

# puritan joy

## THE JOY OF THE PURITANS

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To many people, 'joy' and 'puritan' are about as compatible as 'kindness' and 'Genghis Khan'! Whereas the early Methodists were known for their joy, such an emotion hardly springs to mind in the case of the Puritans. An Anglo-Catholic writer condemns the latter for regarding 'all pleasures, amusements and personal adornments' as sinful. Painting a less biased picture, the Ladybird book on Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) teaches children that though 'we have come to think of these people as disliking any sort of happiness and always going about with gloomy faces, intent on preventing others from enjoying themselves. This is wrong. They were not all like that'. This is a fairer judgement but hardly a ringing endorsement! So, what is the truth? Were the Puritans killjoys or not?

### SOLID JOY

Like Moses of old, the Puritans 'chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt' (*Heb. 11: 25-6*). The immortal Bunyan (1628-88) surely spoke their language in *The Pilgrim's Progress*: when Obstinate cried, "What!...leave our friends and our comforts behind us?", Christian replied, "Yes...because that ALL which you shall forsake is not worthy to be compared with a little of that which I am seeking to enjoy..." It is very likely that there were some sour individuals who made a virtue out of glumness, but this is a gross caricature of Puritanism in general. Meaning business with God rather than with the world, the Puritans were pilloried for their purity - often literally. The fact remains that their enemies could not abide the earnest seriousness of Puritan Christianity. However, it is absurd to accuse the Puritans of joylessness. Besides, since when did being serious mean being joyless? Does the 'serious music' lover not enjoy his Beethoven? Does a 'serious relationship' exclude the joys of love? Never opposed to innocent human delights, the Puritans tasted joys which superficial scoffers knew not of. It all boils down to what or whom one rejoices in. In the 18th century, the hymn-writer John Newton (1725-1807) surely summed up essential Puritanism as well as Methodism thus: 'Fading is the worldling's pleasure,/ all his boasted pomp and show;/ Solid joys and lasting treasure/ none but Zion's children know'. Without denying that every group has its horror stories, let us examine what the Puritans believed, preached and longed for.

That oft-quoted symbol of Puritanism, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, states that 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever'. Thus the Puritans reproduced in English dress what John Calvin (1509-64) had preached in Geneva: 'It is an incomparable benefit not only that our consciences are at peace before God, but that we confidently rejoice in the hope of eternal life...Those who are not carried up above the heavens by this joy, so that they are content with Christ alone and despise the world, boast in vain that they have faith'.

### HOLY JOY

For the 'heavenly doctor' Richard Sibbes (d. 1635), joy in God was the great aim of the Gospel: 'The end of the ministry is not to tyrannize over people's souls, to sting and vex them, but to minister comfort, to be helpers of their joy; that is to help their salvation and happiness, which is here [2 *Cor. 1: 24*] termed joy, because joy is a principal part of happiness in this world and in the world to come'. Of course, Sibbes is careful not to be misunderstood. Since joy is a by-product of communion with God, he is far from advocating some kind of religious hedonism: "Those

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that look to be happy must first look to be holy'. In a similar vein, John Howe (1630-1705) wrote that 'God is not otherwise to be enjoyed than as He is obeyed'. Thus godly joy cannot coexist with unbelief and disobedience. That said, the Puritan brotherhood were utterly opposed to a joyless reformed religiosity. Richard Baxter (1615-91) says with characteristic eloquence: 'All Christ's ways of mercy tend to, and end in the saints' joys. He wept, suffered, sorrowed that they might rejoice; He sendeth the Spirit to be their comforter; He multiplieth promises, he discovers their future happiness, that their joy may be full; He aboundeth to them in mercies of all sorts; He maketh them lie down in green pastures, He leadeth them by the still waters, yea, He openeth to them the fountain of living waters, that their joy may be full'. Baxter too was anxious to link happiness with holiness. Since sin can pollute the purest delights, Christian cheerfulness or 'mirth' must be distinguished from 'sinful mirth'. So Baxter warns: 'Never leave out reason and godliness from any of your mirth'.

## **NORMAL JOY**

Baxter felt very strongly that a joyless Christian contradicts all that he professes: 'I desire the dejected Christian to consider, that by his heavy and uncomfortable life, he seemeth to the world to accuse God and His service, as if he openly called Him a rigorous, hard, unacceptable Master, and His work a sad unpleasant thing...You are born and new born for God's honour; and will you thus dishonour Him before the world?' Accordingly, William Gurnall (1616-79) wrote: 'To see a wicked man merry, or a Christian sad, is alike uncomely'.

Without denying that sometimes - through unbelief and disobedience or even sickness - the Lord's people have good cause to be cast down and cheerless, it ought to be the exception rather than the rule. After all, declares Gurnall again, 'Christ takes no more delight to dwell in a sad heart, than we do to live in a dark house'. Thomas Watson (d. 1690) admitted that pastors are too often faced with a double difficulty: 'to make the wicked sad' and 'to make the godly joyful'. What melancholic if not perverse tendency was Watson correcting when he said: 'Religion does not banish all joy. As there is seriousness without sourness, so there is a cheerful liveliness without lightness...Who should not be cheerful, if not the people of God?' Watson surely strikes at Puritanism's long-faced caricature: 'God would have us part with nothing for Him, but that which would damn us if we keep it. He has no design upon us, but to make us happy. He calls us to salvation, He calls us to a kingdom'. What then is the root cause of joylessness? William Gurnall was in no doubt that 'The reason why many poor souls have so little heat of joy in their hearts, is that they have so little light of Gospel knowledge in their mind. The further a soul stands from the light of truth, the further he must needs be from the heat of comfort'.

## **MASKED JOY**

However, a deep concern for the state of the lost often masks the joy of the most holy. As if to locate the possible origin of the caricature of a joyless Puritanism, Thomas Brooks (1608-80) rebukes those who may misinterpret the sad countenances of the Lord's people: 'Thou sayest, Oh there are none so sad and sorrowful as such and such Christians; but what is the cause of their sorrow and sadness? Is it not thy wickedness and ungodliness? Is it not thy unconverted and unsanctified state? Surely yes. Oh that thou wouldst therefore cease from complaining against them, and fall amending of thine own heart and ways!' These things rightly grasped and understood, the true Christian is no killjoy. The Puritans' negative thesis was simply, in Brooks' words, 'That all the joys, delights, and pleasures that holiness debars men of, are sinful joys, delights and pleasures... O sirs, there is no real pleasure in sin. All the pleasures of sin are counterfeit pleasures; they are but the shapes and shadows of pleasure; they are the seeds of

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future grief;... Certainly if there were the least real delight in sin, hell could never be hell... He that delights in sensual pleasures shall find at last his greatest pleasures to become his bitterest pains'.

## IMPEDED JOY

It must be admitted that spiritual joy and its kindred graces assurance and peace were not as abundant as they might have been in Puritan England. Sinclair Ferguson states that 'In Puritan teaching, the doctrines of limited atonement and predestination often raised the question of personal assurance' (*John Owen on the Christian Life*, Banner of Truth, p. 99). So, were some of the Puritan soul-physicians confronted by the consequences of their own theological imbalance? That said, they were anxious to comfort troubled believers and to promote a joyful spirituality. Oliver Cromwell's chaplain John Owen (1616-83) wrote quite rhapsodically on joy when expounding the 'love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost' (*Rom. 5: 5*): 'He doth it immediately by himself; without the consideration of any other acts or works of his, or the interposition of any reasonings, or deductions and conclusions...Of this joy there is no account to be given, but that the Spirit worketh it when and how he will. He secretly infuseth and distills it into the soul, prevailing against all fears and sorrows, filling it with gladness, exultations; and sometimes with unspeakable raptures of mind'.

## ECSTATIC JOY

Clearly, the Puritans experienced what they preached. Another of Cromwell's chaplains, John Howe wrote late in his life: 'I sensibly felt through the admirable bounty of my God, and the most comforting influence of the Holy Spirit, on Oct. 22, 1704 [what] far surpassed the most expressive words my thoughts can suggest. I then experienced an inexpressibly pleasant melting of heart, tears gushing out of mine eyes, for joy that God should shed abroad his love abundantly through the hearts of men, and that for this very purpose mine own should be so signally blessed of and by his blessed Spirit. Rom. 5: 5'.

Such joy and assurance is the highest a saint may know in this world. Owen and Howe would agree with Baxter that such experiences are extraordinary and occasional. However, lest the Lord's people should imagine that the long absence of such ecstasies consigns them to a joyless and cheerless experience, Baxter rightly says: 'No wise man can expect that...God should diet us with a continual feast...When you have a feast of high joys, feed on it and be thankful! But when they are taken from you, gape not after them as the disciples did after Christ at His ascension; but return thankfully to your ordinary diet of peace'.

## HUMAN JOY

Having demonstrated that the Puritans were no enemies of joy, let us clarify their attitude to 'innocent pleasures'. The Lord Protector himself - regarded by Thomas Carlyle as 'the soul of the Puritan revolt' - may be taken as typical. Clearly, the Puritans were great lovers - lovers of God and of their kin in grace and nature. During his Scottish campaign in 1650, Cromwell wrote to his lonely wife, "Truly, if I love you not too well, I think I err not on the other hand much. Thou art dearer to me than any creature; let that suffice..." Lamenting the infrequency of her husband's letters, Elizabeth replied, "I should rejoice to hear of your desire in seeing me...Truly my life is but half a life in your absence, did not the Lord make it up in himself, which I must acknowledge to the praise of His grace." Cromwell's letters to his children are equally joyful and affectionate.

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Cromwell also appreciated the joys of music - and this was not confined to the psalms of public worship. With his family, he enjoyed listening to John Milton playing the organ at Hampton Court. On Thanksgiving Day, 1657, Carlyle tells us that 'the Honourable House, after hearing two sermons at Margaret's Westminster, partook of a most princely entertainment, by invitation from His Highness, at Whitehall. After dinner, his Highness withdrew to the Cockpit; and there entertained them with rare music, both of voices and instruments, till the evening; his Highness being very fond of music'.

## HEAVENLY JOY

Concluding on a higher and more heavenly note, Cromwell, like all John Bunyan's 'Puritan pilgrims', knew the ebb and flow of spiritual joys. But on his death bed, his joy was complete: "The Lord hath filled me with as much assurance of His pardon, and His love, as my soul can hold - I think I am the poorest wretch that lives: but I love God; or rather, am beloved of God - I am a conqueror, and more than a conqueror, through Christ that strengtheneth me!"

So, judging by the evidence, were the Puritans killjoys? No! On the contrary, they knew a blessedness their critics failed to fathom.