

# The Puritans

by J.C. Philpot

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*The Puritans were a distinct people, marked by their separation from the world and their pursuit of experimental Christianity, which led to a rich legacy of writings and a deep understanding of the human heart.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:10, Galatians 5:13, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "Church History", "Spiritual Discernment"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot delves into the history and characteristics of the Puritans, highlighting their separation from the world due to their purity of principle and conduct. Despite facing persecution and internal challenges, the Puritans were known for their unity, spiritual depth, and discernment. Their writings focused on topics such as grace, regeneration, and the work of the Holy Spirit, reflecting their keen understanding of the human heart and commitment to scriptural truth. While acknowledging the Puritans' significant contributions, Philpot also emphasizes the importance of discernment and not blindly following all their views, encouraging listeners to walk in the light given to them.

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## Transcript

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By J. C. Philpot

The Puritans, called so derisively from their purity of principle and conduct, were hooted down, and driven from society as disturbers of the public peace. They had no need to separate themselves from the world, the world separated them from itself. Thus one grand point was gained. The church and the world were really separated. Ranks of society in those days were much more marked by outward distinctions than in our own. The gayest dresses, the richest silks, the most gaudy colors were then worn by all of both sexes who aspired to worldly distinction. Here were our Puritan ancestors specially distinguished. Their plain garb and unadorned apparel at once marked them. This made a gulf between the world and them, now too much bridged over. And as thus they were driven out of the world, they were more closely united with each other than we have in our day any conception of. Two distinct forces were thus at work to bring together the people of God--external persecution and internal love. One drove and the other drew; one closed the circle from without, and the other attracted in the circle from within.

But as in all ages grain and chaff have been strewn on the same floor, wheat and tares have grown up in the same field, fish, good and bad, have swum in the same net, the Puritan assemblies were not exempt

from admixture. If there was a Judas among the disciples, an Ananias and Sapphira among the Pentecostal converts, a Demas among Paul's personal friends, were the Puritans likely to be, according to their name, a pure heap of unmixed grain? But this very circumstance exercised a peculiar influence on their ministry and writings. If there had been no 'Talkatives' in the little meetings at Bedford, what materials would there have been for Bunyan's inimitable life-portrait? If no 'Mr. By-ends' or 'Mr. Hold-the-world' were to be found within reach of the Tinker's eye and voice, they would not have fallen within the scope of the Tinker's pen. 'Mr. Money-love', it will be remembered, says to his good friend By-ends, "They, and we, and you, Sir, I hope, are going on pilgrimage." And pilgrimage in those days did not mean complying with the Act of Uniformity. In this, however, as elsewhere, we see good springing out of evil.

Being thrown by the circumstances already mentioned more closely together, if there was on one side deeper hypocrisy, there was on the other clearer discernment. In their small assemblies character became more closely watched, and therefore better known. Professors of religion lived more under each other's eye. There was more spiritual conversation; more discussion of doctrine and experience; more marked displays of God's providence; more mutual communion and affection; more sympathy and communion; more bearing of each other's burdens; and more general equality and brotherhood than we have any idea of. Those who experimentally knew the things of God lived more under their power and influence than in our day; and religion, as a personal reality, was with them more a matter of daily and hourly experience and consideration. As a necessary consequence, counterfeits were better got up. If the coins from heaven's mint had in those days a clearer ring, were of brighter hue, bore a more deeply-cut impress, and showed a closer resemblance to the Sovereign's image, the master of the infernal mint was not then behind in his imitative coinage. The crude, mis-shaped, base money of the present day would not have passed in times when Bunyan and Owen were assayers. Their sharp eyes would soon have detected the clumsy counterfeit. This has made the Puritan writers so searching, so discriminating, so minute in the marks which they lay down of a real work of grace.

But the Puritan ministers were also men mighty in the Scriptures. When they had opportunity they had been hard students. Dr. Owen was one of the most learned men of the seventeenth century, and was appointed by Cromwell Dean of Christ Church and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, mainly for the advantage of the students. Most also of the ejected ministers were men of ability and learning. But persecution drove them from public libraries; and poverty soon compelled them to part with books for bread. A learned ministry was rather an idol with the Puritans; and this idol was to be broken. Having to defend the truth from the assaults of Popery on the one hand and infidelity on the other, they had been compelled, as they considered, to study works of learning. But, hunted down by informers, haled before magistrates, hooted by mobs, and immured in prisons, they had little time for learned researches. Poverty made them dig other roots than those of Hebrew words; and the prison taught them to tag laces instead of turning over lexicons. Hiding in a wood by day, and preaching in a cottage by night, expecting every moment to hear the door driven in, were not situations favorable to hard reading. Folios and quartos, the usual sized books of that day, were not readily carried about when soldiers were on their track; and a hollow tree or a damp cellar made but an indifferent study. Thus were they driven to study the heart instead of books, and to watch the movements of grace and the workings of sin instead of confuting the infidel arguments of Hobbes, or replying to the objections of Socinus.

The work of grace on the soul, its various counterfeits, how far a person may go and not be a Christian, the certain marks of regeneration, the opposition made to it by sin and Satan, the privileges and duties of a believer, the misery and danger of an unconverted state, the work of Christ on the cross, and the

influences and operations of the blessed Spirit on the heart--these and similar topics form the staple of the writings of the Puritans. And though in some points, such as the law, general invitations, &c., they may be obscure, or even erroneous, yet where they are at home there is a peculiar weight and power in their works. They are eminently scriptural and invariably practical. They were keen anatomists of the human heart, dissecting its hidden fibers to the very core. Its deceitfulness and hypocrisy were well known to them, and they possessed a peculiar ability in laying bare all its pretenses and false refuges. They were sometimes, perhaps, too systematic, and would scarcely tolerate the least deviation from the prescribed formulas of doctrine and experience. But they were a blessed generation, maintaining alive by their writings, when persecution had much silenced their voices, the hidden life of godliness in the hearts of hundreds; and by sending abroad from their hiding-places their spiritual and savory works, they much made up by their pen what had been lost from their tongue.

The writings of the Puritans are the brightest mirror of their character, as well as the most enduring evidence of their worth; for in them, as in a mirror, we see reflected the features of the men, and, we may add, of that wondrous era when religion in this country was not a shadow but a substance, not a form but a power, not a name but a living reality, pervading all classes and ranks to a degree never before, and never since known. Then appeared a long and successive series of writers upon every religious subject, doctrinal, practical, and experimental, who filled the land with their works.

The history of the Puritans, as a religious body of England, reaches from the accession of Queen Elizabeth, (A.D. 1558,) to the Revolution (1688.) But their writings, at least most of those preserved to the present day, have not so wide a range. The early Puritans were chiefly engaged in controversy against the corruptions of the Establishment, the spread of Popery and Arminianism, and the arbitrary power of the bishops. Their writings, therefore, were not of the same experimental character as the later productions of the same school. The press also being heavily fettered, and no publications permitted but those which were licensed by the Authorities in Church and State, truth was gagged, and its voice choked in the very utterance. When before the writer stood the pillory with the Westminster mob, at its foot the executioner with the hot branding iron in one hand and the shears in the other, and behind it a cell in Newgate for life, it required some boldness of heart to put pen to paper, and paper to press. In Laud's bosom there was no more pity for a Puritan than now rests in the bosom of a London magistrate for a garotter; and as to punishment, there is not the least comparison, for no criminal out of Russia would now be treated as was Dr. Leighton.

But when what is usually called the Great Rebellion, but what should rather be termed the uprising of the English people against the most determined conspiracy of Church and King to overthrow all their ancient laws and liberties, broke out, and in its progress and results liberated, to a large extent, the public press, then appeared a long and successive series of writers upon every religious subject, doctrinal, practical, and experimental, who filled the land with their works.

The religious activity of that age it is almost impossible for us to conceive, and the contrast which it forms with the present is something absolutely marvelous. The change is as great as that of a man one day in full vigor of mental and bodily health, and the next lying on his bed with a paralytic stroke; or that of a fire blazing high, and casting heat and flame in all directions, and then sunk down into a heap of black ashes, under which it feebly and faintly smoulders. When, too, we consider other points of comparison, the contrast will appear more marvelous still. England at that period, say from A.D. 1640 to 1660, may well be contrasted with England of the last twenty years. It was then very thinly inhabited, its whole population probably not exceeding four or five million. There were no great towns; manufactures were but scanty, the

woollen being the only one of any importance; the roads most miserable, and to wheel-carriages almost impassable. And yet, with all these disadvantages, there was an energy in writing, reading, and spreading religious works all over the length and breadth of the land as much beyond the present apathy as the serious earnestness, the ardent zeal, the Christian devotedness, the godly life, and the unwearied labors of the Puritan ministers outshine the words and works of their degenerate descendants.

In those days men breathed religion, ate religion, drank religion. In the House of Commons, Oliver Cromwell would speak more in one half hour of the grace of God, the work of the Spirit, and the blessedness of knowing and serving the Lord, than most ministers in our day in a whole hour's sermon; and the very soldiers in his army over their watch-fires would read more in their little black bibles by the lurid light, and talk to each other more of the precious things of God in one evening, than many of our great divines would do of either in a week.

We by no means intend to express an opinion that all this was real religion, vital godliness. There is no fire without smoke; but, again, there is no smoke without fire. Shadow is not substance; but there is no shadow without it; and the larger the substance the greater the shadow. There is, indeed, the form without the power; but form presumes the existence of power, as much as the image of David, which Michal made in the bed with a pillow of goat's hair for his bolster, (1 Sam. 19:16,) presumed the existence of David. In those days there was, you will perhaps say, much false fire, hypocrisy, delusion, enthusiasm, and wild fanaticism. No doubt there was. But false fire implies true fire, or why should it be false? If, as has been well said, hypocrisy be the tribute paid to godliness, there must be the tribute receiver as well as the tribute payer. So with delusion, enthusiasm, and fanaticism. Where would be the place for these imitations of the light, life, and power of the Spirit--except in a day when his operations were specially manifest?

But Satan is often transformed, you will say, into an angel of light. True--but there must be angels of light to induce the arch deceiver to attempt the transformation. Thus, after making all the deductions that a friend, not an enemy, to vital godliness may assume, we must believe that in that day there was a blessed amount of real, experimental religion. How men could find time to write, money to buy, leisure to read, and strength to digest the ponderous folios which issued from the pens of Owen, Goodwin, Charnock, Manton, Howe, etc., seems at the present day an almost inexplicable mystery, of which we know but one solution--that in those days there was a large number of people in different classes of society who took the deepest and most lively interest in the things which concerned their everlasting peace.

Now, such writers must have had readers of a similar spirit with themselves--solid, serious, spiritually-minded men, with a heavenly sobriety of spirit, well-ripened judgment, and clear discernment in the things of God. There is no fairer or better test of an age than its approved authors, for they represent and embody its spirit.

But while we have sufficiently, we think, indicated our high opinion of the value of these good old Puritan divines, we would carefully guard ourselves against the conclusion which some might thence draw that we fully agree with all their views and sentiments. This is very far from being the case; for in some points we most widely differ from them, as, for instance, in offers of grace, progressive sanctification, the law being a rule of life, calls to the dead. Upon these points, mainly through Mr. Huntington's writings, the church of God has more light than in the days of the Puritans; and as we are to call no man master on earth, and are bound to walk according to the light which is given us, it does not make us inconsistent to revere and admire the Puritan writers, and yet not tread servilely in their footsteps. We follow them as far as they follow the word; but when they depart from that, we depart from them. This is our Christian liberty; and as

long as we use it not as a cloak of licentiousness, but as enabling us to serve the Lord in newness of the spirit and not in the oldness of the letter, none can justly condemn us for inconsistency.

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