

Isaac Ambrose and the Puritan Teaching on Angels

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In *Communion with Angels*, Isaac Ambrose prompts his readers with this challenge: “Let us learn to imitate Angels . . . let us imitate thus, they are as our Guardians, Physicians, Purveyors, Tutors, Instructors, Soldiers, Quickeners, Incouragers, Comforters so let us in our several stations and places aspire to Angelical works; if Angels guard us let us be Guardians of one another; . . . if they tutor us, let us acquaint one another with the mysteries of grace; if they instruct us, and perswade us to our duties, let us so consider one another, to provoke unto love, and to good works . . . Surely the way to have Angels reward, or to see the face of God, is to do the work of Angels.” Ambrose declares these are the believers’ duties to one another but he is quick to assert that we should also imitate angels in relation to ourselves. He continues, “let us imitate [in] reverence the Majesty of God as they do . . . stand ready prest to execute the will of God, as they do . . . Let us study holiness, as they do; they are of a most holy nature, and therefore are called *holy Angels*. So be we holy, even as they are holy.”¹

This principle of imitating angels was introduced four years earlier in Ambrose's best-known work, *Looking unto Jesus* but never in the depth as we read here.² Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664) was a moderate Puritan divine that spent his entire ministry in Lancashire.³ He identified with the Presbyterian movement and was best known for his meditative piety and his unusual practice of spending the month of May in retreat reviewing his diary and practicing spiritual duties. This quotation reveals the Puritan ministry of angels. Unlike the Roman Catholic teaching, especially during the medieval period, that often was consumed by fanciful speculation Ambrose provides practical encouragement to support believers in their daily lives. His lengthy list of items to imitate in relationship to others can be summarized as guidance, instruction, and comfort. Personally for ourselves, angels serve to direct our focus to God, never on angels themselves. Angels are significant for Ambrose because of their frequent mention in Scripture and since they are ministering spirits sent from God believers need to be imitators of them.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXT

While many westerners today are strongly influenced by a scientific rationalistic worldview the perception of the Puritans was shaped by the biblical worldview. They believed in God's ability to communicate with humanity through dreams, angels who reveal God's message and support and comfort believers and the use of prayer to cultivate communion with God. They also affirmed the reality of the devil and fallen angels who actively engage in tempting and tormenting believers. David D. Hall captures the essence of this in his book entitled *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*. No doubt Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693) inspired Hall's title. Hall writes: "The providence of God was 'wonder-working' in making manifest the reach of his sovereignty." Those in seventeenth century whether believers or not affirmed that their world was inhabited by the supernatural that included angels and ghosts. England shared the same sense of wonders of the invisible universe as the New England colonies. Hall writes from the 1620s and onward newssheets were regularly reporting various marvels. Other publications announced, "children speaking preternaturally and offered *Strange and wonderful News . . . of certain dreadfull Apparitions*." Almanacs were popular and communicated "accounts of mystic forces emanating from stars and planets." Reflective of this literature and indicative of this spiritual context,

Samuel Clark, the British nonconformist minister (1599–1682) produced a volume first published in 1654 with this descriptive title, “*A Mirrour or Looking Glasse both for Saints, and Sinners, Held forth in about two thousand Examples: Wherein is presented, as Gods Wonderful Mercies to the one, so his severe Judgments against the other.*” Similar perceptions and literature was common throughout Europe. What is significant is that these authors were not frauds attempting to mislead gullible individuals but were intelligent ministers and other respected persons. Two realms in particular fueled this sense of wonder: metrology and astrology. Amazing to us as contemporary believers, bizarre pagan wonders coexisted alongside Christian beliefs in God’s providence.⁴ Time does not permit consideration of devils, witchcraft, the Salem Trials, and related topics.⁵

Richard Godbeer comments that while Puritan preaching condemned magic and occult practices it was not uncommon for parishioners to compartmentalize their faith from everyday living and still rely upon these unbiblical practices. Godbeer is clear, however; that there was a sharp contrast between the origin of these two expressions of supernatural belief. Puritans claimed that God’s mighty power was available through supplication and given according to God’s wisdom while those favoring the magical arts were manipulative and far more dependent upon human agency. Though Godbeer agrees that this division was not always mutually exclusive.⁶ A similar distinction existed between early Protestants and Roman Catholics that while the former believed in angels and their assistance this help was “unsought” rather than “contrived or compelled” as was the more regular practice of Roman Catholics.⁷ For example, Increase Mather writing in his popular *Angelographia* (1696) warns his readers that consulting “ungodly Fortune-Tellers” was placing a person directly in the presence of “Evil Angels.”⁸

PURITAN PERSPECTIVES ON ANGELS⁹

Alexandra Walsham provides a helpful summary of the angelic portfolio of ministrations. Angels served as guardians for people of all ages, providing warning of impending doom and judgment. This was often related to the admonishment of wickedness. Angels were also agents of God’s gracious deliverance, including both physical and spiritual needs. A final category pertained to consolation and the cure of illnesses which could be manifested in deathbed visitations.¹⁰ Joel Beeke and Mark Jones provide a slightly

different list of duties. For them the ministry of angels involves worship and adoration of God, serving as heavenly messengers especially in relation to God's providence. Angels also provide care for believers and surround and sustain Christians amid the challenges of life.¹¹

A helpful way to expand our understanding of the broader Puritan teaching on angels is to compare it with the Roman Catholic perspective. While generalizations can be misleading, especially given the span of the Western Catholic Church before the Protestant Reformation, they can also be helpful in providing an overview to distinctions among these two broad theological traditions.¹² The first area was that of hierarchies. Roman Catholics reaching back to Pseudo-Dionysius who lived during the late fifth and early sixth centuries were intrigued by both naming specific angels and establishing rankings of angels into hierarchies. Michael was frequently seen as the highest angel. While Protestants did not deny an ordering of angels, especially in the book of Revelation, they typically avoided the speculation in imagining angelic priority and rank. The second category was the ministry of angels. Roman Catholics frequently taught that all people had guardian angels. Some further thought that each person had a good angel on one shoulder and an evil angel on the other. By way of continuity, the Qur'an indicates the good angel was on the right shoulder and the evil on the left. Puritans differed among themselves on this but usually agreed that only elect believers possessed guardian angels. The final controversial distinction is the worship and invocation of angels. Catholics thought that angels may carry our prayers to God, assisting in the intercession, while Puritans eschewed this. Likewise Puritans typically limited the knowledge angels had over a person's thoughts and ability to read their hearts.

Puritans representative of the cessationist view believed that apparitions had essentially ended with the patristic age.¹³ If people saw angels their origin was typically traced to mental illness or demonic deception.¹⁴ However, Puritans still believed genuine visitations from angels were possible but agreed they should not be sought out of fear their request would be answered by the devil. They carefully searched for meaning behind, earthquakes, floods, drought, thunderstorms, and comets believing God's providence often contained some message for them. Though they typically perceived more negative warnings than positive through providence.¹⁵ Puritans frequently referred to angels as God's invisible helpers and believed with Cotton Mather that they often operated "behind the curtain."¹⁶

Following the Restoration in 1660 there was less resistance to apparitions. But 2 Corinthians 11:14 served as a cautionary reminder that Satan could be disguised as an angel of light to deceive believers.¹⁷ In the American colonies, Cotton Mather, while critical of angelic visions, as was his father Increase Mather, had experienced an apparition around 1685.¹⁸ Women were especially prone to angelic sightings but were frequently discounted due to their perceived weaker constitution and less discerning knowledge. The basic resistance to angelic visitation or communication was that the person was peering into the secret will of God and it betrayed a mistrust in God's revelation through Scripture.¹⁹ Awareness of angels changed radically in the next century. One catalyst was the revivals in the American colonies in 1730s and 1740s which inspired increased angel sightings.²⁰ Another reason was a decreased emphasis upon God's wrath and an increased awareness of his mercy.²¹

SOURCES WHICH SHAPED ISAAC AMBROSE'S UNDERSTANDING OF ANGELS

Ambrose reveals that the printer had received his manuscript for *The Ministration of, and Communion with Angels* before it was ready for publication. He had desired to include more citations from other Puritans to buttress his own work which now appear in this version. He confessed that his agenda was not to be "novel" or creative and therefore he makes frequent use of "*others both godly and Orthodox Divines*."²² Reflective of these many citations *Communion with Angels* contains more Latin references than any other of his works.

His first of many proofs was from Bishop Usher and summarizes his teaching that angels provide for others, especially at times of distress as Elijah and Hagar. Angels also serve as a "guard and garrison" for children "to comfort and defend them" as they seek to follow God's will. Instead of using Matthew 18:10, he cites Psalms 34:7; 91:11 as proof of this. Additionally, Angels reveal God's will for believers, rejoice at their conversion, and carry the souls of God's saints into heaven.²³ Edward Leigh published his *A System or Body of Divinity* in 1654. Obviously, there was much repetition between the various Puritan works on angels. Leigh mentions a few new insights including if an angel should appear visibly to a person that individual should honor them but not follow the faulty practice of the papacy and worship them. Additionally Leigh instructs believers to imitate angels.²⁴ Samuel Clark's *Marrow of Divinity* also teaches the importance of imitating angels and summarizes their ministries including rejoicing at the conversion of sinners,

demonstrating proper reverence for God's majesty, and fulfilling God's will "with chearfulness, sincerity, and without wearisomeness."²⁵ Ambrose next includes Thomas Manton and his *Practical Divinity on Jude* (1658). Manton followed a chronological treatment of the ministry of angels from "the womb to the grave" and illustrates how angels attended to the elect at each stage of life. For example, in the first period from the womb until birth, angels are "servants of Providence." Ambrose would later follow this same life span approach in both his *Communion with Angels* and *War with Devils*. Manton also illustrates how Jesus experienced the assistance of angels across his life span.²⁶ Ambrose's last source was Bishop Joseph Hall and he devotes more space to him than any other author. Ambrose confesses that his desire is to avoid controversy and speculation and will leave that to Robert Dingley and Richard Baxter. Ambrose's warm praise for Hall is evident. He describes him as one of our "native Practical Divines." Throughout this treatise Ambrose adds a descriptor to Bishop Hall's name. Twice he refers to him as "our divine Seneca" and once as "the contemplative Bishop."²⁷ Ambrose carefully justifies including a conforming bishop of the Church of England and declares that a person's ecclesiastical position should not deny their wisdom. Significantly, Ambrose published *Communion with Angels* in 1662, just two years after the Restoration of the monarchy. He reasons why should a person's outward policies of church government discount the "bond of brotherhood."²⁸

ISAAC AMBROSE'S TEACHING ON ANGELS

While many Puritan scholars reference Ambrose in their studies they limit themselves to his final work, *Ministration of, and the Communion with Angels*. But Ambrose mentions angels throughout his corpus. I will trace the most important treatises chronologically concluding with his *Communion with Angels*.

Ultima

Not surprisingly since this volume dealt with the last period of a person's life that it contains numerous references to angels. In exegeting Luke 16:19–31 on the rich man and Lazarus Ambrose asserts that angels do not provide ministry to the "soul of a dying sinner" because they are "onely porters for the souls of the just." He will develop this later in *Communion with Angels* that is based on Hebrews 1:14 that clearly articulates God's angels are only for the elect. Ambrose interprets the rich man's request to send someone to warn his brothers to repent as proof

that prayers must be directed exclusively to God and not through any saints or even Peter.²⁹ When a believer is welcomed into heaven, one of the delightful duties of the angels is to welcome that person with a hug.³⁰

In speaking of the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt 25:31-46) Ambrose examines Christ's invitation "come" in verse 34. He declares the joyful sound of Jesus' invitation ravishes the soul of the believer and is superior to any angelic music that they can offer.³¹ Ambrose draws an obvious contrast between Jesus' angels and the devil's angels.³² While Ambrose does speak of a hierarchy of angels, he will often make a list such as "Angels, Archangels, *Cherubims, Seraphims*,"³³ Usually the list is longer and contains principalities and powers.

Angels are also divine comforters before a person reaches heaven and Ambrose affirms the ministry of guardian angels. He imagines God to declare: "*I send an Angell before thee to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee to the place which I have prepared.* These are the *Guardians of sucking infants*, of whom our Saviour told his Disciples in Mt 18:10."³⁴ While the biblical reference is specifically to children, Ambrose explains elsewhere that the term children is expansive and was not limited to those who are infants but includes people of every age.³⁵ Comfort is also evident when Ambrose discusses the penitent thief from the cross. He claims that he was a member of "the Society of Jesus" though not a Jesuit for he was from an even better order in which "the Saints, Angels minister, Archangels rule."³⁶ Similarly, protection and care are prominent when Ambrose describes the angels as heavenly reapers that separate the wheat from the weeds (Matt 13:30).³⁷ He warns his auditors of the danger of dying in unrepentant sin. This is a time of intense spiritual combat but unlike medieval Catholics who frequently taught that each person had a good angel on one shoulder and an evil angel on the other Ambrose and other Puritans taught that a person has "*good and evill Angels on both sides*" of them.³⁸

Media

Ambrose's *Media*, his work on spiritual disciplines, was his most personal treatise since it included entries from his diary. He reports a dream he had in 1647 in which he felt death was imminent. This is prefaced by his explicit desire for God "to sanctifie" his sleep and dreams. He dreamt he had heard the voice of God call his name and welcomed him into heaven. He records that when he arrived "Heavenly ornaments were put upon me by the hand of God, and of Christ: My soul was exceedingly ravished."³⁹ This language

reflective of the Song of Songs reveals a much deeper message. Central to Ambrose's theology was union with Christ. Puritans often referred to this as spiritual marriage.⁴⁰ Indeed, union with Christ was the beginning of a new life in Christ but was not completed until that person had reached the fulness of communion with Christ in heaven. Ambrose frequently reveals both his descriptive and experiential language of contemplation and enjoyment of God on earth as a preparation for heaven.⁴¹ While there is no specific reference to angels in this account Ambrose typically associated dreams with either angels or devils. Later in *Communion with Angels* he will provide specific guidance for discerning the origin and validity of dreams. More striking is Ambrose's dream the night before he died. When some of his previous parishioners visited him, he recounted his experience: "Oh, what a sudden translation! . . . It is reported that the night before [Ambrose] dreamed he was going to heaven, and the angels spread out their arms and embraced and bid him welcome to heaven."⁴² Once again this demonstrates the angel's provision of comfort. While comfort is one of the dominant functions of God's angels the opposite is true of Satan's evil angels. On four different occasions Ambrose records dreams in which he felt Satan torment his sleep.⁴³ In a dream from 1648 he was conscious of God's presence and prayers for him which provided the strength to overcome Satan's temptation.⁴⁴ This provides continuity with the biblical use of dreams as a means of divine communication. Ambrose never speaks of actually seeing an angel. In fact, he observes that angels no longer appear in bodily form as in the past but they continue their same ministry in mysterious and invisible ways.⁴⁵

When Ambrose discusses the importance of occasional meditation, as opposed to deliberate meditation, he illustrates how those in various professions can reflect upon their daily work. He speaks of magistrates, ministers, tradesmen, soldiers, and farmers. Ambrose becomes personal as he describes the farmer's use of meditation and returns to the role of angels in reaping the harvest that he introduced earlier in *Ultima*. This inspires Ambrose to pray that the angels "may gather me into thy barn of Heaven."⁴⁶ Later when teaching about prayer he highlights three essential internal qualities for effective prayer: humility, reverence, and ardency. As he expounds on God's reverence, he illustrates this through the angel's six wings of Isaiah 6:2, "whereof two pair serve to cover their faces and their feet, hereby betokening their Wonderful reverence of God." He invites his readers to imagine themselves joining with the angels and performing the same act of praise and asks how this could increase our

awareness of the reverence of “the great King of Heaven?”⁴⁷

Looking unto Jesus

When Ambrose discusses carrying Christ’s yoke and following him, he examines the multi-faceted ministry of angels as heavenly helpers. He claims, “Angels are compared to nurses that have a charge over weak children to keep them and guard them; so the Angels do all the offices of a nurse, or mother; they keep us, guard us, instruct us, admonish us, correct us, comfort us, preserve us from evil, and provoke us to good.”⁴⁸ This extensive summary of angelic responsibilities contains both defensive and offensive tasks and resembles the lengthy list that was cited in the beginning of this article from *Communion with Angels*. What is lacking here is the invitation that believers should imitate all of these ministries to those around them.

As Ambrose considers the details of Jesus’ final year of his earthly life, he ponders his Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem and visit to the temple. To guide his auditors to experience the nature of Christ he teaches that Christ’s presence contains the presence of the Holy Spirit and also his angels. In other words, whenever a person is aware of God’s angels, they can be assured that Christ and the Holy Spirit are also present. This launches Ambrose into what he calls a digression teaching that “it is a fine skill to know” how angels communicate with Jesus’ followers. He raises three crucial questions: how angels speak to us, how may we recognize when angels speak, and finally how to discern what is actually “spoken by the immediate inspiration of the Spirit.”⁴⁹ First, Ambrose suggests two primary means that angels use to communicate with believers. While people speak to us through words and external senses of sight, sound, touch, etc., angels speak internally through the spiritual senses. Angels also stir up the memory and assist in recalling previous insights or events. Second, Ambrose confesses that it is difficult to know when an angel speaks to a person and “only some conjecture” can be made. He offers two examples. If a person is about to sin, they might experience “contrary whisperings” that might stop them from committing the sin. Or a person might suddenly hear within their soul an “independent supernatural persuasion” to act correctly.

Third, Ambrose quotes Calvin to discern whether the Holy Spirit or an angel has spoken to us. Calvin instructs, “That in such secrets we should keep one rule of modesty and sobriety, and that we should neither speak, nor think, nor yet desire to know any other thing than such as has been taught us by God’s word.”

Critical for Ambrose is the distinction between the immediate or direct initiation of the Holy Spirit and the mediating or secondary operation of God's angels. First, God employs his angels to communicate to our "inward man" by way of "inward motions and suggestions." Second, these communications originate in the Holy Spirit and we typically associate them with the Spirit. Third, it is the Holy Spirit's role to enlighten our understanding and guide our will. Ambrose clarifies this with the analogy of the Spirit as the fountain or source and the angels as cisterns or pathways for communicating to believers. The angels may speak and inspire believers but the efficacy is always due to the Holy Spirit. Ambrose is adamant not to elevate the role of angels above the Spirit.⁵⁰ Given this priority of the Holy Spirit some readers might wonder why we need angels if the Holy Spirit does the real work and is sent by Christ? A variation of this is why do we need ministers or other Christian leaders if Jesus Christ sends his Spirit into the hearts of his believers? While God can work immediately and independently of human participation he often chooses to work through the slower human means.

Ambrose contends that a person can experience this divine presence either through public worship or in spiritual duties. To help awaken a person to the reality of the divine presence, Ambrose asks do you "feel any stirrings, actings, movings in thy spirit?" And do you "feel quickening, warming, feeding, cherishing, healing, mollifying, melting, comforting, strengthening in thy inward parts?" This spectrum of evocative invitations from God's angels covers everything from the conviction of sin to the guiding empowerment of compassion and nurture. This relates to Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:16 "Surely the Lord is in this place" and prompts Ambrose to declare the Spirit and angels are present "ascending and descending."⁵¹

Ambrose diagnoses a problem in his day which is still common for western Christians today. He calls looking unto Jesus a "high Gospel-Ordinance" and clarifies looking unto Jesus is more than a casual remembering of him, reading the Bible, or singing hymns. For Ambrose and the Puritans this meant "an inward experimental looking unto Jesus." This was more than a cognitive awareness of Christ. It must begin with the biblical understanding of Christ's life and teaching but it needs be applied to the heart to produce transformation so that person might be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Ambrose teaches that many of his auditors needed to be aroused from their spiritual dullness. Instead of being inattentive, believers need to follow the example of the angels who are always "waiting and standing in the presence of our God."⁵² That posture

reflects a desire to notice Jesus in every dimension of life. Ambrose continues that it is “the delight and recreation of the elect Angels to look on Jesus.” This is their habitual practice throughout Jesus’ life and ministry. Christians likewise need to “imitate the Angels” and reflect on the “honour” to join God’s special agents in worshiping Jesus Christ. Ambrose calls this grateful gazing on Jesus the “work of heaven.” He quotes Bernard of Clairvaux, one of his favorite medieval authors, who taught that while this contemplative looking on Jesus begins on earth it is perfected in heaven. Ambrose connects the angels with the saints in heaven who always “behold the face of God and Christ.”⁵³ This remembrance deepens a person’s awareness of Christ and inspires grateful and loving adoration and delight. As a reminder that the ministry of angels is not superior to people, Ambrose contends that only believers are married to Jesus. This points to the foundational Puritan theme of spiritual marriage or union and communion with Christ.⁵⁴

War with Devils

War with Devils is designed around four segments of a person’s life span: womb and birth, young child to conversion, riper years, and at death. Ambrose instructs his auditors that we must contend with malicious enemies in our fallen world. He asserts that the devil has assistants who support him in battling against Christians: “the two Captain-Generals the world and the flesh.” But Christians are not left defenseless because “Christ is the Captain of our Salvation” and will not depart from us. Additionally angels assist in protecting us. Ambrose proclaims that typically wrestlers compete inside a ring. He encourages his readers through Psalm 34:7, “The Angels of the Lord encamp round about them that fear him, and they deliver them” that angels provide the outer circumference of the ring of battle. In an effort to comfort and further encourage Christians Ambrose concludes this section remarking, “Now what better aides [i.e. Jesus Christ], or seconds [i.e. angels] can we have than the Angels of God, and the God of Angels? Surely, there are more for us than can be against us.”⁵⁵ Ambrose confirms directly that the “good angels wait upon you as a guard” and that their specific task from God is to keep us safe. He continues what greater comfort to know that we are not dependent upon human strength but can rely on God’s designated agents to guard and protect us.⁵⁶ In speaking of infants Ambrose asserts that while the devil seeks to seduce children God sends his angels to preserve

and keep them until they are able to confess their faith in Jesus Christ.⁵⁷ He also informs his auditors that while angels provide comfort they can never fill Jesus' role as savior. The spiritual corollary is that faith is effective only when it is based on Jesus Christ, not any other heavenly messenger.⁵⁸

Communion with Angels

Ambrose confesses from the outset that the study of angels is both biblical and practical. His concern is not to get entangled in "knotty, thorny, and unprofitable discoveries" of the medieval western Catholic Church that literally split hairs over angels but rather to discover how they assist believers to live more fully in the world.⁵⁹ He eschews endless controversies over angels since they never strengthen the soul.⁶⁰ Ambrose's irenic attitude is content to let Richard Baxter and Robert Dingley serve as the theological bulldogs to critique other writers.⁶¹ This conciliatory nature is consistent throughout Ambrose's works and has been attributed to his contemplative nature.⁶²

Ambrose articulates that his method is four-fold: to establish the meaning of the various terms, to support his statements with orthodox writers, to confirm the same through Scripture, and to give experiences to further illustrate his message.⁶³ He warns that the world is superstitious and frequently offers angels greater glory than they should be given. Angels are excellent and should not be ignored but never at the expense of the far greater excellence of Jesus Christ.⁶⁴ Contextually it is important to recognize that Ambrose spent his entire ministry in Lancashire. This region northwest of London exhibited a stronger Roman Catholic influence that could foster a greater sense of superstition than in other regions less impacted by the papacy.⁶⁵ This might have motivated Ambrose to devote his final two volumes to provide sounder biblical teaching of angels and devils.

Ambrose derives five doctrines from his text of Hebrews 1:14, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them, who shall be heirs of salvation" (KJV):⁶⁶ angels are spirits, their duty is to minister and serve, all angels are ministering spirits. Ambrose briefly declares that there is no hierarchy of angels as conceived by Pseudo Dionysius and other western Catholic authors, Western Catholic teaching on angels beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius to Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁷ God commissions his angels and they go only if they are sent. He covers these first four doctrines briefly and devotes the majority of this book to his fifth doctrine, that angels serve only "heaven's heirs," not all people.⁶⁸

Similar to *War with Devils*, *Communion with Angels* is structured across a person's life span. For each of these areas, Ambrose first examines the ministry of angels and then the corresponding duties of Christians. Due to the abundance of Ambrose's material I will select only the most important insights for our consideration. The first period covers the initial hours of conception until birth. Ambrose concedes the precise time is debatable. The ministry of angels during this period is to "keep, preserve, defend, deliver, sustain and strengthen."⁶⁹ The parental response is to rejoice in God's work and pray for the angelic protection over their infants. Ambrose clarifies that these prayers are not directed to the angels "but to the God of the Angels." Children also have specific responsibilities to become "acquainted with their Angel-keepers." Unfortunately, he does not elaborate what he means by this except that infants should become aware of God's works. Clearer is the expectation that children praise God for their ministering angels. He repeats his previous warning that it is wrong to praise angels since it robs God of his intended glory.⁷⁰

The next period includes infancy and childhood. Ambrose reminds his auditors that this stage is not just for youngsters but can refer to adults as well. This flexibility creates overlap within the periods of both the ministry of angels and the believer's response to God. The first of this three-fold responsibility is protecting children from evil. According to Ambrose, if angels were not active many children would be harmed or seriously bruised. Next, angels preserve a person's health. Daniel Dyke taught that angels removed the diseases and evil that the devil had brought upon people. Since disease and evil are typically not visible, the corrective "invisible hands" of angels are needed to reverse and protect one from the devil's efforts. Ambrose borrows Bishop Hall's illustration of the angel who stirred the waters at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:4) to remind readers that angels are the real cause of healing. While Ambrose believes this Scripture confirms the healing ministry of angels, many today would recognize the stirring of the waters as superstition. Third, angels teach and tutor children. Ambrose acknowledges that the ministry of angels is diverse but he asserts one of the most critical elements is to bring children "up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."⁷¹ Due to its importance Ambrose expands this section. Earlier he compares the role of teachers and pastors with angels. He confesses that human teachers can be removed for any number of reasons but nothing

can remove the instruction of angels. Therefore, he argues, it is essential that Christians converse with angels; a topic he will return to later in the volume.⁷² Ambrose includes numerous experiences that demonstrate how angels served children. One in particular, relates to Origen, the controversial third century biblical commentator. Ambrose endorses him when he asserts that Origen had experienced much of the angel's tutoring and repeated the common story of how his mother hid his clothes so he could not run out to the street and seek martyrdom.⁷³

The third period includes the more mature years until death. This segment receives the largest development of the five sections. In fact, it is longer than the second and fourth divisions, the next two longest periods, combined. Ambrose repeats the angelic ministry of keeping a person from evil and protecting their health and now adds a new item of providing a person "with all of the necessities for this life." Despite the criticism of some contemporary scholars that Ambrose "gave way to speculations and anecdotal evidence"⁷⁴ in describing the celestial supply of food he references Israel's wilderness journey as a confirmation of God's provision that "man did eat angels' food (Ps. 78:25)."⁷⁵ While these items directly benefit the body angels also provide for the souls of believers in declaring God's will. Christians need to follow Mary's example, the mother of Jesus (Luke 2:19), and meditate on the angel's messages that are revealed to a person. At this point Ambrose cautions that the devil can deceive Christians by becoming an angel of light. To defend against this he instructs his readers to discern the difference. Good angels glorify God and always validate Scripture. While evil angels never glorify God since that is anathema to their very existence.⁷⁶

Ambrose returns to the subject of dreams that he introduced in *Media*. He realizes that some of his listeners will object to this since all dreams are not from God. Rather than reject every dream which could include some from God it is critical to develop careful discernment. Ambrose borrows six guidelines from Thomas Warmstry's *The Baptized Turk* (1658). According to Warmstry (1610–1665) dreams should be taken seriously when they do not oppose any truth from Scripture, when they are wise without any inconsistency, when they reflect the disposition of the Holy Spirit, when they inspire holiness and godly obedience, when they agree with what God is already doing in a person's life, and when they are unsought and unexpected. Beeke and Jones question Ambrose's angelic teaching of prompting dreams. However, they concede that

Christopher Love, James Usher, and probably Cotton Mather held the same understanding. Nonetheless they criticize Ambrose and Mather for living “in a world of wonder, populated by invisible spirits.”⁷⁷ This prompts the question how much scientific rationalism has shaped the contemporary western worldview. The Puritans warned against the practice of intentionally seeking God through dreams. The standard wisdom was God would willingly send his angels when they were needed not when a person sought them. Further these principles are significant because Ambrose believes that God uses angels to teach by dreams as Scripture frequently demonstrates.⁷⁸ Ambrose returns to the interaction between angels and the Holy Spirit that he first introduced in *Looking unto Jesus*. Less there is any doubt about the supremacy of the Holy Spirit Ambrose reiterates that angels are God’s “instruments, or agents” for continuing his divine plans and that there is no conflict between the Spirit and angels in this ministry. One reason for this critical ministry of angels is to assist believers in resisting the temptations of the devil. A primary tool of the devil is idolatry and according to Ambrose angels offer “blessed helps” for preventing this sin of rebellion against God.⁷⁹

In discussing how angels protect a person from evil Ambrose reveals three personal experiences. The first was a fire in his house in which everyone was able to escape unharmed. Another time Ambrose was riding his horse and thrown into a stream. He struggled to pull himself free but finally was able to return to home wet and cold that produced a fever from which he recovered. The last experience involved his daughter and their family maid. Their bedroom collapsed into the first floor below, fortunately both survived with the padding of their beds.⁸⁰ We might question the role of angels in these providential encounters but they confirm while angels are invisible that in no way minimizes their presence or ability to protect believers from danger.⁸¹

Central to this treatise and foundational to Christian piety is Ambrose’s teaching that one of the primary human duties is to pay attention to the “motions, workings, hints, intimations” of God. Since Ambrose introduced this in *Looking unto Jesus* and developed it more fully there I will limit my comments here. Beyond the crucial partnership between the Holy Spirit and angels Ambrose counsels that angels are active in creating blockages to protect believers from Satan’s “evil enticements.” Therefore, Ambrose cautions his listeners not to grieve the Spirit or holy angels by ignoring these divine impressions.⁸² He adds that to see the face of God, we must do the work of angels. This returns us to the

article's opening quote and the necessity of imitating angels. It also highlights the importance that we must be attentive to the presence of God's angels.⁸³

The fourth period is the time of death and reflects what a person would expect of angels. Ambrose teaches that these celestial messengers provide consolation. He adds between earth and heaven is a vast region inhabited by the devil and evil angels. Due to this danger angels are responsible for ushering the souls of believers into heaven.⁸⁴ In response the saints are counseled not to be distracted by the pangs of death but to anchor their hope in God's word. Additionally, Christians are invited to make friends with the angels. Ambrose offers this guidance, we must seek to follow the angel's "purity, piety, innocency." Like human friendship believers need to converse with and accept the guidance from wiser and more experienced individuals. Angels are continually prompting Christians with suggestions of how to draw near to God through their impressions or motions. Ambrose teaches his auditors to recognize and respond to these holy promptings to maintain healthy souls. Additionally, he claims that Christians can receive the love of angels through seeking to grow in holiness.⁸⁵

The fifth segment is the final resurrection and glorification. Angels will gather the dust of the saints' bodies and will reassemble it back into a perfect, solid body and then bring these bodies to Jesus at the Judgment Seat. While creative this angelic task lacks biblical warrant. This includes the separation of the faithful from those who rejected Jesus. The angelic ministry is complete when the saints are ushered into the Marriage Supper.⁸⁶

Ambrose concludes this book asserting his desire is to present the most accurate book possible on angels. He recognizes he cannot satisfy every person's questions and objections so he enlisted "some of my godly and learned brothers to object what they can." He includes their comments in the appendix so that the "truth may shine clearer."⁸⁷ The first and longest section comprises a series of anonymous questions with Ambrose's responses. The final section contains Richard Baxter's letter in which he apologizes that time restrictions prevent a more detailed response. Baxter summarizes some basic points about the ministry of angels and agrees with Ambrose that one should not expect to visibly see angels. Baxter makes this wise observation that the more conscious a person becomes about the ministry of angels the greater their danger in offering too much attention to God's ministering spirits. But the opposite position of ignoring angels is even more dangerous.⁸⁸ For those who are reticent to accept

this ministry of and communion with angels Baxter argues that we must not close our minds to the plain truths revealed by God or Scripture.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

If this article ended here Isaac Ambrose would be disappointed. He called *Communion with Angels* his final work of “practical divinity.”⁹⁰ Unlike today when piety is often separated from theology the Puritans were careful to integrate them because they were both lived experiences. Hence the Puritan emphasis on experimental piety or practical divinity. Therefore, if Ambrose was writing today what might he say to us? First, I would imagine Ambrose cautioning us not to limit God by our scientific western worldview. We still live in a world of wonders and God can do far more than we often think or imagine (Eph 3:20). Missiologist Paul Hiebert provides an illuminating challenge for western Christians to recover the biblical worldview of Jesus.⁹¹ I believe Ambrose would also encourage contemporary readers to cultivate a greater awareness to the promptings of God’s angels and the Holy Spirit. Realize these impressions always originate from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the fountain and angels are the cisterns. As we become more conscious of this divine invitation to recognize God’s presence this will increase our communion not only with angels but with our Triune God. Third, directly related to this increased awareness of God should be an expanding desire to praise God for his abundant daily provisions. Part of this providence includes the manifold ministry of God’s angels, his invisible helpers, that are always present to lead and guide believers home to Jesus.

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1. Isaac Ambrose, *Ministration of, and Communion with Angels* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1673) in Isaac Ambrose, *The Compleat Works* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1674), 141, 142. I am using the 1673 publication rather than the original 1662 edition due to illegibility. While Ambrose greatly expands the idea of imitating angels it is not original to him and appeared earlier in Henry Lawrence, *An History of Angells Being a Theologicall Treatise of Our Communion and Warre with Them* (London: Printed by M.S., 1646), 53. Throughout this article, all italics appear in the original writings.
 2. Isaac Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus* (London: Nathanael Webb, 1658), 45, 467.
 3. Defining Puritans and Puritanism has prompted much debate over the decades. For a helpful summary see, John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-7. For a detailed discussion of the challenges of defining Puritans and Puritanism see Randall J. Pederson, *Unity in Diversity: English Puritans and the Puritan Reformation, 1603–1689* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 3-28.
 4. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 71–76, 80.

5. See for example: Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*; Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Heritage Reformation Books, 2012), esp. 189–99.
6. Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion*, 9–10.
7. Peter Marshall & Alexandra Walsham, “Migrations of Angels in the Early Modern World” in Peter Marshall & Alexandra Walsham eds. *Angels in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33.
8. Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion*, 61.
9. For helpful summaries on the Puritan teaching on angels see Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, esp. 179–88; Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early–Modern Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 32–47; Alexandra Walsham, “Invisible Helpers: Angelic Intervention in Post-Reformation England” *Past & Present* 208 (August 2010): 77–130; and Peter Marshall & Alexandra Walsham eds. *Angels in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
10. Walsham, “Invisible Helpers,” 85–99.
11. Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 185–7.
12. This paragraph is a distillation of Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, 48–64.
13. The best treatment of apparitions is Walsham, “Invisible Helpers.”
14. Walsham, “Invisible Helpers,” 82, 83.
15. This paragraph is summarized from Elizabeth Reis, “Otherworldly Visions: Angels, Devils and Gender in Puritan New England” in Marshall & Walsham, *Angels in the Early Modern World*, 282–4.
16. Walsham, “Invisible Helpers” and Reis, “Otherworldly Visions,” 287.
17. Reis, “Otherworldly Visions,” 282, 286, 287.
18. *Ibid.*, 285, 291. Richard Lovelace believes that Mather experienced at least two other apparitions. Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Washington, D.C. Christian College Consortium, 1979), 190–1.
19. Reis, “Otherworldly Visions,” 289, 290, 291.
20. *Ibid.*, 292.
21. Walsham, “Invisible Helpers,” 128.
22. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 94.
23. *Ibid.*, 94, 95.
24. *Ibid.*, 95, 96. Edward Leigh, *A System or Body of Divinity* (London: William Lee, 1654), 278. Leigh simply states that believers should imitate angels without the elaboration found in Ambrose.
25. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 96.
26. *Ibid.*, 97.
27. *Ibid.*, 97, “our divine Seneca,” 120, 162 and “the contemplative Bishop,” 149.
28. *Ibid.*, 98.
29. Isaac Ambrose, *Ultima, The Last Things* (London: Nathanael Webb, 1650), 73.
30. *Ibid.*, 40.
31. *Ibid.*, 116.
32. *Ibid.*, 118.
33. *Ibid.*, 208, 210.
34. *Ibid.*, 212.
35. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 119.
36. Ambrose, *Ultima*, 210.
37. *Ibid.*, 126, 132, 133.
38. *Ibid.*, 86. The Qur'an took this a step further to designate the good angel on the right shoulder and the evil one on the left. Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, 57. This is consistent with Calvin's hesitancy to assign a specific guardian angel to each person. Rather he believes that individuals are protected and sustained by numerous angels. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.14.7.
39. Isaac Ambrose, *Media: The Middle Things* (London: Nathanael Webb and William Grantham, 1650), 76.
40. For a helpful introduction to this in Isaac Ambrose and the Puritans see Tom Schwanda, *Soul Recreation: The Contemplative–Mystical Piety of Puritanism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), esp. 35–74.
41. For a valuable treatment of this in Isaac Ambrose and the Puritans see Schwanda, *Soul Recreation*.
42. William A. Shaw, ed. *The Minutes of the Manchester Presbyterian Classis, 1646–1660 Part III* Vol. 24- new series (Manchester: Chetham Society, 1891), 406.
43. Ambrose, *Media*, 79, 82, 107, 108.

44. Ibid., 108.
45. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 131.
46. Ambrose, *Media*, 139.
47. Ibid., 312.
48. Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus*, 444.
49. Ibid., 473.
50. Ibid., 473–5.
51. Ibid., 475, cf. 473. Calvin's citation appears in his treatment of the function of angels. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.14.4.
52. Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus*, 24, 27.
53. Ibid., 45–6. Ambrose reinforces this crucial practice of imitating the angels using identical language when he addresses Jesus' work of salvation. *Looking unto Jesus*, 467.
54. Ibid., 965. Ambrose affirms this same principle in *Communion with Angels*, 111.
55. Isaac Ambrose, *War with Devils* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1674) in Ambrose, *The Compleat Works*, 8, 9.
56. Ibid., 13.
57. Ibid., 18.
58. Ibid., 88.
59. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 94.
60. Ibid., 97, 106.
61. Ibid., 97.
62. Schwanda, *Soul Recreation*, 112.
63. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 94.
64. Ibid., 102.
65. Schwanda, *Soul Recreation*, 115–6.
66. Christopher Love also used this text in, *A Treatise of Angels* which was included in his *Rejected Soul's Cure* (1657). Richard Baxter's *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1691) used four texts on the title page including Heb 1:14 which was incorrectly printed as Heb 2:14. Baxter mentions Ambrose "who is now with Angels," 228.
67. Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, esp. 23–32.
68. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 103, see pp. 103–7 for his expansion of these doctrines.
69. Ibid., 116, 117.
70. Ibid., 118.
71. Ibid., 120.
72. Ibid., 114.
73. Ibid., 123.
74. Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 187. Elsewhere Beeke observes that *Communion with Angels* was Ambrose's most speculative work. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 36. Kate Harvey asserts that Ambrose's treatment of angels across the five time periods of life lacks "biblical evidence and is more scholastic in tone." Kate Harvey, "Isaac Ambrose, *War with Devils* and *Ministration of, and Communion with Angels*" unpublished paper, 2006, p. 5.
75. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 126.
76. Ibid., 128, 129.
77. Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 187, 188, quotation at p. 187.
78. Ambrose, *Communion with Angels*, 129, 136, cf. Thomas Warmstry, *The Baptized Turk* (London: J. Williams and T. Garthwait, 1658), 66–7.
79. Ibid., 130.
80. Ibid., 132–3.
81. Ibid., 127.
82. Ibid., 140.
83. Ibid., 141.
84. Ibid., 143.
85. Ibid., 149, 150, 151, quotation at p. 150.
86. Ibid., 152, 153, 155.
87. Ibid., 157.
88. Ibid., 168.
89. Ibid., 167, 170.

90. Isaac Ambrose, *Three Ordinances* (London: Nathanael Webb, 1662), To the Christian reader, 1, 2.
91. Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (January 1982): 35-47.