

## Introduction

A number of years ago, a mobile phone advertising campaign that had flourished in England, Scotland and Wales, foundered in N. Ireland. Its slogan was, 'The Future is Bright: the Future is *Orange!*' It was hardly designed to help a Peace Process in its infancy! The future may or may not be bright for the *Orange* network, or for the Ulster Peace Process; but the question we face is just how bright is the future for the Nonconformist cause in Britain?

At face value, answer to that question might seem to be, 'Not very!' Many Chapel congregations are ageing and dwindling, Presbyterian denominations are fragmenting and losing influence and the hoped-for revival of Puritanism of the 'Sixties has not materialised. The situation is further complicated by the dramatic cultural shift experienced by this present generation. We have moved into an era dominated as never before by post-Enlightenment individualism. We seem to be left with a situation summed up by a minister bemoaning falling attendances at Nonconformist-type conferences who said, 'Let's face it, experimental Calvinism is no longer the flavour of the month!'

The current apparent decline raises questions at a number of levels: 'Do declining numbers mean that we must rethink our theology and strategy?' 'Do we simply acknowledge the sovereignty of Providence and go into pietistic bunker-mode?' Or, is it the case that we need to rethink the present situation facing churches in light of both Scripture and the past? The answer can really only be the latter option. We need to rediscover and appreciate afresh our Nonconformist heritage as it relates to a new generation. That is certainly the line we want to

pursue in the remainder of this article; but first we need to sketch in some background details.

A significant (though not sole) factor in the evangelical recovery that took place in Britain during the last century was the rediscovery of the Puritans. It began with a group of Oxford and Cambridge students, including J.I. Packer and Raymond Johnston, who began meeting to explore Puritan literature as early as 1948. The group quickly found its focus in *Westminster Chapel* under the guiding hand of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and then grew from there into what was to become the *Puritan Studies Conference*. It was not a 'Nonconformist' group in the ecclesiastical sense, but it did embrace the spirit of Nonconformity. The growing strength and influence of this little movement was reflected in the establishment in 1957 and subsequent growth of the *Banner of Truth Trust* with its different ministries. All this led to heightened expectations among a new generation of Christians.

However, the movement reached a major watershed in 1966 with the reaction to Dr. Lloyd-Jones' address at the National Assembly of Evangelicals in Westminster Central Hall. The ramifications of what was and was not said that night are in one sense immaterial; what is clear is that what happened that evening led to a significant parting of the ways over denominational alignment.

The decades that followed saw further fragmentation on both sides of the Anglican/ Nonconformist divide over Charismatic issues and the emergence of New Churches. The development of the respective groupings since that time has to a large extent been reflected in the *Banner of Truth* and *Proclamation*

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Trusts for Nonconformist and Anglican evangelicals respectively and *Spring Harvest* and *Word Alive* for those with Charismatic leanings.

What we want to do in the remainder of this article is to reflect on the essence of Nonconformity in its Puritan past, see how it is first and foremost a spirit that transcends denominations (it was born within Anglicanism) and then go on to argue that it has a vital role in the preservation of the gospel in the fullest sense of the word for the future.

The draft title given to this paper in the early stages of planning was, 'Is there a future for Nonconformity?' I want to stick with the question in that title and answer it by saying, 'Yes! If...' – taking the line that the essence of Nonconformity lies in the Puritan movement of the 16th and 17th centuries and its spiritual legacy down to the present time. In light of what these men stood for and achieved there is good reason to believe there is a future for Nonconformity, if we grasp six important features of what the Puritans were and stood for.

### **1. If we Appreciate the Genius of Puritanism**

Scanning through much of what has been written and said about the Puritans – even by evangelicals – it is plain to see they tend to get a pretty bad press. Indeed, the name 'Puritan' was originally intended as a smear from the start and it remains so for many to the present. In one sense it is not hard to pick out the faults, failings and inconsistencies in those who bore that name in the 16th and 17th centuries and also in those who are their spiritual descendants; however, to major on that would be to overlook the incredible achievements of this movement and the

extent to which its theology and influence have long outlived these men in many ways.

J.I. Packer captures the significance and relevance of the Puritans by comparing them to the Giant Redwood trees of Northern California:

As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras, and certainly so in this age of crushing urban collectivism, when Western Christians sometimes feel and often look like ants on an anthill and puppets on a string ... In this situation the teaching and example of the Puritans has much to say to us.<sup>1</sup>

That leaves us wondering what, then, was the genius of Puritanism that gave it such far-reaching and enduring significance? – We can single out five of its main characteristics that are worth noting:

#### **1.1 Their View of God**

Everything these men believed, were and stood for stemmed from their high view of God. (The same was true for their predecessors in the Reformation in Europe and England.) The point is well illustrated by the fact that the first derisory epithet attached to these men was 'Precisians' or, 'Precisionists.' When Richard Rogers (a minister in Wetherfield, Essex) was asked by a gentleman what made him so precise, he responded, 'Oh, Sir, I serve a precise God!' Straightaway see what is going wrong in so many churches today: they embrace a view of God that has been dumbed down in the name of popular Christianity. Even as far back as the 1950's J.B Phillips could say in the title of a book, *Your God is too Small!* The recovery of healthy, vibrant churches is bound up with the need to recover a high view of God.

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## 1.2 Their Esteem of Scripture

The Puritan regard for Scripture is nowhere expressed more succinctly than in Question 2 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*:

Q. What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

In making that formulation and locating it where they did in their catechism, these men were simply reiterating the principle of *sola scriptura* that lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and safeguarding the heart of both gospel and church.

The problem in our day is not merely that the revelation of Holy Scripture is rivalled by many other forms of revelation; but that too often Scripture is subordinated to reason. If the spirit of Nonconformity is to survive, it must bow, neither to the temple of fresh revelation, nor to the academy, but to the Word of God alone.

## 1.3 Their Understanding of Salvation

It is commonplace in contemporary theology – at least at a popular level – to construe ‘salvation’ as ‘the point of conversion’; but that is to lose sight of its larger biblical horizons. Thomas Manton gives us a glimpse of the full-orbed understanding of salvation that was typical of his Puritan counterparts and which shaped their view of the gospel:

The sum of the gospel is this, that all who, by repentance and faith do forsake the flesh, the world and the devil, and give themselves up to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as their creator, redeemer and sanctifier, shall find God as a father taking them for his reconciled children, and for Christ’s sake pardoning their sin, and by his Spirit giving

them his grace; and if they persevere in this course, will finally glorify them, and bestow upon them everlasting happiness.<sup>2</sup>

This larger understanding of salvation explains the Puritan use of the term ‘regeneration’ and their richer understanding of evangelism to which we will come back later. It also explains the disparity between expectations regarding conversion in our day and the way they are fulfilled that stems from too narrow an understanding of salvation.

## 1.4 Their Appreciation of the Church

If there is one thing that can be identified as the main catalyst for the emergence of the Puritans it was their concern for the reformation of the church. They had a high view of the church. This first began to come to the fore in their criticisms of the *Elizabethan Settlement*. Many of these young men were Cambridge graduates who entered the ministry of the Church of England in order to press for ongoing reform at a congregational level. We will come back to this in more detail further down.

The Post-Enlightenment individualism that has become the hallmark of the 21st century church has robbed us of that biblical view that sees the church as the glorious Body and radiant Bride of Christ – the doctrine of the church is really the *Cinderella* of theology.

## 1.5 Their Concern for the World as a Whole

The fifth strand of Puritan distinctiveness worth highlighting is its view of life and community as an integrated whole – the Puritans believed that God has sanctioned the solidarity of society.<sup>3</sup> This translated into their vigorous (however imperfect) efforts in the political sphere – reaching their zenith

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in the Glorious Revolution and the establishment of the Commonwealth. Even though Puritans differed among themselves as to the nature of the relationship between church and state, they held a generally shared conviction that the church has a God-given role in the life of the community at large that went beyond the need for evangelism. (This point is helpfully explored in relation to the influence of the so-called 'High Calvinists' of the Nineteenth Century by Ian Shaw and is illustrated also in 19th century Scotland in the ministries of Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow and Edinburgh.)<sup>4</sup> Reaction against the aberrations of what became known as the 'Social Gospel' in the early part of the 20th century led in many cases to a neglect of wider social responsibility by its end in many Nonconformist churches. Yet a significant part of their Puritan heritage lies in a concern for God's truth to be applied to social and political concerns enabling Christians to function as salt and light in a dark and putrefying world.

The problem with much of the Puritan renaissance that swept through Britain in the last half-century is that it has embraced only a Reformed/Puritan soteriology – one that fails to grasp the grandeur and integrity of the world-life view of our spiritual forebears. (Interestingly, that stands in contrast to the corresponding renaissance that has taken place in American churches.) If there is to be a future under God for Nonconformity in Britain, we need to appreciate afresh the genius of this movement from its earliest days.

## **2. If we Cultivate the Spirituality of the Puritans**

'Spirituality' is one of the buzz-words of this present

generation – it is only a pity that it has been brought back into our vocabulary by acolytes of New Age philosophy! That surely reflects on a century and more of evangelical spirituality that was and continues to be both truncated and myopic. Through the holiness theology of the Keswick movement and its step-daughters in Pentecostal and Charismatic theology, a whole new understanding of spirituality emerged – one that struggled to find biblically persuasive answers for the problems of sin, suffering and sanctification in the Christian life. Dr. Packer probably speaks for many who have struggled with these influences – in light of their experience, as much as in their understanding of Scripture – when he says he only first began to find satisfaction in the Puritans. Again, there are a number of specific areas of their spirituality that are worth noting:

### **2.1 They took Sin Seriously**

Ralph Venning says it all in basing his book *The Plague of Plagues* on the sinfulness of sin. These men were classically styled 'physicians of soul' and as such were concerned with an accurate diagnosis of the soul's deepest complaint. Far from seeing 'sin' as some vague classification that somehow was linked to man's being under divine displeasure, they saw it in all its ugliness and seriousness. It was seen not merely as that deepest malaise of soul that cuts us off from God and that can only be dealt with by the grace of justification; but also as the running sore of the Christian life that can only be dealt with by the grace of sanctification.

The reason there is so much shallowness in much contemporary Christianity is that there is so little

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seriousness in the way sin is viewed both from the pulpit and in the pew.

## 2.2 They lived in the Shadow of Death

Improvements in social conditions in the Western world today, combined with the quality of health care available mean that people can expect – all things considered – to enjoy a long life. The same cannot be said for those who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries. A very real sense of human mortality and the brevity of our time in this world brought the issues of death and life in the world to come into sharp focus for the Puritans and it affected their grasp of these central themes in Scripture.

As we find ourselves living increasingly in a ‘death-denying culture,’ we need to encourage people not only to reckon with the reality of death, but also to realise ‘a person is not ready to live until they are ready to die.’

## 2.3 They had a Holistic View of Life

Another feature of life in the 21st Century to which we would do well to apply some Puritan wisdom is our atomistic approach to life – an attitude that leads to a compartmentalised existence. This affects us as Christians in that we all too easily confine our understanding of spirituality to certain times in our week and certain segments of our life – that explains a great deal of spiritual dysfunction.

If Puritan spirituality can be captured in a single sentence, then it must surely be in its best-known assertion: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever!’ The controlling concern in Puritan Christianity was to know God truly and serve him rightly – in the words of Peter Lewis, ‘Puritanism was sainthood visible.’<sup>5</sup> The visibility of

our faith needs to go far beyond the number of church meetings we attend and activities in which we are involved!

## 2.4 They saw All Truth as being ‘Unto Godliness’

Perhaps the greatest factor in the strength of Puritan spirituality was the way it was rooted in theology. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to illustrate that in his ministry by pointing to the function of a building’s steel frame – without it, the entire edifice could not stand!

Theology for our 17th spiritual forebears was never a merely academic exercise, but always a means by which to cultivate communion with God and to live increasingly to his glory. Add to this the fact that the Puritans saw this not as a privatised, but shared responsibility and it is not hard to see that those who belonged to this movement stood out because of their life.

Putting all this together, Packer argues that the Puritan approach to faith and life provides the antidote for three of the most troublesome groups of Christians in our time: *restless experientialists, entrenched intellectualists and disaffected deviationists*.<sup>6</sup> The need for a spirituality that is both God-glorifying and personally satisfying is paramount for the church in every generation: it needs to be rediscovered not invented!

## 3. If we Share the Vision of the Puritans

As has been said already, the Puritan movement was born out of a concern to reform the Church of England and even as it was both forced and moved by choice out of that church, its vision for ongoing reformation was at the heart of much of Puritan

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labour. This concern expressed itself in the pursuit of reform in three areas: worship, church order and church membership. These issues continue to be matters for discussion and debate in the church of our day and we ignore them to the church's peril. Let me offer just a few brief thoughts on each to show why they continue to be important:

### **3.1 The Worship Issue is Bigger than we Think**

Almost the entire debate over worship in recent decades has been dominated by 'Traditional' versus 'Contemporary'; but there is a much deeper issue at stake. It is the issue of what God's people are doing when they meet together as the church.

One prominent Anglican Evangelical's answer to that question is, 'We are not there to 'worship' – we are just there to meet with Jesus!' The Puritans would have had something very different to say! There is not space to develop these thoughts here; but suffice it to say, our view of worship will profoundly affect the shape of our life as the people of God and the character of our witness to world.

### **3.2 The Need for Reform must be faced by Every Generation**

It was the 17th Century theologian Gisbert Voetius – a Dutch counterpart to the English Puritans – who coined the expression, 'The Church that is reformed must always be reforming.' He was not using the term 'reformed' in its narrow sense of being Calvinistic in theology and polity, but rather to describe the ongoing nature of saving transformation in the corporate life of the people of God. It was that vision that inspired the early Puritans within the Church of England and many laboured to further that reform within that church

until the day they died. (Far from being an anti-Anglican movement, Puritanism was seen as 'a cuckoo in the Anglicans' nest – in it but not really of it – and that from the beginning!')<sup>7</sup>

The Westminster Assembly was called with the express purpose of seeking a basis of faith and a form of church government that would be more widely agreeable in Britain: its goal was ongoing ecclesiastical reform. The so-called 'Grand Debate' over church polity in the Assembly did not find that consensus; however, even their disagreements were to prove fruitful for the church polity of the major groupings who were influenced by the Confession and Catechisms that it produced.<sup>8</sup>

The task of ongoing reformation remains for every church in every age as it faces the challenge of the changing times we live in – to do so is simply to be true to spirit of Nonconformity.

### **3.3 The question of what it means to be a Christian is at the heart of what it means to be a Church**

Alongside the elimination of 'popery from the worship and prelacy in the government' of the Church of England, a major concern of Puritan reform was to remove 'pagan irreligion from its membership'.<sup>9</sup> That did not mean to say the Puritans saw no place for the unconverted in their services, or that they did not seek to evangelise them; but rather it revealed their understanding of what constituted the church. They saw it as the Covenant Community of the People of God. This is an issue that touches every church at the deepest possible level. Christ came into the world to save 'a people for himself' – a new community that would

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stand out for him as his counter-culture in a fallen world – that must be the vision for his people in every age!

#### **4. If we Hold the Convictions of the Puritans**

Out of all the many strengths of the Puritans, the strength of their convictions was one of their most defining characteristics – it was a mark of their utter devotion to God and to the gospel. It led to their being willing to take on kings and prelates in the pursuit of reform, to the drafting and signing of the *Solemn League and Covenant* in 1643 and their readiness to face persecution and imprisonment for the sake of their cause. However, the greatest example of the strength of their resolve was seen in the *Great Ejection* of 1662. Some 2,000 Nonconformist ministers were ejected from their livings as a result.

The fact that so many men (and their families) were prepared to pay such a high price for the sake of conscience was not, as some have suggested, due to a ‘peevish humour,’ but rather because of convictions that were moulded by Scripture and a heartfelt desire for integrity. What they were required to abjure and to swear in the 1662 Act of Uniformity would have been a complete denial of what they had fought for over the past century. Expediency could never be a good reason to abandon such convictions held for so long because the underlying issue at stake was that of the authority of Scripture.

In contemporary terms, this issue raises some painful questions: a mere glance over the past 100 years will reveal a story of battles fought, divisions that followed and what appears to be the cause of Christ in perpetual disintegration – it is hard not to feel

cynical. However, there are two things that help to bring what is at stake into focus: one is the kind of issues over which we must take a stand, the other is the extent to which we are to be bound by church courts. Each in its own way is a sliding scale; but in both there is line we cannot cross over.

#### **5. If we Pursue the Catholicity of the Puritans**

In light of what have just considered about the Puritan conscience, it is easy to focus on debates about small things with which they are associated – such as rings, vestments and festivals. There is no doubt that they were capable of robust and vigorous debate! But at the same time, they were bound together by an extraordinary spirit of catholicity. The unity they enjoyed transcended the boundaries of particular views on polity or doctrine.

The fact that the Westminster Assembly was comprised of a highly diverse group of divines evidenced that: it was no hindrance to achieving the most fruitful theological consensus.

It has been all too easy to divide along denominational and party lines in our debates, when in fact the greater need is to stand together on issues that cross those lines. The spirit of Nonconformity is one that not only galvanises convictions under Scripture, but under that same Scripture tirelessly pursues the unity of the body of Christ visibly on earth.

#### **6. If we Proclaim the Gospel of the Puritans**

We have already seen that the Puritan view of salvation was much bigger than what is generally held today; that view of salvation affected their view of the gospel and how it should be proclaimed. These men preached a ‘comprehensive gospel’ –

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preaching not merely for people to ‘say the words,’ but for evidence of convertedness, in the marks of grace in people’s lives.

Their gospel labours were grounded in the conviction that ‘salvation is of the Lord.’ In the words of Thomas Watson, ‘Ministers knock at the door of men’s hearts, the Spirit comes with a key and opens the door.’<sup>40</sup> It is clear from reading their evangelistic sermons and literature that their views on divine sovereignty were no obstacle to their preaching both with persuasion and with passion.

Too much of today’s gospel and the means by which it is communicated is reductionist, programmatic and geared towards immediate results. If there is to be a future for Nonconformity, then it has to include a place for full-orbed gospel preaching that looks to God to give the increase to our labours.

## Conclusion

It would not be hard to argue that the greatest and most enduring achievement of the Puritan era was the fruit of the Westminster Assembly. This is seen in the form of that set of documents it produced expressing a shared understanding of Scripture that transcends boundaries of church polity. The Assembly was called to create a uniformity in the church in Britain that was based on consensus. It succeeded in part – witness the value and durability of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Savoy Declaration* and the *1689 Baptist Confession* – but it singularly failed in many other respects.

Over the past ten years there have been many indications that there is a renewed longing to find that kind of consensus – rooted in God and shaped by his word.

And there has been no shortage of gatherings and initiatives to pursue it. Out of all those gatherings that I had the privilege to attend, one comment has lingered on. We were discussing the need to work together for more meaningful theological and ecclesiastical ties between churches in Britain, when one delegate said, ‘Brothers, we have it within our grasp to finish the unfinished business of 17th Century!’ It may sound like something of a pipe-dream, but that is the thought I would leave with you as we draw the threads of our deliberations to a conclusion.

The great danger we face in our day on all sides is that of splintering into an independency based on minimalist theology and in which everyone does their own thing. If that proves to be the case it will be a tragic loss to the evangelical cause in this country. If there is to be a positive future for Nonconformity it cannot be achieved without humble co-operation and a shared vision to carry on with the pursuit of true reform in light of the teaching and application of ‘the whole counsel of God.’

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