



Introduction to Puritanism

Colossians 3:1-3

Tonight, I'd like to speak to you about a bunch of dead Englishman who were obsessed with rules, loathed anything that resembled joy and were covered, head to toe, in black itchy felt. Now, if that doesn't sound interesting, please keep in mind that this is the topic I have been assigned by one of you!

Yes, I'm talking about the Puritans. Now, the description that I have just given you of them is inaccurate. But it is a common stereotype. And, while it might not be a stereotype that you, yourself, hold, many of us would not be *able* to correct this stereotype; some of us might not even have the *interest* to do so. Tonight, I hope to stir your interest in the Puritans, and also to commend several things that we should learn from them while dispelling some common myths about them along the way.

I should say that, while I am not at all a Puritan expert, I did have the privilege of studying under one of the top contemporary Puritan scholars. Dr. Joel Beeke, who is the president of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, where I attended, has recently co-authored one of the most important books on Puritanism available. And I wouldn't be properly representing Dr. Beeke if I didn't try to sell a few copies of his book tonight! *Meet the Puritans* provides an interesting biographical sketch of every Puritan author who has been reprinted in the last 50 years. It also provides an annotated bibliography of each of the reprinted books.

I am getting ahead of myself; trying to sell a Puritan book to a group of men, many of whom may be wondering...

1. Why should I care about the Puritans?

First of all, you should care about the Puritans for the simple reason that their writings have made a dramatic comeback in recent years.

Now, by way of background, you should know that from the last years of the 1800's to around 1950 Puritanism lost much of the favor it had enjoyed in previous years. Anti-Puritan opinions were fervent and few people were interested in their writings.

To quote one decidedly non-Puritan, "*The times, they are a changing.*" Beginning in the 1950's a so-called "*neo-Puritan movement*" has been growing.¹ This movement is not only a Calvinistic holiness movement reminiscent of the original Puritan revival. It is also a revival of original Puritan works. In the last fifty years, 150 Puritan authors and nearly 700 Puritan titles have been brought back into print.² What I'm saying to you, is that this resurgence of Puritan interest and literature, in and of itself is worth taking note of.

But it is also worth taking note of the *timing* of this resurgence of Puritan reprints. We live in a day when evangelical Protestants in great numbers are looking for roots. Many people today see the shallowness of modern evangelicalism. The error that many people buy in to is that they think that if they are looking to latch onto Christian roots then they must turn to Catholicism, Anglicanism, or Eastern Orthodoxy. A good many other people are turning to Jewish mysticism in search of substantial spirituality, at least as they see it. I have seen several acquaintances go this direction. We should be thankful that Puritanism, as a solid, biblical foundation is being rediscovered today.

The fact that so many people are looking for solid Christian roots and are actually rediscovering the Puritans is one reason why *you* should care about the Puritans.

The second reason that you should care about the Puritans is because they are your spiritual forefathers.

Being from the Dutch Reformation tradition, we sometimes assume that this is the *only* stock from which we come. But we are far less full-blooded theologically than we might think. It is well documented that the English Puritans and Dutch Calvinists had a very intimate connection in the 17th century.³ One historian explains that the English Puritans “*reached deeply into the Netherlands, influencing its theology (and) deepening its spirituality...*”⁴ One proof of the Puritan influence on the Netherlands is the number of English Reformed works translated into Dutch during the Puritan era. “*In the seventeenth century, more than two thousand Reformed, pietistic titles were printed in Dutch, of which more than one-third were translations from (English) Puritan works.*”⁵ Your Dutch forefathers were reading the Puritans!

For you, as a Reformed person, to ignore the Puritans would be like drawing a family tree but including only your Father’s side. You should care about the Puritans because we are a product of both the English and Dutch Reformations.

Finally, you should care about the Puritans because they are, in many ways, spiritual giants compared to the Christianity of today.

J.I. Packer compares the Puritans *spiritually* to the huge California Redwoods. He highlights their greatness by noting four characteristics of Puritans.⁶

- *They were great thinkers.* The greatness of their thought is seen, for example, in the Westminster Standards which are products of Puritan thought. If one of the strengths of the Heidelberg Catechism is its theological warmth, one of the strengths of the Westminster Catechism is its theological precision. This is not to disparage the greatness of Dutch thinking but it is to impress upon you that the Puritans were great thinkers. With a few notable exceptions, such as John Bunyan and Richard Baxter, the Puritans were learned pastors. They spent long hours in the study and then preached with simplicity to a varied audience. The so-called “*Father of Puritanism*,” William Perkins is an example. “*In preparation there must be careful private study*,” said Perkins.⁷ But the delivery must be plain; Perkins said, “*The plainer the better.*”⁸ One seventeenth century Church historian explains that though his church (in Cambridge) consisted of both the University and the town, Perkins so crafted his sermons that “*the scholar could hear no learned and the townsman no plainer sermons.*”⁹ This is true scholarship! Some people think that if their pastor has thoroughly confused them, then he must be a real genius. True genius is the ability to present solid truth in plain thought.
- *They were great worshippers.* As Packer says, “*The Puritans served a great God, the God of the Bible, unshrunk by any of the diminishing and demeaning lines of thought about him that press upon us today.*”¹⁰ Because they served a great God they had a zeal for real, solid worship that is infrequently matched in our day. Their emphasis on worship is highlighted famously in their catechisms. The first question asks, “*What is the chief end of man.*” The answer is, “*worship; to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*”¹¹ To many today that would be an apt description of the Puritan worship service; to glorify God *forever*. It was not uncommon for Puritan services to last two or three hours. Although the length of a service is not a pure indicator of the zeal of the worshippers, the Puritans would be disheartened to hear people today clamoring for a maximum *one-hour-service*.
- *They were great hopers and their hope was fixed on heaven.* Those of you who have read *Pilgrim’s Progress* know that the book reaches its climax “*with a triumphant passage into the celestial city.*” The whole journey of Christian was focused upon that city; that was his hope! In fact, when he enters the gates of heaven it is with the help of his friend “*Hopeful.*” When Christian and Hopeful are safely inside the celestial city they ask, “*What must we do in the holy place?*” The answer: “*You must there receive the comfort of all your toil, and have joy for all*

*your sorrow; you must reap what you have sown, even the fruit of all your prayers and tears and sufferings for the King by the way...*¹² Notice how Bunyan connected the trials of everyday life with the reward of heaven. There are not many great hopers today because we are too short-sighted. The Puritans were not.

- *They were great warriors.* A lesser-known allegory of Bunyan's is his *Holy War*. "***The Holy War contains valuable counsel on how to fight the good fight of faith.***"¹³ Christians today focus on the Christian life as a journey but have forgotten that it is also a war. The Puritans were sharply aware that the Christian life is a battle; they were great warriors.

The Puritans were giants; they were great thinkers, worshippers, hopers and warriors. If those aren't spiritual qualities that interest you then there is something wrong. Hopefully you are convinced that the Puritans deserve your interest. If so, then we need to ask, secondly,

2. Who are the Puritans?

According to one modern *critic* of the Puritans, "*Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.*"¹⁴ This author is conjuring up the "*common conception of a sour-faced, unsmiling, and tight-laced preacher who continually rebuked everything that would lead to joyfulness.*" Compare this stereotype with what the Puritan Richard Sibbes says. "*The end of the ministry is not to tyrannize over people's souls, to sting and to vex them, but to minister comfort, to be helpers of their joy; that is to help their salvation and happiness...*"¹⁵ Puritanism is *not* the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.

But many others have tried to define Puritanism *negatively*. They've said, for example, "The Puritans were against sex (this is obviously false, if for no other reason than the typically large size of Puritan families!) They were intolerant. They never laughed and were opposed to fun and sports. The only recreation they enjoyed was witch hunting. Others have tried to define them by their excesses. They wore excessively drab and unfashionable clothes. They were introspective and overly strict."

The point is, that many people today *think* they know who the Puritans were. But most people are repeating stereotypes that in many cases are as old as the movement itself. Thankfully many modern stereotypes are being debunked by the abundant printing of primary and secondary Puritan material, which gives us a more realistic picture. Put very simply, the term *Puritan* describes a holistic reform movement in England and North America from around 1550-1700. Now, I'd like to expand four parts of that definition.

First of all, Puritanism was a reform movement

"The Reformation in England was really never completed (as it was, at least to a greater extent in the Netherlands). *It ended in a compromise that is called the Anglican Church. Puritanism was born out of this compromise. Because of the settlement, the Reformation ended somewhere between Roman Catholicism and full Protestantism. It was inevitable that some would want to see it go further.*"¹⁶ The fact is that Christianity in England 450 years ago remained largely a formal matter. In addition to this, the church had either forgotten biblical doctrine altogether or had divorced it from Christian living. Note how neo-Puritan movement dovetails with the spiritual formalism and uncritical emotionalism of the latter part of this century. We're not much different. And so, Puritanism was a reform movement; a continuing reformation.

Secondly, the Puritan reform movement was holistic

By this, I mean that Puritanism was not just a reformation of theology; it called for complete reform. The Puritans indeed wanted to reform the theology of the Anglican Church. But they also demanded personal and civil reformation. According to J.I. Packer, "*Puritanism was an evangelical holiness movement seeking to implement its vision of spiritual renewal, national and personal, in the church, the state and the home; in education, evangelism, and economics; in individual discipleship and devotion, in pastoral care and competence.*"¹⁷ Puritanism was a *holistic* reform movement.

Thirdly, Puritanism was both an English and American movement

Many English Puritans came over to America to find religious freedom that was denied them in 1662 in England. 1662 was the year in which Puritan preachers were ejected from their pulpits. Many of them remained in England preaching in secret. Many of them, like John Bunyan, were imprisoned for preaching. Other Puritans came to America. They made a tremendous impact founding such institutions as Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth. Puritanism was a catalyst for the First Great Awakening which began in the 1730's. That brings us to the dates.

Fourthly, Puritanism began in around 1550 and ended around 1700

The Puritan Reform movement started shortly after Queen Elizabeth's partial reform acts called the "*Acts of Uniformity*" (1559). Wanting to reach a compromise between Catholics and Protestants she introduced some of the ideas of Luther and Calvin (via Cranmer) but failed to remove several important Catholic ceremonies. And so 1559 was really the beginning of the continuing reform movement. Reformers such as Thomas Cartwright (1553-1603) and William Perkins (1558-1602) began to lecture and preach decidedly Calvinistic, Evangelical doctrines. They called for a "*purification*" of the Anglican Church. For this they acquired the term "*Puritan*"¹⁸ The term began as a byword. In fact, "*throughout the sixteenth century (the term) was used (most) often as scornful adjective*" and considered slanderous.¹⁹ Today the Puritans might be called "Radical Right-wingers" or "Protestant Extremists" or the "holier-than-thou's."

The Puritan movement battled against the formalism of the Church of England until around 1689. This year marked the passing of the Toleration Acts under William and Mary which banned persecution of non-Anglicans. Around this time the reform movement technically ended because many of the Puritans began forming their own denominations. Now, Jonathan Edwards, often considered the last Puritan, wasn't actually born until 1703 (d. 1758). However the Puritan movement endured a bit longer in New England so Edwards is still "allowed" to be called a "Puritan."

So Puritanism was a holistic reform movement in England and North America from around 1550-1700.

3. What do we learn from them?

There are many positive things which we could learn from the Puritans. The three things I have selected seem to stand in stark contrast to modern Christianity.

First of all, the Puritans shaped their lives by Scripture²⁰

The fact that they *valued* Scripture is illustrated by the thousands of commentaries which the Puritans wrote. Now sometimes they are criticized for their wordiness in this regard. After all, the Puritan Joseph Caryl wrote twelve large volumes on *Job*. John Owen wrote seven volumes on *Hebrews*. Still, this shows their desire to leave no stone unturned when it comes to the Word of God.

But, not only did they value Scripture and write about Scripture, they also had, as it were, Scripture pulsing through their veins. What Charles Spurgeon said of the famous Puritan John Bunyan could be equally applied to all of the Puritans. Spurgeon said, "*if you pricked him anywhere he would bleed bibline*." He had a profound grasp on the Scriptures as his writings demonstrate. His Bible was almost his only companion for years in the prison, where he could often be seen on his knees in front of it in prayer.²¹

Now, because they valued Scripture and knew Scripture, it shaped their lives. The Puritan John Flavel illustrated this when he said, "*The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying*."²² The Puritans shaped their lives by the Scriptures ... could that be said of us?

Are your lives and the lives of your family self-consciously and unashamedly shaped by Scripture? Or could it be that we are tending toward the formalism and traditionalism of the Church of England

which the Puritans were reacting against. Could it be that your children don't even know how the Bible supports and shapes the way that you and they are to be living? Do you have family conversations about what the Bible says on various topics? Do you spend time with your family asking, "How should the Bible shape our recreational habits?" How should the Bible shape our work and study habits? What does the Bible say about the time that we spend together and the way that we speak to each other as a family? Because their lives were shaped by Scripture...

Their lives were God-centered (Here I am drawing from Leland Ryken's book *Worldly Saints*)

*"Thomas Shepherd wrote to his son at college, 'Remember the end of your life, which is coming back again to God and fellowship with God.'"*²³ Because of their God-centeredness, the Puritans were *"impelled by the insight that all of life is God's."*²⁴ *"C.S. Lewis commenting on the life of William Tyndale, a forerunner of the Puritans, said that 'he utterly denies the medieval distinction between religion and secular life.'"*²⁵

Now, this is interesting because the Puritans were zealous for personal piety. They emphasized the need for personal Bible reading and prayer. But they were not pietistic in the sense of *divorcing* spirituality from life. One of the geniuses of Puritanism is that they *integrated* religion and practical life. This was simply an application of passages such as Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 where God says to the Israelites, *"And these words, which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children. You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."* The God-centered life strives to see God in the commonplace. *"As a young man, Puritan Robert Blair (1593-1666) looked out of the window one day to see 'the sun brightly shining, and a cow with a full udder'; he remembered that the sun was made to give light and the cow to give milk, which made him realize how little he understood the purpose of his own life."*²⁶

I realize that I am speaking at a *Bible Study* dinner. But if we only seek to learn about God and talk about him in Bible Studies then we have not only failed to learn from the Puritans we are also failing to heed the words of Scripture. The God-centered Christian learns from God and applies God and teaches about God not only with regard to Scripture but in all of life.

Thirdly, they were serious about life

This is one area in which the Puritans were and are still criticized; and actually the criticism is partly warranted. It seems the Puritans were at times overly serious about life. However, they recognized something that we often miss. Richard Baxter told his congregants: *"Write upon the door of thy shop and chamber, 'I must be in heaven or hell for ever,' or 'this is the time upon which my endless life dependeth.'"*²⁷ Isn't he right? And if he is, wouldn't this help to promote a more serious view of life?

The Puritans equally saw youth as a time to be serious. English Bishop J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), who is often considered a Puritan born out of due time, was once speaking on the seriousness of life. He was confronted with the objection that his message was unreasonable. *"Youth is not the time of life when people ought to be serious and thoughtful."* He answers by relating a story told by the Puritan Matthew Henry, of a young Christian man who was accused by his friends of being too serious. He replied: *"I am serious; for (everything around me is serious). God is serious in observing us, Christ is serious in interceding for us, the Spirit is serious in striving for us, the truths of God are serious, our spiritual enemies are serious in their endeavors to ruin, poor lost sinners are serious in hell; and why then should not you and I be serious too?"*²⁸

Oh, that we and our children would, at least at times, be accused of being too serious. Now, certainly the Puritan Thomas Becon went too far when he advised parents to *"laugh not with thy son"*²⁹ but we and our children have much to learn about the seriousness of life.

Conclusion: Modern Puritans

One of the great pressing needs of our time is to live before the face of God in two worlds simultaneously. If we live before the face of God then we will not be content with the present state of our lives. We will see the need for further reformation. The Puritans understood and took seriously what Calvin had said earlier: *“So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of being he is...”* then we will see our need for regeneration and reformation. We need a continuing reformation. I can be frank here ... because I’m moving across the country in a few months. We need a reformation in our family lives. I’ve talked to enough students in our school who don’t know their parents. I’ve talked to enough students who have effectively heard their parents say, “Do what I say and not what I do.” The result of this is we have young people who are living a formal Christianity. And I wonder if this isn’t because they have seen their parents live a formal Christianity. Well, this is the very thing that the Puritans were rebelling against.

Brothers, we need to imitate the Puritans in living before the face of God. This is the *only* beginning of true piety. But, though we live face to face with God we realize that our feet are still fixed upon the earth. We must live in two worlds. The piety that we learn from living before the face of God must be lived out, not only in its spiritual dimensions but in its practical dimensions. We don’t need to return to the seventeenth century. But we do need to be modern Puritans, not only for our good but for the glory of the great God that we serve.

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Endnotes:

¹ Kelvin Randall, *Evangelicals Etcetera*. (Ashgate Publishing Co., 2005), 22.

² Joel Beeke, *Why You Should Read the Puritans*. Unpublished paper. Personal permission to use granted 03/27/08.

³ Joel Beeke. *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 289.

⁴ Beeke, *Quest*, 289.

⁵ Beeke, *Quest*, 290.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 332-334.

⁷ Prophesying 23

⁸ Ryken 105

⁹ Lloyd-Jones 385

¹⁰ Packer, *Quest*, 333.

¹¹ The second part of that answer should be enough to convince critics that the Puritans were not enamored with joylessness!

¹² John Bunyon, *Pilgrim’s Progress* (New York: Mershon Co., ND), 216.

¹³ Beeke, Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 111.

¹⁴ Ryken 1

¹⁵ Quoted in J. Gwyn-Thomas’ “The Puritan Doctrine of the Christian Joy,” *Puritan Papers: Volume Two* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001), 119.

¹⁶ Joel Beeke. Unpublished class lecture notes delivered in January 2006.

¹⁷ Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, xviii.

¹⁸ The term “Puritan” was first used in the 1560’s of those English Protestants who considered the reforms under Queen Elizabeth incomplete and called for further “purification.” Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), xv.

¹⁹ Beeke and Pederson, xvi.

²⁰ Beeke and Pederson, xix.

²¹ Quoted from a weak web-source: <http://www.ravenbrook.org/bunyan.php>

²² Beeke and Pederson, xx.

²³ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 206.

²⁴ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 208.

²⁵ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 208.

²⁶ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 209.

²⁷ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 210.

²⁸ Bishop Ryle in *Thoughts For Young Men*, quoting Matthew Henry, 34

²⁹ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 200.