Physicians of the Soul: The Puritans and Biblical Counseling

Presented by Dr. Jeff Robinson at the Birmingham Counseling & Discipleship Training, July 19, 2012.

Introduction

J.I. Packer: “‘Puritan’ as a name was, in fact, mud from the start. Coined in the early 1560s, it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth’s Laodicean and compromising Church of England.”

I. Who were the Puritans?

The term was first used in the 1560s to describe those Protestant Christians in England who considered Queen Elizabeth’s reforms of the Church of England to be incomplete and unsuccessful. The Puritans were those believers and ministers who believed that the Church of England had not given up many of the unbiblical practices and superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church and they sought to remain within the church to purify or reform it.

II. What did they believe?

A. Some key doctrinal emphases:

1. Sola Scriptura. Scripture alone as the final authority for religious belief and practice. The regulative principle of worship was a major feature of this that governed Puritan worship.

2. Sola gratia. Viewed salvation as utterly a work of sovereign grace. Theological heirs of Calvin.

3. Sola fide. The necessity of personal regeneration. Each person had to be born again individually and had to believe in Christ. They saw faith as a gift of God.

4. The notion of a covenant as the guiding principle for virtually all relationships.

5. A strong emphasis on the sovereignty and providence of God.
6. The doctrine of calling or vocation. Dignified all jobs. Clergy is not a higher calling than other jobs in contrast to the Roman Catholic view.

7. An emphasis on the family as the basic unit through which God worked to redeem His people.

B. **Theology by a bunch of dead guys: What value do they hold for the church today?**

III. **How firm a foundation: The Puritans and the sufficiency of Scripture.**

A. **Competent to counsel. Tim Keller:** “The Bible was the main authority for the Puritans in helping souls in distress. They considered the Scripture more than comprehensive enough to deal with every basic human condition or problem. John Owen was happy to glean from pastoral experience and the variety of ‘casebooks’ of that era, but he added a warning that nothing was a substitute for a diligent study of the Scriptures, meditation thereon, fervent prayer, experience of spiritual things, and temptations in their own souls, with prudent observation made to the work of grace in them. Without these things, all pretences unto this ability and duty of the pastoral office are vain.

Clearly, the Puritans rested their counseling approach on Scripture. In many ways the Puritans are an excellent laboratory for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology. Many of those today claiming to be strictly biblical in their counseling approach still evidence the heavy influence of Maslow or Rogers or Skinner or Ellis. But the Puritans had the field of ‘the cure of souls’ virtually to themselves; they had no secular competition in the area of counseling. Thus we need to consider very seriously their counseling models.” (Tim Keller, “Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling,” *CCEF Journal*, June 2010)

IV. **Caregivers to the souls of man: How the Puritans speak to contemporary counseling issues:**
(Note: I am partially indebted to Mark Deckard and Tim Keller for some of these categories. Please see Deckard’s excellent book *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* and Keller’s helpful article in the CCEF Journal from June 2010, “Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling”)

1. Why do bad things happen to good people? The Puritans on man, God, and Providence.

   A. John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*.

   B. Some helpful counseling points from his work:

   - Sometimes God ordains physical suffering for a believer to help him in his struggle with sin (34)
   - Flavel saw it as the biblically-mandated duty of every Christian to meditate on God’s providence during times of trouble (36)
   - Asaph increased his depression by reflecting upon the intricacies of God’s ways in *Psalm 73*; the same is often true of us (36)
   - **Counsel to have patience and wait.** Writes Flavel, “Consider that the mercies you wait for are the fruits of pure grace. You do not deserve them, nor can claim them upon any title of desert; and therefore have reason to wait for them in patient and thankful frame.”

     All we have from God is mercy and often, part of our healing and learning is time spent in his school of waiting. (p. 42-43) But I can often live as if I have earned God’s favor and that he should act in a certain benevolent way toward me. Flavel counsels that it is important for believers to recall that we deserve nothing good from the hand of God.

   C. Advantages of meditating on the providence of God.

   D. Application of the doctrine of providence: Five ways I can know God’s will for my life.

   E. Other Puritans on suffering and God’s providence:

      --Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot*.

2. **Born this way: The Puritans on sin.**

   A. Sin, the fundamental issue.

   - Indwelling sin always abides, therefore it must always be mortified.
   - Indwelling sin not only abides, but is still acting.
   - Indwelling sin is not only active, but will produce soul-destroying sins if not mortified. Here, he points readers to the catalog of sins in *Galatians 5:19-21* that will inevitably arise if the heart is not purified daily through the killing of sin: “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lust, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envy, murder, drunkenness...”
   - Indwelling sin is to be opposed by the Spirit and the new nature.

And what is the result of neglecting the mortification of sin in the believer? “Where sin, through the neglect of mortification, gets a considerable victory, it breaks the bones of the soul (Ps. 31:10; 51:8), and makes a man weak, sick, and ready to die (Ps. 38:3-5), so that he cannot look up (Ps. 40:12; Is. 33:24); and when poor creatures will take blow after blow, wound after wound, foil after foil, and never rouse up themselves to a vigorous opposition, can they expect anything but to be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and that their souls should bleed to death.”

3. **Why am I so stressed out and miserable? The Puritans on depression, stress, discontentment, and low self-esteem.**

   A. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (1651).

   **Contentment is a matter of worship,** a matter of showing that we are creatures dependent upon our Creator: “By contentment we come to give God the worship that is due to him...The word that the Greeks have that signifies ‘to worship’ is the same as to come and crouch before someone, as if a dog should come crouching to you, and be willing to lie down at your feet. So the creature, in apprehension of his own baseness, and the infinite excellence that is in God above it, when it comes to worship God, comes and crouches to this God, and lies down at the feet of God...When you see a dog come crouching to you, and by holding your hand over him,
you can make him lie down at your feet, then consider, thus should you do before the Lord; you should come crouching to him, and lie down at his feet, even on your backs or bellies, to lie down in the dust before him so as to be willing that he should do with you what he will. Just as sometimes you may turn a dog this way or that way, up and down, with your hand, and there he lies before you, according to you showing him your hand; so when the creature shall come and lie down thus before the Lord, then a creature worships God and tenders the worship that is due to him. Now in what disposition of the heart do we thus crouch to God more than when we have this state of contentment in all the conditions that God disposes us to? This is crouching to God’s disposal.”

B. William Bridge, A Lifting Up of the Downcast (1648).

Lists nine sources of discouragement for believers:
1. Because of their sins.
2. Arising from their weaknesses.
3. From their failing or non-acceptance of godly duties.
4. From their lack of assurance of the love of God in their lives.
5. From the strength of their temptations to sin.
6. From their ‘desertions,’ that is from those times when God feels absent or withdrawn from their lives.
7. From the afflictions they are suffering.
8. From their struggles with their work.
9. From their spiritual condition not being what they know it should be.

C. Other Puritans on melancholy (depression):

--Timothy Rogers, Trouble of Mind and the Disease of Melancholy.


B. Positive signs of a genuine Christian.

C. Other Puritan works on assurance of and perseverance in salvation:

--John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress.*

**Conclusion**

Sinclair Ferguson’s important biblical lessons from John Flavel (and from all Puritans) from “The Mystery of Providence” in *The Devoted Life—An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* IVP, 2004, 222-23.

- God is in control of his universe.
- God is working out his perfect purposes.
- God is not my servant.
- God’s ways are far more mysterious and wonderful than I can understand.
- God is good—all of the time; I can trust him—all of the time.
- God’s timetable is not the same as mine.
- God is far more interested in what I become than in what I do.
- Freedom from suffering is not part of the promise of the Christian gospel.
- Suffering is an integral part of the Christian life.
- God works through suffering to fulfill his purpose in me.
- God’s purposes, not mine, are what bring him glory.
- God guides me by enabling me to read his Providences through the lens of his Word.

I have few greater pleasures than tracking the wonders of God’s ways.