also ‘dark’ experiences such as repentance, affliction, despondency, and desertion.

Secondly, several recent studies have analyzed the Puritan view of suffering.\(^{15}\) These studies are important because they emphasize the overarching framework of God’s providence as well as the believer’s response to suffering, but their focus is on external suffering. Although such suffering has its impact on believers, the inner troubles that are precipitated by external suffering are implied and not explicitly identified.

Thirdly, the Puritan view of internal suffering has been researched as well. In his *Protestantism, Puritanism and Practical Divinity in England, c.1570-c.1620*,\(^{16}\) Jason Yiannikkou notes that the puritan ‘afflicted conscience’ is rooted in the repression of English Protestants during the reign of Mary (1553-1558). During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), affliction was interpreted as a component of contrition, and was being used as the context of a believer’s account of personal deliverance by God’s grace. The seventeenth century Puritan analysis of spiritual affliction became increasingly lengthy and detailed. This begs the question whether external factors such as persecution and being marginalized have permanently molded the Puritan identity, and whether they are reflected in writings that focus on spiritual affliction. This is not the case in the period following Mary’s reign, when, in spite of religious and social tensions, the Puritan movement was not dominated by polemical thinking. The Puritan focus on spiritual affliction has to be explained as being motivated by pastoral and spiritual concerns.

As far as we know, only one explicit study of Puritan writings on spiritual desertion and depression has been published. In his *The Genius* 


of Puritanism, Peter Lewis provides us with a clear assessment of the homiletical and pastoral background of these writings. Analyzing the conditions, causes, and cure of spiritual desertion, he investigates what relationship there is between God, Satan, and the believer. However, since Lewis discusses soul trouble only from the vantage point of spiritual depression, other aspects of spiritual desertion, such as the absence of spiritual experiences and spiritual barrenness, are hardly addressed. The main restrictions of his thematic approach are that the distinctive profile of various Puritan authors is not highlighted sufficiently, while certain developments during the course of the seventeenth century, especially after 1660, are not analyzed.

Within the context of an emerging focus on experience within Reformed spirituality and devotional literature, particularly the studies of Yiannikkou and Lewis have contributed significantly to the study of the Puritan view of spiritual suffering. At the same time, as this article does, it is useful to opt for an approach that is of a more chronological and comparative nature.

A. William Perkins: theological framework and distinction

Introduction
While enrolled at the university of Cambridge, William Perkins (1558-1602) became a member of the puritan brotherhood. Subsequent to 1584, as a lecturer at Cambridge, Perkins sought to achieve the reformation of both the individual and the congregation by way of preaching, pastoral care, and writing and, in so doing, he exerted much influence in Puritan circles as well as on the international scene. Perkins published a remarkable quantity of writings, ranging from a treatise on predestination to one dealing with proper discipline within the family. The

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17 Haywards Heath 1977.
Puritan way of interconnecting theology, spirituality, and morality is clearly manifested in these writings.20

**Spiritual desertion of unbelievers**
In his book *A Declaration of Certaine Spiritvall Desertions, Serving to Terrifie All Drowsie Protestants, and to Comfort Them Which Mourne for Their Sinnes*,21 Perkins addresses spiritual desertion, and he seeks to reach out pastorally to believers who are troubled about their sins during such a season of spiritual suffering. However, the title indicates that he is also addressing a different audience, namely *drowsie protestants*. Given the use of the general term *protestants*, we are to think here of nominal or counterfeit Christians who, except they repent, should view their spiritual desertion as being preliminary to their eternal perdition.

Already at the outset of his book, Perkins posits that spiritual desertion is a consequence of God dealing punitively with his creature:

> [...] which is nothing else but an action of God forsaking his creature. Furthermore, God forsakes his creature, not by withdrawing his essence or beeing from it: for that cannot bee, considering God is infinite; and therefore must needes at all times bee euery where: but by taking away the grace and operation of his Spirit from his creature.22

Though not abandoning him, God nevertheless withdraws the *grace and operation of his Spirit*. This theological dimension is indicative of the significant influence of the orthodox and Reformed doctrine of predestination, teaching that God’s omnipotence governs the lives of all men in general and of believers in particular.23 This influence is evident when Perkins makes a sharp distinction between the spiritual desertion of believers and that of unbelievers. He characterizes the latter group as *that part of mankinde which is prepared to destruction*, and as *reprobates*.

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Spiritual desertion in the general sense of the word refers to this category of reprobates. As is true for believers, unbelievers do indeed interact spiritually with the Bible, the preaching of the Word, and the sacraments, but these means of grace do not yield for them a life with Christ. Perkins believes that the majority of Church members find themselves in such a troubling spiritual predicament.24

The title of his book indicates that Perkins addresses the spiritual desertion of nominal Christians in order to awaken them spiritually by way of shock effect (terrifie). It is evidently no question for him whether his call to repentance can coincide with his emphasis upon eternal reprobation, for he does not know who the reprobate are. He believes that repentance and a believing surrender are even possible for the most hardened of men.

**Spiritual desertion of believers**

Though reprobates will ultimately be fully and eternally deserted, the desertion of believers is only partial as God never forsakes them fully, and it is only temporary since their spiritual desertion only pertains to their earthly existence.25 Perkins can articulate it as such since he views believers in light of their eternal election, and their ultimate salvation is therefore secure in God’s electing decree.

Regarding believers, Perkins distinguishes between two categories of spiritual desertion. The first is a punitive desertion, or a *desertion in punishment*. This refers to difficult circumstances in one’s life which God uses as a means of chastisement, and they are neither diminished nor removed. Consequently they can affect one’s spiritual well-being. Perkins then addresses the manner in which God works when inflicting punitive desertion. For example, He can temporarily withhold his blessing upon the use of the means of grace in order to awaken in believers a love and intense desire for himself and his former favour. God can even temporarily withdraw all sense and feeling of his gracious gifts, resulting in the believer experiencing spiritual barrenness. For Perkins this highlights a significant aspect of God’s mode of operation, namely, that graces will issue forth and grow when the opposite appears to be the case (*in or by contraries*). He illustrates this paradoxical reality by the frequently used Puritan metaphor of a barren tree in the winter. This

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metaphor indicates that though God’s grace can indeed be hidden experientially for the believer, it has not disappeared. Furthermore, the ‘barren tree’ greatly emphasizes the pedagogical objective of spiritual desertion, namely, the exercise and growth of faith.\(^{26}\)

However, Perkins also points out the perilous aspect of the concealment of God’s gracious gifts, because especially then a believer no longer perceives any difference between himself and a hypocrite, and he will consequently seriously doubt his being a partaker of salvation:

> The man which hath had some good perswasions of Gods fauour in Christ, comes afterward uppon many occasions to be troubled and to bee ouerwhelmed with distrustfullnesse and grievous doubtings of his salvation, so as hee iudgeth himselfe to haue beene but an hypocrite in former times, and for the time present a cast-away. [...] and the rather if with this desertion be ioyned a feeling of Gods anger [...].\(^{27}\)

The combination of the absence of the assurance of salvation and the experience of God’s wrath renders the believer fearful that he will perish forever, and spiritual despair will then threaten to overtake him.

Perkins addresses the second form of spiritual desertion in greater detail, namely *desertion in sinne*. In such a case God will withdraw the help of his Spirit, causing the believer to fall into open sin. Though God then appears to become the Author of evil, Perkins holds sinful man and the devil fully accountable for this. Albeit that God can withdraw his hand from the believer, the believer himself will always remain responsible for his actual missteps. According to Perkins it is especially the second form of spiritual desertion that indicates that sin is the primary reason for its occurrence. This is particularly true for human pride:

> The elect children of God, are diseased with an inward, hidden, and spiritual pride; whereby they affect themselues, and desire to bee something in themselues forth of Christ [...] God therefore in great mercie to remedie this dangerous corruption, lets his elect seruants fall into trouble of minde and conscience, and if they happily be of greater hardnesse of heart, into some actuall sinne [...].\(^{28}\)


When focusing upon spiritual healing, we also encounter this paradoxical manner of God’s dealings. An example from the medical world will illustrate this. Just as a medical doctor will occasionally administer to a patient a medicinal cure that is worse than the disease, likewise God will occasionally permit a believer to fall into sin to deliver him from pride.29

The focus upon sin reemerges when the pedagogical intent of spiritual desertion is addressed. An important objective of the uncovering of one’s guilt is not merely the stimulation of a more profound sense of humility, of a more thorough confession of guilt and of a determined resolution not to commit evil, but also of a more profound sense of love, patience, and desire.30

Evaluation
1. Spiritual desertion is, according to Perkins, a form of spiritual barrenness during which the experience of God’s nearness and power are absent. The troubling consequences of this spiritual malady are a lack of assurance regarding one’s personal interest in salvation and a being fearful of God’s judgment. When discussing desertion in sin, Perkins makes it clear that this spiritual suffering is frequently God’s reaction to the sin of human pride.

2. Perkins places spiritual desertion squarely within the context of the orthodox Reformed doctrine of predestination. This theological perspective yields two important consequences. First, Perkins posits that the spiritual desertion of the reprobates is a precursor of their future perdition, and hereby he wishes to stir up nominal Christians and hypocrites to seek spiritual transformation. However, the most important objective of his book is the pastoral encouragement of assaulted believers, doing so with the confidence that even spiritual desertion cannot undo their spiritual status which is secure in their eternal election. Secondly, God’s providence is of central significance, for thereby the spiritual desertion of believers has a pedagogical objective, namely, the exercise and deepening of their faith.

B. Thomas Goodwin: pastoral-psychological elaboration

29 Perkins, Workes I, 420.
Introduction
Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) also contributed to the Puritan discussion of spiritual desertion by way of his *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*. He has further expounded Perkins’ analysis of this spiritual suffering by a more elaborate analysis of both spiritual desertion and the assaulted believer. His publication is also worthy of our attention, for it was a bestseller in its day.\(^1\)

Subsequent to his conversion in 1620, Goodwin became entrenched in the theological, homiletical, and spiritual tradition of Perkins.\(^2\) When he served as pastor in Cambridge and in London, he subscribed to the form of church government known as congregationalism. As a result of the Puritans being repressed by the government, he fled to the Netherlands, where in Arnhem he was able to implement his views regarding church government in a congregation of English refugees. In 1641, Goodwin returned to England and promoted his congregational views regarding church government. From 1650-1660 Goodwin was president of Magdalen College (Oxford) and after the Restoration he served an independent congregation of London as pastor until his death in 1680.

Goodwin’s writings can generally be classified as belonging to the Puritan tradition of practical divinity. His significance as a Puritan pastoral theologian has become more evident by virtue of the scholarly assessment of his Christology, his Pneumatology, his views regarding the assurance of salvation, and the Christian life.\(^3\)

Spiritual Desertion
Goodwin’s book about spiritual darkness was published in 1636: *A Childe of Light Walking in Darkness: or, A Treatise Shewing the Causes, by Which the Cases, Wherein the Ends, for Which God Leaves His Children to

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\(^1\) Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism*, Oxford 2000, Appendix I, s.v. ‘Goodwin, Thomas’.


Distresse of Conscience.\textsuperscript{34} It is based on sermons about Isaiah 50:10-11, in which the prophet exhorts the believer who walks in darkness to trust in God. Goodwin describes \textit{spiritual darkness} as spiritual desertion, saying that \textit{God leaves his children}. His extensive discussion of spiritual desertion appears to indicate that this inner trouble was not an unknown phenomenon for his reading audience. However, at the conclusion of his book he emphasizes that in light of the restrictive language of Isaiah 50:10 - \textit{Who is among you?} - such walking in darkness is the portion of but a small number of believers. Nevertheless, Goodwin makes a deliberate pastoral choice by evidently concentrating on the relatively small category of assaulted believers.

The darkness referred to in Isaiah 50:10 is, according to Goodwin, an inner darkness, which is experienced within the believer and pertains to his relationship with God:

\begin{quote}
It is principally to be understood of the want of inward comfort in their spirits, from something that is between God and them; and so meant of that darkness and terrors which accompany the want of the sense of God’s favour. And so darkness is elsewhere taken for inward affliction of spirit and mind, and want of light, in point of assurance, that God is a man’s God, and of the pardon of a man’s sins [...].\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Spiritual darkness ensues due to the absence of experiencing God’s favor, and then as it particularly manifests itself in the forgiveness of sins and one’s personal interest in redemption. This darkness is therefore closely connected to the lack of the assurance of salvation.

Goodwin especially focuses upon the ordinary seasons of spiritual darkness which frequently can be related to personal sins, an emphasis we also discovered in Perkins. Goodwin has in mind here spiritual pride, the neglect or formal use of the means of grace, as well as bitterness in response to afflictions.\textsuperscript{36}

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\textsuperscript{34} London, M. F(lesher); STC., 12037.5. This work was also published as part of other pastoral-spiritual writings in: \textit{Certain Select Cases Resolved: Specially Tending to the Comfort of Beleevers, in Their Chiefe and Usuall Temptations}, London, s.n., 1644; Donald Wing (comp.), \textit{A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America and of the English Books Printed in Other Countries, 1641-1700}, 2nd ed., 3 vols., New York 1982-94 (\textit{Wing}), G1226A. Use has been made of: Thomas Goodwin, \textit{The Works of Thomas Goodwin}, 12 vols., Edinburgh 1861-1866, vol. 3.


\textsuperscript{36} Goodwin, \textit{Works 3}, 288-91, 294-95.
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In Goodwin’s description of spiritual desertion, the repeated use of the words *sense* and *sensible* are conspicuous:

When, therefore, here he says he hath no light, the meaning is, he wants all present sensible testimonies of God’s favour to him; he sees nothing that may give sensible present witness of it to him. God’s favour, and his own graces, and all the sensible tokens and evidences thereof, which are apprehended by spiritual sight, are become all as absent things, as if they were not, or never had been [...].

Doing so more emphatically than his Puritan predecessor Perkins, it indicates that Goodwin focuses on the believer and enlarges upon spiritual desertion at the experiential level.

Affirming that a man may be a real believer and yet be incapable of discerning God’s favour, Goodwin makes a pastoral distinction between the presence of God’s grace and the knowledge of it: ‘the influence of God’s favour may be really in the heart, when the sense, sight, and light of it is withdrawn [...]’. In this way it is possible to acknowledge the seriousness of spiritual desertion while simultaneously consoling the believer by emphasizing the authenticity of his spiritual life.

**Causes and Objectives of Spiritual Desertion**

In the aforementioned definition, Goodwin does not define spiritual desertion as being exclusively a lack of spiritual experience, for considering his use of the word *terrors* he also has in mind that spiritual terror that increases the gravity of spiritual darkness. In order to get a better picture of such spiritual terror, we will focus upon God, the devil, and the human heart as the threefold cause of spiritual darkness. By engaging in an extensive and detailed analysis of the activities of these three parties, he also provides us with an in-depth assessment of the believer that is both pastoral and psychological.

As did Perkins, Goodwin places spiritual darkness within the framework of God’s sovereignty, and he considers it to be a process by which God’s Spirit incrementally responds to the sins of believers. At the initial level the Spirit withdraws the experience of God’s love, and at the next level He manifests God as an angry Father, whereas at the deepest

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level He can even confront the believer’s conscience with God’s eternal judgment:

And such impressions of immediate wrath, as expressions and effects of God’s anger, the Holy Ghost may make upon the spirit of his child. For it is a truth that God is angry and wroth with them when they sin; which anger he may make known, not only by dumb signs in outward crosses and effects, but by an immediate witnessing, and plain and express speaking so much to their consciences [...].

When God chastises the believer incrementally, it will engender grave uncertainty in the believer regarding his personal salvation as well as fear for eternal perdition. However, Goodwin wishes to encourage the assaulted believer by assuring him that spiritual darkness is but an expression of God’s temporal wrath and does not sever the Father-child relationship. He therefore posits that the intimate relationship between spiritual darkness, doubts, and fears is of a different origin. Evidently God’s chastisement triggers the unified response of the sinful human heart and the devil to this condition:

Satan and their own hearts, unto which he may and doth often further also leave them, may take occasion from these dispensations of the Holy Ghost, which are all holy, righteous, and true, to draw forth false and fearful conclusions against themselves and their estates, and start amazing doubts and fears of their utter want of grace, and lying under the curse and threatenings of eternal wrath at the present, yea, and further, of eternal rejection for the future, and that God will never be merciful [...].

Whereas spiritual desertion is a manifestation of God’s temporary displeasure, having pedagogical objective the chastising and restoration of the believer, the two spiritual adversaries of the soul will suggest that this spiritual suffering is proof of one’s hypocrisy and will therefore culminate in God’s eternal punishment of the soul.

Goodwin first of all discusses man’s carnal reason as a dangerous point of entry for spiritual mischief. Such carnal thinking becomes evident by a wrong use of the Scriptures. Whereas the unconverted and hypocrites deem themselves to be spiritually healthy by an illegitimate

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39 Goodwin, Works 3, 245.
40 Goodwin, Works 3, 246.
appropriation of salvific passages, the Christian in spiritual desertion is readily inclined to be negative in the assessment of his spiritual condition by evaluating the experience of God’s desertion as an affirmation of his not being a child of God, as well as a foretoken of his eternal rejection. He will do so because he misinterpret God’s dealings with him, for he will judge them by the works and dispensations of God that he sees and feels, rather than by judging God according to His word of promise.41

The third party contributing to spiritual darkness is the devil.42 Though Goodwin underscores that God’s providence determines the limits and measure of all Satanic activity, nevertheless, the devil can increase the believer’s inner suffering by endorsing carnal reason’s abuse of scriptural words.43 However, not only does Satan foster the misapplication of God’s threatening words, but he also doth now delight to make God a liar to us in our apprehensions, by questioning his promises, thereby taking advantage of God’s ‘dark’ dealings with the believer. His most dangerous mode of operation is in the realm of the conscience when he engages the knowledge of sin of the believer; that is, his guilt of conscience. Goodwin provides an example of this:

[...] Satan oft argueth and chargeth the conscience of one distressed in this or the like manner: ‘Those in whom any sin reigneth, or in whose hearts hypocrisy and selflove is the predominant principle, are not in the state of grace.’ ‘But such a one art thou,’ &c. For the proof of which minor he musters up and sets in order, in the view of conscience, a multitude of instances of sins committed, thus heinously, thus oft; of duties omitted, and if performed, yet with such and such pride of heart, self-aims, &c.44

By insinuating that their sins yield proof of hypocrisy, the devil aims at undermining the spiritual stability of believers who are conscious of their guilt.

Furthermore, Satan endeavors to intensify the doubt he has thereby engendered regarding being partakers of salvation by working

41 Goodwin, Works 3, 250, 252.
42 Lewis devotes ample attention to the role of Satan in the experience of spiritual desertion (Genius of Puritanism, 91-103).
43 For Satan’s activity in Puritan practical divinity, see: De Koeijer, Geestelijke strijd bij de puriteinen, 277-91.
44 Goodwin, Works 3, 269.
upon the *passions and corrupt affections*, especially upon those of fear and grief:

He can immediately, by his own power, stir the passions of fear and grief, &c., excite them beyond nature, as the winds can raise the billows in the sea, and make the floods to make a noise; so can he tumult in the affections [...] and cause such thunders and lightnings as shall hurl all in a black confusion, such as if hell and the soul would presently come together.45

By threatening him with God’s eternal judgment, Satan aims at bringing the believer to spiritual despair.

Goodwin’s emphasis upon God’s providence surfaces again when he discusses the objectives to be achieved by spiritual darkness. When during a spiritual trial God sustains and restores a believer, his omnipotence and his love become very transparent, and it is simultaneously evident that the assaulted believer is completely dependent upon his *spiritual comforts and refreshments*, for example the bringing forth of His gifts with increased clarity in the believer. This is especially true for faith and its focus upon God’s grace:

[...] a man relies on God, when all his dealings would argue he had forsaken a man; that though God put on never so angry a countenance, look never so sternly, yet faith is not dashed out of countenance, but can read love in his angry looks, and trust God beyond what he sees [...].46

It is faith which enables the believer during a season of in spiritual desertion to look beyond the paradoxical perception of God’s actions to His unchangeable love.

**Pastoral Guidance**

The Puritan link between spiritual suffering and sin once more comes to the fore when Goodwin first of all exhorts his readers in their state of spiritual desertion to engage in painstaking self-examination, for it is his belief that the hiding of God’s face is frequently precipitated by either a sin of commission or a sin of omission. The confession of one’s guilt is therefore the first evidence of spiritual restoration.

Although Goodwin wishes to stimulate deserted believers to live by faith, at the same time he avails himself of a mark of grace when he exhorts his readers to reflect on God’s grace in the past. However, we discern in him the usual Puritan ambivalence regarding these marks of grace, for he deems it possible that the remembrance of former signs does not yield any genuine comfort. He therefore makes an appeal not to remain mired in internal *reasonings and disputings*, but rather, to strive for the present strengthening of one’s faith. The primary means to achieve this is to concentrate on God’s Name as the warranty of his salvific promises in Christ. This orientation upon God’s Name must be accompanied by a persistent use of especially the prayer for deliverance.\(^{47}\)

**Conclusion**

1. Goodwin places spiritual desertion under God’s providence, and in so doing he builds upon the foundation laid by Perkins. However, Goodwin addresses himself exclusively to believers, which makes the matter of spiritual comfort a more prominent feature. This dovetails quite well with their ecclesiological differences. Whereas Perkins focused upon the broad spectrum of the common people that constituted the local church, and thus upon a multitude that was spiritually very mixed, Goodwin as a Congregationalist addressed himself especially to a smaller group of devoted church members. By his assertion that only a small number of Christians experience spiritual desertion and by his attention to primarily this category, it is all the more obvious that Puritan pastoral theology had a special fondness for the spiritual encouragement of weak Christians.

2. In regard to Perkins, there is a noteworthy progression in that Goodwin not only offers a more elaborate analysis of spiritual desertion, but he also gives a more in-depth description of the believer and his experience that is both pastoral and psychological. First, he focuses on the inner life of the believer in connection with his definition of spiritual desertion in which the want of a spiritual sense of God’s favour is conspicuous. Further, this focus is also evident relative to the contradictory operations of God, Satan, and man’s carnal reason, all of which are described in detail as having a considerable impact on the conscience of the believer. Finally, this is evident in the attention Goodwin

\(^{47}\) Goodwin, *Works* 3, 326.
gives to the so-called signs marks of grace as internal evidences of the believer being a partaker of salvation. By focusing upon the believer more extensively and in greater detail, Puritan pastoral guidance increasingly focuses on the experience those who suffer from spiritual desertion.

C. Joseph Symonds: zenith of the pastoral-psychological approach

Introduction
After having been an assistant at Rotherhithe, Symonds became rector of St. Martin’s in London in 1632. Due to his congregational views regarding church government, Symonds like Goodwin left for the Netherlands, where he became the preacher of an English congregation in Rotterdam. In 1647 he returned to England and secured a leading position at Eton College Windsor. He passed away in 1652.

Symonds published the most extensive and thorough book regarding spiritual desertion: The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soule: or, A Treatise Concerning the Nature, Kindes, Degrees, Symptomes, Causes, Cure of, and Mistakes about Spirituall Desertions. This work was published for the first time in 1639, and it can be classified as the zenith of the Puritan treatment of spiritual desertion. Given the title, the reader should not only anticipate a thorough analysis of the nature, various forms, and remedy for this spiritual suffering, but rather, this work also probes the depth of the deserted soul both pastorally and psychologically. Symonds’s work also yields a good opportunity to make comparisons with Perkins and Goodwin.

Theological context
In his preface, Symonds makes it clear that spiritual desertion explicitly relates to the spiritual experience of believers. Spiritual communion with God is subject to fluctuation, and negative experiences can be so predominant that believers will feel that they have been forsaken of God.

49 STC., 23590; Green, Print and Protestantism, Appendix I, s.v. ‘Symonds, Joseph’. In the period 1639-1651 three editions were published, after which no new editions followed. Use has been made of the edition Edinburgh 1721.
These fluctuations and experiences are described by way of several expressive images:

Where shall we find a Man that hath not met with these Rocks and Sands, and hath not seen some gloomy Days, and winter Storms, passing through many Changes, sometime rejoicing, as the Plants in the Spring, in the Sight and Sense of God’s gracious Presence, sometimes again mourning for his Loss of God, sometimes lift up to Heaven in his Soul, and mounting as it were on Eagles Wings; sometimes again depressed to the Depths of Hell, and held as with Chains of Brass or Iron, now quickened, but growing dull again. Few can say they have once found God, but may say they have often lost him.⁵⁰

In line with Perkins and Goodwin, Symonds believes that spiritual desertion is a component of God’s providence and thus it transpires within a theological context. Spiritual desertion comes about when God withdraws his grace. When Symonds addresses this, he does not have in mind the indestructible core of life in the believer, to which he refers as habitual grace or the principle of life,⁵¹ but rather he means assisting grace, that which determines the well-being of spiritual life. Assisting grace is subject to fluctuations and can therefore decline as to its efficacy. Though existential fellowship with God does not vanish due to the decline of this grace, the spiritual health of this fellowship is affected thereby.⁵²

The theological context of God’s sovereignty also comes to the fore when Symonds emphasizes that instruction and correction are the two interrelated pedagogical motives of spiritual desertion. Both motives are discussed within the context of the temporary nature and the brokenness of one’s earthly existence, during which the Christian finds himself to be but a sojourner.⁵³ During this sojourn, spiritual desertion confronts him with the fact that spiritual instruction and correction are necessary so that he will remain focused upon the future world as being the ultimate

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⁵¹ By using this scholastic term puritan writers wanted to make clear that spiritual life is God’s gracious and indestructible gift. See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, Grand Rapids 1985, s.v. ‘habitus’; idem, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids 2003, 358-59.

⁵² Symonds, *Case and Cure*, 16.

destiny of his journey. Within the context of spiritual correction Symonds analyzes various sins that precipitate spiritual desertion, especially human pride. With regard to instruction spiritual desertion yields the important lessons of a deeper knowledge of self and a deeper knowledge of God. Self-knowledge will first of all prompt believers to focus upon inner uncleanness and weakness, whereas a deeper knowledge of God will particularly relate to the sovereignty and necessity of God’s grace, for such self-knowledge will teach the believer not only that he is not worthy of God’s grace but also that he continually needs this grace. This in turn forges a strong union with Christ:

The Death of Comfort occasions a greater Life and Strength towards Christ, both in Desire of him, and Dependence upon him, and for this Cause God shakes the Soul with Earthquakes, that it may stand faster upon its true Basis and Foundation. That which at first brings the Soul to Christ, is his Worth, and our Need, and the more we see our selves necessitous, the more our Hearts gather in to Christ. 54

As is true for Perkins, Symonds also views spiritual desertion paradoxically in connection with the growth of the life of faith, especially growth in the knowledge of Christ.

An in-depth pastoral and psychological analysis
Although Symonds emphasizes spiritual comfort for assaulted believers, it is emphatically not his intention to underestimate the pastoral issues at stake here. Consequently, he engages in an extensive discussion regarding the various symptoms of spiritual desertion, stating the seriousness of this spiritual malady and simultaneously yielding profound pastoral and psychological insight into its spiritual consequences.

A significant symptom of spiritual desertion is the loss of comfort. Symonds describes this with strongly-worded experiential vocabulary such as Missing the Light of God’s Countenance, The Quicknings of His Spirit, The Subduing of Lusts, Success in our Prayers, Tastes of Heaven, or in this manner:

[...] he could formerly mourn bitterly in the Remembrance of his Sins, but now the Heart is frozen, and cannot relent, he could have prayed with

much Affection, and holy Boldness, but now the Heart is cooled, weakned, straitned, indisposed [...].

Spiritual desertion results in a significant inner and sensible chilling of communion with God. There is a spiritual deadness that pervades the entire life of faith giving room for the growth of sinful desires.

The pastoral and psychological approach of Symonds clearly comes to the fore when he analyzes the various degrees of such a loss of spiritual comfort. The first step is that God’s quieting presence is no longer as noticeable in the believer as before: “The Soul that was a dwelling Place to her Friend, is but an Inn now.” The second step is that inner peace nearly vanishes, and thereafter a Night of Darkness and woful Deadness manifests itself in which not only all comfort has evaporated, but also the faith of the believer languishes. The highest degree of such darkness, described extensively by Symonds, precipitates an emergency situation:

[...] God sometimes comes to set out a Sin unto Man, and then it is very dreadful, such a Terror and Astonishment seizeth upon him by a full Sight and Sense of Sin, as that, if there be not a supporting Hand of Grace and Mercy extended to him, he cannot stand under it. [...] When the Soul seeth that Vastness of Eternity filled with Death and Sufferings, and seeth not the Refuge in the Gospel, this is a great shaking to the Soul.

While the believer is confronted intensely with his guilt, a sight of God’s grace and his personal interest in salvation is withheld from him. When he moreover becomes ensnared in an abundance of dark and black thoughts and passions regarding himself, and when added to this there are the intrigues of the devil, he is in danger of succumbing to spiritual despair.

Symonds’ focus upon the spiritual experience of this suffering is most prominent when he analyzes spiritual desertion from three different vantage points: in regard to graces, sinful corruptions, and the means of grace. Firstly, spiritual desertion manifests itself in regard to believer’s graces by way of a diminished inability of the mind to motivate the heart to engage in spiritual activity and to resist sinful desires. The diminished operation of God’s Spirit also affects the human will. While the performance of external duties such as listening to the preaching of God’s

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55 Symonds, Case and Cure, 19.
56 Symonds, Case and Cure, 238-39.
Word and prayer continue as usual, there is a decline in inward actions and motions such as self-examination, contrition, a yearning for Christ, and faith. Finally, spiritual desertion also pertains to one’s human emotions. The believer experiences an inner chilling, such as diminished love and a decline of the spiritual enjoyment of God, which is described visually and experientially:

If you did delight in God as before, what means your hanging back from him? [...] It may be, to be with God hath in Times past been to thee better than thine appointed Food, but now thou comest to Duties, as to Meals when thou has no Stomach. What then more clear than this, that thy Delight is less in God.  

Emotional symptoms of desertion are also a decline of sorrow over sin as well as an increasing neglect of the prayer for spiritual assistance.

Secondly, spiritual desertion affects the manifestation of the inner corruption of the believer. During spiritual desertion the power of sinful desires increases, and this in turn affects the quality of the life of faith. Since the mind cherishes the temptation and draws the heart to it, also the will and the affections are influenced, fostering a desire to sin. If the believer yields to this, evil will be victorious.

Thirdly, spiritual desertion will also affect the use of the means of grace. Symonds posits that the believer then has a diminished desire for the Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer, whereas the spiritual effect of their use is also significantly diminished.

Prevention and healing of spiritual desertion
Symonds also addresses the prevention and healing of spiritual desertion in much greater detail than Perkins and Goodwin. Noteworthy are not only his pastoral motive either to keep believers from this experience or to deliver them from it noteworthy, but also the manner in which he plumbs the psychological depths of the believer.

The most prominent means to prevent spiritual desertion is to maintain an existential walk with God as being the very essence of the life of the Christian. The responsibility of the believer plays a significant role in this. Symonds deems this calling to be the exercise of self-examination,

57 Symonds, Case and Cure, 54.
58 Symonds, Case and Cure, 58, 69-70.
contrition, meditation, prayer, and the reading of the Bible. Additionally, the Christian’s walk plays a role in this, and this is particularly true in regard to the foundational disposition of love which yearns after holiness and steadfastly resists all inclinations to the contrary. Symonds’ emphasis upon the calling of the believer is based upon his conviction that men regenerate have power to do something of themselves. Though he repeatedly stresses that both the initial conversion of the believer, as well as his daily renewal, are to be attributed to the grace of God, he wants to counter any inclination toward spiritual passivity by positing that God engages the believer through the use of the means of grace.59

Besides the prevention of spiritual desertion, Symonds also addresses the spiritual healing of this suffering. This only transpires when believers repent regarding their loss of fellowship with God and the causes of this, namely, spiritual carelessness and a yielding to sinful desires. This is expressed in a touching way by letting a penitent speak for himself:

Oh! Wretch that I am, that that precious Communion, which I had with my God, was of no more Esteem with me, that those sweet Streams of Comfort which I now want, but then had from the Well of Life, those quickning Beams from the Sun of Righteousness, those refreshing, those ravishing Sights and Tastes of Jesus Christ, those pleasant Banquets which I had in the Ordinances and in Duties, those blessed Embraces of the everlasting Arms of the Lord my God; were of so low Account with me, that I should lose them by my Folly.60

The next step toward spiritual restoration is a surrender to Christ, and Symonds therefore makes an urgent appeal to his readers to go to the Father in this way.61 The affectionate articulation of Christ’s gracious offer of salvation, as well as the believing surrender to Him, are distinctive features of Symonds’ analysis of spiritual restoration. The believer must come to Christ via a prayer that is characterized by confession of guilt, love, desire, and a trusting in the promise of salvation. This will culminate in renewed fellowship with God.

The two-fold pastoral objective of Symonds’ book about spiritual desertion is highlighted clearly in the paragraph about its prevention and

59 Symonds, Case and Cure, 94-151.
60 Symonds, Case and Cure, 181.
61 Symonds, Case and Cure, 279.
healing. On the one hand, he wishes to warn believers for spiritual
desertion via preventative advice, and on the other hand he wishes to
courage them by positing that this perilous spiritual condition can be
remedied.

Evaluation
1. Symonds addresses spiritual desertion most extensively and includes
the nature, the distinct variants, and the symptoms of spiritual desertion
as well as the prevention and healing thereof. Furthermore, there is the
centrality of God’s providence. This enables him to ascribe several
pedagogical objectives to spiritual desertion, such as the unveiling of the
gravity of sin, confession of guilt, repentance, and a deepening of the life
of faith. Symonds’ primary pastoral objective is to demonstrate that
even though spiritual desertion can deeply affect the believer’s
experience, from the vantage point of God’s omnipotent and pedagogical
providence it can both be managed and treated.

2. When compared to Perkins and Goodwin, Symonds gives the
most detailed, and in-depth pastoral and psychological analysis of
spiritual desertion as well as its prevention and its healing, and along with
this considerable attention is given to human experience. This focus upon
experience is especially evident when Symonds discusses spiritual
desertion as being the absence of comfort. Here he primarily views the
loss of communion with God from the vantage point of his actions, while
at the same time describing it emphatically from the vantage point of the
spiritual experience of the believer.

God’s activity and human experience
As they increasingly emphasized the psychological and experiential
dimension of spiritual desertion, Perkins, Goodwin and Symonds thereby
introduced a pastoral ambivalence between God’s dealings and human
experience. In light of their Reformed-Orthodox theology, it was
impossible that believers could lose God’s grace, whereas both the
indwelling of his Spirit and the concurrent spiritual peace were principally
and incontrovertibly affirmed. Yet the question remained how they
should explain God’s dealings in regard to spiritual desertion. Though they

62 Although Lewis mentions several examples regarding both the discovery and remedy
of sin, he does not stress that this is the first pedagogical objective of the Puritan pastoral
analysis of spiritual desertion (Genius of Puritanism, 77-83).
focused on matters such as divine withdrawal, absence, and wrath, they certainly did not want to suggest that with God this was merely a matter of pretence. Therefore when considering spiritual desertion from a theological perspective, the three Puritan authors maintained that communion with God could not be lost, whereas when considering it from an experiential perspective they taught that God could withdraw himself.

Though spiritual desertion results in the experiential loss of God’s nearness, it is not an indication that God is really absent, for He is still engaged secretly within the soul. It was therefore the Puritan view that spiritual experience can be a misleading guide, and the believer was consequently exhorted not to live by his feeling, but rather by faith. Deeming the loss of assurance of salvation as being perilous for believers, Puritan authors asserted that an important pedagogical objective of spiritual desertion is to foster the exercise of trusting God’s salvation in spite of one’s feelings.

However, the Puritan pastoral approach did not resolve the aforesaid tension, making clear that not only could one have a dark spiritual experience, but also that one could encounter a dark spiritual reality. As we observed, spiritual desertion was frequently explained as God punishing sin, albeit that this activity did not contradict his deepest intention, namely, the spiritual well-being of his people. Therefore, a distinction was made between judicial punishment which has been removed through union with Christ, and paternal chastisement which is pedagogical in nature.63 Thus the believer’s experience of God’s absence could be a true indication of his paternal chastisement for their persistent sins. Among them were numbered not only reoccurring and daily transgressions, but also conscious departures or chronic spiritual negligence. Though God would not withdraw himself completely, He nevertheless could hide himself in such a manner that the experience of his nearness, power, and comfort would ebb away. Therefore, Puritan writers customarily call their readers to self-examination, confession of sin and faith in God’s promise of forgiveness, for this is the way in which God’s absence will be reversed.64 However, the experience of guilt might cause believers to be troubled with paralyzing thoughts of spiritual hypocrisy and the concurrent fear of eternal perdition. However, this was

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63 Goodwin, Works of Thomas Goodwin 3, 245.
64 Perkins, Workes of William Perkins 3, 420.
not caused by God’s desertion, but rather, by virtue of Satan’s devious activity.65

Thus, the three Puritan writings on spiritual desertion are ambivalent in regard to the immutability of God’s grace and the vacillating nature of spiritual experience. On the one hand, believers are exhorted not to allow themselves to be governed by their experience, but rather, by believing that God is caring for them in spite of their spiritual darkness. On the other hand, these Puritans also emphasized that the experience of spiritual desertion could very well be an indication of God’s displeasure toward their sins. In that sense experience contributes in its own unique way to the troubling of souls, especially the souls of believers who lack assurance and thus are doubting ‘weak Christians’. Considerable pastoral instruction was primarily intended for the healing of such believers, rather than merely making a distinction between faith and feeling. Perkins, Goodwin and Symonds taught that spiritual desertion is not always a manifestation of God’s anger, but rather that it could also be intended as a testing of faith and to foster a deepening of spiritual life. The intensity of this experience is contingent upon the influence exerted by both the devil and human temperament. Yet these instructions appeared to have had but a limited effect, for it was difficult to separate feeling from faith, to identify the precise causes of spiritual desertion, and to distinguish between the spiritual dimension of the divinely initiated desertion and the psychological influence of the human temperament.

Nevertheless an explicit method was employed to foster the healing of spiritual desertion. The first step was self-examination, so that thereby it might be discovered what sins precipitated spiritual backsliding. The next step consisted of the confession of sin, repentance, and the exercise of faith unto the forgiveness of sins. This was followed by believers seeking renewed communion with God by using the means of grace, and by waiting upon Him to grant them a new spiritual experience of his grace and love. Although Perkins, Goodwin, and Symonds thus deemed the believer’s experience to be an unreliable guide for spiritual life, they also emphasized that the experience of God’s absence was connected to sin, and therefore called for self-examination, repentance, and renewal.

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Notwithstanding the ambivalent relationship between God’s activity and experience, spiritual desertion was viewed as being in the context of a deeper experience of God’s grace. This connection becomes evident when one views it in parallel with the Puritan view of initial conversion. Puritans considered both conviction of sin and one’s radical break with evil as indispensable preparations for union with Christ, for the knowledge of forgiveness, and for Christian living. Consequently they understood the Christian life to be a sort of devotional cycle wherein the knowledge and confession of sin, as well as humility, were dialectically related to the knowledge of God’s grace and spiritual joy.

Puritans believed that spiritual growth consisted of a spiritual cycle that not only leads to a deeper self-knowledge, but especially to a deeper and more gratifying relationship with God. These latter aspects reveal a mystical strain in Puritan spirituality.66 Spiritual desertion also played an important role within the context of spiritual growth, because it stimulates self-examination, confession of sin, and a renewed trust in God, all of which leads to a deeper knowledge of grace:

Therefore God sends back the Soul into her old Prison, to feel the Weight of her ancient Irons and Chains, and causeth her to put on her old cast Garments of Mourning, that Sackcloth and Ashes which she wore in the Days of Old, that by laying this Rod upon her [...] so a new Life may come into the dying Love, and now Mercy is raised to its former Price, and Christ is advanced on high, now the Soul returns with redoubled Strength, and with multiplied and increased Thankfulness.67

Thus the Puritan pastoral analysis of spiritual desertion not only yields an ambivalent relation between faith in God’s promises and spiritual experience, but as a movement that was theologically influenced by Reformed Orthodoxy, Puritanism particularly emphasized that the knowledge of God’s grace was governed by the overarching involvement of God’s providence, as well as by the pedagogical lessons yielded by the cyclic structure of self-examination, repentance, and restoration.

**International influence**
The influence of Puritanism in the Netherlands was significant, which is also affirmed by the translation into Dutch of the three Puritan works that

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66 Schwanda, *Soul Recreation*.
have been addressed in this article. Perkins’ work on spiritual desertion was published separately at Amsterdam for the first time in 1663, and was entitled: *Eene Verklaringe van eenige Geestelijke Verlaatingen*, whereas the work of Goodwin appeared in Dutch as *Een Kind des Lichts, wandelende in duysternisse*, initially without a date, and subsequently in 1655. Given the number of editions, it appears that Symonds’ writing was the most prominent of these publications. His work was initially published in 1660 as one of Jacobus Koelmans (1632-1695) translations: *Van geestlyke verlatingen in opzicht van heylighmaakingh en verwakkering in godtzaligheid*. Subsequent editions followed in 1687 and 1722.68

The influence of these three works is especially evident in the writings of Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676). In 1646 his *Disputaty van Geestelicke Verlatingen* was published,69 whereas his later work *Ta askètika sive Exercitia pietatis* (1664) addresses the subject of spiritual desertion in a separate chapter. Voetius refers regularly to sources within English Puritanism, doing so particularly and repeatedly in regard to Perkins’ writing, while he also refers to the work of Goodwin, and once to that of Symonds.70

In his *Logikè Latreia, d.i. Redelijke Godsdiest*, another famous author of the Dutch Further Reformation, Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711), devotes a separate chapter to spiritual desertion. However, he does not refer to Puritan spiritual sources, though it seems probable that he was acquainted with them.71

The writings of Perkins and Goodwin were also published in Germany, whereas this was not the case for those of Symonds. Perkins’ work was published in 1610 as: *Gründliche Erklärung etlicher geistlichen Verlassungen*, as part of *Zwey lehr- und trostreiche Stück[e] Guilielmi Perkinsii* [William Perkins]. Other editions were included in: *Drey nützliche und lehrreiche Büchlein*, and were published in 1660 and 1666. Goodwin’s

68 J. van der Haar, From Abbadie to Young: A Bibliography of English, Most Puritan Works, translated i/t Dutch Language (FATY), Veenendaal 1980, 1501-02 (Perkins), 873-74 (Goodwin), 1754-56 (Symonds); see also Pietas Online.

69 This work contains a translation of Voetius’s earlier Latin disputation on spiritual desertion (see A.C. Duker, Gisbertus Voetius, vol. 3, Leiden 1989 (reprint), 56, n. 2) and a work of Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617-1666) on this subject.


work was published as: Ein Kind des Lichts wandelend im Finstern, and was included in Geistreiche Schriften, published in 1705, 1715, and 1730.\textsuperscript{72}

Conclusion

By analyzing spiritual desertion, Puritan authors like Perkins, Goodwin, and Symonds address a classic theme in the history of Christian spirituality. Whereas Perkins describes spiritual desertion among both believers and unbelievers, Goodwin and Symonds focus exclusively on this spiritual suffering in the life of believers. An explanation for this difference is rooted in their ecclesiology. Perkins was a member of the early Puritan movement within the Elizabethan church, and he was therefore confronted with great spiritual diversity, whereas Goodwin and Symonds were active in congregational communities where more spiritually homogeneity could be found.

The Puritans combined a Reformed-orthodox doctrine of God’s grace with an experiential spirituality that also focused on disconcerting experiences such as spiritual desertion. The theological affirmation of the Puritan’s paramount emphasis upon God’s grace is evident in the fact that Perkins, Goodwin, and Symonds assign to God’s providence a position of central importance. By aligning their Reformed and orthodox view regarding God’s providence with the Father - child relationship between him and believers, they posit that spiritual desertion usually serves the purpose of chastising sin in believers. In so doing, it is God’s pedagogical objective to elicit their confession of sin, as well as to foster repentance and spiritual growth. By thus addressing spiritual desertion pastorally, these Puritan authors desire to lead believers to a deeper knowledge of God’s grace. At the same time they insist upon the believer’s personal responsibility, which means that he must be actively engaged in entering into communion with God by the daily use of the means of grace.

During the course of the seventeenth century, the pastoral and psychological dimension of the Puritan movement increasingly internalized, as is evidenced by comparing Perkins, Goodwin, and Symonds, and thus an increased emphasis upon the experience of spiritual desertion begins to manifest itself. As to the realm of Christian experience and spiritual desertion, Puritan authors may have been

\textsuperscript{72} Edgar C. Mckenzie, A Catalogue of British Devotional and Religious Books in German Translation from the Reformation to 1750, Berlin 1997, 821-23 (Goodwin), 1340-42 (Perkins).
influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux as well as by (late) medieval English mystical spirituality. There is a tension between the Puritan emphasis upon God’s omnipotent and gracious activity, and the increased focus both pastorally and psychologically upon the experience of spiritual desertion. On the one hand, this experience of desertion is generally speaking an unreliable foundation for one’s spiritual well-being, and therefore the believer is exhorted to live by faith. On the other hand the experience of God’s absence is viewed as the spiritual indicator and as the common manifestation of divine activity calling for repentance, spiritual renewal and a deeper knowledge of grace.

Within the orthodox, Reformed, and theological context of God’s gracious activity the unique pastoral contribution of the Puritans to the discussion of spiritual desertion is certainly their affirmation of the inseparable relationship between sin and grace as reflected in the cyclical reoccurrence of contrition, repentance, and renewal. Divine activity not only results in spiritual desertion, but it also remedies it, fostering a pietistic spirituality that is preeminently experiential.

Summary
This article analyses the writings of three Puritans on spiritual desertion: William Perkins (1558-1602), Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680), and Joseph Symonds (d. 1652). Although Perkins mentions spiritual desertion with regard to the unconverted, this spiritual reality mainly pertains to believers, and Goodwin and Symonds therefore restrict spiritual desertion to the lives of believers. According to these authors, God’s providence and sin are the two related causes of this spiritual suffering. Spiritual desertion is regarded as God’s reaction toward sin and therefore calls for repentance and spiritual renewal. Therefore, by their emphasis on God’s activity, Perkins, Goodwin, and Symonds want to comfort the believer by assuring him that even spiritual desertion cannot prevent his ultimate salvation. An important development is an expanding emphasis upon experience. Though Perkins’ attention to the experience of spiritual desertion is limited in its scope, Goodwin’s approach is much more focused on the inner life of the believer, whereas Symonds brings the Puritan pastoral approach to full fruition by his detailed and experiential description of the internal workings of spiritual decline and restoration. The dual emphasis upon God’s activity and spiritual experience engenders a pastoral ambivalence between God’s real objective regarding spiritual suffering and the occasionally deceptive influence of human experience. Despite such apparent ambivalence, the unique pastoral contribution of the Puritans to the discussion of spiritual desertion is certainly
their affirmation of the inseparable relationship between sin and grace as reflected in the cyclical reoccurrence of contrition, repentance, and renewal.

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