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In Defence of the Puritans

by Martin Brown

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In the course of my studies towards ordination in the Church of England I have, on a number of occasions, been challenged by others about my persistent reading of Puritan Theology. Over the years I have spent at college (five of them now), there has been a growing desire within me to give an answer for this allegedly absurd theological quirk. This recently came to a point where I sat down and wrote the following apology. It is perhaps among students, either at University or Theological College, that this short work will find most application. If it encourages some then I shall be thankful to God. If it turns some to those old Puritan divines, if it goes some small way to rectifying the slur often intrinsic in the title 'Puritan', then I shall be driven to praise God for the abundance of his grace.

At the outset of this 'apologia', it is necessary to define precisely what is being attempted. I am in no way trying to win converts to the reading of Puritan theology. Rather, I am simply giving reasons for that reading of the Puritans which occupies a large part of my interest. The following should therefore be read with this in mind. This is not a polemical essay. I am not trying to score debating points, or win an argument.

Firstly, I shall tackle the issue of whether or not the Puritans are a waste of time and effort on the grounds that they are unreadable both stylistically, linguistically and theologically. *Secondly*, I will give some consideration to the suggestion that the Puritans are not only unreadable, but downright dangerous. Thus one is often accused of being locked in the seventeenth century, of fighting old and irrelevant battles and the like. *Thirdly*, I would like to mention some of the great benefits that are, I believe, to be derived from studying these Divines. Other things will doubtless arise as we proceed, but these will form my three main heads.

I

First of all, then, let us ask if reading the Puritans is a waste of time due to their antiquity. I concede without demur that both the language and style of the Puritan writers make it a formidable task to read them. But let it be added that theologians even of our own day are liable to the accusation that their language and style make them unreadable. Try reading the *Church Dogmatics* of Barth or Thiselton's *The Two Horizons*, while you are waiting for the bath water to run one evening! The fact is that I am not advocating a casual reading of Charnock or Owen, but rather a serious and studious effort to grasp what they are saying. This is study, and that means taking the linguistic and stylistic problems seriously and being prepared to master them. This is the challenge to us all, whether we are reading Baxter or Barth, Charnock or Küng.

Nonetheless, it must also be pointed out that not all the Puritans wrote in the high flown academic tones of a John Owen. I suspect that many critics of the Puritans would be quite surprised to find how readable some Puritans can be. Try, for example, Samuel Bolton's work *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*. Admittedly the editors of the current Banner of Truth edition have sought to introduce a system of paragraphing and heading not found in the original edition of 1645, but the language, although not twentieth-century, is by no means incomprehensible:

But believers are freed from the law as a covenant of life and death. Therefore they are free from the curses and maledictions of the law. The law has nothing to do with them as touching their eternal state and condition. Were you indeed under the law as a covenant, condemnation would meet you, nothing else but condemnation (p 30).

Now compare this with something more meaty from the great John Owen:

In all the crowd of evil and wicked men that the world is pestered withal, there are none, by common consent, so stigmatized for unworthy villainy as those who are signally ungrateful for singular benefits. If people are unthankful unto them, if they have not the highest love for them, who redeem them from ignominy and death, and instate them in a plentiful inheritance, (if any such instances be given) and that with the greatest expense of labour and charge; mankind, without any regret, doth tacitly condemn them unto greater miseries than those which they were delivered from. [Works I, p 165].

The difference is clear! But it must be borne in mind that this is due, to a certain extent, to the fact that, whereas I have quoted from one of Owen's more academic and scholarly works, the quote from Bolton is from a more popular work. The point is that there are Puritans and Puritans, scholarly and pastoral, polemical and devotional. Occasionally the linguistic style of the Puritans renders them difficult reading. But I do not accept the charge that this makes studying

them a waste of time. Were it so, then we could likewise dispense with theological literature altogether, contemporary authors included. If we desire gold, then we must be prepared to dig for it. It is not found lying on the ground for all and sundry to collect without any effort or labour. The occasional stiffness and antiquity in Puritan literature does not call for our rejection of it, but rather for diligence and application in reading it. Of course, this is contrary to that spirit of our age which looks always for the instant and automatic. But Christians (and especially those engaged in theological study) ought to be prepared to use that reason and intellect with which God has endowed them!

But I cannot leave this point without paying a little attention to the theological content of Puritan literature. Some have said that the Puritans taught a theology for their own day, which is now irrelevant. We have moved on, it is said, and require a theology for our day. Now there is an element of truth in this observation that is worth noting. But the great themes which occupied the Puritan writers are themes which are crying out to be preached and taught today. The enormously experimental emphasis which marked the Puritans is of tremendous relevance to an age in which people are searching with all their strength for spiritual experience. I doubt whether the Mystical and Eastern sects, so common today, would have enjoyed even half the success among young people that they have, had the Christian Church been preaching that living, experimental and devotional Calvinism found in the Puritans. Today's Evangelicalism is so often purely cerebral. We lack a deep and solid spirituality. The Puritans, by and large, knew no such lack. When was the last time a Christian received a letter from his pastor of the kind which Samuel Rutherford used to write? Listen to this for spirituality:

Mistress, - Grace, mercy, and peace be to you. I am glad that ever ye did cast your love on Christ; fasten more and more love every day upon Him. O if I had a river of love, a sea of love that would never go dry, to bestow upon Him! But alas the pity, Christ hath beauty for me, but I have not love for Him! Oh what pain is it to see Christ in His beauty, and then to want a heart and love for Him! But I see, want we must, till Christ lend us, never to be paid again. O that He would empty these vaults and lower houses of these poor souls, of these bastard and base lovers which we follow! And verily, I see no object in heaven or in earth that I could ware (spend) this much love upon that I have, but upon Christ: ... (Letter 153, in the Thomas Smith edition published in Edinburgh, 1881).

Or again, when was the last time you read an evangelistic book of the calibre of William Guthrie's *The Christians's Great Interest*? Granted that these works clearly breathe 17th-century air, but their message could not be more relevant! It is a great injustice that is abroad in our day, that says the Puritans

taught no more than a cold and lifeless Calvinism. It is precisely the reverse that is true. Their spirituality and warmth put many of today's authors to open shame.

Hard work they may be, but the Puritans cannot be called a waste of time. Their message, in the main, is relevant; any who wish to enjoy it, however, must be prepared to sweat for it.

II

We turn secondly to face the charge that the Puritans are not merely irrelevant but also dangerous. I agree! Of course they are dangerous. But that does not mean to say that we do not or must not read them. After all, modern theologians are also dangerous, and perhaps it is not unfair to say that their lack of a strict biblical basis makes them even more so than the Puritans. Danger should result in a care not to abuse, rather than a rejection of that which is dangerous. Drugs are dangerous, and so we use them only under proper medical supervision. But what are the dangers, and how can they be overcome? I turn now to a consideration of those which I consider to be chief.

Perhaps at the bottom of all the dangers lies this one foundational error of coming to the Puritans with a lack of a proper critical approach. Because the Puritans are often recommended for their soundness in the faith, the undiscerning reader can begin to read them without allowing for the fact that he is reading the works of men. The Puritans like ourselves were prone to error. So it is important that we come to the Puritans with our critical faculties sharpened, and our minds prepared to test what we read by Scripture. If we do this, we will avoid falling victim to any serious danger. Care also needs to be taken to put what we are reading into its proper historical context. By failing to do this, we may fail to understand what we have read, for without due attention to historical context we will distance ourselves from an easy grasp of what a particular author is saying. This is of crucial importance when we read works which were written during times of theological debate, although it is not so crucial when we are reading non-controversial material.

A further danger is that of simply fighting old battles over again. As a member of the Protestant Reformation Society, as well as a reader of the Puritans, I find that this accusation is often repeated. But the fact of the matter is that many of the controversies confronting the Church in our day are but recurrences of older ones. One of the oldest controversies before us in the book is the Arminian-Calvinist one. And yet it is still with us, for the evangelistic preaching of our day

is so often no more than a shallow decisionism based on the old man-centred tenets of Arminianism. Again, some will say that to feel and speak strongly against the Church of Rome is to be out of touch; we live in an age of Ecumenical effort, and surely it is the responsibility of all Christians to lay aside the controversies of the past and come together again as one body. But this will not do. For the simple truth is that the Church of Rome is still maintaining those very doctrines that lay at the heart of the historic debate. They still teach a sacrificial understanding of the so-called Mass, the veneration of the Virgin and the saints, and the sevenfold sacramental system. No, the battles of the past are with us today!

The real danger however is that we will fail to make the appropriate jump from the Puritans into the present day. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the seventeenth century. But it must also be said that the Puritans were not always fighting battles. Thus the aim of reading the Puritans is not to find ammunition with which to blast Roman Catholics, but rather to be edified in the truths of God and the riches of Christ.

There is one further and great danger of reading the Puritans which we should all recognize. It is the danger of becoming narrow and dated in theological vision and relevance. This is a very real danger and must be fought against at all costs. It would be utterly wrong to read the Puritans and nothing but the Puritans. We need a balanced diet of contemporary and classical theological literature.

But it must also be pointed out that there is at least as great a danger for some of reading nothing but modern theology. Present and past must belong together, for they give each other meaning.

III

What, then, are the benefits of reading the Puritan writings? Perhaps 'benefits' is not the best word to use. Perhaps it is better to ask: What positive contributions have the Puritans to make in the contemporary Christian and theological world?

First and foremost is the way in which the Puritans sought to build on the Word of God. They sought to maintain a strict biblical basis for all they said. Their whole attitude to Holy Scripture was reverent. They sought to submit themselves to it. To them, what Holy Scripture said, God said. It is perhaps the saddest feature of contemporary theology, that today's theologians often belittle

Holy Scripture. It is true that this is a generalization. But this sort of approach seems to be becoming more and more a part of so-called Conservative Evangelicalism. For in that camp too we find an increasing atmosphere of criticism in approaching the Bible. I recall the way in which an Evangelical missionary recently stated in public that she felt the Bible to be of secondary importance to her, in comparison to the immediate revelation of Christ to her by the Holy Spirit. The facts are that modern Evangelicalism has imbibed a great deal more liberalism than it often realizes, and that a renewed emphasis on the supremacy and inerrancy of Holy Scripture would not be out of place today. This the Puritans can offer us.

Another great contribution of the Puritans stems from the intense pastoral focus of their writings. The aim was to edify the flock of God. Today, we have driven far too great a wedge between pastoral theology and pastoral ministry. The two need each other to be sound and meaningful, and this is a fact that the Puritans seemed to have grasped firmly. They were not concerned with mere intellectual knowledge. They pursued wisdom, that heart-felt knowledge of divinely revealed truths which tends to holiness and deep acquaintance with Christ. Today's theology by contrast is so often purely intellectual. Even as Bible-based evangelicals we often fail to apply the Word of God, and our sermons and books can tend to be no more than academic and of little practical use to the people of God.

I have found that some of the most helpful experiences of my Christian life have come through reading a Puritan writer who had a real grasp of the spiritual needs of the Christian soul, and who also had a very clear understanding of the nature and workings of the human heart. Further, he has applied the Word of God to that need, and brought me face to face with the living Christ and also with myself. This, surely is what the teaching ministry is all about. It is not simply the passing on of facts about the Bible, or about Christian doctrine. It is bringing people to a living acquaintance with God in Christ. It is leading them on in their Christian life by alerting them to the spiritual dangers and pitfalls that confront them. It is giving them those spiritual weapons with which they may fight 'manfully under Christ's banner' against the world, the flesh, and the devil. John Calvin's words to the Duke of Somerset, protector of Edward VI, were fulfilled in the Puritans and need hearing again today:

Let the people be so taught as to be touched to the quick, and that they may feel that what the Apostle says is true, that The Word of God is a two-edged sword, piercing even through the thoughts and affections, to the very marrow of

the bones... The utmost care should be taken, that so far as possible you have good trumpets, which shall sound into the very depths of the heart.

I have found also that the Puritans knew the truth of an injunction by the same great reformer, that pastors ought to 'edify the body of Christ, devastate Satan's reign, pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious' (John Calvin, sermon 61 on Deuteronomy). We touched earlier upon the spirituality of the Puritans, which is so relevant for today. This, coupled with the pastoral thrust of the Puritan theology, is what should draw us above all else to those ancient writers. They provide a theology that is biblically wholesome, and leads to a spiritual experience of the Gospel of the grace of God. It is of course a corollary of this, that for someone training for the ministry, the Puritans provide a pattern of preaching and pastoring.

They are a reminder of what can happen when a Christian minister places his mind under the Word of God, and his heart into the hands of the Holy Spirit.

IV

So then I feel no inclination to stop reading Puritan Theology. Indeed, I am encouraged to continue doing so. It may not be the desire of all Christians to sweat over these treasure-filled theological mines. But let us not allow the opinions of others to deter those of us who are readers of the Puritans from continuing to be such. Let us rather pray that God will enable us to follow their example in godliness, sincerity and faith. And to those involved in the Christian ministry, may God grant a return to the whole-hearted commitment to his Word and Spirit that characterized these antiquated authors. When he does, then this nation will once again know a great awakening, and enjoy a time of true revival.

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