Introduction

The name 'Puritan' in contemporary culture often has negative connotations. As Barzun remarks: “the Puritan is Malvolio in Twelfth Night, who thinks that because he is righteous there will be no more cakes and ale.”¹ For Barzun, “narrow moralism” and “social repression of dissent” are the characteristics that have influenced the United States more profoundly than any others.² In this essay, I will argue that despite their faults, the Puritans' zeal to obey the word of God gave rise to a political boldness and a spiritual distinctiveness that all evangelical Christians can learn from today. I will illustrate this with reference to a variety of primary texts, including The Admonition to Parliament, Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation, and Owen's Discourse concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity.

The historical development of Puritanism

From it's inception, the word 'Puritan' was a derogatory term.³ In fact, it was some time before it came to be associated (as one of several terms) with a particular religious group.⁴ What is clear, however, is that the movement at first was merely composed of “real” rather than “formal” protestants.⁵

Puritanism is often taken to have begun in England during the reign of Elizabeth I in about 1559 with the Act of Uniformity and ended in about 1662 with the revised act.⁶ These acts enshrined reformed doctrine, liturgy and episcopal church government within the Church of England.⁷ However, the roots and philosophy of puritanism extend both backwards and forwards from these dates.⁸ Reflecting on the early days of the movement, while writing his historical journal Of Plymouth Plantation, Bradford (1590-1657) describes the birth of Puritan ideology as being “enlightened by the word of God ... [and] touched with heavenly zeal for his truth.”⁹ In this regard, William Tyndale (1492–1536) who wrote in his preface to the Pentateuch that “it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue”¹⁰ must surely be counted among them. In a similar way the plain, biblical and practical teachings of Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Boston (1676-1732) are considered 'Puritan' despite being geographical and historical outliers.¹¹

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¹ Jacques Barzun, From Dawn to Decadence: 500 years of Western Cultural Life (New York.: Perennial, 2001), 261.
² He reflects that “toleration of the individual conscience, linked to the democratic right of participation in government and the demand for social justice co-exist with the hounding of dissenters and the extermination of witches. Mixed again is the welcome to the full enjoyment of life, art and pleasures of the body, coupled with a strain of asceticism, born of a high sense of duty.” Barzun, Dawn to Decadence, 283.
³ Patrick Collinson, English Puritanism (London.: The Chameleon Press, 1983), 7. For example, John Manningham, collected a number of common sayings that equated puritanism with hypocrisy, such as “a puritan is such a one as loves God with all his soul, but hates his neighbour with all his heart,” Collinson, English Puritanism, 9.
⁴ According to Collinson, the earliest recorded use of the term in this way, is found in the polemical writings of Catholic Exiles during the Elizabethan period in about 1565, Collinson, English Puritanism, 6-10.
⁷ Leland Ryken, Worldy Saints, The puritans as they really were (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: Zondervan, 1986), 7.
¹¹ See James Packer's preface in Boston, Crook in the Lot for a brief overview of his life and work. Others like Jonathan Edwards are similarly considered to be part of the Puritan heritage.
The historical events between the two acts of uniformity essentially consist of turbulent advances and setbacks in the reformation of the Church of England mediated through the influence of the state. The wavering was largely dependent on the monarch or ruler currently in power, and how sympathetic the current Archbishop of Canterbury was to the cause.

After Charles I became king, persecution led to increasing alienation from and objection to the official church. As Bradford remarked:

“They were both scoffed and scorned by the prophane multitude, and the ministers urged with the yoak of subscription, or els must be silenced ... till they were occasioned .. to see ... how not only these base and beggerly ceremonies were unlawfull; but also that the lordly and tiranous power of the prelates ought not to be submitted unto”

This was interrupted temporarily by the Civil War and the subsequent oversight of Oliver Cromwell, before Charles II resumed the hostility. Therefore historically, the Puritan movement was marked by “opposition ... grievous to flesh and blood.”

**Political distinctives**

In order to outline some political distinctives, I will discuss briefly the nature, development and tactics used by the Puritan movement.

As previously noted, the nature of the Puritan movement was originally simply a reformed protestant movement within the Church of England i.e. not a separatist movement. As Collinson writes “By definition, puritans were satisfied that the Church of England met at least the bare criteria of a true church.” True churches existed and careful use of the prayer book and additional material allowed the construction of a service they found acceptable.

However, the movement developed as the degree to which unscriptural practices were to be tolerated quickly began to diverge. Some felt able to work within flawed established church (and...
some even became bishops)\textsuperscript{19} and others who insisted in “total conformity to the Word of God in the Bible”, even in areas of indifference (adiaphora).\textsuperscript{20} In line with this second group, Tyndale, who defied church authority (forbidding unauthorised translation of the bible) and state authority (forbidding unauthorised foreign travel) “[foreshadowed] years of puritan insubordination and 'reformation without tarrying for any'”.\textsuperscript{21}

The use of vestments in services became a point of controversy for many in 1567-68 and was another example of the simple tactic of insubordination. Part of the Act of Uniformity brought in under Elizabeth prescribed the use of certain vestments which the puritans saw as relics from catholicism.\textsuperscript{22} Many refused to comply, and at first Parliament were simply unable to enforce the stipulated requirements.\textsuperscript{23}

Non conformity within the local church was combined with extensive lobbying of the government. The Admonition, written by John Field and Thomas Wilcox in 1572, marked certainly the most well known and widely circulated position paper of the movement. It boldly demanded that the existing hierarchy and many other “abuses” should be “utterly removed” and replaced.\textsuperscript{24} It was sent to Parliament but distributed far wider around the country as well, setting out what a “truly reformed church” should look like, chiefly in terms of it's preaching, administration of the sacraments and church discipline.\textsuperscript{25} It concluded that “we in England are so fare of, from having a church rightly reformed, accordyng to the prescript of Gods Worde, that as yet we are not come to the outwarde face of the same.” The focus was always on the Bible reforming the church so that every congregation required a “learned & diligent preacher ... [to preach] not quarterly or monthly, but continually”, but not “homilies, injunctions, [or] a prescript order of service made out of the masse booke,” so that God would be glorified, Christ's flock edified, and the pouring down of God's justice prevented.\textsuperscript{26}

The contemporary evangelical church could learn from the boldness with which the Puritans were prepared to assert their position. In their minds, the reform simply had not gone far enough and for the sake of the building of God's kingdom, and averting his judgement, further reform had to be boldly demanded.

However, there were times when it is questionable whether the vociferousness of the appeals both verbally and in print served their cause as best they might. For example Elizabethan clergyman Edward Dering declared in a sermon to queen Elizabeth “while that all these whoredoms are committed, you at whose hands God will require it, you sit still and are carelesse, let men doe as they list.”\textsuperscript{27} No doubt she never forgot his words, but it does not appear to have softened her resolve to clamp down on what she saw as renegades within the church. This is in stark contrast to the

\textsuperscript{20} Ryken, \textit{Worldy Saints}, 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Collinson, \textit{English Puritanism}, 14. Archbishop Grindal is an example of a sympathetic Archbishop during this period. He was able to encourage the queen to abolish stone altars where protestants would simply not stand them.
\textsuperscript{23} Frere and Douglas, \textit{Puritan Manifestoes}, xii.
\textsuperscript{24} Frere and Douglas, \textit{Puritan Manifestoes}, 9.
\textsuperscript{25} Frere and Douglas, \textit{Puritan Manifestoes}, xvi.
\textsuperscript{26} Frere and Douglas, \textit{Puritan Manifestoes}, 12-13.
\textsuperscript{27} Patrick Collinson, \textit{A Mirror of Elizabethan Puritanism, The Life and Letters of 'Godly Master Dering'} (London.: Dr Williams's Trust, 1964), 17.
approach of Thomas Cranmer for example, whose quiet work within the establishment allowed for periods of great advance in reformation. However as we have previously seen, the Puritans utmost concern was the honour of God, and for His sake, patience and tactics were often dispensed with.

Theological and spiritual distinctives

I have already outlined that the extent of disenchantment with the Church of England varied. Some were less concerned for the “drastic presbyterian doctrine” that was being expounded. However for others, like the separatists who went to New England, those who preferred exile in the Netherlands and John Owen in England, conscience demanded separation, and a “casting off” of “anti Christian corruptions.” As Collinson remarks, “this was where the geological fault line between Anglicanism and Nonconformity, Church and Chapel, began.”

For Owen, the conditions of communion required within the Church of England for ministers, were unscriptural. As such, whether those things were lawful in themselves, or whether any protestant should tolerate them, was a secondary concern. In his estimation, to make them an “indispensable condition of communion” was intolerable. They had no authority to do it and indeed the only valid “rule of communion among the disciples of Christ in all his churches is invariably established and fixed by himself.”

Even if the Puritans differed on some of the details, they all agreed that the Bible must govern the life of worship. As always with the Puritans, theological truth had practical implications. I will outline four such implications below:

Firstly, in church meetings, unbiblical additions such as the white surplice, the necessity of kneeling for communion, and the tracing the sign of the cross on infants heads during baptism, were abandoned. They were replaced, where necessary, with the singing of "metrical psalms". However, meetings were adapted to extend the time available for the sermon. The sermons themselves were to not deviate from the Bible, and were to “preach Christ, relying on God's Spirit for blessing.”

Secondly, just as the church services were to be reformed by the word, so the preaching of the word was to reform the hearer. Therefore, like William Brewster, the Puritan preacher was to be “moving and stirring of affections, also very plaine and distincte in what he taught; by which means he became the more profitable to the hearers.” Sadly, this style of preaching, with it's combination of careful biblical scholarship and appeal to the affections is often absent in the pulpits of evangelical churches today.

Thirdly, the reformation of life that was sought also had a holistic perspective, since all of life was lived by faith and nothing was to be excluded from it's agency. John Cotton (1584-1652) preached that a Christian, “whether he live as a Christian man, or as a member of this or that Church, or

28 e.g. in the production of the Forty two articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Book of Homilies.
32 Collinson, English Puritanism, 15-16.
33 Owen, “A Discourse concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity,” 15:143-160. Additionally, he remarks (on the same pages) that the apostles followed Christ's teaching alone, had been quick to quash any attempt to adopt “Mosaical ceremonies and institutions”and declared doctrinally the liberty Christians had in this area (e.g. Romans 14-15).
34 Collinson, English Puritanism, 15.
35 Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, A Puritan Theology of Preaching (St Antholin's Charity Lecture, 2005, 53-54).
Commonwealth, he doth it all by faith in the Son of God.” This doctrine was to produce a deep sense of God ordained purpose and responsibility, reliance on God in that role, and contentment in all situations. In contrast, some sections of the evangelical church today diminish the intrinsic value of work. This can lead to a sense that work only has value in so far as it creates opportunities for evangelism. Although evangelism is of course a necessary and essential focus, the theology behind this view can split life helpfully into sacred and secular domains. Again, we can learn from the Puritans in this regard. Despite the negative connotations of the “Puritan work ethic” today, Cotton points towards moderation as the sensible approach reminding his hearers that “It is in vain, saith faith, to rise early, and go to bed late, but it is God that gives his beloved rest, Psalm 127. 1, 2, 3. Prov. 3. 5, 6”

Fourthly, the reformation of life in all these areas was done in the context of the pursuit of godliness. Goring notes that “in the half century before the Civil War there is no doubt that in common parlance the word 'puritan' came to have definite moral connotation. To most people a puritan was one who endeavoured to lead a sin-free life and to persuade others to do likewise.” Perhaps this moral element more than any other, has been used to caricature the Puritans. Goring's study of their attitude to the sports and entertainment is revealing. He remarks that they, along with other groups in society were certainly opposed to some sports and games but that “in a period of growing concern about crime and disorder it was only natural that many should look askance upon any gatherings of people that were rowdy and hard to control.” This certainly seems to have been the situation in Plymouth, where the drinking and dancing around a Maypole was associated with “inviting the Indian women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking together ... and worse practises” and was duly cut down. Goring’s conclusion is that the real fight, as far as the Puritans were concerned, was to win hearts for obedience to Christ.

Conclusion

It is clear that the political, theological and spiritual priorities of the Puritans stem from a high view of God's revealed word, and a desire for His revelation to be applied practically, for the sake of his honour. The “narrow moralism” that Barzun describes is in fact a reclaiming of the whole life of mankind for God, arguably in a wider sense than modern evangelicalism commonly applies it. It is true that their “repression of dissent” was perhaps often overzealous. However, it's root, in a passion for the glory of God, is one that we might do well to learn to cultivate more of ourselves.

38 Cotton, “Christian Calling' in The Way of Life” 1:319-327. This reliance on God is a theme that runs through much Puritan literature. Cotton explains that “faith saith not, Give me such a calling and turne me loose to it; but faith lookes up to heaven for skill and ability, though strong and able, yet it looks at all its abilities as a dead work, as like braided wares in a shop, as such as will be lost and rust, unlesse God refresh and reneue breath in them.” (1:321). Thomas Boston applies the doctrine of God's sovereignty to suffering with pastoral brilliance in Crook in the Lot (Fearn.: Christian Focus, 2003).
39 The intrinsic value of work is established in the doctrine of creation.
41 Ryken, Worldy Saints, 23.
43 Goring, Godly exercises or the devil's dance, 22-23.
45 Goring, Godly exercises or the devil's dance, 23.
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