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NEW IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

The Puritans as Guides for Modern Biblical Counseling

WHY THIS BOOK?

Within the current resurgence of literature about the Puritan writers of the 1600s and 1700s, there has been a useful focus on making their writings more accessible and relevant to the average Christian. The Puritans were masters at understanding the nature of human beings and applying Scripture in practical ways to help people with their struggles and problems. In the truest sense of the word they were psychologists, students of the inner person, before there ever was a field of secular psychology. As such, they have much to offer believers today for their spiritual growth, especially those involved in peer, lay, or professional counseling ministries. This book seeks to explore specifically chosen Puritan books to make direct application of their principles to biblical counseling concerns today. By so doing, it will hopefully encourage believers to revisit these and other Puritan writers in order to be better equipped in their ministry of helping others.

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I write from the specific background of a biblical counselor who sees the need for sound biblical understanding to counter some of the shallow psychological understandings that are prevailing in our culture and sadly in Christian circles as well. In addition, I have been involved in training lay counselors, professional counselors, and pastors in the U.S. and overseas in principles of effective biblical counseling. I have found in the reading for this book that the Puritans continually challenge me with more effective ways to help the struggling people I meet. My hope is that you will find yourself similarly challenged and equipped.

Too often today, the past is seen as irrelevant or outmoded and therefore of little use as we attempt to think about and help those struggling with counseling types of problems. The emphasis is always on the new ‘finding’, the new research, the new medication, the new diagnosis which will suddenly unlock the secrets to people’s dark struggles. I am reminded of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde in which Robert Louis Stevenson presented this very situation (120 years ago) as Dr Jekyll tries to find the special drug formula that will separate good from evil in people’s inner lives and thus free the world from insanity. Of course, his efforts fail in the book and too often today’s efforts follow the same storyline. Just as with Dr Jekyll, it is not from a lack of concern or even from a misplaced emphasis on scientific answers. Psychology does at times offer observations and research that helps counselors in terms of understanding the nature of people’s struggles and even effective ways to help them in those struggles. But the key area of disagreement always comes back to the foundations – who are people, why do they struggle, what has God provided to help with those problems? Without proper answers to these questions, we build the walls of our house on a shaky foundation. The walls may actually be sturdy in and of themselves but if they have a poor foundation they will ultimately fall to the ground.

It is exactly at this point that we can benefit from looking back to the past, to the great Puritan pastor–theologians. While the Puritan preachers were careful interpreters of Scripture they are also commonly referred to as ‘physicians of the soul’ because they were equally committed to interpreting their hearers. They

knew their theology but they also studied and knew their people. For them psychology, being the knowledge of man, was to be founded in theology as the knowledge of God. And theology was not a study simply for the academic elite but was a subject for all believers. They were sound theologically but did not stop with just propounding theological truth or doctrine, rather they made those doctrines functional in the day to day struggles of the people they taught. And it is important to note that many of these well educated theologians were pastors to day laborers or seafarers, and some, such as John Bunyan, did not have formal academic training. So, the Puritans certainly were trying to bring doctrinal truth to bear in the lives, not of the elite, but of people with day to day problems such as poverty, loss of children, abuse, and alcoholism.

How should we use their approach? Sarles answers, 'By applying the theological truths they employed to the psychological presuppositions of our own day. Their view of how sin dominates the life provides the key to understanding addictive behavior. Their God-centeredness established the framework for a proper approach to self-image.' He quotes Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City:

By modern standards any person struggling with deep patterns of self-gratification or self-will might be told, 'You aren't responsible' or 'A real Christian wouldn't feel like that' or 'you must have a demon.' By contrast, the Puritan counselor first exhorted the person to mortify the sin through contrition, confession, and repentance. The counselor encouraged the individual that the struggle with sin was a good sign, indicating there was not yet a complete dominance of sin. On this basis there was reason to hope that the pattern of sin would be broken through the truth of the gospel. The English Puritans would be appalled at the emphasis today on self-esteem; they would eschew talk of 'unmet needs,' because in their view the only real need to be met was the need to worship. That is why Puritans practiced sanctification by theology rather than by psychology.¹

¹ Ken L. Sarles, 'The English Puritans: a Historical Paradigm of Biblical Counseling' in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, ed. John F. MacArthur, Jr. and Wayne Mack (Dallas: Word, 1984), 28.

The Puritans understood clearly that underlying heart motives and desires drive our behavior and must be addressed for true growth through problems to occur. But they were also sensitive to the varying causes for personal problems – physical, spiritual, temperamental and demonic – so they provide us with a truly holistic way of trying to look at people in difficulties rather than an imbalance that focuses only on one of these areas (true in secular psychology circles, biblical counseling circles and also in spiritual warfare thinking). It is a balanced approach, but one with a firm foundation in the teaching of Scripture.

WHO WERE THESE PURITANS?

Originally, Puritan was a reference to those who wanted to purify the worship and teaching of the Church of England in the late 1500s and 1600s. But it soon grew to be a term that referred to a movement and a somewhat unified body of belief. It was not a strictly unified body of doctrine, however, for among the Puritan ranks were Anglicans (William Perkins, Richard Sibbes), Separatists (William Bradford), Independents (Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton, John Owen), Presbyterians (Thomas Watson) and Baptists (John Bunyan). Puritan came to describe more a group of people firmly committed to the authority of Scripture in all areas of life, and living lives dedicated to the glory of God. And some are included (Thomas Boston and Jonathan Edwards) who lived after the time of the formal Puritan dissent had concluded in 1689 with the Act of Toleration in England.

Historically, there was an ebb and flow to the Puritan movement as they went through periods of being the dominant religious voice in England to periods of persecution. After the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary in which Protestants were persecuted, many returned to England with the rule of Queen Elizabeth (1533–1603). But many felt that Elizabeth's Acts of Uniformity (1559) only 'half-reformed' the church and so voices such as Thomas Cartwright began to be heard seeking for deeper, genuine reform. In 1593 the Act Against Puritans was issued which removed many of these 'Puritans' from

their pulpits. They continued teaching wherever they could. In 1603, James I, a Calvinist, became King but the situation did not improve as James yielded to the idea that his political power as King was linked to the established church structure (the King being seen as the Supreme Head of the Church of England). More ministers were suspended and many left for the Netherlands. James I did ease the pressure as his reign continued.

But he was followed by Charles I, a Catholic King, whose advisor William Laud began to exercise religious control beginning in 1628. With the dissolving of Parliament in 1629 Bishop Laud was free to exercise his persecution of Puritans to the fullest. This produced another exodus of Puritan leadership to the Netherlands and to New England (led by John Winthrop to Massachusetts). Many others followed to New England (John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Sheppard) starting the historical trend that culminated in the ministry of Jonathan Edwards in the 1700s.

Finally, Charles' persecution brought about a Civil War in which the Puritan, Oliver Cromwell, led the forces of the Parliament (which Charles I had dissolved) to victory. It was during the Civil War (1642–48) that the re-established Parliament brought together over one hundred Puritan leaders at Westminster Abbey where they drafted the still utilized *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector until 1658 and allowed religious freedom so that all religious groups flourished and grew, including the Puritans with whom he identified personally. However, the monarchy was restored in 1660 by Charles II who initially promised liberty of religious conscience, but instead pushed for religious conformity. It was during this time of persecution that John Bunyan found himself imprisoned. The 1662 Act of Uniformity demanded that Puritan ministers renounce their denominational ordinations and be re-ordained by the bishops. Those who refused (thousands of them) were removed from their churches. This was followed by the Conventicle Act in 1664 which banned nonconformists from preaching in fields or homes, and then in 1665 by the Five Mile Act which prohibited the ejected ministers from coming within five miles of their former churches or any city or town. It was a time

when much of the Puritan preaching was silenced, but as authors they continued to speak through the written word.

The Puritans were unified in their basic commitment to Scripture and glorifying God, and in their experience of persecution and often exile. Gleason and Kapic note seven basic core beliefs they all shared:

1. Understanding Puritanism as a movement of spirituality.
2. Laying stress on experiencing communion with God.
3. United in their dependence upon the Bible as their supreme source of spiritual sustenance and guide for reformation of life.
4. Were predominantly Augustinian in their emphasis upon human sinfulness and divine grace.
5. Placed great emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.
6. Were deeply troubled with sacramental forms of Catholicism spiritually fostered within the Anglican Church.
7. Can be understood as a revival moment.²

WHAT ABOUT TODAY?

The Puritans combined being students of the Word of God, not just in an academic way (although many were professors at colleges and universities), but with also being experiential. They never allowed experiential to supersede Scripture as the ultimate authority but neither did they see sound doctrine as divorced from an experiential Christian life. They learned who their people were and taught them Scripture in ways that would help them go through their day to day struggles, finding contentment and strength for the journey of the Christian life. And despite our modern prejudices, their problems were not all that different than our own. Application is certainly needed for the twenty-first century but the basic struggles of fear,

² Randall Gleason and Kelly Kapic, 'Who were the Puritans?' in *The Devoted Life – An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press. 2004), 24–30.

depression, spiritual warfare, and explaining a seemingly chaotic and random world were all problems in their day as well as ours. And because of the persecutions they individually suffered, they speak with a genuineness of having experienced these problems in their own lives and ministries. They truly do offer us helpful truth in past places and we ignore their contributions at our own personal loss, but also to the detriment of those we seek to help as they fight through their overwhelming problems in today's world.

The Puritans are admittedly rather difficult for modern readers to digest. This is partly due to the cultural and historical differences but also to their general style of writing which would probably be considered flowery and verbose in modern writing circles. This is coupled with a deep theological content that frankly makes them hard to understand, much as Peter writes of the Apostle Paul in 2 Peter 3:15–16, 'just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand...' Peter struggled to understand Paul at times but he kept on reading him. In a similar way, the Puritan writers can be difficult to understand in the depth of their concepts but they are worth the struggle. It is my hope that I can help bring seven of these key authors and their books to a point where we can understand their basic applications to counseling problems today. In so doing, their teaching from the past will live on as useful not only in the lives of their original hearers or readers, but also in the lives of believers today.

I have sought to diligently read the Puritans with the specific question of biblical counseling in mind. While they are worth reading purely at a theological level, it would be a disservice to them to leave them solely at that level. As previously noted, they were concerned to be physicians of the soul, bringing biblical truth and doctrine to the lives of fellow strugglers so as to assist them in the journey, as well as keep them progressing in the work that God wanted to do in their lives. Where possible I have changed some of the more archaic words in quotations from the authors but



Helpful Truth in Past Places

have otherwise allowed their words to stand on their own with the interpretations and applications being mine.

I have found this personal journey convicting. As I read and wrote, I was trying to think of how I might equip others to use these wonderful resources to be more effective in people's lives today and I hope that goal is achieved. But I also repeatedly experienced personal conviction and encouragement as I thought upon what these men of God were saying some 350 years ago! I hope your journey is a similar one and that if you are not already a fan of the Puritans you may take a stab at reading one or two of them directly without the intervention of myself or another interpreter.

