

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 68

Puritans and Contemporary Christianity – Part 3

After crossing the Atlantic safely by the providence of God, the Puritans found themselves existing in the strange setting of the New World. A new beginning with new challenges and opportunities awaited them.

Puritanism was viewed as a commitment to obey the will of God as fully as possible. In so doing these people lived in ways that were distinctive: observing the Sabbath more strictly than most others did, relishing sermons, “godly” books, and the Bible, and preferring the fellowship of other “godly” people like themselves.¹ What would that distinctive lifestyle look like on the new canvas they beheld?

We will explore how the Puritans expressed their faith in society, in marriage, and in parenting. Then, we will examine contemporary Christianity in relation to these environments of society and family. As always, the points for home will be the icing on the cake.

PURITANS AND SOCIETY

The word “order” captures how the Puritans chose to relate to society in the New World. They held a high view of God, the Bible, and morality. For them, sanctification followed justification. In other words, behavior would reflect beliefs. They understood that good behavior was the result of salvation. “They wrote hundreds of books explaining the exact conduct demanded by God in every human situation. They had in fact, complete blueprints for a smooth, honest, civil life in family, church and state, and they were willing to live in the wilderness in order to build a society according to those blueprints.”²

Planting their lives in New England, the Puritans seized the opportunity to establish a tangible expression of their faith. “In other words, the Puritans came to New England not merely to save their souls but to establish a ‘visible’ kingdom of God, a society where a smooth, honest, civil life would prevail in family, church and state.”³

In their understanding, God had revealed a clear order for how they would relate to society. “The essence of the social order lay in the superiority of husband over wife, parents over children, master over servants in the family, ministers and elders over congregation in the church, rulers over subjects in the state.”⁴ The common thread of order was subordination. “Order is a divine disposal, of superior and inferior relations, in humane or Christian societies.”⁵ The Puritans

¹ David D. Hall, *Puritans In the New World: A Critical Anthology* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. x.

² Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (reprinted Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ John Norton, *Heart of New England Rent* (Cambridge, 1659), p. 30.

identified God's pattern of subordination throughout creation and infused that concept in their human relations.

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIETY

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. **Matt 5:13-16 (NIV)**

¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. **Phil 2:14-16 (NIV)**

PURITANS AND MARRIAGE

The Puritan adherence to God's revealed order was evidenced in the marriage relationship. Their marital interaction was marked by restrained love. "Wives were instructed that woman was made ultimately for God but immediately for man."⁶ The husband's affection toward his wife would be limited by choice in loyalty to his understanding of God's order. "The only relationship which endured beyond this life was that between man and his final end, God in Christ."⁷

In a sermon during a wedding ceremony at New Castle in New England, John Cotton declared, "Women are Creatures without which there is no comfortable Living for man: it is true of them what is wont to be said of Governments, *That bad ones are better than none*: They are a sort of Blasphemers then who despise and decry them, and call them *a necessary Evil*, for they are *a necessary Good*; such as it was not good that man should be without."⁸ The Puritan husband had to maintain proper balance in his love for God and his love for his spouse.

Ministers would remind married couples of their need to love their spouse in moderation. The focus of their love was to be on God who was to be the supreme object of their love. "Human mortality gave a grim warning to every Puritan couple that God had placed a limit on their love, for marriage ended at the grave."⁹

An example of a Puritan's restraint on expressing his love toward his spouse is found in a love letter from Edward Taylor, the minister of Westfield, Connecticut, to his sweetheart: "My Dove, I send you not my heart, for that I trust is sent to Heaven long since, and unless it hath woefully

⁶ Morgan, p. 20.

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ John Cotton, *A Meet Help* (Boston, 1699), p. 15.

⁹ Morgan, p. 48.

deceived me, it hath not taken up its lodgings in any one's bosom on this side of the Royal City of the Great King, but yet most of it that is allowed to be layed out upon any creature doth safely and singly fall to your share."¹⁰

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY AND MARRIAGE

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

³² This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Eph 5:21-33 (NIV)

In our contemporary context, Christian couples often employ Gary Chapman's concept of "The Five Love Languages."¹¹ He contends that a person will by nature communicate and receive love through his own primary love language. The contemporary Christian view is to seek to speak your spouse's primary love language.

An effective concept that Chapman teaches is that of monitoring your spouse's emotional love tank. When the love tank is empty, the relationship will suffer. When the love tank is full, the relationship will exhibit healthy attributes. Chapman admonishes the reader to learn to speak the spouse's love language in order to fill the emotional love tank.

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman:

- Words of Affirmation
- Quality Time
- Receiving Gifts
- Acts of Service
- Physical Touch

When you consider how God communicated His love to a lost and dying world, it becomes apparent that God speaks our love language. He comes to us as we are and communicates His love in a way that best connects with us personally.

¹⁰ Frances M. Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut* (Hartford, 1866), p. 154.

¹¹ Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1995).

PURITANS AND PARENTING

The Puritans clearly loved God and demonstrated their love for their children by providing them with food, clothing, shelter, and a religious upbringing. “The Puritans had come to New England for a variety of reasons, but one of the strongest, by their own account, was the urge to perpetuate pure religion among their children. By the latter half of the seventeenth century it had become an accepted tradition that the founders of New England had left the old world for the sake of their children.”¹²

Ironically, Puritan parents often did not trust themselves with their own children. They would place their children in other families in fear of spoiling them with too great affection. Their decision was justified on the grounds that children learned better manners by being brought up in another home other than their own.¹³ Affirming that God demanded and deserved one’s primary affection, the Puritan parent would limit his or her affection toward the children.

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY AND PARENTING

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. **Deut 6:4-9 (NIV)**

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"-- which is the first commandment with a promise-- ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. **Eph 6:1-4 (NIV)**

In the contemporary Christ setting, there is a tendency towards “child-centered” parenting. In this scenario, the child dictates the home environment. The parents focus their energy on making sure their child is “happy.”¹⁴

Of course, the Bible does not support this view. God clearly expects the parents to establish and maintain the spiritual climate in the home to nurture a healthy and progressive environment for spiritual upbringing.

POINTS FOR HOME

¹² Morgan, p. 168

¹³ Lewis Einstein, *Tudor Ideals* (New York, 1921), pp. 245-246.

¹⁴ An engaging book you may want to read that confronts this issue is by Ed Young, Jr., entitled: *Kid CEO: How to Keep Your Children from Running Your Life* (Warner Books Inc, 2004).

Action Step 1: Maintain Intimacy with God.

- Select a time, place, and plan to have a daily time alone with God.
- Secure a godly mentor to help you establish and maintain a spiritual growth path.
- Stay committed to a connection group.

Action Step 2: Master Your Spouse's Love Language.¹⁵

- Purchase and read Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages*
- Pray for God's Favor
- Practice communicating love based on your spouse's love language.

Action Step 3: Model What You Want to Multiply.

- Recognize that you are the most graphic living Bible your children will ever read.
- Resolve to create a healthy spiritual environment in your home.
- Rest in God's provision.

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV)

¹⁵ You may want to consider securing "The Five Love Languages" test from Louis Miori to identify your primary love language.