

An Examination of the History and Legacy

of the Puritans

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine and to interact with the contents of three lectures given on the subject of puritanism in America by Sinclair Ferguson, Kevin Swanson, and Carl Trueman. In particular, the writer hopes to shed light on many of the historical inaccuracies which have caused these God-fearing, hard-working men being almost universally caricatured as prudish, narrow-minded, miserable, and unbending legalists. As will be demonstrated, a purely factual history of these godly men reveals them to be something of far more positive than negative significance in the formation of America as a country as well as in the development of her deep religious roots.

Part One of this paper will point out many of the most common allegations that have been made against the Puritans over the years, many of which, although the age of puritanism has long since past, persist as convenient ways of discrediting those who would seek to emulate their behavior and incorporate their godly world view.

In Part Two of this paper, the writer will attempt to set the record straight with regard to the aforementioned allegations against the Puritans by turning to many of the experts in the field of Puritan and early American history.

Part Three of this paper will consist of an in-depth examination of the origins of and influences on Puritan spirituality.

In Part Four of this paper the writer, will seek to answer the question of whether or not the Puritans can teach us anything today.

In the interest of complete fairness and impartiality, in Part Five of this paper, the writer will address some of the areas in which the Puritans were perhaps at fault in their understanding and application of what should be a Scriptural Christian world view. To attribute infallibility or

inerrancy to the Puritans would be, in this writer's opinion, just as damaging as the many negative caricatures which have been painted of them over the years.

In Part Six of this paper, the writer will offer a brief word of conclusion.

### **Part I: Bearing False Witness**

#### **What's in a Name?**

Puritan. The moniker alone will invariably evoke one of three responses from the typical individual: At one end of the pendulum swing, in the minds of many, the Puritans are worthy of perpetual respect and admiration. For others, thoughts of the Puritans will forever remain in the realm of uninformed neutrality. For those on the opposing end of the pendulum's swing, the term "Puritan" is met with immediate derogation, scorn, and ridicule. This is especially noteworthy given the Puritans' verifiable legacy as, generally speaking, men of unwavering godliness and inimitable character. And yet, as Swanson (2012) noted concerning the negativities surrounding the Puritans, "most Americans have bought into this caricature." Whether one agrees with Swanson's assessment implying that "most" people indeed view the Puritans as a detestable lot, in this writer's opinion, his estimation may not actually be far from the truth.

Upon close historical examination, it is simply undeniable that many have long held the Puritans in derision. In fact, as J. I. Packer observes in the Foreword to Ryken (1986), the name "Puritan" was "mud from the start." A phrase "Coined in the early 1560s," Packer continues, "it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its basic implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth's Laodicean and compromising Church of England." (p. ix). According to Daniels (1995):

For over four centuries "puritan" has been a synonym for the dour, the joyless, the repressed. Few historical concepts have proven so strong: from the literati of Elizabethan

England through the critics of the Moral Majority in the 1980s, the image of the Puritan as a killjoy has endured. (p. 3)

According to Wakefield (1957), from the beginning, there has been a prevailing sentiment that “Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy” (p. x).

Even today’s Merriam-Webster online dictionary reveals that, at least in some degree, this same negative sentiment concerning the Puritans yet persists. Identified as a pejorative, the synonyms listed for the word “puritanical,” for example, include “blue-nosed,” “nice-nelly,” “prudish,” and “straitlaced.” Words said to be related to this word are “priggish” and “stuffy,” arguably pejoratives as well in their own right.

### **Why All the Negativity?**

Opinions abound concerning precisely why the Puritans were cast in such a negative light so early on in their existence. Some, for example, see a great deal of the negativity stemming from a notorious series of unfortunate events which were clearly not representative of the Puritans’ finest hour: the Salem witch trials. Beginning in the spring of 1692, a wave of hysteria swept through Salem, Massachusetts as the result of the testimony of a group of young girls who, claiming to be demon-possessed themselves, accused several women of being engaged in witchcraft. By September 1692, having been sentenced by Puritan magistrates Jonathan Corwin and John Hawthorne, a total of nineteen women had been hanged at nearby Gallows Hill while approximately 150 other men, women, and children awaited a similar fate. If not for the intercession of Increase Mather (then president of Harvard College) and his son, Cotton, the trials would likely have continued. According to Schanzer (2011), the Mathers successfully argued that the standards of evidence for alleged witchcraft should be equal to those for any other crime commenting that, “It would be better that ten suspected witches may escape than one innocent person be condemned” (p. 107). As public sentiment concerning the trials began to

reflect more and more opposition, the trials became less frequent and, by early 1693, all who had been brought up on charges of witchcraft were pardoned and released. Although this sad series of events only lasted a brief while, considerable damage had been done to the reputation of the Puritans, creating a dark stain on an otherwise spotless reputation, a stain which, unfortunately, remains a defining characteristic in the minds of many to this day.

While the Salem witch trials undoubtedly contributed to a tarnished reputation, Swanson (2012) also attributes much of the negative sentiment surrounding the Puritans to men such as celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, ironically of Puritan descent himself. In his classic work, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is believed to have routinely cast the Puritans in somewhat of a dim light. According to Hall (2011), Hawthorne's views are attributed to "the 'grim rigidity' he imputes to the men and women wearing 'sad-colored garments' who gather outside the Boston prison to observe, self-satisfied, the punishment of Hester Prynne..." (p. 85). These sentiments, the author contends, "embody an ethics of righteousness devoid of human sympathy or, as Hawthorne would have it, 'heart'" (p. 85). Agreeing with this assessment, Daniels (1995) notes:

Probably more than any other piece of literature, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* cemented the image of the joyless Puritan into the American mind. Not content to practice mere self-denial, Hawthorne's Puritans opposed happiness, leisure, and recreation anywhere they found them. (p. 4)

Interestingly, however, further research reveals that not everyone shared the opinion that Hawthorne's view of the Puritans was a negative one. According to Mills (1948):

The critics have made much of [Hawthorne's] Puritan subject matter and his sympathetic treatment of Puritan themes. Some have come close to identifying Hawthorne with Puritanism, as though he were a spiritual contemporary of Cotton Mather born out of his time. (p. 78)

The author further observed that early 20<sup>th</sup> century American journalist and literary critic W.C. Brownell “saw in Hawthorne a genuine son of the Puritans and called *The Scarlet Letter* ‘the Puritan Faust’” (p. 78). Similarly, Mills (1948) related, Herbert Schneider (early 20<sup>th</sup> century professor emeritus of religion and philosophy at Columbia University) “sees Hawthorne as reviving the best in Puritanism,” having recovered “the spirit of piety, humility, and tragedy in the face of the inscrutable ways of God” (p. 78). Ryken (1986) also adds some important insight here on the importance of properly categorizing Hawthorne’s work, not as actual history, but as satirical fiction:

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “*The Scarlet Letter*” is not a historically accurate picture of the Puritans. In the preface of the novel, Hawthorne describes discovering the scarlet letter that Hester wears in the story as punishment for her adultery while working in a Salem custom house. Hawthorne’s account is purely fictional; he never ran across such a letter in real life. Furthermore, Hawthorne (who wrote two centuries after the original Puritans) used the Puritans in his story for satiric purposes, and it is a convention of satire to exaggerate the negative features of the thing being attacked. It is a great tragedy that the only picture many people have of the Puritans comes from works of literary satire that make no pretense of being sources of accurate history. (p. 189)

While the aforementioned factors have undeniably contributed a great deal to much of the negativity surrounding the Puritans, in this writer’s opinion, the systemic cause is fairly simple to identify from a Scriptural standpoint. As the apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, in 2 Tim. 3:12, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Similarly, as the apostle Peter wrote to his readers in 1 Pe. 4:12ff:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Far from merely being a first century phenomenon, the annals of church history are replete with example after example of those who were persecuted, including many who would die a martyr’s

death for simply desiring to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. Among these, many were Puritans. In 1581, for example, Richard Hooker, a newly ordained Anglican priest, published his anti-Puritan book *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* which was a direct attack on many of the Puritan notions governing how worship was to be conducted. In 1590, even William Shakespeare got in on the act ridiculing Puritans in his characterizations of Falstaff, Malvolio, Flavius, and others. In 1593, at the instigation of Elizabeth I, the unambiguously named Act Against Puritans was published wherein it was stipulated that all Puritan assemblies and activities were to be outlawed. In the end, the overzealous enforcement of this Act resulted in the hanging of a few Separatists as well. In 1618, James I issues his “Declaration of Sports” which was read in all of the churches. The stated goal of this declaration was “to encourage healthy fun and games on Sundays.” Needless to say, this was a direct blow to the Puritans’ belief in the solemnity and sacredness of the Lord’s Day. In 1628, William Laud was made archbishop of London and began to oversee the institutional persecution of the Puritans in England, a period of persecution which would last until Laud’s downfall and imprisonment in 1640. Perhaps the most prominent among those persecuted for their faith was John Bunyan of *Pilgrim’s Progress* fame. Arrested for preaching without a license in 1660, Bunyan was subsequently imprisoned for twelve years. Adding to the grief of his unjust confinement, he was also separated from his wife and four small children, including his eldest, a blind daughter.

One might be inclined to think that the Puritans’ flight to the New World brought an end to their persecution. This, however, was not the case at all. As Swanson (2012) indicates, although by 1640 there were thousands of Puritans in America, Puritan pastors were routinely kicked out of Virginia because they were not Anglican. In Swanson’s (2012) estimation, although the Puritan era proper has long since ended, Puritans are still, in a way, being

persecuted today. This, he insists, is because the humanists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century took over the church which, in turn, led to the takeover of our educational institutions. For example, the Puritans are not read in our schools today, he maintains, “because of the God-hating humanists. They hate the sovereignty of God and favor man’s free will.” Whether the reader completely agrees with this sentiment is immaterial. What is patently clear is the fact that believers are, in Swanson’s (2012) words, living in a time when “anarchy is preferred over narrowness in terms of Christian liberty” and “pluralism is welcome, regardless of one’s religion” (unless, of course, one’s religion happens to be Christianity).

As stated previously, the systemic cause of the persecution suffered not only by the Puritans themselves but by all who hold similar values is perhaps best summed up by Christ’s own verdict on the matter in Jn. 3:19-21:

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

## **Part II: Setting the Record Straight**

As Swanson (2012) points out, one of the most unsettling things inherent among those to whom the noble task of constructing the historical record is entrusted is that “the winner always gets to write the history.” Nowhere is this more obvious than in the revisionist history that has developed concerning the Puritans. So, what is the real story? What do the Puritans look like sans the filter of bias that has clouded so much of their rich history and tradition? A brief word on their true history is certainly warranted here if the record is to be effectively set straight.



### **A Brief History of Puritanism**

Providing an exact date for the beginning of puritanism is not easy. The difficulty of this task is compounded significantly when one considers the sheer number of (sometimes voluminous) works that have been made available over the years, each one varying considerably on the issue of Puritan beginnings. Hall (1965), for example, points out that the term Puritan was not used until 1567. Knappen (1939), on the other hand, asserted that puritanism actually began much earlier, in 1524, with the ministry of William Tyndale. Lloyd-Jones (1987) agreed with this assessment, arguing:

It is clear that two of the great characteristics of puritanism began to show themselves in Tyndale. He had a burning desire that the common people would be able to read the Scriptures. But there were great obstacles in his way; and it is the way in which he met and overcame the obstacles that show that Tyndale was a Puritan. He issued a translation of the Bible without the endorsement and sanction of the bishops. That was the first shot fired by puritanism...Another action on his part which was again most characteristic of the Puritans was that he left this country without the royal assent...and went to Germany, and there, helped by Luther and others, he completed his great work.

It was this attitude, Lloyd-Jones (1987) argues, which set the stage for others, leading them to take even bolder steps towards reform in the established church. While this writer holds Dr. Lloyd-Jones in the highest esteem, he would be inclined to disagree slightly on a semantical basis. To refer to Tyndale as a Puritan is, in this writer's opinion, a bit anachronistic given that the Puritans were reacting, not necessarily to the issues they had with the teaching and practices within the Roman Catholic Church but with those within Henry VIII's newly formed Anglican Church. Thus, while Tyndale may have indeed been a "proto-Puritan" figure, he simply was not a Puritan according to the most widely accepted definition of the term.

To be clear, puritanism actually sprang from the desire that many within the Anglican Church had expressed for further reform. Granted, the establishment of a new church after breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church was certainly a considerable step in the right

direction (regardless of Henry VIII's selfish and sinful motives), however, it soon became quite apparent that the Anglican Church was little more than a copy of the Roman Catholic Church, having retained most of its erroneous doctrine and unscriptural ceremonialism. Those who would later be labeled as "Puritans" were simply the ones who desired further reformation within the Anglican Church. As Lloyd-Jones (1987) observed, "That, surely, is the essential and most characteristic note of puritanism – the feeling that the Reformation had not gone far enough" (p. 242). And how successful were the Puritans at promoting further, sustained reformation within the Anglican Church? Unfortunately, they enjoyed very little success, which resulted in many of them setting sail for the New World, an idea which quickly gained traction. In fact, as alluded to previously, by 1640 it is believed that there were as many as 40,000 Puritans in America. At this point, a further word of clarification must be offered in an effort to correct what is often easily misunderstood concerning Puritan identity. Simply expressed, contrary to popular belief, the Pilgrims and the Puritans did not comprise the same group of early American religious freedom-seekers. As has been alluded to previously, the Puritans sought reform within the Anglican Church while the Pilgrims advocated complete separation. As Hodgson (2006) expressed concerning celebrated Pilgrim William Brewster:

The dominant intellectual fashion in Cambridge, ever since the ideas of the Reformation first arrived in England from Europe, was Protestantism, and in particular the more radical ideas of those who became the English Separatists. We know from the books in Brewster's library later in life, as well as from what we know of his declared opinions, how deeply he was influenced by Protestant ideas. At the heart of them was the conviction that the Protestant Reformation had not been carried far enough, that the Elizabethan Settlement was a cowardly political compromise, and that the church must go further in the direction of reform if it was to be purged of the corruptions and distortions introduced by the medieval period, with its papacy and its bishops, its ceremonial and vestments, its hierarchy and its worldly wealth. (pp. 25-26)

While it is indeed true that the Pilgrims and Puritans shared many common beliefs and goals, the Pilgrims deemed complete separation from the Anglican Church the only opportunity for the true church to return to her Scriptural moorings.

With beliefs firmly rooted in the theology of the Protestant Reformation, both Pilgrim and Puritan alike saw the “New World” as a place where those escaping the religious tyranny of the Anglican theocracy could establish a country in which their God could be worshiped without fear of persecution and in accordance with His inspired, infallible, and inerrant word.

With this fresh beginning in the New World, the Puritans saw a wonderful opportunity to make a tremendous impact on those who would follow. As early Puritan settler and Governor John Winthrop famously wrote in 1630 while aboard the *Arbella* awaiting passage into the New World:

We must knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities... We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all the people are upon us so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout all the world.

### **The Puritan View of Christian Liberty**

In order to succeed in these new endeavors, the Puritans considered it quite necessary to maintain a certain posture of rigidity with regard to Christian liberty. This rigid stance, however, must be understood in the overall context of society at large during this time. The Puritans were quite narrow on Christian liberty, yes, but what many in the historical revisionist camp conveniently fail to report is that most everyone of this time period, in keeping with their premodern presuppositions about such things, was similarly quite narrow. It was not only the Puritans, for example, who believed in an unwavering devotion to and preaching of God’s word.

This was also a priority shared by many within mainline Protestantism, along with such practices as Sabbath keeping, worship, and the fellowship of the saints.

Additionally, while it is true that the Puritans longed to live in such a way as to honor God through strict obedience to His word, this does not mean that they eschewed anything and everything that might be considered enjoyable. In fact, many scholars have proven that just the opposite is true. Daniels (1995) has done much to dispel such erroneous notions in his unambiguously titled, Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial America. Generally speaking, the author argues:

Puritan piety never admired the extreme ascetic. Neither did it embrace a gloomy, otherworldly, and tragic conception of life, which sought to forbid relaxations. Puritans may have been tough-minded in judging sinners, they may have been complacent about the superiority of their own beliefs, but they never argued that virtue had no room for cakes and ale...Pleasure had a useful role in Puritan cosmology; never did Puritans believe that actions were sinful merely because they were enjoyable. (pp. 6-7)

And yet the negative stereotypes persist. As Ryken (1986) observed, puritanism, we are told today, “damages the human soul, renders it hard and gloomy, and deprives it of sunshine and happiness” (p. 1). As stated previously, what is especially noteworthy about this oft-repeated claim is that, in reality, the lives of the Puritans were much more normal than what is portrayed by their detractors. In a world that has progressively and successfully redefined and thus reshaped the minds of the masses along the way, it is no wonder that morality is viewed by many as little more than stifling legalism; that humility is seen, not as something to be desired but as a form of unhealthy self-loathing; that opposition to indoctrination is tantamount to approved ignorance, or that a strict adherence to biblical standards somehow constitutes a threat to the safety and stability of humankind. During the time of the Puritans, however, it must be understood that these mores and values were not looked down upon but were quite common, even among those who perhaps did not share the Puritan’s views on religious matters.

## Dispelling the Myths

As concerns their alleged aversion to all things enjoyable, there is ample evidence to suggest that much of what many today believe to be true about the Puritans is based on little more than myth.

Many, for example, teach that the Puritans were against sex when, in fact, they considered sex to be one of God's greatest gifts to be enjoyed within the confines of matrimony.

Others maintain that the Puritans were somehow anti-fashion, insisting that only the most drab and unfashionable clothing be worn. While they did in fact exhibit a preference for wearing black on the Lord's Day or at other times when a sense of dignity or formality was required, their normal daily attire was actually quite colorful. As Ryken (1986) explains:

The American Puritan William Brewster wore a blue coat, a violet coat, and a green waistcoat. Anthony Wood described how John Owen looked during his days as vice-chancellor at Oxford University: "hair powdered, cambric band with large costly band strings, velvet jacket, breeches set round at the knees with ribbons pointed, and Spanish leather boots with cambric tops." Russet or various shades of orange-brown were the most common color for clothes, but surviving inventories also show many items in red, blue, green, yellow, purple, and so forth. (p. 3)

Another of the popular and enduring misconceptions concerning the Puritans is that they were opposed to all forms of sports and recreation. Not so, contends Ryken (1986). In fact, the Puritans routinely "enjoyed such varied activities as hunting, fishing, a form of football, bowling, reading, music, swimming, skating, and archery" (p. 3). The Puritans did forbid the enjoyment of these things on Sundays, however, this was not a uniquely Puritan sentiment as it was also held by most of those of the Christian persuasion that the Lord's Day was to be reserved for worship and extended contemplation of the things of God. In fact, this long-standing belief is something that many in the church today continue uphold, as evidenced by the most popularly

held Confessions. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), for example, reads as follows in this regard:

This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

Another of the false charges often leveled at Puritanism is the notion that it was a movement reserved exclusively for old people. In actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Quoting C. S. Lewis, for example, Ryken (1986) noted that the early Puritans were “young, fierce, progressive intellectuals, very fashionable and up-to-date” (p. 4). Especially enlightening in this regard is the taunting of the Elizabethan Puritans in 1583 by Anglican Archbishop Whitgift who, according to Ryken (1986) said to them condescendingly, “You are...but boys in comparison of us, who have studied divinity before you were born” (p. 4).

Perhaps one of the most oft-cited of the charges levied against the Puritans is that they were too strict. This particular charge, it seems, is not entirely without justification. The Puritans were indeed a very serious-minded and devout people. In fact, it was this charge of strictness which led to the Puritans initially being called “Precisionists.” Ryken (1986) relates a revealing snippet of a conversation between English Puritan preacher Richard Rogers and another who told him, “Mr. Rogers, I like you and your company very well, but you are so precise.” To this Mr. Rogers reportedly replied, “O Sir, I serve a precise God” (p. 5).

While, as has been shown, some of the charges levied against the Puritans did have some degree of merit, many of them actually border on the absurd. One such example can be seen in the allegation that the Puritans were an ignorant people who opposed education. As Ryken (1986) correctly notes, however, “No Christian movement in history has been more zealous for

education than the Puritans. The adjective ‘learned’ was one of their most frequently used positive titles for a person” (p. 7). Indeed, the founding of such revered institutions as Harvard and Yale Universities owe their very existence to the Puritans. Although one would be hard-pressed to detect any clear Christian sentiment expressed at the current liberal enclave known as Harvard today, there is no doubt that the university was founded on Christian principles. As Ryken (1986) shares, this was enumerated in the institutions earliest rules:

Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. (p. 161)

Needless to say, the Puritans would indeed be shocked by the extent to which education has been secularized today. As Cotton Mather expressed:

Before all, and above all, tis the knowledge of the Christian religion that parents are to teach their children... The knowledge of other things, though it be never so desirable an accomplishment for them, our children may arrive to eternal happiness without it. But the knowledge of the godly doctrine in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ is a million times more necessity for them. (p. 162)

It is not as though the Puritans believed that all education was to be religious. This constitutes yet another of the false allegations made against them. In truth, colleges such as Harvard were established as liberal arts institutions, the general consensus among the Puritans being that the most effective minister of the word of God would be one who possesses a wide variety of knowledge on a range of subjects. As Ryken observed, “The Puritan commitment to humanistic knowledge was based on the conviction that God is the ultimate source of all truth. All truth is God’s truth” (p. 167). He goes on to quote Richard Sibbes’ assertion of the same idea:

Truth comes from God, wheresoever we find it, and it is ours, it is the church’s... We must not make an idol of these things, but truth, wheresoever we find it, is the church’s; therefore, with a good conscience we may make use of any human author.

In summary, and in preparation for the ensuing discussion of Puritan spirituality, suffice it to say that the most common cause for a great deal of the animus exhibited toward the Puritans would be their penchant for purely binary or “black and white” thinking with regard to matters of right and wrong. On such issues, they were simply immovable. As Ryken (1986) states:

For Puritans, the question of right and wrong was more important than any other. They saw life as a continuous struggle between good and evil. The world was claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan. There was no neutral ground. (p. 11)

Among the beliefs that resulted from this fundamental presupposition were things such as a view of sexuality that forbade sex outside of marriage. As Swanson (2012) relates, only 11% of Puritans were guilty of fornication and, in those cases, marriage always followed. This proves, Swanson (2012) contends, that they were normal people who simply handled everything biblically. Speaking of sex, Puritans are also very often mischaracterized as being overly prudish in this regard. On the contrary, as Swanson (2012) indicates, “The Puritans were not prudish but spoke often about God’s gift of sex.” As Daniels (1995) related:

Practiced with moderation, sex within marriage met all the Puritan requirements for appropriate relaxation: it was sanctioned by Scripture; it did not squander undue time or resources; it refreshed body and spirit; and it was productive. Although theologians did not dwell on the recreational qualities of sexual intercourse, they did regard it as a pleasurable duty wives and husbands owed each other. Failure to perform the marital act was evidence of the failure of the marriage and one of the permissible grounds for divorce. “God was of another mind,” John Cotton wrote, “than to believe in the excellence of virginity.” (p. 125)

Ryken (1986) also weighs in on this often misunderstood topic saying, “Married sex was not only legitimate in the Puritan view; it was meant to be exuberant. Gouge said that married couples should engage in sex ‘with good will and delight, willingly, readily, and cheerfully’” (p. 44). Lest the reader think that the Puritan view of sex was that it was for recreational purposes only (sadly, the predominant view in today’s society), it must also be noted that theirs was a very balanced view which included sexual intimacy as part of a three-fold purpose for marriage:



procreation, a remedy against sexual sin, and mutual society. As Ryken (1986) notes, “The distinctive contribution of the Puritans within this framework was to shift the primary emphasis from procreation to companionship” (p. 47).

As clearly evidenced by these beliefs, the Puritans were also huge proponents of marriage, believing that (according to their understanding of 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 2) anyone serving in the pastorate was to be a married man. According to Swanson (2012), William Gouge believed that it was “the doctrine of devils” to not be married. It must also be emphasized that the Puritans were thus very focused on the family as well. As Swanson (2012) indicates:

The Puritans had a multi-generational vision and passion to see that their children walked in the vision they received from the word of God; they prayed for their children and encouraged fathers to pray fervently for the salvation of future generations. There was a faithfulness to them that is unmatched.

### **Part III: Puritan Spirituality - Origins and Influences**

#### **Puritan Theology is Reformation Theology**

One of the most helpful ways to understand the basis for the Puritans’ practical behavior is to seek to gain a proper understanding of the origins *of* and influences *on* their spirituality. After all, it is universally understood that how one behaves in a practical sense reveals a great deal about what he believes and why he believes it. How might one thus characterize the origins and influences of Puritan theology? As noted previously, Puritan theology is, simply stated, Reformation theology. As Trueman (2012) indicates, it was Martin Luther who, in the second decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, introduced those on the European continent to the doctrine of justification by faith and its crucial component: assurance. Prior to Luther’s introduction of these doctrines, the medieval church understood the assurance of salvation as something to which only those who had attained “super saint” status were entitled. As one who is familiar with these doctrines can attest, the idea that one could be justified apart from his own works and have

assurance of that salvation literally revolutionized much of the church at large. As Trueman (2012) observed, “The point is the Reformation reshapes everything. Protestant spirituality today is very distinctive because of the doctrine of justification by faith.” Interestingly, he continues, this pivotal doctrine was also responsible for changes in the very architecture of churches. In Roman Catholic churches, the eye was drawn to the altar while in Protestant churches, the pulpit occupied the central position, which was reflective of a definite shift toward word-based worship.

This is not to suggest that the church in the middle ages had no interest in Scripture because they did. The Reformation, however, simply ushered in a new age of Scriptural priority as the Word of God was wrested from the papacy and the magisterium and once again given its rightful place as the priority in worship. Trueman (2012) makes a very interesting observation regarding the effect of this shift:

The Lutheran reformation was seen as the recovery of the gospel message of justification by faith. This is why Lutheran churches look like Catholic churches. They weren't so concerned with radically changing the church. The other Reformers (Zwingli, Knox, et al.) saw the Reformation as a crusade against idolatry within the church. Luther, however, disagreed.

This, Trueman (2012) argues, is why Lutheran churches look like Catholic churches. The Lutherans were far less concerned with radically changing the church and more intent on seeing her return to her gospel roots.

### **The Regulative Principle of Worship**

The Reformation also gave birth to what is known as the regulative principle of worship. While many feel that this principle owes its origin to John Knox, many see an earlier introduction (or at least a prototype) in a particularly interesting act of defiance. In 1550, John Hooper was appointed to serve as Bishop of Gloucester in England. Prior to this appointment,

Hooper had committed himself to considerable study on the European continent under the tutelage of such luminaries as Heinrich Bullinger and Huldrych Zwingli. Having become convinced of the errors within the Roman Catholic Church, when asked to wear the vestments during his consecration, he refused on the grounds that the wearing of such “costumes” was not required from Scripture. He was subsequently jailed but soon thereafter relented and was thus consecrated. Nevertheless, Hooper’s insistence that he not be required to do that which was not specifically ordered in Scripture was the precursor to what would later be known as the regulative principle. Scottish reformer John Knox would later summarize the regulative principle saying, “All worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry.” According to Thomas (2010), defined in its simplest terms, “the regulative principle of worship states that the corporate worship of God is to be founded upon specific directions of Scripture.” The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) provides a more detailed definition:

...the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture. (21.1).

Although, as evidenced in the aforementioned account of John Hooper’s defiance, there were earlier examples of attempts to adhere to a Scripturally-based form of worship, again, it is believed that John Knox is largely responsible for the introduction of the regulative principle as it is observed in Protestant churches today.

It is not as though the introduction of the regulative principle was without event either.

As Trueman (2012) points out:

The regulative principle has been both positive and negative within Reformed practice. One hundred years after Knox, the debates about the regulative principle were focused on the Book of Common Prayer. There are things in the book that are simply not scriptural.

From the 1560s onward, the Book of Common Prayer was used as a means of controlling the church by the British government.

Evidence of this tension can be seen historically in the differences between worship in New England and worship in Britain. In the former, there were weekly sermons preached on the providence of God while, in the latter, the government did not believe that sermons should come from the preacher's own preparation but from a common source. This, Trueman (2012) argues, is where the homily and liturgy (still observed in the Anglican church today) came from. The Book of Common Prayer became a means of controlling the people. While the homily made sure that everyone heard the same message, the Book of Common Prayer ensured that no one was even able to utter prayers of their own. The regulative principle was thus designed to secure religious freedom by ensuring that churches who faithfully observed it would not be subject to worshipping in any way not specifically commanded in Scripture. On a contemporary note, although the regulative principle of worship has indeed been widely accepted by many, it is not without its detractors. As Waldron (2007) observed:

It seems that one of the major intellectual stumbling blocks which hinders men from embracing the Regulative Principle is that it involves the idea that the church and its worship is ordered in a regulated way different from the rest of life. In the rest of life God gives men the great precepts and general principles of his word and within the bounds of these directions allows them to order their lives as seems best to them. He does not give them minute directions as to how they shall build their houses or pursue their secular vocations. The Regulative principle, on the other hand, involves a limitation on human initiative in freedom not characteristic of the rest of life. It clearly assumes that there is a distinction between the way the church and its worship is to be ordered and the way the rest of human society and conduct is to be ordered. Thus, the Regulative Principle is liable to strike many as oppressive, peculiar, and, therefore, suspiciously out of accord with God's dealings with mankind and the rest of life.

It must be understood that in spite of this particular disagreement concerning how worship was to be conducted in the church, doctrinally speaking, there was not a substantial difference between what the Puritans and Anglicans believed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Puritans,

for example, did not have a problem with the Thirty-nine Articles. Where they differed from the Anglicans was, pure and simple, in the area of worship and how it was to be conducted.

### **Coram Deo**

According to Swanson (2012), one of the most important aspects of Puritan spirituality is that they sought to live every moment of their lives “coram Deo.” Translated literally, this term refers to something that takes place in the presence of, or before the face of, God. According to Sproul (2013), “to live coram Deo is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.” The Puritans committed themselves to this principle daily. Examining this principle further, one who is familiar with the Puritans’ devotion to God can readily attest to its fitness as a means of describing them. As Sproul (2013) continues:

To live in the presence of God is to understand that whatever we are doing and wherever we are doing it, we are acting under the gaze of God. God is omnipresent. There is no place so remote that we can escape His penetrating gaze.

As recorded in Thomas (1975), Thomas Watson once observed, “A man has no time for which he is not accountable to God. If his very diversions are not governed by reason and religion he will one day suffer for the time he has spent in them” (p. 141). Far from being a strictly Puritan notion of how life is to be lived, Watson was merely agreeing with the apostle Paul who wrote in Eph. 5:15-16, “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.” The Puritans did not, as many today are prone to do, separate their lives between the “religious” and “nonreligious.” Once again, Sproul (2013) is instructive here:

To live all of life coram Deo is to live a life of integrity. It is a life of wholeness that finds its unity and coherency in the majesty of God. A fragmented life is a life of disintegration. It is marked by inconsistency, disharmony, confusion, conflict, contradiction, and chaos. The Christian who compartmentalizes his or her life into two sections of the religious and the nonreligious has failed to grasp the big idea. The big idea

is that all of life is religious or non of life is religious. To divide life between the religious and the nonreligious is itself a sacrilege.

Professing Christians today would do well to recover this most important Puritan principle and incorporate it into their own lives as a means of consistently honoring and glorifying the God they claim to serve. This certainly makes for a fitting segue into the next part of this paper in which the writer seeks to answer the question, “Can the Puritans teach Christians anything today?”

#### **Part IV: Can the Puritans Teach Christians Anything Today?**

As Spanish philosopher and novelist George Santayana famously observed, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Nowhere is this more applicable than as a means of expressing how important it is that Christians today familiarize themselves with the many contributions made by the Puritans, especially with regard to truly living according to what they say they believe.

#### **Puritan Contributions to the Church**

According to Ferguson (2009), Christians today can indeed learn a great deal from the Puritans. Before one can actually learn from them, however, he must first understand the nature of their great contributions to the church at-large. Speaking of John Knox (considered by many to be the Father of English puritanism), Ferguson (2009) observed:

He had a burning vision to reform the church of Jesus Christ so it no longer had a face that looked like it had come from Scotland, England, or even Geneva; but a church that was reformed according to the Scriptures; a church that looked, not to tradition, but to the Scriptures in all respects.

The Puritans that would follow Knox shared his vision for a church which would transcend all traditional and cultural boundaries and adhere to a purely Scriptural pattern in all matters of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Sadly (but naturally), the acceptability of such a staunch position of

ensuring that all things be done in a manner consistent with Scripture began, over time, to wane considerably and those carrying the “Puritan” moniker soon found themselves cast in an increasingly negative light.

One of the most tragic outcomes stemming from the many negative stereotypes that have been attached to the Puritans is that, in the minds of many, it is believed that there is nothing positive about them from which society today may benefit. Of course, given the state of this country’s current government system and its seeming penchant for all things immoral and unethical, short of true revival sweeping the land, it is highly unlikely that the tenets of puritanism will ever be reconsidered. For Christians, however, there are actually tremendous benefits which could be realized through a reemphasis of certain Puritan distinctives. For example, the Puritans sought to purify the church and see it returned to its Biblical roots. As Ferguson (2009) notes, we would do well to “recognize that we ourselves need to recapture their vision.” When boiled down to its most rudimentary elements, Ferguson argues, “the Puritan movement was a twin-pronged burden: to see the reformation of the church and the revival and renewing of the church by the Holy Spirit.”

### **God-pleasers Not Man-pleasers**

Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be learned from the Puritans is that they were not particularly beholden to the formal church establishment or government. They instead sought the face of God with the sole aim that His will might be done above all else. The reader will note that this in no way implies that these godly men were anti-church government, but simply that they understood quite well the inherent inadequacies of human government and wanted to be sure they were conducting themselves as God-pleasers and not man-pleasers. It was this wholesale dependence on God and the consistent seeking of His will which led to

widespread success in a number of important areas. As Ferguson (2009) states, “Men became burdened much like the apostle Paul, going places where the gospel might take hold and spread.”

With this newfound burden came the realization that one of the best places to start their renewed spread of the gospel would be the universities in England. Men like Cambridge’s William Perkins actually enjoyed a great deal of success in this undertaking. Students under his tutelage included notables such as William Ames, Thomas Goodwin, James Ussher, and Richard Sibbes. Given this focus on reaching the universities, the Puritan movement soon began to move like wildfire throughout England, producing other notable Puritans such as Cotton Mather, John Cotton, Richard Baxter, and John Owen, but a few examples of the fruit of this movement of God in the hearts of those sharing a common burden, a common prayer life, and a common desire to see the gospel carried to the ends of the earth. As Ferguson (2009) opines:

We badly need this today...Not just famous ministers with large congregations but brothers in the ministry spread across the country. No hierarchy, no formal supremacy, but a burden to bring the gospel to a lost and dying world...God does great things when ordinary people are bound together and committed to a cause which promotes His glory.

In this writer’s opinion, there is indeed no greater need in the world today than for ministers of the gospel to return to this pattern of ministry. When one looks out across the current evangelical landscape, he would be hard-pressed indeed to find churches in which the lone objective is to preach Christ crucified and how salvation must be procured through Him alone. As Boice astutely noted:

We don't like to admit it, but anyone who honestly evaluates the church's life and outlook will understand that these are not good days for evangelicalism. Yes, we've achieved success, but in a worldly sort of way -- big numbers, big budgets, and big outreaches. Yet church attendance is actually down and alleged "born again believers" do not differ significantly in their worldview from their neighbors. Why? We have forgotten our theology and, consciously or not, have pursued the wisdom of the world, accepted its "doctrines," and utilized its methods. (p. 14)



Similarly, MacArthur (1993) observed:

The new philosophy is straightforward: The church is in competition against the world, and the world is very good at capturing people's attention and affections. The Church, on the other hand, tends to be very poor at "selling" its product. Evangelism should therefore be viewed as a marketing challenge, and the church should market the gospel in the same way all modern businesses sell their products. That calls for some fundamental changes. The goal in all marketing is "to make both the producer and consumer satisfied." So anything that tends to leave the "consumer" unsatisfied must be jettisoned. Preaching – particularly preaching about sin, righteousness, and judgment – is too confrontive to be truly satisfying. The church must learn to couch the truth in ways that amuse and entertain. (p. 38)

There can be no doubt that God has raised up in our current generation great stalwarts of the faith; men who are indeed lifting high the banner of Christ and faithfully declaring, "thus saith the Lord" week in and week out to congregations numbering in the thousands. Very often, however, as Ferguson (2009) laments, the unintended consequence of this has been the coronation of a relatively new breed of gospel communicator: the celebrity pastor. Though not necessarily a negative thing in and of itself, this trend has created in many men an unhealthy infatuation with and a preoccupation to be like those who have enjoyed such success. Needless to say, when the prospect of career success supplants one's desire to honor and glorify God, nothing truly good can result. In this writer's opinion, it is this very thing which has led to such things as the overtly pragmatic emerging/emergent controversy that has infected so much of the church at-large. No longer is it seen as important to guard a regenerate church membership, what seems to matter most to many is simply attracting more people into the church which will, in turn, result in bigger budgets and more lucrative salaries for her leaders. In many of these churches, the idea of the church being a counter-cultural organism is considered to be outdated, outmoded and, in the worst cases, simply intolerable. What is needed, many contend, is a church which accepts everyone just the way they are, even if it means approving of that which God clearly considers abominable. Conveniently, many churches have adopted special (and wholly

unbiblical) labels and categories with which to classify those who fail to even attempt to live lives according to Scripture's clear standards. The term "carnal Christian," for example, once widely considered an oxymoronic term, was adopted as a means of identifying those who are allegedly in a saving relationship with Christ and yet bear no evidence of a transformed life in their daily conduct. What is more, one would do well to note how many things are becoming acceptable, even normative, in the church that were once believed to be (and indeed are) in direct violation of the Word of God. Only recently, an article appeared in several prominent news mediums which announced:

A Southern Baptist church in California has broken with the denomination's stance on homosexuality and has decided to accept the LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] community without judgment. The church made the change after its lead pastor announced that he no longer holds to the teaching that homosexuality is a sin.

Similarly distressing, a 2005 interview of Joel Osteen (pastor of what is arguably America's largest church) by CNN's Larry King is also quite telling concerning how far many in the churches of today have strayed from Scriptural truth. In this interview, King asks Osteen, "How about issues that the church has feelings about? Abortion? Same-sex marriages?" Osteen responds, "Yeah. You know what, Larry? I don't go there. I just..." King then interjects somewhat incredulously, "You don't call them sinners?" to which Osteen immediately responds, "I don't." King then probes further, "Is that a word you don't use?" Osteen replied:

I don't use it. I never thought about it. But I probably don't. But most people already know what they're doing wrong. When I get them to church I want to tell them that you can change. There can be a difference in your life. So I don't go down the road of condemning.

### **Contributing Factors**

There are of course a great number of contributing factors to this predicament, but one of the most predominant among them has to be the de-emphasis of the importance of education in

sound doctrine in many churches. As Ferguson (2009) observes, there is “a vital necessity of recovering the pulpit in order to recover the church.” Interestingly, during the early Puritan era, the Anglican church was also languishing in terms of its ministers’ ability to rightly divide the word and clearly articulate it to the people. As stated previously, sermons coming from Anglican pulpits during this time largely consisted of simple recitations from the Book of Common Prayer. As Trueman (2012) noted, “In Britain...the government did not believe that sermons should come from the preacher’s own preparation but should be uniform or common...The Book of Common Prayer thus became a means of controlling the people.” And what was the result of this approach? In the first place, it had a profound impact on the ministers’ need to study the word of God for himself. Secondly, it resulted in a significant decrease in church attendance. As Ferguson (2009) observed, “The ministry was a despised thing in the seventeenth century, so what was needed was a mastering of the Word of God for the benefit of those who heard them teach.” The Puritans recognized early on that their ministers needed to be godly and educated. What’s more, they also felt that they should be available and accessible to those to whom they ministered, insisting that God’s Word be preached both in and out of the pulpit.

### **A Band of Brothers**

In further keeping with the premise that the church of today can indeed learn a great deal from the examples set by her Puritan brethren, one of the most important suggestions to this end would be for Christians to regain a firm grasp on the need for a spiritual brotherhood, a vision to recover the Word of God in the pulpits of the land, a deeply Trinitarian understanding of the gospel, and a renewed emphasis on the overall significance of the church in the purposes of Christ. With regard to the first of these, Ferguson (2009) explains:

The Puritan churches were not perfect, but they saw the need to commit themselves to one another as to Christ. They understood that unless the church was really a church (e.g.

Acts 2), it would never make a true difference in the world. Far more important than being individualistic, the church as a whole needs to be the light on the hill that others look up to.

As Ferguson (2009) goes on to state, it was this sense of commitment to one another which resulted in their placing tremendous stress on the Covenant. They saw the Covenant as something far larger than simply the foundation for the church but as something that bound them together. They wrote their own covenants to promote this pledging of themselves to one another and also believed that the basic metaphor for the church was the family, a tremendously important point in light of the fact that belonging is so important even to the most seemingly individualistic of men.

As this writer can attest having served in pastoral ministry for more than a quarter of a century, Christian brotherhood is something which seems to be severely lacking in many churches today. With so many churchgoers finding contentment in mere perfunctory church attendance each week (square-filling or box-checking, as it were), combined with the individualism that is routinely advocated by the world, the concept of cultivating and maintaining a true spiritual brotherhood seems, sadly, to be something of increasing difficulty for many to grasp. The Puritans found that there was indeed “safety in numbers” and believed very strongly that the church would enjoy God’s blessing only to the extent that her constituent parts worked together for the common cause of Christ and His kingdom. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Eph. 4:11-16):

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held

together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

### **A Trinitarian Focus**

While few would contest the assertion that what is most needed in the church is a spiritual brotherhood, a recovery of the Word of God in the pulpits of the land, and a renewed emphasis on the significance of the church in Christ's plan and purpose, what may perhaps be confusing to some is Ferguson's (2009) mention of the need for a deeply Trinitarian understanding of the gospel. As he observes, "What drove the Puritans was the deep sense of the ultimate glory of a Triune God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). They were passionate to defend the Trinity against Arminians and others who would downplay the same." This particular observation is especially important, in this writer's opinion, in light of what is undeniably an alarming trend toward either outright anti-Trinitarianism at worst or, at best, an apathetic approach to this and other crucially important doctrines. Quoting one Fred Sanders, Taylor (2011) shares a bit of preliminary insight into this modern phenomenon:

It is a disturbing fact that the most vigorous form of anti-trinitarianism currently on the market is to be found within the sphere of conservative evangelicalism. In the nineteenth century, the dominant variety of anti-trinitarianism was the old-world Unitarianism which found fertile soil in America... For evangelical Christians of a conservative temperament, Unitarianism as a theological movement was as easy to ignore as any version of liberal theology. It offered a pervasively non-supernatural interpretation of Christianity, and thereby rendered itself irrelevant to churches which were committed to a range of traditional doctrines such as incarnation, atonement, miracle, revelation, the inspiration of scripture, and heaven and hell. Today, however, there is an altogether different kind of anti-Trinitarian teaching putting itself forward, one which bears no relation to the old liberal Unitarianism, and requires a completely different response from either Unitarianism or the more obviously non-Christian Jehovah's Witnesses movement.

Taylor (2011) is referring to the rise of Oneness Pentecostalism and other non-denominational entities (e.g., Unitarians, Christadelphians, etc.) in which Trinitarian doctrine is either denied altogether or relegated to a position of less importance.

Ferguson (1987) explains precisely why Trinitarian doctrine is so important by noting that Jesus' teaching in the upper room on the last night of His earthly ministry (recorded in Jn. 13-17) was concentrated on the revelation and exposition of the Trinity. He continues by asking:

Can this be true? After all, this doctrine of the Trinity has caused problems and even divisions in the history of the Christian Church. Was there not virtual war in the early centuries of the Church's life over this doctrine? True! But this controversy can be interpreted and reacted to in different ways. Either it means we should avoid like the plague even thinking about the Trinity! Or, it means that the very heart of the Christian gospel depends on the Trinity – which explains why the battles were so fierce. Jesus' teaching in the upper room underlines that the second interpretation is the right one. The amount of time in his sermon on that occasion devoted to the relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit indicates how central this teaching must be. It also suggests that if Jesus concentrated on this subject in his darkest hour and at the time of his disciples' greatest need for comfort and encouragement, then the doctrine of the Trinity must have the most practical and important repercussions. (p. 13)

It must also be noted that while the Puritans did in fact place the highest premium on the importance of Trinitarian doctrine, they did not pretend to understand it completely, insisting rather that it is something that is known by faith. As Thomas (1975) offers, Thomas Watson once noted:

The Trinity is purely an object of faith, the plumb line of reason is too short to fathom this mystery; but where reason cannot wade, there faith must swim... This sacred doctrine, though it be not against reason, yet it is above reason. (p. 297)

In a similar vein, John Arrowsmith remarked:

As to the point of Divine subsistence, Jehovah Elohim, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: three persons, but one God; or in Lee's expression – one God without division in a Trinity of persons, and three persons without confusion in an unity of essence – it is a discovery altogether supernatural. (p. 297)

Arrowsmith would also add that the Trinity is “a mystery which my faith embraces as revealed in the Word, but my reason cannot fathom” (p. 297). Finally, Thomas Adams observed that “it is rashness to search, godliness to believe, safeness to preach, and eternal blessedness to know the Trinity” (p. 297).

### **A Summary of Puritan Concerns**

While the foregoing was a fairly detailed explanation of how the Puritans might teach Christians today some very important things in the areas of spiritual brotherhood, a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the Word of God in worship, and an emphasis on Trinitarian doctrine, it is also quite helpful to acknowledge how they arrived at their particular beliefs regarding such things. This can be accomplished, in part, by summarizing the basic elements or foci of Puritan concerns. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) relate, there are basically five of them.

In the first place, the Puritans sought to be Berean in their approach to understanding the Scriptures. They would search them, collate their findings, and then attempt to apply what they gleaned to every area of life. This explains, at least in part, why they were so intent on being confessional and theological Christians.

In the second place, as discussed previously, according to Beeke and Pederson (2006):

The Puritans were passionately committed to focusing on the Trinitarian character of theology. They never tired of proclaiming the electing grace of God, the dying love of Jesus Christ, and the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of sinners. Their fascination with Christian experience was not so much motivated by an interest in their experience per se as it was in their desire to trace out the divine work within them so that they could render all glory to their Triune Lord. (xvii)

Thirdly, the Puritans placed the highest premium on the significance of the church, believing that the worship of the church was to involve the outworking of her biblical faith. Puritanism thus focused on the clear preaching and teaching of God's Word, liturgical reform, and the brotherhood of the saints. They also believed that the Bible clearly outlined a specific order for church government and sought to conform to that order.

In the fourth place, the Puritans very much depended on the Word of God to instruct them in the area of good and effective citizenry.

Finally, the Puritans were very focused on the need for the conversion of the individual. As Beeke and Pederson (2006) observe, “They excelled at preaching the gospel, probing the conscience, awakening the sinner, calling him to repentance and faith, leading him to Christ, and schooling him in the way of Christ” (p. xvii). From this, the Puritans taught that true saving faith should be accompanied by its appropriate evidences or “fruit” which was to be displayed inwardly as well as in the home, in the church, at work, and in society.

As the thoughtful observer of today’s popular trends in the church at-large would agree, what is most desperately needed in order for churches to best honor and glorify the Lord who bought them is a wholesale commitment to a return to the basic fundamentals of Puritan piety and devotion. Quoting a timely (if not prescient) offering by George Whitefield, Beeke and Pederson (2006) offer a fitting conclusion to this portion of this paper:

The Puritans [were] burning and shining lights. When cast out by the black Bartholomew Act, and driven from their respective charges to preach in barns and fields, in the highways and hedges, they in a special manner wrote and preached as men having authority. Though dead, by their writings they yet speak; a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour; and for these thirty years past I have remarked, that the more true and vital religion hath revived either at home or abroad, the more the good old puritanical writings, or the authors of a like stamp who lived and died in communion of the Church of England have been called for... Their works still praise them in the gates; and without pretending to a spirit of prophecy, we may venture to affirm that they will live and flourish, when more modern performances of a contrary cast, notwithstanding their gaudy and tinsel trappings, will languish and die in the esteem of those whose understandings are opened to discern what comes nearest to the Scripture standard. (xiii)

### **Part V: The Puritans Were Not Perfect**

One of the inherent dangers of writing in such a way as to cast the Puritans in their proper historical light is that one can actually overstate his case or overcompensate in an attempt to clear the Puritans’ name. In doing so, he can unwittingly paint a picture of the Puritans as the perfect Christian specimens. This is actually far from true when one considers that the Puritans, like all believers both then and now, did in fact have considerable faults. Summarizing Ryken’s (1986)



very helpful chapter in this regard, the writer offers the following discussion of a few of these inconsistencies.

### **Faults or Virtues?**

The writer would acknowledge first and foremost that he agrees with Ryken (1986) who related that what he calls “faults” will “occasionally seem like virtues to others.” Given the wide variety of beliefs in these areas, it is indeed simply naïve to expect that consensus might be gained among all who read this. Nevertheless, the following is offered in an attempt to establish a more balanced view of those called Puritans.

### **Were the Puritans Anti-Christmas?**

Some of what appear as faults in Puritan belief and practice become more understandable when examined carefully from a historical viewpoint. For example, one of the faults most often pointed out about the Puritans was their alleged aversion to the celebration of Christmas. So, were the Puritans actually guilty of such “Scrooge-esque” beliefs? Not exactly, but they did eschew anything about the season that did not promote the expression of purely Christian sentiments. Governor William Bradford did in fact forbid New Englanders from celebrating Christmas as they had become accustomed to. In England, Christmas was celebrated, not as an opportunity for solemn reflection on the incarnation of Christ but as a purely secular holiday. According to one English observer, as reflected in Ryken (1986), what the Puritans reacted so viscerally to was the mixing of the sacred with the secular:

Then march this heathen company towards the church and church-yard, their pipers piping, drummers thundering...and in this sort they go into the church (though the minister be at prayer or preaching), dancing and swinging their handkerchiefs over their heads...with such a confused noise that no man can hear his own voice. Then the foolish people, they look, they stare, they laugh, they...mount upon forms and pews to see these goodly pageants. (p. 188)

So, as a correct understanding of history reveals, the Puritans were not as much anti-Christmas as they were in disagreement with the unbiblical revelry and sacrilege that so often accompanied its celebration. Many Christians today are similarly disturbed by what they see as the over-commercialization and over-secularization of Christmas.

### **The Puritans as Iconoclasts**

Another fault frequently ascribed to the Puritans is that they were iconoclastic and would go into churches and remove their artwork or apply whitewash over the murals. While there is in fact some truth in this particular allegation, it must be understood that this was a fairly common practice among the Anglicans as well. In fact, in 1559, Queen Elizabeth published an injunction stipulating that Anglicans shall:

...take away, utterly extinguish and destroy, all shrines, coverings of shrines, all tables, candlesticks, trindals and rolls of wax, pictures, paintings and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry and superstition; so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass windows or elsewhere within their churches or houses.

It is also reported that both Anglican and Puritan armies used churches as barracks and horse stables, but again it must be understood that many of the things Puritans are excoriated for were simply common practices within the church they sought to reform. This certainly does not excuse the behavior but it does cast it in the appropriate historical light nonetheless.

### **The Puritans and Recreation**

The Puritan view of recreation is another area in which some degree of fault may indeed be found. While the Puritans were not nearly as vehemently opposed to recreation as many have portrayed them to be, they did, as Ryken (1986) indicates, hold to a rather unique utilitarian theory of recreation: “Instead of valuing recreation for its own sake, or as celebration, or as an enlargement of one’s human spirit, the Puritans tended to look upon play as something that made work possible” (p. 190). In other words, recreation was viewed, not as an opportunity for rest

and relaxation, but as a means of making men more fit for labor. In the Puritan mind, man should literally be consumed with only two activities: the worship of God and work. Richard Baxter actually created a list of eighteen rules that was to be used in determining whether or not a given recreation was “lawful.”

### **The Puritans and Legalism**

In addition to such strong aversions to recreation, the Puritans also had other legalistic tendencies. Nowhere is this more evident than in their view of Sabbath observance. For example, in New England, a young couple was actually tried for sitting together on the Lord’s Day under an apple tree. On another occasion, Ryken (1986) reports that “someone was publicly reprovved for ‘writing a note about common business on the Lord’s Day, at least in the evening somewhat too soon” (p. 191). Another gentleman reportedly was fined “for wetting a piece of an old hat to put in his shoe” to protect his foot (p. 191). Needless to say, legalism always produces a great deal of apprehension among those who fall prey to its rigid demands and can even lead to an unhealthy fear that one might not actually be among the redeemed at all. As Ryken relates, Nathaniel Mather wrote in his diary:

When very young I went astray from God...Of the manifold sins which then I was guilty of, none so sticks upon me as that...I was whittling on the Sabbath Day; and for fear of being seen, I did it behind the door. A great reproach to God! A specimen of that atheism that I brought into the world with me. (p. 192)

The legalism of the Puritans is a wonderful example of how even the best and most studied of men can create an extra-biblical framework in which to trap himself and others. Sadly, this particular fault is not something limited to the Puritans but persists today in many otherwise doctrinally sound churches.

### **Men of Many Words**

One of the most common critiques of the Puritans, at least from those who read them a great deal, is that they tended to be excessively verbose. That is, as one author keenly noted, they rarely knew when they had said enough about something. Indeed, in some cases, this writer has actually seen a single sentence occupy an entire page or more! This may not be a negative thing per se if not for the propensity the Puritans often displayed for repeating themselves. As Ryken (1986) states, “The characteristic Puritan style...is to take at least twice as many words as necessary to express a thought” (p. 194). He then provides a fitting example of this redundancy from the writing of Richard Sibbes:

God hath placed us in the world to do him some work. This is God’s working place; he hath houses of work for us; now, our lot here is to do work, to be in some calling...to work for God.

Not only was such verbosity characteristic of their writing, it was frequently characteristic of their praying and preaching as well. As Ryken (1986) reports, at his ordination, Cotton Mather prayed for an hour and fifteen minutes and then preached for an hour and forty-five minutes. In another example, in 1625 members of the House of Commons were forced to endure seven hours of preaching in a service that continued for a full nine hours.

### **Pious Moralizing**

In addition to being overly verbose, the Puritans also had a tendency to engage in what Ryken (1986) refers to as “pious moralizing” (p. 194). One of the strengths of puritanism, as mentioned previously, is that they did not compartmentalize their lives between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane. For the Puritans, all of life was sacred or none of life was sacred. In spite of the undeniable nobility of this worldview, however, many of the Puritans did have an inclination toward overdoing it when it came to their application of piety to all things.

Edward Taylor, for example, did not feel comfortable in expressing his love to his wife without reminding her that his love for her must be subordinate to God's glory. In addressing his wife, John Winthrop referred to her as "the happy and hopeful supply (next to Jesus Christ) of my greatest losses." When Cotton Mather's children would fall ill, he would remind them of "the analogous distempers of their souls" and then instruct them concerning how Christ could relieve them. Mather even made it a point to ensure that every time he went to the toilet he would be in the habit of "shaping in my mind some holy, noble, divine thought." As Ryken (1986) observed:

At every turn, Puritan preachers and writers show a tendency to moralize about the topic at hand. No matter what human activity they discussed, they believed it their duty to add a reminder that it must be done to the glory of God and that it must be "lawful." Their theology on these occasions was impeccable, but their style leaned in the direction of what today we would call "overkill." (p. 195)

### **Male Chauvinism**

One might be willing to simply write off the Puritan view of male headship as yet another common denominator among the vast majority of men of their day, and indeed it was. What one cannot do, however, is successfully reconcile this view with Scripture itself. Not only were certain of their views wholly unbiblical, they were also both deeply offensive and embarrassing from a 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset. Puritan Robert Bolton, for example, having described the male's mental and physical superiority to females added that though "souls have no sexes," if they did, they would be male. Richard Baxter, ever the proponent of lists, listed twenty disadvantages of marriage for ministers. One of these "disadvantages" concerned "the natural imbecility of the female sex." John Winthrop is said to have posited an interesting theory on why the wife of the Connecticut Governor at the time had gone insane. As Ryken (1986) observes, apparently, in Winthrop's opinion, "she read too much and dabbled in intellectual matters where she had no business":

For if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way...to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God had set her. (p. 196)

John Knox went so far in his chauvinism as to publish an entire work entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. In this work, as Ryken (1986) shares, Knox expressed his feelings about having a woman occupying the throne of England. He wrote:

To promote a woman to bear rule...above any realm...is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice.

While few Reformed Christians today would argue with the biblical premises concerning male headship in the home and church, it must be pointed out that Scripture nowhere teaches that women are thus to be viewed as inferior to men. On the contrary, the Bible is replete with examples in which women are given the respect they are due as man's help meet and completer.

### **Partisanship**

As Knappen (1939) observed, "the curse of partisanship was another evil heritage from the early Reformation struggle" (p. 352). Of course, once again, this was not a behavior limited exclusively to the Puritans, however, it is most unbecoming considering the Puritans' insistence that every aspect of one's life should be God-honoring and above reproach. One of the most unsettling examples of Puritan partisanship can be seen in their peculiar detestation of something which should have been viewed with relative indifference: the church organ. Because organs were used in Roman Catholic churches, the Puritans often ripped them out of churches and literally smashed them to bits. In all fairness, this was not always the case as some of the more resourceful among them would actually install the organs in their homes.

It is not as though the Puritans simply found the rejection of all things not Puritan as sufficient, quite often they were prone to making outlandish, even offensive, statements about

certain matters which could very well have gone unsaid. Their repudiation of the Anglican Prayer Book, as recorded by Ryken (1986) is one such example:

We must needs say...that this book is an imperfect book, culled and picked out of that popish dunghill, the mass book full of all abominations. For some and many of the contents therein be such as are against the word of God. (p. 197)

One can certainly appreciate and understand the Puritans' aversion to the Anglican Prayer Book but, at the same time, one must also ask why they saw such venom and vitriol as worthy of any kind of merit. Perhaps one way such behavior can be explained would be in their understanding of themselves as God's elect nation. Ryken (1986) quotes John Cotton as having said, "the order of the churches and of the commonwealth was so settled...that it brought to mind the New Heaven and New Earth, wherein dwells righteousness" (p. 198).

Once again, lest one be tempted to cast an inordinate amount of aspersion on the Puritans, this is an area in which Christians of all generations could certainly improve. As an unflinching and unapologetic Calvinist of more than 30 years, this writer is willing, in the interest of complete transparency, to admit that doctrinal arrogance and partisanship is something he struggles with on a continual basis. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that this writer is not alone. By way of explanation, it is recommended that the reader avail himself of a very informative article by French (2012) unambiguously entitled, "Are Calvinists Arrogant?" In answering this question, the author writes:

When I first heard the critique, I scoffed. Surely not. After all, who has less reason to boast than a Calvinist? Not only can we take *zero* credit for our faith (can a zombie take credit for someone graciously giving him the antidote?), but the theology is, frankly, not that complex. Let's face it: "God is sovereign" is not a hard concept to grasp. I kept scoffing — until the evidence mounted and mounted.

The author goes on to provide substantial (and quite credible) evidence to support his contention. He begins by pointing out that there are a great number of Calvinists who could be characterized as arrogant: "We could have a reputation for arrogance because, well, we're arrogant." He then

further supports his contention by observing that “Calvinists are a squabbling, disputatious lot.” He likens Calvinists to his former denomination, the Church of Christ, concluding:

But we Calvinists certainly give the Church of Christ a run for its money. Where my ancestors used to break off and start their own church, my fellow congregants bring claims in church courts and glare from the pews at preachers they despise. The theological disputes are at least as intense, the language every bit as nasty, but — crucially — that nastiness exists when *we don't actually believe souls are at stake*. In my Church of Christ upbringing, lost arguments could mean damned souls. Not so for the Reformed, yet we fight on. And on. And on.

The author next points out that while Calvinist theology may indeed sound arrogant to modern ears, there is no need for Calvinists themselves to add their own arrogance into the mix. His solution is both simple and pointed. He writes:

So here's my message to my fellow Calvinists: let's proclaim the Gospel, but let's get over ourselves. After all, how can we possibly be cocky about a simple theology that we couldn't possibly understand without divine intervention?

### **Puritan Extremism**

In addition to what are subjectively defined as faults, the Puritans were also given to unhealthy extremes at times. As Ryken (1986) notes, one of these extremes is evidenced by “the Puritan conviction that children are fallen creatures who stand in need of God's grace to save them” (p. 200). The problem is not at all with the statement itself. Indeed, as we are told in Scripture, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The problem with the Puritans' expression of this particular conviction is that they very often chose to present it in the most insensitive ways imaginable. Three separate quotes in this regard are provided to substantiate this point. The first is from Thomas Becon:

Laugh not with thy son, lest thou have sorrow with him and lest thou gnash thy teeth in the end. Give him no liberty in his youth and wink not at his follies. Bow down his neck while he is young, and beat him on the sides while he is a child. (p. 200)



Similarly, Benjamin Wadsworth wrote, “Their hearts naturally are a mere nest, root, fountain of sin and wickedness; an evil treasure from whence proceed evil things... Their hearts... are unspeakably wicked, estranged from God” (p. 200). Finally, as John Robinson opined:

Surely there is in all children, though not alike, a stubbornness and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride, which must... be broken and beaten down... For the beating must provide carefully for two things: first that children’s wills and willfulness be restrained and repressed. (p. 200)

As mentioned previously, one of the Puritans’ greatest defining characteristics was their recognition that all of life should be lived *coram Deo* or under the direct gaze of God. As noble a sentiment as this surely is, however, it can be taken too far resulting in unhealthy extremism. Ryken (1986) observed, for example, that Cotton Mather once attributed a toothache to the sins of his teeth saying, “Have I not sinned with my teeth? How? By sinful, graceless, excessive eating, and by sinful speeches” (p. 200).

Sadly, instead of reveling in the goodness of God and rejoicing in the grace bestowed on them at salvation, many of the Puritans it seems were far more interested in self-loathing. For many, the detestation of oneself was actually an admirable practice as it was firmly believed that God could only be exalted to the extent that man is willing to degrade himself. While there is some element of truth in this conceptually, it must be noted that the Scripture nowhere advocates that believers hate themselves as a means of garnering God’s favor. As Paul wrote to the Romans, we are to “present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable unto God which is [our] reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1), but nowhere is it stated implicitly or explicitly that self-loathing is either warranted or commendable.

## **Part VI: Conclusion**

The aforementioned faults and extremist tendencies aside, although the Puritans were by no means a perfect people, they do stand alone in history as men and women who were willing to

sacrifice everything for the kingdom and cause of Christ. Having left their homeland in search of a better life in the New World, their singular focus on living life coram Deo is not only commendable but is something which should be emulated by every true believer today. Additionally, the church would do well to recover what Ferguson (2009) cites as the three greatest needs in the Puritans' collective mind: a grasp of the need for a spiritual brotherhood, a vision to recover the word of God in the pulpits of the land, and an understanding of the gospel that was deeply Trinitarian. Simply stated, what is needed among believers today is the understanding that they are to be more interested in God than in personal godliness; that they are to be God-centered and not experience-centered. Indeed, may the Puritan spirit of devotion and piety, along with the desire to see Christ exalted above all else be realized once again in the churches of our day.

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