

THE PURITAN CONCEPT OF PARENTING AND CHILDREARING:
AN HISTORICAL INQUIRY

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The Uniqueness of the Puritan Ideal for the Family

Through the demise of modernism, with its false presuppositions and conclusions, most of the world has lost touch with the richness of the Puritan experience. One aspect of their experience that has been misperceived greatly is their concept of family and parenting. This is even true among evangelicals today. Some stereotypes may be that parents beat their children excessively; or that they demanded perfection from their children; or that they sheltered their children from the world; or that wives were their husbands' servants; or that they arranged all of their children's marriages. A closer look at the norms of the movement will show that these stereotypes indeed are false. As a matter of fact, there seems to be no group in Church history since the early Church that emulates biblical and theological depth in their approach to the family. Amidst the smog-saturated air of contemporary family theory and practice, one can look back and breathe the fresh air of Puritan family theology and practice. Prime examples of this are what they saw as the purpose for the family and its leadership.

The Puritans viewed the family as a small church.¹ It was to be the very backbone of the local church. Its sole purpose was to advance the glory of God by instruction in the Word of God, walking in holiness, and worship². This concept should not be foreign to any evangelical today. However, most evangelicals do not embrace this in their families. This purpose of the family being the glory of God means everything. Leland Ryken notes:

What is important about viewing the purpose of the family as the glory of God? In the long run it determines what goes on in a family. It sets the priorities in a spiritual rather than material direction. It determines what a family does with its time and how it spends its money.³

This vision and purpose for the glory of God in the Puritan family lasted because it was branded in the consciences of parents and produced a God-centered direction in everything the family did.

One of the areas in which we go wrong today in the pursuit of a God-glorifying household, and which the Puritans focused on like a laser, was the spiritual leadership of the father in the home. They recognized God's design; that, like the church, the family consists of fallen people and needs the shepherding of a man of God.⁴ As

¹ "A holy family is place of comfort, a church of God...Oh that God stir up the hearts of people thus to make their families as little churches, that it might not be in the power of rulers or pastors that are bad to extinguish religion, or banish godliness from any land!" (Richard Baxter, "The Poor Man's Family Book" in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996, Vol. 4, p.230, 231).

² "The household is as it were a little commonwealth by the good government whereof God's glory may be advanced, the commonwealth...benefited and all that live in that family may receive much comfort and commodity." (Robert Cleaver, quoted by Daniel Doriani in "The Godly Household in Puritan Theology, 1560-1640", Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985, p.52).

³ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 74.

⁴ "It was the husbands responsibility to channel the family into religion; to take them to church on the Lord's Day, to oversee the sanctifying of the entire day in the home; to catechize the children, and teach them the faith; to

the “governor” of the household, the husband/father/master had the duty of leading the family in worship. Oliver Heywood described it as acting as a priest in the family, a role that consisted of the four duties of the Old Testament priest:⁵

1. To instruct the people in the principles of religion, and their duty to God and each other
2. To manage the holy offerings and sacrifices for atonement (confess the sins of the family)
3. To intercede for the people (to stand between the dead and the living)
4. To bless the people

A man that didn’t lead his household was looked upon by the Puritans as a fool and scoundrel, worthy of all scorn. This outlook on family leadership was so overwhelming that it became principle even to the non-Christians that lived in the Puritan communities.

The ideals for the family mentioned above set the stage for an examination of Puritan parenting and child rearing. Parenting is something that the Puritans took very seriously and practiced with sobriety; and for good reasons. It is evident in a historical inquiry of Puritan parenting and child rearing that the root of their understanding and practice was not theoretical but theological. Theology fed and permeated Puritan parenting.

Puritan Attitudes toward Children

The Puritans view of life was God-saturated and focused on His glory as the chief end of all things. This is due primarily to their adherence and embracing of Reformed Theology. They held firmly to the sovereignty of God in all of life, as He has foreordained all things that come to pass, and what we consider the “doctrines of grace.” But the under girding of the doctrines of grace that really forms their attitudes toward children and parenting is the concept of the covenants:⁶ the covenant of works, the covenant of redemption, and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works was the covenant that God made with Adam in Eden that if Adam would obey all of God’s commandments, he would have eternal life. The covenant of redemption is that covenant that God the Father made with Christ that if Christ would remain in obedience to the Father, the Father would give Him a people to redeem

examine the whole family after each sermon, to see how much had been retained and understood, and to fill any gaps of understanding that might remain; to lead the family in worship daily, ideally twice a day; and to set an example of sober godliness at all times and in all matters.” (J.I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990], p.270).

⁵ *The Whole Works of Rev. Oliver Heywood*, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999, published earlier in London: John Vint, 1825), Vol. 4 “The Family Altar”, pgs. 309-311

⁶ “The essence of a covenant is the idea of contractual obligation. The framework of covenant theology increased rather than decreased the Puritans’ sense of parental responsibility for their children.” (Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p.79).

for Himself. The covenant of grace is the covenant that God makes with every believer and their children upon faith that He will give them eternal life and be their God. Although these covenants may not be clearly outlined in Scriptures, nonetheless the Puritans used this as their grid or system through which to view the rest of Scripture.

Such theology produced a few different attitudes toward children. As covenants included both blessings and cursings, so children were seen as mixed blessing.⁷ John Robinson said that “[Children] are a blessing great, but dangerous.”⁸ They would affirm Psalm 127, that children are a blessing from the Lord, but that they also bring heartaches physically and spiritually from their birth until eventual marriage. This impressed upon them, though, the importance of their responsibility to their children as belonging to God: “Puritan attitudes toward children were rooted in the conviction that children belong to God and are entrusted to parents as a stewardship.”⁹ Thus they owned their children just as they own any other earthly thing, as a stewardship from God. The difference in “owning” their children with owning any other thing is, however, that their children’s souls are eternal and that is what they were accountable to God for. Also, they were not to love any other thing they owned the way they loved their children. They tried to keep a balanced view of loving their children. Excessive affectionate smothering, or “doting”, of their children was looked down upon.¹⁰ They observed that even apes killed their young with hugging.¹¹ They did not want to be cold toward their children but rather impartial.¹²

The Beginning of the Parenting Experience: Conception

Given the conditions for child bearing in their day and their concern for the soul of their future child, the concern began for them at conception. This concern created two duties for parents. Their first duty was prayer. There was always the risk of death for both the mother and child, so they were to pray that God would spare each of their lives. More importantly, though, was prayer for the salvation of their child. Some thought that if this is neglected now, that it would always be neglected during the life of the child:

⁷ This idea is perceived best by Daniel Doriani: “Children are a potential blessing in the eyes of godly brethren but the final evaluation of their status depends on their spiritual qualities, not their number or health...The “potential blessing” theme most often occurs in passages where preachers exhort parents to perform their moral and spiritual duties.” (“The Godly Household in Puritan Theology”, 1560-1640, p.391).

⁸ *The Works of John Robinson*, Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1851, Vol. 1, p.244

⁹ Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p.78

¹⁰ “The extreme in the excess is too much doting upon children: as they do who so unmeasurably love them, as they make reckoning of nothing in comparison of children.” (William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Ltd., 1976 [Facsimile, published earlier in London: J. Haviland, 1622], p.500).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Wherefore remember that the parently love must be extended equally to your children. Do not like eagles, which turn some out of their nest, and bring up other some.” (Paul Bayne, *An Entire Commentary upon the Whole Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians*, Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866, [published earlier in London: M. F., 1643], p.361

Some think it needless to pray for a child before it be born, not considering that in sin it is conceived. When it is born they refer this duty to the midwife, whereas it properly appertains to the father. After it is grown to any ripeness, they put it off to the child to pray for itself. And when they are on their death bed, they think it enough if they can pray for their own souls. Such parents show little true love to their children: but less faith in God.¹³

Prayer was the best thing that parents could do for their children. But it was always accompanied by their second duty, which was the physical care of the mother¹⁴. Miscarriages were common, so the health of the mother was a major concern throughout the pregnancy. J. Philip Arthur reflects, “Every effort should be made not to bring about a miscarriage though some piece of careless behaviour.”¹⁵ This meant that the expectant mother had the responsibility of taking all things soberly and lightly, both physically and emotionally. The mother who engaged in stressing activities, if it led to a miscarriage, was thought to be guilty of murder. William Gouge warned:

They who through violence of passion, whether of grief, or anger, or through violent motion of the body, as by dancing, striving, running, galloping on horseback, or the like: or through distemper of the body, by eating things harmful, by eating too much, by too much abstinence, by too much bashfulness in concealing their desires and longings (as we speak) cause any abortion or miscarriage, fall into the offense contrary to the forenamed duty [the mother taking care of herself], they would, I think, be more careful of themselves. For if through their default, they themselves or their child miscarry, they make themselves guilty of that miscarriage; if both miscarry, they make themselves guilty of the blood of both; at least in the court of conscience before God.¹⁶

Husbands were also responsible for the well-being of their wives. They were expected to assist their wives in any way possible in care of their wives and the child.¹⁷

The Importance of the Natural Mother in Feeding

Once a child is born in a Puritan home, the major responsibilities are given to the mother. The primary responsibility that she had was to provide nourishment for her new born. The best nourishment that she could possibly give to her new born was that which came from her own breasts. William Gouge gave the best treatment as to why this is the case.¹⁸ Among some of his best arguments are the example that Mary suckled Jesus, the fact that

¹³ William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, p.501-502

¹⁴ “Whilst it is yet but an embryo, there is not only requisite prayer, (which was presupposed), with thanksgiving for the sanctifying the fruit of the body, as Jeremiah and John were (1 Tim.4:5; Jer.1:5; Luke 1:15); but also a tender care for the preservation of life.” (Richard Adams, “What are the Duties of Parents and Children; and how are they to be Managed According to Scripture?”, *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689*, Wheaton: Robert Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1981 [Published earlier in London: James Nichol, 1844], p.324).

¹⁵ J. Philip Arthur, “The Puritan Family”, *The Westminster Conference Papers*, 1997, p.82

¹⁶ *Of Domestic Duties*, p.506. Since they took this so seriously, they saw abortion as outright murder. Gouge follows in the next paragraph, “But they who purposely take things to make away [abort] their children in their womb, are in far higher degree guilty of blood: yea even of willful murder. For that which hath received a soul formed in it by God, if it be unjustly cast away, shall be revenged.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.507-518

dry breasts were considered a curse (Hos.9:14), and the obvious conclusion that there is no other natural function for a women's breasts. John Dod also saw this a foundational duty:¹⁹

Now follows the especial duty of the mother, which is to nurse up her own child, if God has given her the ability thereunto. Not to throw it from her so soon as she has brought it into the world; but, as God has given her, not only the womb to bear, but also the breasts and milk to nourish her child, so let her be thankful to God for these blessings, and use them to the end that he gave them.

This was not always possible for every mother, but the stress on this duty is to establish the natal bond with the child from the womb, so not to give it over to a midwife or nanny. Husbands were also responsible for encouraging their wives during this process,²⁰ that it is obedient and the best thing for both the mother and the child.

Children of the Covenant: Baptizing Infants

As was previously mentioned, the Puritans viewed the Scriptures through the lens of covenant theology. The chief manifestation of this is their practice of infant baptism. According to the covenant of grace, children were seen as part of the covenant that God makes with believers. In the Old Testament, God gave circumcision as a sign of the faith of the parents and the Passover feast as a memorial of the Exodus. They transferred these into the New Testament as baptism being a sign of the faith of the parents and the Lord's Supper as being a memorial of deliverance. These are viewed as sacraments, or visible signs of invisible grace. They were to be obeyed as a commands from God. Baptism, in particular, was seen as an inauguration of a child into the covenant: "[God] ordained baptism to be used as a solemn initiation of all that will come into his church, and enter into the covenant of God."²¹ If a baptized infant would grow up and come to faith, he would have proved himself to be in the covenant, and grace would have availed. If the child grew up only to reject the faith, that initial grace would prove to be in vain.²²

The Puritans did not believe that infant baptism absolved the children of original sin at all, as the Roman Catholic Church believes. Practically speaking, it more or less served as what we see today as a baby dedication. By the time of baptism, a name was to be chosen (preferably a biblical one), it was to be done in public in front of an

¹⁹ *A Plain and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, (newly corrected and amended by author. London: Thomas Man, Paul Man, and Jonah Man, 1632), p.180

²⁰ Gouge comments: "The duty which on a father's part in this respect is required, is that he encourage his wife, and help her with all needful things for the performance of this duty." (*Of Domestical Duties*, p.517).

²¹ Richard Baxter, *Practical Works*, Vol.4, p.179

²² "Children who by their parents' covenant were half saved, might by education become wholly saved...[T]he conditional promise was God's part of the covenant of grace; the believer's part was to bring up his children so that the promise might be fulfilled. The children, after all, belonged to God." (Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, New York: Harper & Row, revised edition, 1966, p.91).

assembly of other believers, and prayer for the child was to be offered. They believed that baptism was to be done only with water, and that children of believers were the only ones that should have been baptized. What baptism did signify was the parent's dedication of the baby to God and pledge that they would raise the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The Nurture and Admonition of the Lord: Education and Worship

As it has been alluded to above, the salvation of their children was the top priority for Puritan parents. They wanted nothing more than to see their children cherish Christ and live a holy life. Therefore, they believed that the education of their children in religion was their premier duty. They would often imagine the horrors of what their children might say of them if they went to hell on account of their negligence in education:

They will follow thee up and down in that ever-burning lake with direful curses and hideous outcries, crying out continually, "Woe unto us, that ever we served such a wicked wretched master, that had no care of the salvation of our souls, took no course to save us out of these fiery torments!" Even thine own dear children, in this case, will yell in thine ears, world without end, "Woe and alas, that ever we were born of such accursed parents, who had not the grace to teach us betimes the ways of God, to keep us from our youthful vanities, and to train us up in the paths of godliness! Had they done so, we might have lived in the endless joys of heaven; whereas now we must lie irrecoverably in these everlasting flames. Oh! it was the fault of our own parents' unconscionable and cruel negligence, that all our life long struck full deep in our souls, and hath now strangled them with everlasting horror."²³

This is an extreme thought, but there was truth to what is expressed here; namely, that parents are the keepers of their children's souls. They understood that children are ultimately accountable for their own souls before God, and that their damnation couldn't be blamed on anyone but themselves; but they also understood that they have to answer to God as to the efforts put forth to teach them of Christ and holiness.

The Puritans saw that salvation was the purpose of education. Therefore, they sought to catechize their children as soon as possible²⁴. They thought that it was so essential that they made parental education law in Puritan America. By law, parents also had to teach their children how to read.²⁵ They did not understand teaching their

²³ Robert Bolton, *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God*, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995, (published earlier in London: F. Kyngston, 1625), p.276

²⁴ The standard catechism was the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Thomas Becon, Richard Baxter, and John Bunyan each wrote catechisms as well.

²⁵ "The grounds of law are clear: the Puritans insisted upon education in order to ensure the religious welfare of their children. This motive certainly explains the requirement that children learn a catechism. It also explains in large measure why they should know the capital laws, for the capital laws were simply the most important of the laws of God, an understanding of which was essential to the welfare of the smallest child...The Puritans sought knowledge, therefore, not simply as a polite accomplishment, nor as a means of advancing material welfare, but because salvation was impossible without it. They retained throughout the seventeenth century a sublime confidence that man's chief enemy was ignorance, especially ignorance of the Scriptures." (Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, p.88-89).

children to read as an end to itself, but as a tool to teach them theology. This is when tools like the *New England Primer* (1683) were used. It was the theological ABC's that they taught: from A, "In Adam's Fall, We sinned all", to Z, "Zacheus he Did climb the Tree His Lord to see."²⁶ These tools worked hand-in-hand with what they would have been learning from catechization.

Parents didn't just feed their children's heads with knowledge, but made every effort to apply all that they were learning. As they might often ask their children to recite some of the catechism for them, they would take the time to explain what was being memorized and how it applied to their lives. The Puritans hated the idea of having a strong head and a cold heart. The last thing they wanted was orthodoxy for its own sake, like Rome. Therefore, they taught their children the delight of virtue:

Let it be the principal part of your care and labour in all their education, to make holiness appear to them the most necessary, honourable, gainful, pleasant, delightful, amiable state of life; and to keep them from apprehending it either as needless, dishonourable, hurtful, or uncomfortable. Especially draw them to the love of it, by representing it as lovely.²⁷

The best way that they could teach them this was by practicing it in their own lives and being an example of godliness. Some key ways that they did this was bringing the children into their spiritual lives. Both in the morning and the evening, they would lead family devotions and worship.²⁸ This was when they would gather together and the father would explain the Scriptures to the family, they would pray, and worship God by singing psalms²⁹. It was a time where the children could ask questions and the father could examine the lives of his children. On Sundays after church, the father would often lead a discussion regarding the morning sermon and inquire into his family's life what they need to correct or where they need repentance.

The Rod and Reproof Give Wisdom: Discipline

As can be imagined, the Puritans did not appeal to their authority as such when correcting their children. They didn't neglect the fact that they had authority because they knew that spiritually and naturally they were the family government. They appealed, rather, to the highest authority, the law of God. They wanted God's law as the law of the household. When their children disobeyed, they wanted to be able to take them to the Scriptures in order

²⁶ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, "Ordering Their Private World: What the Puritans did to grow spiritually", *Christian History* 13, 1: 18

²⁷ Baxter, "Christian Economics", *Practical Works*, Vol.1, p.451. William Perkins thought that the "instruction of children in learning and religion, must be so ordered, that they may take it with delight." (*The Works of William Perkins*, Cambridge: J. Legatt, 1606, Vol.1, p.694).

²⁸ Baxter outlines this well in "The Poor Man's Family Book" (*Practical Works*, Vol.4, p.236-237).

²⁹ Oliver Heywood's *The Family Altar* was dedicated to instructing parents on why and how they should maintain these things everyday.

to correct them, and to show them the weight of their depravity and need for Christ. They understood that correction was necessary because their children were born in sin and that they had a sin nature. Therefore, the goal of the parent in correction and discipline was to restrain evil in their children by breaking them from their sinful wills:

Train them up in exact obedience to yourselves, and break them of their own wills. To that end, suffer them not carry themselves unreverently or contemptuously towards you; but to keep their distance. For too much familiarity breedeth contempt, and imboldeneth disobedience.³⁰

For beating, and keeping down of this stubbornness parents must provide carefully for two things: first that children's wills and wilfulness be restrained and repressed, and that, in time; lest sooner than they imagine, the tender sprigs grow to that stiffness, that they would rather break than bow. Children should not know, if it could be kept from them, that they have a will in their own, but in their parents' keeping: neither should these words be heard from them, save by way of consent, "I will" or "I will not."³¹

The goal was to have obedient children, but they understood that they were not perfect. This is seen in the way that they approached correction.

Parents generally saw two kinds of correction: by word and by the rod. It was necessary to correct their children with reproof, by showing them from the Scriptures that they have committed sin against God first and foremost and that there were eternal consequences. But correction is something that they didn't want to be too lenient or too strict, as William Perkins pointed out:

Yet in these two extremes are carefully to be avoided; That the parent be not either too severe, or too indulgent to the child. For severity Paul gives this rule, Eph.6:4: 'Parents do not provoke your children to anger,' that is, by too much authority in government. For lenitie, we have old Eli his example; 1 Sam.3:23.³²

Corresponding with this, they were instructed by their pastors and teachers to gauge each child individually, to see that their children had different characters and that they needed discipline suitable for each of them: "Parents were counseled to recognise that children have different temperaments and that discipline must be fitted to the child."³³

They attempted to reprove their children in the best way possible, but leaving the rod as the last resort:

The latter and more proper kind of correction which is by stripes and blows is also a means appointed by God to help good nurture and education of children. It is the last remedy which a parent can use: a remedy which may do good when nothing else can.³⁴

Cotton Mather was known to say, "Better whipt, than damned". That notion sums up the Puritan attitude toward discipline. They firmly believed what the Proverbs teach: that foolishness is bound in the heart of a child but the rod

³⁰ Baxter, "Christian Economics", *Practical Works*, Vol.1, p.450

³¹ John Robinson, *Works*, Vol.1, p.247. The idea here, is that if a sinful will is left to itself, it will do nothing but sin; so the goal was to keep them from their own sinfulness.

³² *Works*, Vol.1, p.694

³³ J. Philip Arthur, "The Puritan Family", p.85

³⁴ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, p.552

of correction will drive it away (22:15); not to withhold correction from children because smiting them won't kill them but will deliver their souls from hell (23:13); and if one spared the rod it showed they hated their child (13:24).

However, this was not something to be taken lightly. John Dod gave instructions on how to approach this:³⁵

1. Let it be done in season, and done in time; pass it not over too long. So Solomon said, "He that loves him corrects him betime", and doth not omit it till it be too late, but taketh the fittest opportunity, when we may (with most ease, and fewest stripes) do most good...
2. It must be done in great compassion and mercy not in bitterness, to ease oneself with the pain of the child, for that is rage and cruelty...
3. It must be done with prayer, that God would give them wise hearts to give due and seasonable correction; and their also soft hearts, to receive it humbly, and meekly, and to their profit.

They tried to act soberly when they used the rod to discipline. The right motive was the most important thing and they wanted it to be love for the souls of their children.³⁶

Helping to Find the Calling of their Children

In the Puritans' understanding of the sovereignty of God was the belief that God had foreordained a calling for every believer to a special vocation in which he or she was to serve and worship God.³⁷ Therefore, they believed that there was no distinguishment between a secular or sacred vocation; all vocations were thought to be under God and for the glory of God. So as the children were advancing into their early teens, the parents had the duty of helping them to find their particular calling. Richard Adams appealed:³⁸

Christian parents are concerned not only to train-up their children for business in the world, but to do what they can to provide an honest, fit, and useful calling or profession, wherein they may serve their generation according to the will of God, (Acts 13:36), and the abilities he hath bestowed on them, and the inclinations he hath implanted in them, whereby they may mostly promote the kingdom of Christ.

This required the parents to be skillful in discernment and to know their children well. Much like today, children had an awareness that they would eventually need some calling and the parents' job was to encourage them and help them to find it; not to necessarily pick one arbitrarily for them.

³⁵ *A Plain and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, p.179-180

³⁶ George Swinnock shares his desire for his children: "That the rod on earth may keep him from the rack in hell, correction here may prevent his execution hereafter. Oh that I might be so prudent as first to draw them to virtue and godliness with the cords of love; but if that will not do, rather to prick them forward than to suffer them to flag behind, and to come short of heaven and happiness. When vipers are lashed they cast up their poison; Lord, be thou pleased so to strike in with every stroke, that the rod of correction may be the rod of instruction, and their weeping here may prevent their going to that place where is nothing but weeping and wailing and nashing of teeth." (*The Works of George Swinnock*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992, [published earlier in Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1868], Vol.1, p.435).

³⁷ William Perkins work *Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men* is the standard treatment on this and generally represents the Puritan view.

³⁸ "What are the Duties of Parents and Children; and how are they to be Managed According to Scripture?", *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689*, Vol.2, p.338

Normally girls were the first to begin, at an early age, in the study of a calling. This is due to the fact that they would probably not have any vocation apart from being a housewife, whether as daughter, wife, or mother.³⁹ Boys, on the other hand, began when they were more mature. Normally they would have made a choice about their vocation between the ages of ten and fourteen. Unless they wanted to go into ministry, have a skilled trade, or get a liberal education, they would likely become a common laborer.⁴⁰ This would imply a period of training as an apprentice under a master of the trade, so he would have had to start early:

Since the training for almost every trade was gained through an apprenticeship of seven years of some master of the trade, if a child wished to be free and able to earn his living by the time he became twenty-one, he had to begin his apprenticeship not later than his fourteenth year. If he began it then, as many children did, he usually remained an apprentice until he reached twenty-one.⁴¹

If the a child did not want to pursue an apprenticeship to be a laborer, he could go to college to pursue the ministry, a more skilled trade, or make up his mind later while in school. No matter what a child might choose for a vocation, he started relatively early to find it and get training. This early start set the pace for maturity to adulthood around the age of fourteen; then they would be old enough to leave their homes.

Helping to Find a Mate for their Children

There are many similarities with helping to find a vocation for a child and helping to find a mate for a child in the Puritan mind. Both were seen as enduring for a lifetime, both were suited to the temperament of the child, and both were seen as holy and sanctified by God. And although marriage was not required, like finding a vocation, it was something that was highly expected. Singleness was not viewed as being a favorable thing to the Puritans. They thought that almost everybody is called to marriage: “Most people, declared the teachers, were called to marry, and were made aware of this by discovering the inconveniences and frustrations of living single.”⁴²

The parents also played a similar role in helping their children find a husband or wife as with vocation. It’s not that they picked a spouse for their child and forced them to marry, but that they helped and encouraged their children in their pursuit. Gouge admonished parents:

Though the match may seem meet in the parents’ eye, yet he may not force his children thereto...[T]hough the authority of parents ought in this case to be inviolable, yet a middle course is so to be held, as the parties may willingly with a mutual consent join themselves together.⁴³

³⁹ Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, p.67

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.68

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p.272

⁴³ *Of Domestic Duties*, p.564

Parents were to help the children discern if the proposed spouse be suitable in all areas. Among their concerns were that they were not “unequally yoked”, that they were properly motivated (not for money, power, etc.), and that they would walk together in godliness in marriage. They wanted the marriage to be “in the Lord”, and thus not to hinder God’s blessing on them.⁴⁴ The parents’ involvement was seen to either make or break the future marriage of their children. Consequently, children were instructed to be trusting and mindful of their parents’ wisdom as they were considering a potential mate.⁴⁵

The Measure of Success in Parenting

From conception to marriage, parents were to be heavily involved, and, therefore, very influential in the lives of their children. The goal of their parental endeavor was to drive their children to God. The measure of their success in this was to see their children in communion with God, to see their godliness and holiness manifest to their children and the fallen world around them, and for them to be solid contributors to the advancement of society. If their child became wanton, unproductive, mischievous, or immoral, or any other form of ungodliness, many thought that this was as much a commentary on the parents as it was the child. Likewise, if the child became a godly minister, a well known merchant, or the parent of godly children, much credit was given to the parents.

Much more could be said about the duties and dealings of Puritan parents. Some other notable things that they emphasized were physical provision for their children, the children’s healthy involvement in recreation, the blessing of children, the inheritance for their children, and the preparing of a last will. Only the most substantial and exhaustive topics were dealt with in above in keeping with the purpose of this inquiry. As each of these areas in the Puritan parenting dynamic have been examined, there has been a consistency in their biblical and theological perspective. In each tough issue they faced, they looked to the Scriptures and God as their chief authorities and guides. They immersed their duties in prayer, wanted nothing but to see their children be instructed in the ways of the Lord, and sought to embody holiness in their example before them.⁴⁶ Some think that the Puritans were

⁴⁴ Dod, *Ten Commandments*, p.183. He continues: “Contrarily, the neglect of this duty, is oftentimes the cause of much mischief.; that when parents be careless to provide for their children, they either defile their bodies with uncleanness, or else entangle themselves with some one or other, that is not so fit, and so grow rash precontracts, which cannot afterward so well be broken.”

⁴⁵ Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, p.79

⁴⁶ Ryken notes: “The threefold foundation of Puritan childbearing was the importance of early training, the influence of example as well as precept, and a balance between restrain and positive support.” (*Worldly Saints*, p.87). All of these things are displays of godly living as found in the Scripture (Prov.19:18; 1 Cor.11:1; Eph.4:29).

innovative in their approach to child development and had accurate theoretical⁴⁷ concepts regarding child psychology. What should not be missed in reflection on Puritan parenting and child rearing is that they did not take a theoretical, subjective, or pragmatic approach; but a theological, objective, and uncompromising approach.

⁴⁷ Concern should be raised when well-known Christian scholars like Leland Ryken refer to the Puritan “theory” of child development when it is purely biblical and theologically true: “The Puritan *theory* of child development stressed that children were, like their parents, fallen creatures whose sinful bent needed to be redirected toward God and moral goodness.” (*Worldly Saints*, p.87). Granted, if he were mentioning their idea of infant baptism as a theory, that would be one thing because that is entirely debatable amongst evangelicals. But to say that total depravity is a mere “theory” of the Puritans is incorrect. Total depravity is a *truth* that the Puritans *embraced*.

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