

What Can the Puritans Teach Us?

Examining Puritan Family Spiritual Formation

For Use in the 21st Century

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Table of Contents

I.	Purpose, Need, and Assumptions for This Paper.....	3
II.	The Puritan View of a Child’s Salvation.....	6
III.	The Congregational Response.....	7
III.	Child Centeredness as Theology.....	11
IV.	A Child’s Faith Development.....	12
V.	Congregational and Puritan Views on S.F. and Charity.....	14
VI.	The Primacy of the Home for Nurturing.....	15
VII.	Time Tested S.F. Activities the Puritans Would Have Approved Of	17
VIII	Concluding Remarks.....	29

Purpose and Need for This Paper

Why should we examine the Puritans as parenting role models for the nurturing of spiritual formation in our children? The first reason is that the Puritans were determined to keep the family as the most important of the spheres of influence affecting their children's spiritual development. Their history of allowing parents the opportunity to be their children's primary teacher of scripture's lessons and framers of their children's conception of God should be told to parents today.

The second reason is that too many parents have forgotten the request God has asked of them in His advocacy for all children. Psalm 78:5 -7 clearly says that fathers should instruct their children in the Law, build their confidence in Him and not allow them to forget the works of God (and the unwritten assumption is that mothers should too). Acts 2:39 says that the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit is for parents and their children and for all whom the Lord will call unto himself. After weeks of studying Puritan anecdotal writings, it would seem truthful to say that the Puritans would want us to pay attention to some primary directives from the Bible.

It would also be reasonable to say that most Congregational parents have left spiritual formation of their children completely up to the church. And when church attendance is not a regular phenomenon, a child can quickly assume that the importance of the Bible and its application to life is of secondary importance (to soccer or other life events). Hardaway and Marler (1998) assert that actual, regular church attendance in Protestant America settles more around 20% - much lower than the Gallup poll's regular reporting of 40%. If that is true, it is no wonder that more and more children are leaving

the church when they become adults and do not come back.

Deciding that the Puritans can be great examples of spiritual nurture doesn't exactly take a normative view of their legacy. Most people today take a dim view of the historical leftover impressions of the Puritans. Cox (1996) writes:

“As with many of our most powerful images of the past, the image of the repressive Puritan parent comes to us through subsequent representations which have acquired a life of their own. Twentieth century arrogance is particularly critical of the narrow Puritanism of the Victorian age, but much of that criticism is itself based upon nineteenth century critiques of Puritanism and its heirs” (13).

Yet Ryken (1994) notes that, “Puritans regarded family, no less than the church, as a center for instruction in Christian doctrine and morals” (54). They placed the broader family – including apprentices and servants – at the center of moral, political, and economic life. Black and Trafton (2006) use original Puritan sources, noting that Richard Baxter said to parents that they should let their own example be that which teaches and nurtures children:

“. . . that holiness and heavenliness and blamelessness of life and tongue the virtues which you desire them to practice” (37).

This paper asks three questions which might be important for any parent who wishes to be more intentional about the spiritual development of their children, yet still wishes to maintain some tradition in the Congregational way. These questions are:

1. What practices and activities can we take from Puritan heritage and tradition to keep the spirit of God present in the consciousness of the family in all the aspects of their lives?

2. What assumptions were made about children in Puritan times pertaining to theology and salvation? What assumptions are made in the Congregational Church in the same vein today?

3. What are some developmental theories and child centered ideas that speak to both the need for time honored tradition but also to how we know a child feels and learns?

Here are the assumptions this paper holds which will guide the discussion:

1. The church can only supplement, but never be the primary spiritual nurturer of our children. As busy as parents are, they must make time in their lives for Bible study, stories, prayer, heart to heart talks, games, family worship and other venues to nurture spiritual formation (hereafter referred to as S.F.).

2. The word "Puritan" has too many extracted connotations that deem our ancestors "harsh" and "rigid". Therefore, sources which quote them and examine their stewardship of their children's spirituality are looked at for fairness. These sources are deemed to be fair in their examination of Puritan S.F. if they have kept in mind the context of living in the harsh reality of the New World in the 17th century, of the Puritan belief in a Calvinist God who condemned or saved at His leisure, and of their holistic approach to investing prayer and reflection in all aspects of their lives.

3. There are many wise theologians, academics and pastors who have thoughtfully built comprehensive sets of ideas on how to keep God in the consciousness of our children from birth to adulthood. No single author has every idea fleshed out, but we can pick and choose the best ideas and provide them in this paper. Since our focus is mainly on Puritan practices that work today, many more ideas are going to be out there for the culling but will not be mentioned in this paper.

The Puritan View of a Child's Salvation

Ann Woodlief (2006) formulated the following basic tenet of Puritan theology, useful to us as a window into their 17th century outlook on life. Regarding original sin, she notes:

"Because Adam sinned, every human is born sinful. This concept of Original Sin has no exceptions. In Michael Wigglesworth's poem 'The Day of Doom,' even babies who died at birth were condemned to hell (if that fate had been predestined for them). Redemption requires the preliminary overwhelming consciousness of one's own sinful nature."

Regarding whether one could be saved, Woodlief (ibid.) writes:

"God saves those he wishes, the doctrine of predestination. Because God is all-knowing, He already knows the final destination of every soul. Although all deserve to go to hell because of original sin, God in his mercy has chosen to save a few. However, a person cannot be totally certain of his or her Election, and thus must constantly examine his or her life and motives to see if they show signs of God's grace."¹

The Puritan child was born into a God fearing family who instilled in their children the very real notion that God was watching them every second of every day. Among the quotes for children of this time comes from James Janeway in the preface of his original book, A Token for Children (1671), as quoted by Cox (1996):

¹ Available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/puritantheology.htm>

“Are you willing to go to hell and be burned with the devil and his angels?

Would you be in the same condition as naughty children? Oh, hell is a terrible place that is worse a thousand times than whipping. God’s anger is worse than your father’s anger! O child, this is most certainly true, that all that be wicked and die so, must be turned into hell; and if any be once there, there is no coming out again” (13).

To summarize, Fishburn (1983) writes that the Puritan child was God’s seed, created by God and placed in the temporary care of their parents (92). Children were born fallen, infected with original sin by the semen of the father at the point of conception.

The Congregational Response

The Child as Sinner or Blank Slate

There is *nothing* to counter this argument written by any of the modern Congregational denominations in America. Most Congregational churches, under any of the three largest polities², are completely non-specific in their theology of children. Their binding statements, theologically, all have to do with being unified through their belief in Christ and in community with the Holy Spirit. All three have their own individual polities that recognize the diversity of their member’s viewpoints. Doctrine on a child’s salvation is something the Congregational church, as a result of its tradition, might not

² The three main denominations of Congregationalism are the United Church of Christ, Congregational, the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

be capable of writing collectively.

Congregationalism is not usually bound by creedal statements and doctrine. This is typified by a statement in the bylaws of the Community Congregational Church – a U.C.C. affiliate – which notes that members have the right to interpret scripture according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Bosman, 1999).

The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches also has a definitive statement about the progressive nature of the “Congregational Way”, which certainly attests to a denomination that has evolved into a faith their Puritan forebears wouldn’t recognize:

“The perspective that has always distinguished Congregationalism is that of open engagement with contemporary thought grounded in affirmation of a covenantal relationship with God, the ground of all being. Congregationalism has changed, is changing, and will always change as it continues its commitment to taking seriously a progressive approach to dealing with religious outlook in relation to the issues God presents to each generation.”³

The best known theological thesis pertaining to children – their spiritual formation and salvation – was written by Horace Bushnell. Himself a Congregational pastor, Horace wrote Christian Nurture (1912) and argued that the influence of evil is propagated by the environment and transmuted by the family. Instead of shepherding

³ “The Congregational Way”, by Stephen Ware Bailey. Available on the Internet at

http://www.naccc.org/Cong_Way_Series/The_Congregational_Way.htm.

the child away from his or her evil tendencies, Bushnell saw childhood as a period of innocence. In infancy, the child was innocent and a “blank slate” before that child became a moral agent.

The following quote gives the reader a clear window into just how innocent Bushnell believed children were (Fishburn, 1983):

“Observe, again, how very quick the child's eye is, in the passive age of infancy, to catch impressions, and receive the meaning of looks, voices, and motions. It peruses all faces, and colors, and sounds. Every sentiment that looks into its eyes, looks back out of its eyes, and plays in miniature on its countenance. The tear that steals down the cheek of a mother's suppressed grief, gathers the little infantile face into a responsive sob. With a kind of wondering silence, which is next thing to adoration, it studies the mother in her prayer, and looks up piously with her, in that exploring watch, that signifies unspoken prayer” (97).

Fishburn (1983) writes further that the Victorian Bushnell made the parent the primary and most influential power in character formation. Parents implanted the seed of Holy Principle through their nurture, the source of Christian character (95). Evil was an influence of the environment, transmitted by propagation in an unintentional and ambivalent family. This idea, of course, turned theology of the Puritans on its head.

To summarize, 21st Century Congregational parents have a heritage of two very divergent views of the nature of children. Whether the child is a natural sinner or blank slate, whether God automatically saves the unbaptized child or just the children of the Elect, or none who are baptized at all, the parent can't tell from modern

Congregationalist notions, only from 19th century historical writings (like Horace Bushnell's). Without church doctrine, they will have to make their own decisions as to what to believe.

The Authority of Scripture

As it did for the Puritans, how one leans theologically does frame what a parent will teach and how that person will discipline her child. The other decision the parent needs to make is how much authority scripture will have in her instruction. It is fair to say that the Congregational church is liberal, on the literalist to interpretive continuum, and such liberal positions have a thoroughgoing historical approach that runs counter to the classical Reformation reformers, thus making the primacy of scripture relative (Ogden, 1976).

The Puritans decided that the authority of scripture in its totality was paramount. In contrast, it is assumed that most Congregational parents would be more selective of age appropriate and relevant scripture for their child's life today. Many may see little relevance in teaching Biblical narrative that justifies Israel in slaughtering their enemies when that parent's hierarchy of values tells her to teach scripture that speaks more directly to toleration and peace.

Fortunately for the parent, S.F. "how to" books include methodology and practice from authors coming from a range of evangelical and liberal perspectives. In the end, the most important aspect of S.F. may not be the parent's view of salvation or the authority of scripture, but whether the child foundationally believes in a God who saves.

Child Centeredness as Theology

Before moving on to the theories of faith formation and S.F. practices in the home, it is encouraging to note that there is a grass roots effort by church leaders and academics to build a comprehensive “Child Theology Movement”. Bunge (2006) writes that at international and ecumenical meetings, leaders of this movement are trying to address shared concerns by:

“. . .deliberately putting the child in the midst of theological reflection, imagining what the child might experience, and reflect together on that child as they rethink specific doctrines or practices of the church (571).

As Wall (2006) puts it, “Our responsibility for children as the least among us shines a particularly strong light on what it means to love fellow creatures of God overall” (546). He argues that human moral responsibility dictates we respond to the vulnerabilities of our little ones through a “social self-creativity” that gradually develops their capabilities for God’s purposes.

The importance of this small section of this paper serves notice that the more parents are concerned for a child’s spiritual well being, the more that parent should well consider the child’s view of the world. According to DeRoos (2006), who conducted two validated statistical surveys of children and their parents, young children are more likely to have a strong loving God concept among groups of non-affiliated and liberal Christian parents when they have influential, religious teachers who work as hard as the parents to nurture the child’s S.F. Later on, the influence of peers, of course, is seminal.

Therefore, it is wise to continually update one’s parental perspective as to how

the child perceives his world and what or who adds to the God construct. By adolescence, the primary influences and influencers change. The parent has to hope, as the child nears adulthood, that they've done what they could.

Children's Faith Development

According to Yurst (2000):

"Faith is an act of grace in which God chooses to be in relationship with humanity. Children are religious beings from birth. If we hold this definition of faith as an act of grace, then we make room for children as an actual people of faith rather than just potential people of faith in need of further development before they can truly engage in a spiritual life (6). Like a little bit of yeast that leavens the loaf of bread, faith modifies the life of those to whom it is given. It affects all the other of life's ingredients" (10).

Given Congregationalism's liberal tradition, comments by a noted liberal theologian like Fredrich Schleiermacher may also be in vogue. Devries (2001) writes that Schleiermacher saw adults as growing in sanctification through their care of children. Their complete dependence upon parents challenges them to live for others.

At the same time, children within a community give a **gift** to adults: they draw them back into the spiritual perspective of the child. Without this **gift**, many adults would become so jaded and cynical that they would be incapable of receiving the **gift** of reconciliation that Christ has to offer them. Childhood, then, is intrinsically valuable as the spiritual perspective most easily able to draw us into fellowship with God" (166). In other words, our faith as parents would not be whole without theirs.

When working to instill spirituality in children starting early is critical. Cully (1983) writes that little ones can't understand intellectually what is going on in church, but children sense that it is a special occasion (207). Parents who model safety, security, and warmth build trust in a God who is, likewise, a secure attachment for them.

Bellows, De Roos, and Summery (2004) write that representational memories used to form the construct of self from the earliest period of memory are often brought back into consciousness for the child to reflect on during periods of low self-esteem. Often times, the child's construct of God carried past the formative years cannot be changed. They finish their chapter with a quote that cannot be overstated, "God concepts remain intertwined in a complex way with one's own experience with their parents" (204).

To summarize, congregations must advocate for families to act more like worshiping communities whose activities reflect an enthusiasm for communing with God. "Catching them while they're young" is critical and parents need to understand that the concept of S.F. from cradle to grave really does start at the cradle.

Congregational and Puritan Views on S.F. and Charity

If we choose to remain aligned with Puritan moral teachings in this paper, we must make a brief statement about the need for S.F. as it relates to charity and good works. Spiritual formation that just speaks of God and being chosen for God's spiritual community means nothing without service in love to others. The Puritans were adamant about this. The Puritan parent - aside from modeling piety and the multiple ways to live an exemplified "filled with spirit" life to their children - would have

wanted their children to roll up their sleeves and help anyone else less fortunate than they.

J.I. Packer (1990) noted that the Puritans viewed all work –even that which earn their livings - as callings. In the same vein, the Puritan husband and wife would have taken their calling as parents very seriously, a certain kind of life ordained and imposed on man by God for the *common good* (Packer, 272).

The Puritan commitment to their children and their ever seeking of ways to build a New Jerusalem in the New World would have been an extension of work for the common good. Fishburn (1983) writes that the root of the American tendency to link children to a better future comes from the Puritan conviction that the continuity and establishment of God's kingdom depended on their children (93).

John Winthrop's sermon, "A Model for Christian Charity" (1630) was delivered during the voyage of the *Arbella*. On charity he spoke in earnest:

Every man might have need of other, and from hence they might be all in it more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection. From hence it appears plainly that no man is made more honorable than another, or wealthier out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man."⁴

The United Church of Christ Congregational stands alone among the modern of the Congregational denominations in affirming the need for social justice for children as

⁴ Available on the Internet at, <http://library.marist.edu/diglib/coresyllabi/liberal-arts/origins/winthrop-modell.htm>

God's love actualized for them on Earth. They write:

"Because children are powerless and often live with adults who are poor and have little voice, there is a tendency not to see or hear them. Too often, their basic needs go unfulfilled. The United Church of Christ has a long tradition of affirming public policies which generate and distribute resources in ways that provide all people, including children, with the potential to live healthy and productive lives. The covenant of God is with all children of our nation and the world, not just with the children who share our church life."⁵

The Calvinist Puritan would not have understood the Social Gospel or modern humanism's concern for social justice. She would have thought not just about her salvation, but of the need for God's work to be enacted through love of neighbor. Each Puritan child was taught to practice faith through this love as much or more than any other concept of God centeredness. It is likely they would have approved of the U.C.C. statement of not allowing a child's basic needs to go unfulfilled, regardless of whether they believed it was possible to optimistically change man's constructs of government here on Earth towards a utopian propensity towards social caretaking.

The Primacy of Home Nurturing

Thomas Cobbett is quoted in Ryken's Worldly Saints (1986) as writing:

"The greatest love and faithfulness covenanters (the Puritans) could show to God and to their children was to educate them on the conditions of God's covenant

⁵ Issues of Justice and Peace Pertaining to Children, written by the United Church of Christ, Congregational. Available on the web at, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/children.htm>.

with man so that their children might attend to them” (84).

There was indeed a preoccupation by Puritan parents for wanting to nurture S.F. in the home. Puritan parents encouraged and modeled piety, selflessness, honesty and sociable manners praising the positive and coming down severely on the negative. Knowing that church could never take their place, parents still viewed the family as an extension of it, making devotions a standard feature of their home life.

Miller-McLemore (2006) references Elizabeth F. Caldwell, who wrote Making a Home for Faith (2000), as one of the most important books yet written about S.F. in the home. Besides the “how to do it” chapters, Miller –McLemore says that Caldwell brings S.F. to the table by utilizing spiritual language built around alternative metaphors of organic growth, pilgrimage, and home making (651).

She also references J. Bradley Wigger’s book The Power of God at Home (2003). Underscoring the importance of the Biblical story in a sweeping overview, Wigger then goes on to relate the relevance of that story to home and family. Evidently, when parents value home bound Bible instruction and nurture an essence of holiness in their homes as a place for worshipping God (through prayer, activity, and loving relationships), they are planting seeds of S.F. that the church simply cannot.

Joanne Mercer warns (2004) that busy parents who don’t address S.F. in their homes will have the margins of their children’s value systems filled in by the media. Materialism can and will, quite literally, reshape how a child relates to other children creating a fabric of identity based on goods, not God:

“In terms of children's spirituality, consumerism means the structuring of

relationships with children around consumption. Relationships and responsibilities toward children are increasingly figured in relation to the "use-value" of children, foregrounding market values of self-interest, and utilitarianism. Hence, children come to be valued not in and of themselves as human beings-or as it would be put within the Christian tradition, as creatures of God possessing inherent and incomparable worth as bearers of the 'Imago Dei'" (82-83).

Once this happens, she argues, a child's spiritual formation has begun to be diminished by that child's preoccupation of the media and its attractiveness. Being that the church cannot reach the child and her values and moral constructs as often as the parent can, it is fair to say that the home is absolutely the most formative place for God to develop in a child's heart. As Robert Davis Hughes puts it (2005):

"A home is a school of perfection because of the endless opportunities it affords for the exercise of fraternal charity-which is, of course, the true meaning of that much-misused proverb, 'Charity begins at home.' That is, the give and take of normal family life is the primary school for learning the virtue of agape love, the proximate goal of all Christian spirituality" (391).

Time Tested S.F. Practices Puritans Would Have Approved Of

The literature is deep and broad when it comes to practices for family nurture of the child's concept of God and Christ in the 21st century and from the Puritan time. Traditional worship, holidays, and family spiritual activity mold the child's relationship

almost as much as the love the child experiences from his or her parent (as discussed). Advent and Christmas, for example, are among the most vividly wonderful or distasteful memories a child can extract from their past, depending on how cherished and serious the traditions were taken. Holiday sharing in community can often make or break how a child views Christ's birth as promise for him or her thereafter.

From the child's perspective, he or she needs tradition specific religious language to name, value and express their ultimate concerns so they can cope with them (Miller - McLemore, 2006). From the parent's perspective, a hands-on set of specifics are needed for the parent to immediately grasp, so he or she can sit down and read to the child, play with him or her, or do an activity that is tangible to any religious instruction the parent wishes to provide.

The Use of Scripture for Moral Training

Fleming (1969) writes that the chief book of New England back then was the Bible, the "...fountain whence has proceeded all good which is to be found in other books" (78). The Puritan's method of Bible instruction was to read it to the child from beginning to end, omitting nothing, regardless of the child's ability to understand. Often the stories were edified by the parent's warnings of what happened to children who did not follow God's rules.

Modern developmental theory simply forbids reading everything in the Bible to a child unready for metaphorical or paradoxical content. Of course we know that teaching is effective when the teacher has found the link between the child's interest, his or her ability to process information and the utility of the concept taught.

Rather than the Puritan imperative to instill a mortal fear of God and shame the child into remorse, the Congregational parent might be more inclined to stimulate the child to build schema for making decisions based on what he or she has discerned about God's will for righteous living. This would involve both knowledge of God's values through His revelation in narrative, prophecy, wisdom literature (Proverbs) and Christ's teachings (palatable to the developing child). It would also involve careful staging of discussion between parent and child that breaks down avoidance-conflict situations. By talking about the bully on the playground, for example, the child can process what action she might take initially, the consequences for the action decided upon, and rationale behind what she did.

This is a very difficult thing to do. What the parent is really working towards is a child's ability to be relativistic. Relativism doesn't mean that one view is as good as another or that the truth is relative, but means that the child is able to put himself in the place of others – to see events from perspectives quite different from her own (Clouse, 1984).

Equally important, we as parents have to model that relativism, reflecting on how the child feels when she is scolded, sent to bed without supper, or banished from the television for three days (272). Justice may still be metered out, but the parent would at least be able to reflect on appropriate consequences, matching serious deliberate misbehavior with harsher consequences, but showing the child that sometimes it's best to overlook a wrong, give a soft answer, or turn the other cheek in accidental situations

(273). In either situation (deliberate or accidental) it is suggested that the parent acknowledge the child's feelings (I know you are feeling. . .) before initiating any action.

The above discussion parts company with the Puritans. They weren't as psychologically sensitive to stages of either moral or cognitive development. To take it further, they would have most likely looked to scripture for teaching material to stimulate moral growth, utilizing it literally.

To summarize this concept, moral growth occurs when the child internalizes the expectations and normative demands of society as interpreted by her parents (Clouse, 90). Values clarification, on the other hand, is more modern and quite different. It allows the child to discern which conceptual commodities such as wise judgment, self-control, honesty, and kindness are those which God intended. It is as important as moral reasoning. A child needs to discern and attach real meaning to the conceptual framework of these God centered character traits, and then reflect on those values to reason morally correct behavior.

Primarily done in the 80's in school, values clarification became quite political in the parenting - school debate. It stirred up heated arguments between the religious right and agnostic parents. Recently, it has resurfaced for discussion in the spiritual development literature. It involves a moral issue that the parent might bring up to discuss -peers using drugs, for example. The child and parent together can examine the child's feelings when she sees drug use, discuss alternative viewpoints (how the worried mother of the child might be feeling), consider the consequences of various choices in a thoughtful manner, discern what choice the child would freely make based on her

knowledge of God's will, and finally, then, imagine scenarios where that child would act on with her new affirmed belief in that value. The resulting personal values construct (obedience) is discussed openly as a characteristic of a spiritually maturing person (Kirschenbaum, 1992).

Moral reasoning and values clarification in real situations or Biblical narrative (Jonathon protecting David in 1 Samuel 19) brings to the child perspective building and the growth of the child's ability to be relativistic. Initiating this kind of discussion and problem solving needs to be done early. The optimal time for moral growth is between the ages of two and six (Clouse, 90). Once again, there is no more sage altruism for the parent regarding this than "Catch 'em while they're young".

Bible Stories and Associated Activities

Transitioning to curriculum, any parent can walk through a Christian Book store or peruse the Internet to find tailored children's Bibles suited for many purposes. Children's Bibles are found in almost all bookstores and on the Internet and examples of such need not be discussed in this paper, save one. To illustrate how many authors have attempted to modify the Bible to every appropriate age, note that it begins at birth. There is even a Baby Bible Storybook written by Robin Currie in 1995.

If the parent is trying to reinforce Biblical content for its own sake, then hands on activity needs to compliment the story. Stonehouse (1998) references Jerome Berryman who was the originator of a now widely used Sunday School curriculum called "Godly Play". Berryman calls entering Bible stories with children what Godly play is all about. For children to engage in Godly play, the children should have the water, green

pastures, clothing and other tangibles of the environment of the story as manipulative they can touch, to feel and examine. Stonehouse (ibid) further writes:

“ . . .as they work with the materials, children with their hands the stories and ideas of Scripture and through this means are able to grasp them with their hearts” (187).

The story of Jacob asking his brother’s forgiveness by Esau in Genesis 33 is a wonderful example of a moral dilemma for a child to grasp with props. After explaining Jacob’s transgression of stealing the blessing of Isaac in simple terms to the child, the child could then listen to the Bible story (from a children’s bible) and then play act the story themselves in an impromptu skit, using traditional robes and headgear fashioned out of fabric.

To summarize this section, a proper selection of age appropriate stories from the Bible gives the parent the best opportunity to tell children of God’s love and care for them, and to tell them that some behaviors are blessed and others despised.

Catechisms

Other literature besides the Bible that the Puritans saw as effective were catechisms (Ryken, 1974). The question and answer format accorded well both with the Puritan’s stress on the intellectual content of faith and their need to have things well defined. John Cotton’s “Spiritual Milk for Babies” (1668) and Isaac Watt’s “Instructions in the Principles of the Christian Religion (1730) were guides read by children governing how to behave, think, and believe. “The Family Instructor” by William DeFoe (1715) was written for parents and provides them with fictional dialogues between lively

characters that illustrated some of the problems with family conduct (displays of temper, overindulging the child, etc.).

In 2006, catechisms are still used almost exclusively in the Catholic domain. Across the Congregational domain, the only referenced catechistic like program is what is called "Confirmation". This is used by church teachers to basically re-teach forgotten principles from the Bible and our denominational heritage of religious freedom to junior high youth. It is an area for further exploration as to whether a Congregational family would want to use little books largely written with Catholic doctrine at their core as foundations for teaching their child's faith.

Be that as it may, these booklets are structured well in terms of their age appropriateness. According to Busch, Franco, Ristow and Schaeffler (1999), catechetical materials used in the U.S. Catholic schools follow, in general, an age directed general progression of concepts as follows. Creation and all its wonders are explored in kindergarten. First grade is an introduction to God, especially Jesus. Second-graders continue the study of Jesus and the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist. The Church and the Creed are explored in the third grade. Fourth graders are involved in an intensive study of Christian morality and conscience development. The sacraments are the focus of study in fifth grade. Sixth-graders explore salvation history. It is in the sixth grade, then, that youngsters encounter the Hebrew Scriptures in a very intentional way.

Non-Biblical Stories and Narratives

Today, of course, there is a huge range of stories that go beyond the Bible and catechisms. One such book, as mentioned by Kay Wilson (2006) is The Little Red Hen.

The Biblical proverb, "So you sow, so you shall reap", is completely framed in this simple story. Children can be encouraged to think about times at school where they knew someone who didn't put all the work into a class project but then wanted to enjoy the rewards that were undeserved to them.

A cautionary note related to the theology of picking books. The Puritans would frighten their children into conformity (no two ways about it) through the stories they chose for their children. But the damage to a child's psyche could be irreversible.

Cruising through Amazon.com, it is easy to find such stories. Tasha Tudor's Give Us This Day (1987) brought the following review from Publisher's Weekly:

"This sentimental, neo-Victorian rendering of the Lord's Prayer does an injustice to the psalm it illustrates. Angelic 19th century children scamper through most of the volume, observing with reverence God's luminous creations. Then the phrase "Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven" is illustrated by a picture of three wistful tykes placing flowers on their mother's grave. Similarly, the phrase "But deliver us from evil" is accompanied by a terrifying scene of a post-apocalyptic landscape, glowing red while a lone child cowers in the foreground. Parents who want to strike some old-fashioned fear of damnation into their children will be well-served by this book; other families, religious or not, should steer clear."⁶

Another modern idea for literacy and spiritual reflection that Puritans would have approved is to have the child do a "self narrative". A child could, after the initial

⁶ Copyrighted 1987 review by Publisher's Weekly, available on the Internet at:

<http://www.amazon.com/Give-This-Day-Tasha-Tudor/dp/0399214429>

birth and early childhood biography, write about conflict and resolution as he or she has come to it in their young life. Clouse (1984) argues that self-narrative for the purpose of moral growth is increasingly lauded by educators as a method of examining life's context. With this examination can come reflection by the spiritually nurtured child about how he or she relied on God for guidance.

The Puritans would have approved of any method for encouraging a child to self-reflect in a journal. Theologically, the Puritans were concerned with their salvation minute by minute. Any self-examination of a "day in the life" was to be done to ascertain whether or not a person's walk with Christ was filled with penitence, prayer and service.

Family Fun and Celebrations

By just having a family game night, mom and dad are already teaching the value of fellowshiping. With proper modeling of protocol and polite behavior, the parents are also tacitly teaching the importance of fairness and civility.

Arts and crafts utilize the child's creative ideas and tactile and motor skills. Creating a craft for display at a religious event like Christmas instills pride and further reinforces the child's self esteem related to his or her perceived ability.

One of the most God loving activities a family can do together is to, as aforementioned, serve the community. Helping to make Thanksgiving meals for the homeless, collecting clothes for reclamation agencies that distribute to those in need, or even just singing Christmas carols to the shut ins of church sends the strong moral

message of valuing all in one's community and further fleshes out the child's concepts of dignity and love for a wide range of encountered diverse people.

Another practice the Puritans employed was to have children's prayer meetings. Children came spontaneously together to sing, read, and pray, as evidenced by Chauncy in 1726 in New Milford, Massachusetts (Fleming, 146). Later in the history of the church, these meetings were affected by the revivalist tendencies of the Great Awakening and the religious excitement at school sometimes was the catalyst for these gatherings by children, who sang hymns and prayed vigorously.

Today's youth gatherings are much more oriented towards junior high and high school groups. The web is full of curriculum designed to get youth excited about evangelical events where church youth groups can gather for a staged performance of a band or an evangelist.

The spontaneity that was described in the anecdotes about children's gatherings in Puritan times is largely gone. If youth gather impromptu at the high school or in their neighborhood today, it is almost always to be social with peers.

The fact that almost all youth events in Christendom are orchestrated for effect would have been deeply concerning to the Puritans. They were not into hype and sensationalism. By in large, they wouldn't have understood why the young were allowed so freedom and would have condemned parents for not providing their children with more work to do.

Family celebrations were, however, quite covenantal to them. They were a

demonstration of thanks to a God who chose (but didn't have to) provide them joy in their lives. The Puritans called family celebrations a thanksgiving day of feasting and prayer. They would invite a multitude of people and spend a fair amount of their family's resources on these celebrations.

The inference for modern parents is that many family celebrations can be done with prayer and scripture readings that acknowledge God's bountiful grace. Weddings don't have to be the only venues for public displays of affection for God's word. A brief reading of Ephesians 5: 15-17 is more than appropriate at an opportune time by a parent during a son or daughter's graduation party. His word can be glorified in all situations.

Family Worship at Church

Going to church was mandatory for the Puritan child. The Sabbath was completely and totally observed. The day, according to Fleming (1969), was filled with religious exercises. Anything not associated with such exercises was questioned. Often the children would get their own special sermon on how wicked they could be - if not for their good parents -and how through Christ's grace and their own piety they were spared the fiery damnation of hell.

Repeating the sermon at home was a common practice on Sundays. Richard Baxter wrote in his *Christian Directory* (1673) that family worship should be held twice each weekday. He thought it was "seasonable" every morning to give thanks for the rest of the night past and to beg direction, protection, provisions, and blessings for the following day.

To review, there are two clear truths for parents to take away from the Puritans on going to church. The first is to come to church faithfully and treat it as a special day of revelation from God for both parents and children. The second is to discuss the concepts at home after service which the parent thinks the child might not understand. Often, as with the parent trying to talk to an adolescent about sex, the parent has to subjectively seek an opportune moment to quietly listen to a child's understanding or lack thereof, then reinforce or re-teach. The interaction may produce learning on everyone's part.

Concluding Remarks

The teaching of the Bible makes it plain that the children of believers belong to God. They are his children, given in trust to parents for the purpose of nurturing them to maturity in the knowledge of God. In the words of the prophet Malachi, God desires godly offspring (2:15). In the words of the apostle Paul, the children of believers are holy (1 Corinthians 7:14).

The relationship that children of believers have with God under the new covenant is intrinsically the same as that which they had under the old covenant. Abraham's sons were circumcised with the same sign and seal of salvation as Abraham received, in response to his faith in God. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31).

Parents can keep that promise and with love and exhilaration, pass it on. Through daily activity, prayer, readings, and discussion in the home, the child can flower with a sense of joy and of being chosen by God to represent the righteous. Parents don't have to

be afraid of "religion", but do have to be afraid of an absence of God in their child's psyche. Failure to teach about God and his will in the home by the parent may result, as Mercer (2004) suggested, of culture filling in the margins with unwanted suggestion.

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