

## Why we should read the Puritans

### Introduction

The writings of the English Puritans are full of theological depth and practical wisdom. Their style may be outdated, but their writings speak to the heart. Most books today are informative. But the writings of the Puritans are penetrative. It pierces deep inside the conscience both to expose its inconsistencies and to heal it with a gospel peace. Yet despite the enormous benefit that comes from reading the Puritans, very few, especially here in Singapore and Asia, take to the reading of the Puritans. I think I can explain the reasons.

1. They were written in old English. Puritans wrote in 17<sup>th</sup> century English. It is therefore very difficult to read them in their original style. All of the Puritan reprints today have been edited. Although the Banner of Truth and Soli Deo Gloria publishers have made them easier for the modern reader, they are still not easy to read. Very often we may have to reread the sentences to get at their meaning. Sad to say, modern readers do not have the time and patience for this kind of reading.

2. Their writings are loaded with insightful teachings, deep theology, and lengthy counsels about how to live the godly life. John Owen's commentary on Hebrews, for example, is a mammoth work totaling six volumes with each volume numbering to about 300 over pages. But although their writings are long, they are seldom repetitive. In fact they could even pack a lot of profound thoughts in a few words. Eg William Perkins, when he wrote about preaching, he said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing".

Thankfully, not all Puritans wrote so much. But in general you will find their writings lengthy and loaded. This means that you have to read slowly to benefit from the reading.

3. All of their writings have a heavy theological emphasis. Today many Christians are theological illiterate. The modern Church today prefers to major on areas like counseling, church growth, character building, fellowship life, etc. Even preaching today takes a greater practical slant. The lack of theology, both in preaching and living, has made us doctrinally impoverished, and spiritually poorer than our forefathers. For this reason, many today will find the Puritans boring. JI Packer in a lecture on John Owen even said that to ignore their writings is even sinful for their writings were God's gifts to the Church.

### Why then should we still be concerned with the Puritans and their writings?

1. We learn to be passionate about God. They live and wrote with a passion for the glory of God. The Puritan ambition in life is reflected in the first question of the WSC. What is the chief end of man? JI Packer said that they were great souls serving a great God. Calvin's enemies used to say of him that he was God-intoxicated. And the same can be said of the English puritans. Their writings and life were full of God. When we read the Puritans we will learn to live in the presence of God (Coram Deo).
2. We learn that to integrate all of life together and regard all we do in life as a spiritual calling. The Puritans did not worship God on Sundays and live without God in the weekdays. Neither did they consign God to the church and regarded God as irrelevant in the barn and streets. For the Puritan, all of life is sacred. As JI Packer noted, there was for them no disjunction between sacred and secular. When a layman was confused about his calling in life, John Bunyan pointed to the parishioner and told him that "God too was in the barn and farm". Since all of life is a calling, they performed their work with diligence and a sense of service to

God. People today still write about and praise the Puritan work ethics as the ideal standard for work and economics. But people do not realize that their incentive for hard work was not to earn more money. They considered work as a sacred service, one that is to be done for the Lord's honour.

3. We learn to be precise in our theological thinking. There is very little original theological thinking today. Most people today get their theology from published books and journals. But the Puritans lived in a period where they had to formulate theology. They had to decide what is orthodox and what is heresy. To do this they had to be extremely precise in their theology and thinking.
4. We learn to blend orthodoxy with right living. The writings of the Puritans are unsurpassed in their piety. And this emphasis on piety is not only found in their devotional writings. For the Puritans, theology is devotional and Christianity is experiential. JI Packer remarked that this is one lesson he learned from the Puritans. He said that the Puritans made him aware that all theology is also spirituality. William Ames defined theology as the "Science of living in the presence of God". The Puritans detested cold intellectual Christianity. True religion is a religion that penetrates into the recesses of the heart. To accomplish this, the mind is the necessary passage. John Owen wrote, "The way to the heart is through the mind." This balance of mind and heart is important in Puritan spirituality. For it distinguishes it from the false piety of the Mystics in the Middle Ages and the Moravians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike these two movements, Puritan piety is not a mindless "feel good" experience, much like the Charismatics today. Their piety was an outcome of solid mental thought and reflection.

Their piety arose out of a heart. John Bunyan's last words –

Their piety focused on enjoying Christ – closed with Christ

5. We learn to meditate deeply in the Scriptures. The Puritans wrote with a profound and deep understanding of Scriptures. Very few in the history of the Church could comment on the Scriptures like Matthew Henry, John Trapp, Matthew Poole, Thomas Manton and Thomas Goodwin. The reason why these men could expound Scriptures with unusual skills is because they meditated deeply on the words and truths. When a Puritan exegetes a text, he does not merely restate the meaning. He explores the context, explains every word, brings in other Scriptures to shed light on the text, and he unearths the theology and practical truths inherent in the text. The Puritans were primarily bible commentators. Many of their theological writings were a result of their exposition of the Scriptures. A good example of this is John Owen, the prince of Puritan theologians. When he was asked which is his most important writing, his answer was his commentary on Hebrews.
6. We learn about human psychology. The Puritans had a deep insight into the psychological experiences of the human soul. This is one part of Puritan theology that intrigues me. The Puritans were masters in the area they called "The cases of conscience". There were several books written on the subject of the conscience. The most well known in the Puritan period were the two volumes written by William Ames and William Perkins. Sin and depression were two subjects that the Puritans wrote extensively. They wrote books like, "The Plagues of Plagues", "The Mischief of Sins", etc. Why were they so keen in these matters? Approach is positive – not because they wanted to make the sinner feel bad, but they wanted the sinner to find full assurance of faith. The doctrine of the full assurance of faith was so important in their pastoral care that they included a chapter on this in their credal standards – the WCF. Because of their abilities to deal with soul sicknesses, the Puritans earned the title "Physician of Souls". And the greatest Puritan soul physician was at the same time the

greatest Puritan theologian – the great John Owen. His treatise on Sin and Temptation is still revised and republished in many modern editions. He wrote, “If sin and thy soul doth not part, Christ and thy soul can never meet”.

7. We learn to love the Church. The modern man loves the mega malls, but the Puritans loved the Church. They pursued reforms in the Church and never gave up. Their primary aim was to reform the Anglican Church, to make it less Roman Catholic and more Reformed. When they could not bring reforms to the Church, they went to another country to practice their religious liberty and convictions. They were true reformers in the sense of the word. One key motto of the Reformation is “Reformed, always reforming”.
8. We learn the importance of preaching. The Puritans were great preachers. Writing was one way they tried to bring reform to the Church. But their main methodology in reforming people’s lives was through the pulpit. Their preaching followed a standard pattern. Puritan sermons start with an explanation of the text, where they restate the Bible text in their own words with their careful insights. Then the sermon enters into a discussion of the doctrine, where important points of doctrines from the text were set forth. The sermon ends always with a heading called “uses”, where the practical lessons are set forth. Although their sermons were very detailed and well organized, preaching was not just the presentation of a well-researched material. Preaching in the words of Richard Baxter should be as “a dying man speaking to a dying man”. Aristotle said a good oration should have three elements – pathos, ethos, orthox, and the Puritans had all three elements in their preaching. The real heroes of the Puritan movement were the preachers.
9. We learn to examine our salvation. Their writings are very probing. An excellent example of this is Matthew’s Mead, “The Almost Christian Discovered”, or Joseph Alleine’s “Alarm To The Unconverted”. Both of these writers set out in their books to distinguish a false professor from a true Christian. Their goal was to make a professing believer examine his life before God so that he may be sure that he is not becoming a Christian for other reasons than to love Christ. To reach this goal, the Puritan pastor uses his words skillfully. He would write and preach in such a way that the words would work their way into your heart and conscience. Listen for example to the words of John Bunyan, “better to pray with the heart that has no words, than to pray with words that have no heart”.

**By Pastor Cheah Fook Meng**