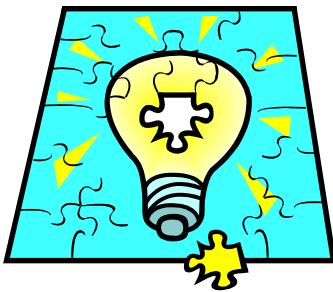




Insights
on
Lessons from the
Puritans

by Andrew Young



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LEARNING FROM GOD’S GIANTS

Back in the early 1990’s when our family was living in Australia, a pastor friend came to me one day ablaze with excitement. “There’s a new book in the bookstores,” he said, “which is worth selling your shirt to get.” He was talking about Jim Packer’s *A Quest for Godliness – the Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*¹. I duly bought the book and found it was every bit as good as my friend said that it would be.

J. I. Packer, one of the most influential evangelical theologians of the last century (and of this one too), has been an avid student of the English Puritans for over fifty years. They have shaped his theology and spirituality, and he believes modern evangelicalism desperately needs to feel their influence too. He likens the Puritans to the giant Redwoods of California. As the Redwoods are to other trees, so the Puritans are to the mass of Christians today – giants among dwarfs.

The Puritans were a body of evangelical Christians who lived in England between 1550 and 1700. They were deeply concerned about the “Laodicean coldness” in the Church of England, and tried to reform its spirituality and worship. The term “Puritan” as it was applied to them, was intended as a smear word. It was meant to convey the impression of excessive and hypocritical religiosity. And that is the way the Puritans have been largely viewed through the centuries. The mud has stuck!

At least, it has until relatively recent times. Revived scholarly interest in the Puritans in the twentieth century scraped away much of the prejudice and gave a truer picture of Puritan character. In this

¹ *A Quest For Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990) has also been published under the title, “Among God’s Giants.” It is essentially a collection of essays that Packer had previously published in magazines and journals.

new light they aren’t seen as overscrupulous fanatics, but “sober, conscientious, and cultured citizens; persons of principle, devoted, determined, and disciplined, excelling in the domestic virtues, and with no obvious shortcomings save a tendency to run to words when saying anything important, whether to God or man.” (*A Quest for Godliness*, p. 22).

What have they got to teach us today? Packer sees them as **models of Christian maturity**. He describes them as earnest, robust, committed Christians whose faith had been ripened in the furnace of suffering.

It is this element of hardship and suffering – and the character it produces – that Packer sees missing in our affluent Western world. Modern Christianity, he says, quoting a well-travelled North American Church leader, is “man-centred, manipulative, success-orientated, self-indulgent and sentimental” (*Ibid.*, p. 22). As a consequence, it lacks depth and strength. “Ease and luxury, such as our affluence brings us today,” Packer writes, “do not make for maturity. Hardship and struggle however do, and the Puritan’s battles against the spiritual and climatic wilderness in which God set them produced a virility of character, undaunted and unsinkable, rising above discouragement and fears, for which the true precedents and models are men like Moses, and Nehemiah, and Peter after Pentecost, and the apostle Paul” (*Ibid.*, p. 22). If the Puritans were spiritual giants, we are dwarfs.

In the coming weeks we will let Packer be our guide as we explore what the Puritans can teach us today. Our journey won’t be a sentimental one, nor will it necessarily give a stamp of approval to all we discover. But it will hopefully reveal little-known strengths that we, through God’s grace, can reclaim for the Church today.

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INTEGRATED LIVING

It's worth saying as we begin this new series that it's important not to idolize the Puritans. We can easily do that by treating them as though they were the ultimate standard and perfect practitioners of life. But of course that honour belongs to our Lord alone. The Puritans, at best, are people who can teach and inspire us by their efforts to live for God in their generation.

J.I. Packer believes we can learn from *the integrated character* of their daily lives. Two things are implied by this expression – plurality on the one hand, and harmonious unity on the other. An integrated life is one in which many strands are woven together to serve a single goal. This was a striking feature of the way the Puritans lived.

Three things contributed to this. The first was their awareness that **the whole of life belonged to God**. The Puritans embraced life in all of its richness as coming from the hand of a generous Creator. There were no divisions in their thinking between what was secular and what was sacred. Everything came from God and properly belonged to him – matters relating to health, family, work, recreation, worship, society, politics and so on. That gave sanctity to every aspect of life, and a sense of dignity as well.

Secondly, the Puritans believed that since everything was from God, everything was also **to be done to God**. Packer describes it in this way: “There was for them [the Puritans] no disjunction between sacred and secular; all creation, so far as they were concerned, was sacred, *and all activities, of whatever kind, must be sanctified, that is, done to the glory of God* ... Seeing life as a whole, they integrated contemplation with action, worship with work, labour with rest, love of God with love of neighbour and of self, personal with social identity, and the wide spectrum of relational responsibilities with each other, in a thoroughly conscientious and thought-out way” (A

Quest for Godliness, italics added, p. 24). Doing everything in the sight of God and for the glory of God was the integrating force for everyday Puritan life.

A third factor contributed to their consistently God-centred living. It was the Puritan tendency to be **down-to-earth, practical, and orderly**. Packer writes, “in their heavenly-minded ardour, the Puritans became men and women of order, matter-of-fact and down-to-earth, prayerful, purposeful, practical... They lived by ‘method’... planning and proportioning their time with care, not so much to keep the bad things out as to make sure they got all good and important things in – necessary wisdom then as now for busy people!” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

As a result, their lifestyle was what Packer calls “eminently balanced.” They blended together all the duties Scripture required, in the proportions it required, for the situations they were in. By comparison, Packer notes, we today “tend to live unplanned lives at random in a series of non-communicating compartments.” Consequently, we feel “swamped and distracted most of the time” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Surely we can learn from the Puritans in this matter. Many of us, out of an inadequate understanding of this world as God's creation, do compartmentalize our lives. We see some things as from God and some belonging simply to this world; we see some activities as having reference to God, and others as of no relevance to him. And we tend to resist being orderly, preferring the “freedom” spontaneity gives to indulge in whims and preferences. Consequently, our lives often lack the consistency that marked the Puritans. We are anything but “integrated” in the way we experience life.

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SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

J. I. Packer believes that a second way we can learn from the Puritans is from the quality of their spiritual experience. Communion with God was their passion, the defining characteristic of their spirituality. We can learn from them in this regard.

Packer identifies two things in particular worth noting. First was the Puritan commitment to **meditating on the Scriptures**. They viewed the Bible as “God’s word of instruction on divine-human relationships,” and through it they sought both to know God himself and how they were to live. To this end they were not content to read the Scriptures, but they aimed to have their hearts deeply affected by them. And, as Packer puts it, “knowing themselves to be creatures of thought, affection and will, and knowing God’s way to the human heart (will) is via the human head (the mind),” they practiced “discursive and systematic” meditation on the whole range of biblical truth as it related to life (*The Pursuit of Godliness*, p. 24).

In this, Packer notes, they first endeavoured to grasp the meaning of the Bible, and then have their hearts stirred by what it was saying. “In meditation,” he writes, “the Puritan would seek to search and challenge his heart, stir his affections to hate sin and love righteousness, and encourage himself with God’s promises...” (*Ibid.*, p. 24). This led to a form of spirituality that, in Packer’s words, was “rational, resolute and passionate.” It was “conscientious without being obsessive, law-orientated without lapsing into legalism, and expressive of Christian liberty without any shameful lurches into license” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Secondly, Puritan spirituality emphasized the importance of **self-examination**. Knowing “the dishonesty and deceitfulness of fallen human hearts,” says Packer, “they cultivated *humility* and *self-suspicion* as abiding attitudes” (*Ibid.*, p. 24). In practice this meant that they kept a close watch on their hearts for “blind spots and

lurking inward evils,” and upon their outward lives for sinful actions. While to us this seems a recipe for depression, to the Puritan it was the pathway to happiness. “They may not be called morbid or introspective on this account,” writes Packer. “On the contrary, they found the discipline of self-examination by Scripture (not the same thing as introspection, let us note), followed by the discipline of confessing and forsaking sin and renewing one’s gratitude to Christ for his pardoning mercy, to be a source of great inner peace and joy.” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Serious heart work of this kind is largely missing from contemporary spirituality. We hear repeatedly of the “dumbing down” of evangelical Christianity, a phenomenon marked by biblical illiteracy and the thoughtless quest for religious enjoyment. Many Christians today scarcely know how many books there are in the Bible, let alone their contents and implications for life. “Discursive and systematic” meditation is fast becoming a lost art. And as for serious self-examination, that’s viewed as an unhelpful exercise bound to lead to unacceptable restrictions. So there is no place (or need) for that either.

As a consequence, current spirituality is a far cry from the “rational, resolute, passionate piety” of the Puritans. Let Packer have the last word on the modern situation. “We today who know to our cost that we have unclear minds, uncontrolled affections, and unstable wills when it comes to serving God, and who again and again find ourselves being imposed on by irrational, emotional romanticism disguised as super-spirituality, could profit much from the Puritan’s example at this point too” (*Ibid.*, pp. 24-5).

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PURITAN ACTIVISM

J. I. Packer describes the Puritans as people with “a passion for effective action” (*A Quest for Godliness*, p. 25). He thinks we can learn from them in this regard.

When he speaks of the Puritan “passion for effective action,” Packer is referring to the way the Puritans took action to put their ideals into practice. In this sense they were thoroughgoing activists. They were men and women with dreams – dreams of what a godly family, society and church should be like – but they weren’t just dreamy idealists. They did something to realize their dreams. Committed as they were to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, they didn’t believe that his over-ruling providence relieved them of responsible action. So they dreamed, they believed, and they also acted.

Packer puts it this way: “Though the Puritans, like the rest of the human race, had their dreams, they were decidedly not the kind of people we could call ‘dreamy’! They had no time for the idleness of the lazy or passive person who leaves it to others to change the world” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). We might say, then, that Puritan activism was first of all **realistic**. It was down-to-earth, practical and sensible.

It was also **reliant**. Though determined and active people, the Puritans were never self-reliant in the wrong sense. They knew that they could only achieve anything for God’s glory with his help. No matter how gifted and industrious they were, how methodical and well thought-out their plans, they looked to God for help in everything. Packer describes it this way: “They were men of action in the pure Reformed mould – crusading activists without a jot of self-reliance; workers for God who depended utterly upon God to work in and through them, and who always gave God the praise for anything they did that in retrospect seemed to them to have been right; gifted men who prayed earnestly that God would enable them

to use their powers, not for self-display, but for his praise” (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

This captures the Puritan spirit well – men and women devoted to glorifying God and doing his will; committing all their energies, gifts and resources to that end; at the same time, relying totally upon God to work in and through them; and giving him praise for anything of worth they were able to accomplish.

Thirdly, Puritan activism might be described as **revolutionary** in the sense that it was bent on establishing a God-glorifying society. The Puritans were not restless reactionaries, chafing to set the world on fire with their radical ideas. Nor were they selfish, stubborn, bigoted cranks. They were men and women who longed to see God honoured in every part of his world, and who took steps to bring that to pass in whatever way they could. “None of them wanted to be revolutionaries in church or state, though some of them reluctantly became such,” Packer says. “All of them, however, longed to be effective change-agents for God wherever shifts from sin to sanctity were called for” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). The last phrase captures the goal of their activism well – seeing shifts “from sin to sanctity” wherever these were called for.

Packer believes that we need to learn from the activism of the Puritans. Listen to his indictment of our modern spirituality: “Today... Christians in the West are found to be on the whole passionless, passive, and one fears, prayerless; cultivating an ethos which encloses personal piety in a pietistic cocoon, they leave public affairs to go their own way and neither expect nor for the most part seek influence beyond their own Christian circle. Where the Puritans prayed and laboured for a holy England and New England... modern Christians gladly settle for conventional social respectability and, having done so, look no further. Surely it is obvious that at this point also the Puritans have a great deal to teach us” (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

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PURITAN FAMILY LIFE (1)

“It is hardly too much to say,” J.I. Packer writes, “that the Puritans created the Christian family in the English-speaking world” (*A Quest of Godliness*, p. 25). If what he says is true, there’s great value in studying what he calls their “program for family stability.” For much of the foundation they laid for the Christian family has been eroded in recent times.

Packer notes three important features of Puritan family ethics. The first of these is their **ethic of marriage**. He has this to say on the way the Puritans approached finding a marriage partner, and then set out to establish a marriage relationship: “The Puritan ethic of marriage was to look not for a partner whom you *do* love passionately at this moment, but rather for one whom you *can* love steadily as your best friend for life, and then to proceed with God’s help to do just that” (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

I doubt that the Puritans suppressed all elements of what we call romantic love. They were men and women just as we are, and cherished the wonder of “the way of a man with a maiden” (Proverbs 30:19), and the marital intimacy depicted in the Bible. But their approach to selecting a marriage partner, and then of establishing married life, obviously had a strong note of realism about it. They weren’t swept off their feet into hasty marriages built on passing feelings. It wasn’t, as Packer puts it, the passionate love of the moment that decided the issue for them, but the prospect of steady love for a lifetime. How much heartache could have been avoided if a greater measure of this foresight and restraint had been shown in the case of many marriages today?

Secondly, Packer notes what he calls the Puritan **ethic of nurture** – that is, the Puritan outlook on raising children. “The Puritan ethic for nurture,” he says, “was to train up children in the way they should go, to care for their bodies and souls together, and to educate

them for sober, godly, socially useful adult living” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). All three elements of this statement bear comment. The Puritans “trained up children in the way they should go.” They didn’t leave youngsters to discover their own path in life. They saw it as their responsibility to *train* them (with all the instruction, support and correction implied in that word) in the way they considered God meant them to go. That is, they brought them up in “the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

Furthermore, they cared for them both in “body and soul.” They were eager to see their children develop strong bodies, and encouraged them to eat, sleep and exercise well. But above and beyond this, they cared for the souls of their children. They were eager to see them truly converted and established in a life of communion with God. As we shall see next week, the home was the first sphere of evangelism for the Puritan.

Puritan parents also aimed at seeing their children prepared for “sober, godly, socially useful adult living.” They never lost sight of the goal of nurture. It was to see the children entrusted to them responsible and useful adult members of society. In other words, they were purposeful and intentional in their childrearing. They wanted to raise a “godly seed” for the Lord (Malachi 3:15).

Thirdly, Packer identifies a Puritan **ethic of home life**. This, he says, was “based on maintaining order, courtesy, and family worship. Goodwill, patience, consistency, and an encouraging attitude were seen as essential domestic virtues” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). How different our world would be if these virtues were still staple qualities of home life! I’m sure that many a schoolteacher today wishes his pupils all came from such homes. The task in the schoolroom would be made much easier. But more on this next week.

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PURITAN FAMILY LIFE (2)

Two other strengths of Puritan family life excited J.I. Packer's admiration.

The first of these was **their patience under hardship**. Life was hard in Puritan times. Packer describes it as an existence "of routine discomforts, rudimentary medicine without pain-killers, frequent bereavements (most families lost at least as many children as they reared), an average life expectancy of just under thirty years, and economic hardship for almost all..." (*A Quest for Godliness*, p. 26).

Yet in spite of such difficulties, he notes that the Puritans "resisted the all-too-familiar temptation to relieve pressure from the world by brutality at home, and laboured to honour God in their families despite all" (*Ibid.*, p. 26). Their hardships created "a school for character in every sense," and made them more heavenly minded and reliant upon the help of God than we are today. They accepted hardships and disappointments "realistically as from God," and refused to be "daunted or soured by any of them." In these respects, says Packer, "they merit supreme praise" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

The second admirable quality Packer saw in Puritan family life was the **concern to foster vital spirituality**. "It was at home in the first instance," he writes, "that the Puritan layman practiced evangelism and ministry. 'His family he endeavoured to make a church...labouring that those who were born within it, might be born again to God'" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

Puritan fathers in particular assumed the role of pastors to their own family. Scarcely if ever a day passed without the family (including servants) assembling to hear the Bible read (and often expounded), and to sing psalms and pray. Children were catechised and the main heads of Sunday sermons rehearsed. Mothers surrounded their children with songs and words of worship from the time they were

born. Every effort was made to see another generation embrace the faith of their parents with sincerity and delight.

In his typically piercing way, Packer contrasts this with what has become commonplace in modern practice. "In an era in which family life has become brittle even among Christians," he writes, "chicken-hearted spouses taking the easy course of separation rather than working at their relationship, and narcissistic parents spoiling their children materially while neglecting them spiritually, there is once more much to be learned from the Puritan's very different ways" (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

Who can disagree with him? In the modern West families don't seem to be coping with hardship and pressure the way they once did. Brutality is a feature of life in many homes, and so too is divorce. Husbands and wives are choosing the path of flight over the more difficult way of resolution and reconciliation. Our record of marital stability doesn't stack up well against that of earlier generations, particularly that of the Puritans.

The same is true with regard to the spiritual training of households. Family worship is a fast disappearing feature of Christian homes, as is catechising and Bible teaching. And it appears that many parents, as Packer suggests, are indeed spoiling their children with material possessions to relieve them of the need to spend time with them. In such circumstances there is little hope of the rising generation imbibing the faith of their parents. We could well take a leaf out of the Puritan's book when it comes to Christian family life.

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THE VALUE OF A SOUL

We can learn from the Puritans, J.I. Packer believes, *in their appreciation of human worth*. They viewed each person as having great value and unique individuality.

Their appreciation of **the worth of individuals** grew out of their thinking about God. They saw each human person as someone God had made in his own image. Moreover, they believed that he had made them for a special friendship with himself, a special purpose, and for a special destiny. This inevitably led them to believe that every human being was of immeasurable value.

Packer puts it this way: “Through believing in a great God... they [the Puritans] gained a vivid awareness of the greatness of moral issues, of eternity, and of the human soul” (*A Quest for Godliness*, p. 26). We might paraphrase and expand his words as follows: By looking at people in terms of their relationship with God, everything about them becomes significant. Moral issues, for example – questions of right and wrong – take on a new seriousness. What makes things right and wrong for people is determined not by changing social preferences but by God’s will. Similarly, the fact that we have been made to live forever – either in heavenly bliss or eternal woe – makes our souls of incredible worth. We are not simply the impersonal products of biological mechanisms; we are God’s special creations.

Our natural man-centredness robs us of this appreciation. The sense of wonder we feel at the mystery of life in a newborn baby fades as soon as our feet hit the busy pavement. Among the crowds, people lose their special value. We no longer see them as image-bearers God has made for himself, but people to be used, avoided or competed with. Nothing betrays that more than our unfeeling response to death – except when it touches us personally. Our tears

don’t flow for those who leave this life without God and without hope. We simply don’t appreciate the worth of a soul or the significance of eternity in the way that we should.

Secondly, the Puritans appreciated **the individuality of people** in a way that we don’t. “The wonder of human individuality was something they felt keenly,” writes Packer (*Ibid.*, p. 26). “Though,” he continues somewhat wryly, “they did not in every case manage to respect those who differed publicly from them, their appreciation of man’s dignity as the creature made to be God’s friend was strong,” (*Ibid* p. 26).

Again, it was their belief that we are God’s special creatures that made them appreciate each person’s uniqueness. Each one had to be reconciled to God as an individual. Each one had to discover the possibilities and path of friendship with God. And each one had to view their circumstances, backgrounds and abilities in terms of God’s special purpose for them. To the Puritan, every human being was intentionally unique, and needed to be appreciated as unique.

That is not to say they favoured the individualism rife today. There is a vast difference between appreciating created individuality and the fostering the self-centred isolation of modern individualism. The Puritans could hold a high view of the uniqueness of the individual and at the time, a commitment to human society as a collective body. The unique design of each person was intended to benefit the family, the church, and the commonwealth.

Again, Packer deserves the last word with this incisive comment on our modern world: “In the collectivised urban anthill where most of us live nowadays the sense of each individual’s eternal significance is much eroded, and the Puritan spirit is at this point a corrective from which we can profit greatly.” p. 26

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CHURCH RENEWAL

In this the last of our weekly insights on lessons from the Puritans, we examine what J.I. Packer calls *the Puritan ideal of church renewal*.

It is fitting to end our series on this note, for it could be said that at heart, Puritanism was a movement of church reform. It began with earnest, spiritually minded members of the Church of England wanting to see their church change. The earliest Puritans (called Brownists) wanted reform in both outward and inward aspects of the Church's life. They wanted elements of the order and practice of the church brought back closer to the apostolic model, and they were eager that widespread formalism be replaced with vibrant spiritual reality. They didn't want to divide the Church, but they did want to reform it.

Packer describes their ideal of church renewal in these terms: "The essence of this kind of 'reformation' was enrichment of understanding of God's truth, arousal of affections God-ward, increase of ardour in one's devotions, and more love, joy, and firmness of Christian purpose in one's calling and personal life" (*A Quest for Godliness*, p. 27).

Some would say that we have seen a renewal of this kind in our own country in the last fifty years. Many churches (and individual Christians) have been spiritually revived as they have rediscovered the power of the Holy Spirit and the practice of the priesthood of all believers. Be that as it may, the need for renewal is ongoing. Christians and churches never stand still, nor do they arrive at perfection this side of the Lord's return. The constant drift toward formality and deadness makes renewal an ongoing need.

While there may be similarities between Puritan reform and modern renewal, there are differences as well. One of these is in the agent of

church renewal. The Puritans put more emphasis on the pastor in this regard than would be common today. They saw a renewed pastor as the key to revived churches. Let a man preach and pastor with fresh vigour, they said, and the church will change. The goal of the Puritan pastor was, using Packer's words, to see his congregation brought, "by God's grace without disorder into a state of what we would call revival, so as to be truly and thoroughly converted, theologically orthodox and sound, spiritually alert and expectant, in character terms wise and steady, ethically enterprising and obedient, and humbly but joyously sure of their salvation" (*Ibid.*, p. 27).

This emphasis on the pastor fostered what some would call an unhealthy clericalism – a limitation that Packer says "boomeranged when lay zeal finally boiled over in Cromwell's army, in Quakerism, and in the vast sectarian underworld of Commonwealth time" (*Ibid.*, p. 27). However, as Packer says, it cannot be denied that there is "a nobility" about the Puritan ideal of a reformed pastor. The Puritan pastor was a "gospel preacher and Bible teacher, shepherd and physician of souls, catechist and counsellor, trainer and disciplinarian all in one" (*Ibid.*, p. 27). That may not be the exact profile of a pastor for our times (many would consider that these tasks should be shared by other competent leaders in the church), but it nevertheless remains a high goal and challenge for pastors today.

Packer sums up what we can learn from the Puritan passion for church renewal well in these words: "From the Puritan's ideals and goals for church life, which were unquestionably and abidingly right, and from their standards for clergy, which were challengingly and searchingly high, there is yet again a great deal that modern Christians can and should take to heart." p. 27

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