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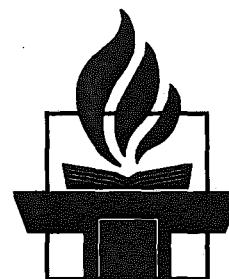
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Reformation & Revival



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Why Read the Puritans Today?

Don Kistler

There are a couple of reasons, I believe, for the resurgence of interest in the Puritans and their writings. One is that people are getting tired of religion offering things it can't deliver. All kinds of promises are being made, but people investigate religion out of self-interest, and when these things don't come true, they are disappointed. I think they are also tired of shallow, superficial religion. Most people don't worship God, because the God most people hear about really isn't worth worshipping. He is not the "High and Lofty One," He is not the "Lord God omnipotent who reigneth forever and ever." He is just "my friend," and familiarity surely breeds contempt!

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The Puritans were men who were passionately obsessed with the knowledge of God. I have listed ten reasons why we should read the Puritans today, and every one is directly derived from the Puritan view of God and Scripture.

I) They will elevate your concept of God to a degree you probably never thought possible, and show you a God who is truly worthy of your worship and adoration. Jeremiah Burroughs, in his classic book *Gospel Worship*, said, "The reason why we worship God in a slight way is because we do not see God in His glory." Modern man hears about a God who isn't worth worshiping. Why should he worship a God who wants to do good, but can't pull it off because man just won't cooperate? Who then is sovereign? Man is!

Read the Puritans and you will find yourself, in a spiritual sense, somewhat lonely. You will become excited about what you are reading and what you are feeling in your heart, and then you will notice that there aren't a lot of other people who know what you are talking about, and that can be lonely! When you experience Isaiah's vision of God (Isa. 6), and you realize that the reality of God is infinitely beyond anything your mind can comprehend, you

will realize that the average man doesn't think much about God at all, much less at the deep level you are thinking.

One of the reasons we think so poorly is because we read so little. Reading helps us think. We live in a photographic culture now instead of a typographic culture. Everything is pictures, videos, movies. The work is all done for us, so we don't have to wrestle with concepts. Someone else interprets the matter for us in pictures. Four hundred years ago, words were frozen on a page and forced readers to deal with the thoughts expressed.

2) Puritans had a “love affair” with Christ, and they wrote much about the beauty of Christ. One of the greatest of the Puritans was Thomas Goodwin, a Congregationalist. Writing about heaven, Goodwin said, “If I were to go to heaven, and find that Christ was not there, I would leave immediately, for heaven would be hell to me without Christ.” Heaven without Christ is no heaven, and if Christ is not there, I have no desire to be there. These people were in love with Christ.

James Durham wrote in the application of his sermon on song of Solomon 5:16: “If Christ is altogether lovely, then everything else is altogether loathsome.” We don’t feel that way about Christ, do we? We want a little of Christ, and a little of a lot of other things. But the true Christian wants Christ and nothing but Christ.

Samuel Rutherford wrote this about the beauty of Christ:

I dare say that angels' pens, angels' tongues, nay, as many worlds of angels as there are drops of water in all the seas and fountains, and rivers of the earth cannot point Him out to you. I think His sweetness has swelled upon me to the greatness of two heavens. O for a soul as wide as the utmost circle of the highest heaven to contain His love! And yet I could hold but little of it. O what a sight, to be up in heaven, in that fair orchard of the New Paradise, and to see, and smell, and touch, and kiss that fair field-flower, that

evergreen tree of life! His bare shadow would be enough for me; a sight of Him would be the guarantee of heaven to me.

If there were ten thousand thousand millions of worlds, and as many heavens, full of men and angels, Christ would not be pinched to supply all our wants, and to fill us all. Christ is a well of life; but who knows how deep it is to the bottom? Put the beauty of ten thousand thousand worlds of paradises, like the Garden of Eden, in one; put all trees, all flowers, all smells, all colors, all tastes, all joys, all loveliness, all sweetness in one. O what a fair and excellent thing would that be? And yet it would be less to that fair and dearest well-beloved Christ than one drop of rain to the whole seas, rivers, lakes, and fountains of ten thousand earths.

That's someone who loves Christ, isn't it?

3) The Puritans will help us understand the sufficiency of Christ. This comes under great attack in our modern church. You may have Christ to save you, but today you need psychology to help you get through life. You may have Christ to save you and help you with your spiritual hurts, but you need something else for those deep emotional pains you are feeling.

There is a title by Ralph Robinson, a contemporary of Thomas Watson in London, *Christ All and In All*. There is another book by that same title by Philip Henry. Robinson wrote more than 700 pages on one verse in Colossians, “*Christ is all, and in all*” (3:11). You see, it is our deficiency in understanding the sufficiency of Christ that is the issue. If Christ is all in all, how can we look to anyone else or anything else for answers?

In his book, *The Saints’ Treasury*, Jeremiah Burroughs has a sermon on the Colossians verse. Burroughs makes a statement like this, “Surely Christ is an object sufficient for the satisfaction of the Father.” None of us would argue with

that, would we? Isaiah tells us that God will see the result of the anguish of His soul and be satisfied. So Christ is enough to satisfy the Father. Burroughs continues: "Surely, then, Christ is an object sufficient for the satisfaction of any soul!" Do you get the reasoning? Pity those Christians who spend their entire lives whining about their lot in life as if Christ were not enough. What blasphemy to say that Christ is enough to satisfy God, but He isn't enough to satisfy me! Long before there was a Freud, a Puritan had solved the problem of modern psychobabble that has so charmed the church today.

4) The Puritans help us see the sufficiency of Scripture for life and godliness. That is what Peter said (2 Peter 1:3-4). Scripture gives us the knowledge of God which gives us all things pertaining to life and godliness. The battle cry of humanity today goes like this: "I'm searching for self-esteem," or, "I just want to feel good about myself."

Christians don't need self-esteem; they need Christ-esteem! Isaiah found out who God was and then Isaiah knew who Isaiah was. I remember being invited overseas for a speaking engagement and being asked to talk about myself. I can't imagine anything more boring than to have you know something about me. In Burroughs' *Saints' Treasury*, his first sermon is titled "The Incomparable Excellency and Holiness of God," and it is based on the Old Testament verse, "Who is like unto Thee, O God, among the nations?" It's a thirty-five-page sermon, and Burroughs writes about the splendor of God for half the sermon. Then he writes on the second half of the verse, "and who is like unto Thee, O Israel?" What's the point? Since there is no one like your God, there is no one like you! So you don't need to have self-esteem to feel good about yourself; you need to have Christ-esteem; you need to feel good about God!

If man is created in the image and likeness of God, how

could anyone ever have a lack of self-esteem? Christ traded His life one-on-one for His church. That's true worth, my friends!

5) The Puritans can teach us about the heinous nature of sin. Edward Reynolds wrote a book titled *The Sinfulness of Sin*, and Jeremiah Burroughs wrote *The Evil of Evils*. There is no doctrine on which it is more important to be orthodox than this one, because if you are off on the doctrine of sin, you are off on every other doctrine. This is the thread that will unravel the entire garment.

Burroughs wrote sixty-seven chapters on this premise: Sin is worse than suffering; people will do everything they can to avoid suffering, but almost nothing to avoid sin. Sin is worse than suffering, however, because sin causes suffering. In fact, Burroughs makes this point. Sin is worse than hell, because sin caused hell. And the thing which causes is greater than the thing it causes.

Obadiah Sedgwick, a prominent London Presbyterian who was a member of the Westminster Assembly, wrote a searching book, *The Anatomy of Secret Sins*, a treatise on David's plea to be delivered from secret sins, those sins hidden deep in the recesses of our hearts, the sins known to no one but to us and God, the sins that are just as wicked and damning as any other sins.

Jonathan Edwards said this about sin: "All sin is of infinite proportion, and it is more or less heinous depending upon the honor of the person offended. Since God is infinitely holy, sin is infinitely evil." That's why there's no such thing as a small sin, because the slightest sin is an act of cosmic treason committed against an infinitely holy God.

Simply on its sheer literary value, this material is priceless. Edwards' imagery in his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is unsurpassed. He compares God to an archer with a bow; that bow is pulled tight, the arrow is pointed right to the sinner's heart, the archer's arms are shaking

because the bow is pulled so tightly, and Edwards says that the only thing that keeps God from letting that arrow fly and being drowned in the sinner's blood is the mere good pleasure of a God who is infinitely angry with sin every day. One secular writer who was doing a piece on Edwards was asked by a Christian this question: "You know, if Edwards is right, that arrow is pointed at your heart. How do you sleep at night?" The answer was this, "Sometimes I don't! I just hope to God he's wrong."

6) The Puritans will help us with practical living. Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* has been called "the greatest manual on biblical counseling ever produced." Before this century, all counseling was done from the pulpit or during a pastoral visit to the home to catechize the family. Pastors were seen as the physicians of the soul. Interestingly enough, the very word "psychology" means the study of the soul. *Suke*, from which we get "psyche," from which we get psychology, means soul. But now, what used to be the cure of sinful souls has become the cure of sick minds. That has now been taken away from the pastor, who knows the soul best, and given to counselors, most of whom don't even believe in God. They can't cure spiritual ills. Baxter's *Directory* shows the genius of a man who could apply Scripture to all areas of life. Dr. James Packer calls it the greatest Christian book ever written.

Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety* is a model of a Puritan devotional manual. The idea was that of regulating one's entire day and life by Scripture. Dr. John Gerstner says that this book started the Puritan movement.

There was no area of life that the Puritans believed was not to be regulated by Scripture. Even time alone was to be put to godly use. Nathanael Ranew wrote a fine work titled *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation*. This is the classic Puritan work on spiritual meditation. Ranew's premise is that even when alone the Christian can "improve" himself

by putting his mind to good use, meditating on God and His attributes. If there were to be an eleventh commandment, it would be: "Thou shalt not waste time."

The Puritans wrote many of these kinds of "manuals." John Preston preached five sermons from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 on prayer, titled "The Saints' Daily Exercise," which is included in *The Puritans on Prayer*.

R. C. Sproul wrote the foreword to Jeremiah Burroughs' book, *A Treatise on Earthly-Mindedness*. Here is a book on the great sin of thinking like the world thinks rather than thinking God's thoughts after Him.

The Puritans were very pastoral, in addition to being very theological. Christopher Love, about whom I wrote a book, *A Spectacle Unto God*, said this in his third volume, in his sermons on growing in grace:

Look not so much on your sins, but look upon your grace also, though weak. Weak Christians look more on their sins than on their graces; yet God looks on their graces and overlooks their sins and infirmities. The Holy Ghost said, "Ye have heard of the patience of Job." He might also have said, "Ye have heard of the impatience of Job," but God reckons His people not by what is *bad* in them, but by what is *good* in them. Mention is made of Rahab's entertainment of the spies, but no mention is made that she told a lie when she did so. That which was well done was mentioned to her praise, and what was amiss, is buried in silence, or, at least, is not recorded against her and charged upon her. He who drew the picture of Alexander, with his scar on his face, drew him with his finger on his scar. God lays the finger of mercy upon the scars of our sins. O it is good serving such a master, who is ready to reward the good we do, and is ready to forgive and pass by what is amiss. Therefore, you who have but little grace, yet remember that God will have His eye on that little grace. He will not quench the

smoking flax, not break the bruised reed.

7) The Puritans will help us with evangelism that is biblical. Most evangelism today is man-centered, but Puritan evangelism was God-centered. The Puritans had another doctrine which has largely been lost today, and it goes by the name of “seeking,” or “preparation for salvation.” It was widespread in the English Puritans and the Reformers. It was taught by Jonathan Edwards in his sermon “Pressing Into the Kingdom,” and before that by his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. Stoddard wrote *A Guide to Christ*, which John Gerstner calls the finest manual on Reformed evangelism he knows of. Additionally, you might want to read Thomas Watson’s *Heaven Taken by Storm*.

The doctrine of seeking teaches us that God works through means, and if a man wants to be saved, he ought to avail himself of those means. Let me give you an example. Faith comes by hearing, and men are saved by faith, or more correctly, men are saved by grace through faith. But if I need faith to please God, and I realize that I don’t have it in me to believe in God savingly, what should I do?

Here’s where “seeking” comes in. If faith comes by hearing, then I ought to hear someone preach an orthodox sermon about Christ. If God is going to save me, His normal means will be through the preaching of the Gospel. God is under no obligation to save me if I hear a sermon, but He is not likely to save me apart from hearing a sermon about God’s grace.

The sinner, then, ought to do all in his natural power to soften his heart. He can’t earn salvation, but at least he can cooperate with God in this salvation, rather than oppose Him. I’m not making myself pleasing to God by seeking, since I’m doing it out of self-interest, but I am making myself less offensive to God rather than more offensive, and even if God doesn’t save me, my punishment in hell will be less.

And the Puritans would say, “If you can’t go to God with a right heart, then go to God for a right heart.” Seek the Lord.

8) Reading the Puritans will help us have right priorities. Second Corinthians 5:9 says, “We have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him.” One Puritan said it this way, “God’s smile is my greatest reward; His frown is my greatest fear.” If it is true that we become like the people with whom we spend our time, then it is an investment in eternity to spend time with the Puritans. Then spend your time with the best! Jeremiah Burroughs’ book *Gospel Fear* is on having the right priority. It is seven sermons on Isaiah 66:2, on what it means to tremble at the Word of God. If God says, “To this one I will look, . . . who trembles at My Word,” then we’d better know what it is to tremble at the Word of God.

9) The Puritans can help us clarify the issue of how a man is made right with God. Another title of Solomon Stoddard’s is his masterpiece on imputed righteousness, *The Safety of Appearing on the Day of Judgment in the Righteousness of Christ*. I cannot overemphasize the importance of being sound on this matter of imputed righteousness in this day when so many are not sound on the eternal difference between imputed and infused righteousness. The difference between these two positions is not simply the distance between Rome and Geneva; it is the distance between heaven and hell. I commend to your reading *Justification by Faith ALONE* on this issue. If you specifically want a Puritan title on the matter, read *The Puritans on Conversion*, or read Matthew Mead’s book, *The Almost Christian Discovered*. Mead lists twenty-six things a person must do as a Christian. Doing them doesn’t prove he indeed is a Christian, although not doing them proves he isn’t a Christian! It’s not for the faint of heart. This was the seventeenth-century version of *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 300 years before John MacArthur wrote that fine work.

10) Finally, let’s look at the Puritans and the authority

of the Word. We know that the Scripture is God speaking to us. The classic verse in Timothy tells us that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (literally, God-breathed)” And we know that whatever God says, we must obey. In fact, that was what the Old Testament people of God realized. In Exodus 24: 7 they declare, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” There isn’t anything God says that we must not do; and if we don’t we are not Christians! It’s that simple!

The Puritan divines who were members of the Westminster Assembly in 1643 wrote,

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.

We know that when God speaks we must listen. In fact, a great part of the Great Commission is to teach people to submit to the authority of God’s Word—”teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”(Matt. 28:20).

This is what amazed people when Jesus taught. Matthew 7:29 says that when Jesus taught, the people were amazed. What was the basis for their amazement? “He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

That is exactly how preachers are to preach: with authority. It is a command of God that they do that. “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you”(Titus 2:15). While we affirm that if God were to say something we would obey it, we forget that the faithful minister is God speaking to us today. It is the Reformation view of the pulpit ministry that when a faithful minister is expounding the Word of God, that is God’s voice you are hearing, not a man’s; and that means it is to be

obeyed.

But what do you hear after the sermon? At best you will hear, “That’s interesting; I’ll have to think about it.” But God never gave us His Word for our opinion or for us to think about; He gave us His Word to obey.

The Puritan Thomas Taylor wrote:

The Word of God must be delivered in such a manner that the majesty and authority of it shall be preserved. The ambassadors of Christ must speak His message even as He himself would utter it. A flattering ministry is an enemy to this authority; for when a minister must sing placebos and sweet songs, it is impossible for him not to betray the truth. To withstand this authority, or to weaken it, is a fearful sin, whether in high or low men; and the Lord will not allow his messengers to be cut off. Hearers must (a) pray for their teachers, that they may deliver the Word with authority, with boldness, and with open mouth; (b) not mistake this authority in ministers as anger or bitterness, and much less madness; and (c) not refuse to yield subjection to this authority, nor be angry when it bears down upon some practice which they are loath to part with; for it is just with God to put out the light of those who refuse the light offered.

Deuteronomy 30:20 equates loving God with obeying His voice; in fact, it says that is how we love God.

Well, that is how the Puritans viewed Scripture. Their high view of God came from their high view of Scripture. And if we want to know God the way they did, we must love His Word the way that they did. And that love will be increased only by diligent, intensive study. And to read the Puritans is the next best thing. In fact, it is like going to school with the finest minds the church has ever had.

Where should you start? I recommend to the beginner

Why Read the Puritans Today?

the following titles:

The True Christian's Love to the Unseen Christ, Thomas Vincent.

The Mischief of Sin or The Duty of Self-Denial, Thomas Watson.

Gleanings from Thomas Watson, a little book of collected sayings.

The Grace of Law, Ernest Kevan; a good book on the role of the Law in Puritan theology.

The Puritans on Conversion, The Puritans on Prayer. Two very excellent compendiums that give the reader the best of Puritan thought on the respective subjects.

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