

Lesson VII: Puritan Literature & Legacy

I. What we've learned about the Puritans so far:

"In summary, the late sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century movement of Puritanism was a kind of vigorous Calvinism. Experientially, it was warm and contagious; evangelistically, it was aggressive, yet tender; ecclesiastically, it sought to practice the headship of Christ over the faith, worship, and order of His body, the church; politically, it was active, balanced, and bound by conscience before God, in the relations of kings, Parliament, and subjects. J. I. Packer says it well: 'Puritanism was an evangelical holiness movement seeking to implement its vision of spiritual renewal, national and personal, in the church, the state, and the home; in education, evangelism, and economics; individual discipleship and devotion, and in pastoral care and competence.'"

II. *The Character of an Old English Puritan, or Non-Conformist* By John Geree (1600-1649)

The Old English Puritan was such an one, that honored God above all, and under God gave every one his due. His first care was to serve God, and therein he did not what was good in his own, but in God's sight, making the word of God the rule of his worship. He highly esteemed order in the House of God: but would not under colour of that submit to superstitious rites, which are superfluous, and perish in their use. He revered Authority keeping within its sphere: but durst not under pretence of subjection to the higher powers, worship God after the traditions of men. He made conscience of all God's ordinances, though some he esteemed of more consequence.

He was much in prayer; with it he began and closed the day. In it he was much exercised in his closet, family and public assembly. He esteemed that manner of prayer best, where by the gift of God, expressions were varied according to present wants and occasions; yet did he not account set forms unlawful. Therefore in that circumstance of the church he did not wholly reject the liturgy, but the corruption of it. He esteemed reading of the word an ordinance of God both in private and public but did not account reading to be preaching. The word read he esteemed of more authority, but the word preached of more efficiency.

He accounted preaching as necessary now as in the Primitive Church, God's pleasure being still by the foolishness of preaching to save those that believe. He esteemed the preaching best wherein was most of God, least of man, when vain flourishes of wit and words were declined, and the demonstration of God's Spirit and power studied: yet could he distinguish between studied plainness and negligent rudeness. He accounted perspicuity the best grace of a preacher: And that method best, which was most helpful to the understanding, affection, and memory. To which ordinarily he esteemed none so conducive as that by doctrine, reason and use. He esteemed those sermons best that came closest to the conscience: yet would he have men's consciences awakened, not their persons disgraced.

He was a man of good spiritual appetite, and could not be contented with one meal a day. An

afternoon sermon did relish as well to him as one in the morning. He was not satisfied with prayers without preaching: which if it were wanting at home, he would seek abroad: yet would he not by absence discourage his minister, if faithful, though another might have quicker gifts. A lecture he esteemed, though not necessary, yet a blessing, and would read such an opportunity with some pains and loss.

The Lord's Day he esteemed a divine ordinance, and rest on it necessary, so far as it conduced to holiness. He was very conscientious in observance of that day as the mart day of the soul. He was careful to remember it, to get house, and heart in order for it and when it came, he was studious to improve it. He redeems the morning from superfluous sleep, and watches the whole day over his thoughts and words, not only to restrain them from wickedness, but worldliness. All parts of the day were like holy to him, and his care was continued in it in variety of holy duties: what he heard in public, he repeated in private, to whet it upon himself and family. Lawful recreations he thought this day unseasonable, and unlawful ones much more abominable: yet he knew the liberty God gave him for needful refreshing, which he neither did refuse nor abuse.

The sacrament of baptism he received in infancy, which he looked back to in age to answer his engagements, and claim his privileges. The Lord's Supper he accounted part of his soul's food: to which he labored to keep an appetite. He esteemed it an ordinance of nearest communion with Christ, and so requiring most exact preparation. His first care was in the examination of himself: yet as an act of office or charity, he had an eye on others. He endeavored to have the scandalous cast out of communion: but he cast not out himself, because the scandalous were suffered by the negligence of others. He condemned that superstition and vanity of Popish mock-fasts; yet neglected not an occasion to humble his soul by right fasting: He abhorred the popish doctrine of opus operatum in the action. And in practice rested in no performance, but what was done in spirit and truth.

He thought God had left a rule in his word for discipline, and that aristocratical by elders, not monarchical by bishops, nor democratical by the people. Right discipline he judged pertaining not to the being, but to the well-being of a church. Therefore he esteemed those churches most pure where government is by elders, yet unchurched not those where it was otherwise. Perfection in churches he thought a thing rather to be desired, than hoped for. And so he expected not a church state without all defects. The corruptions that were in churches he thought his duty to bewail, with endeavors of amendment: yet he would not separate, where he might partake in the worship, and not in the corruption.

He put not holiness in churches, as in the temple of the Jews; but counted them convenient like their synagogues. He would have them kept decent, not magnificent: knowing that the gospel requires not outward pomp. His chief music was singing of psalms wherein though he neglected not the melody of the voice, yet he chiefly looked after that of the heart. He disliked such church music as moved sensual delight, and was as hinderance to spiritual enlargements.

He accounted subjection to the higher powers to be part of pure religion, as well as to visit the fatherless and widows: yet did he distinguish between authority and lusts of magistrates, to that he submitted, but in these he durst not be a servant of men, being bought with a price. Just laws and commands he willingly obeyed not only for fear but for conscience also; but such as were unjust he refused to observe, choosing rather to obey God than man; yet his refusal was modest and with submission to penalties, unless he could procure indulgence from authority.

He was careful in all relations to know, and to duty, and that with singleness of heart as unto Christ. He accounted religion an engagement to duty, that the best Christians should be best husbands, best wives, best parents, best children, best masters, best servants, best magistrates, best subjects, that the doctrine of God might be adorned, not blasphemed.

His family he endeavors to make a church, both in regard of persons and exercises, admitting none into it but such as feared God; and laboring that those that were borne in it, might be born again unto God. He blessed his family morning and evening by the word and prayer and took care to perform those ordinances in the best season. He brought up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and commanded his servants to keep the way of the Lord. He set up discipline in his family, as he desired it in the church, not only reproof but restraining vileness in his.

He was conscientious of equity as well as piety knowing that unrighteousness is abomination as well as ungodliness. He was cautious in promising, but careful in performing, counting his word no less engagement than his bond. He was a man of tender heart, not only in regard of his own sin, but others misery, not counting mercy arbitrary, but a necessary duty wherein as he prayed for wisdom to direct him, so he studied for cheerfulness and bounty to act.

He was sober in the use of things of this life, rather beating down the body, than pampering it, yet he denied not himself the use of God's blessing, lest he should be unthankful, but avoid excess lest he should be forgetful of the Donor. In his habit he avoided costliness and vanity, neither exceeding his degree in civility, nor declining what suited with Christianity, desiring in all things to express gravity. His own life he accounted a warfare, wherein Christ was his captain, his arms, prayers, and tears. The Cross his banner, and his word, Vincit qui patitur ['He conquers who suffers.']

He was immovable in all times, so that they who in the midst of many opinions have lost the view of true religion, may return to him and find it.

“Because you are but a young man, beware of temptations and snares; and above all, be careful to keep yourself in the use of means; resort to good company; and howbeit you be nicknamed a Puritan, and mocked, yet care not for that, but rejoice and be glad, that they who are scorned and scoffed by this godless and vain world, and nicknamed Puritans, would admit you to their society; for I must tell you, when I am at this point as you see me, I get no comfort to my soul by any second means under heaven but from those who are nicknamed Puritans. They are the men that can give a word of comfort to a wearied soul in due season, and that I have found by experience since I did lie down here.”

- John Gordon, 1st Viscount of Kenmure (1599-1634) on his deathbed