

The Seeds of Anti-Slavery in Reformed, Puritan Doctrine

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Sometimes people accuse the Puritans that their teachings formed an ideological cage to imprison African slaves in perpetual bondage. In this brief essay I aim to show that Puritan theology actually holds the key to unlock that cage and emancipate the slaves. Though it took a tragically long time for this seed of truth to germinate and bear fruit, it was present in the earliest Puritan writings.

Some say that the Puritans used predestination as a way to lull slaves into lethargic submission to their oppressed state. But the Reformed doctrine of predestination does not promote fatalism or passivity. Instead, predestination creates courage and activism, for we believe that a sovereign God hears our prayers and empowers our efforts. The Puritans were fighters and agents of change who warred against the tyranny of the king in England and launched the American experiment in New England.

The Puritans taught men of all stations to be content, to submit to authority, and to use their authority in love and justice, not because of their doctrine of predestination, but because of biblical exhortations to contentment and submission. They applied Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6:5–9 to their present situation. But they also believed that manly godliness called us to take action against injustice and tyranny.

The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, "Purity of religion in the church cannot stand long with slavery admitted in the state. . . . But blessed be God, that now there is a rising of spirit among us [the Puritans]. . . . Now our kingdom will never bow down and submit their consciences, nor estates, nor liberties, to the former bondage and oppression. No, they had rather die honorably than live basely" (*Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea* [Beaver Falls, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1989], 16).

It is true that many Puritans owned slaves in the early colonial era. According to Francis Bremer (*The Puritan Experiment* [Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995], 205–208), the first African slaves probably arrived in New England in 1638. The Massachusetts legal code of 1641 stipulated that slaves (of any color) must be given the same rights and protections as granted in the Old Testament law. So their position was somewhat better than in the South. Their

marriages were valid and binding; they had a right to trial by jury. Most did not oppose slavery as an institution but sought to educate and evangelize the African slaves, such as Cotton Mather and John Eliot.

The Puritan William Gouge in 1622 addressed the relationship between masters and servants, meaning by “servants” both those “born servants, or sold as servants, or taken in war” and those “being by voluntary contract made servants.” He said that a master does not have the right to take away the life of his servant or slave, nor to destroy any member of his body such as his eye (Ex. 21:20, 26). Gouge did condone corporal punishment, but rebuked “cruelty,” reminded masters that they were disciplining “their own flesh,” and forbade any striking that would “wound, bruise, and lame” the slave, or “impair life, health, or strength” so as to “disable him.” Furthermore, the master must respect the marital rights of his servants or slaves, not forcing them into a marriage against their consent nor separating them from their spouses. Masters must not “put servants to such hard tasks as impair their strength, endanger their limbs, and venture their lives” (William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, ed. Greg Fox [Edinburgh, Ind.: Puritan Reprints, 2006], 117, 485–89, 495).

Gouge also said that regardless of where we stand in human society, we have “equality” before God. He warned, “If the greatest man that ever was in the world should have a servant that were the [lowest in rank] that ever was, and a case betwixt that master and that servant should come before God, God would not any whit at all lean to that master more than to the servant” (*Domestic Duties*, 509, 511).

This is not to minimize the injustice of slavery, but to recognize that godly Puritans viewed slaves as human beings to whom we owe love and fairness. No doubt some masters in the seventeenth century treated their slaves with criminal cruelty. But the Puritan ideal, which was reflected in many homes, was to include the servants in the extended family, to welcome them into family worship, to instruct them in the ways of God, and to care for their needs when sick or elderly.

Puritan theology contained seeds that slowly grew and blossomed into anti-slavery teachings. Not only did they recognize the humanity of all peoples and our duty to show them love and justice, but they also saw that stealing people to place them in bondage—the fountain and source of slavery—is contrary to biblical ethics. At the end of the sixteenth century, William Perkins, often called the father of Puritanism due to his pervasive influence, said that the Eighth

Commandment forbids us “to steal other men’s servants, or children” (*Golden Chaine* [London: John Legat, 1600], 91). “Man-stealing” (cf. Ex. 21:16; 1 Tim. 1:10) was denounced as a sin by the Puritans in the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 142) in the mid-seventeenth century. This became a key term in the Christian polemic against slavery.

Richard Baxter, one of the best known Puritans, applied this principle directly to the enslavement of Africans: “To go as pirates and catch up poor negroes or people of another land, that never forfeited life or liberty, and to make them slaves, and sell them, is one of the worst kinds of thievery in the world; and such persons are to be taken for the common enemies of mankind; and they that buy them and use them as beasts, for their mere commodity, and betray, or destroy, or neglect their souls, are fitter to be called incarnate devils than Christians, though they be no Christians whom they so abuse” (*Christian Directory* [Ligonier, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990], 1:462).

By 1700 the Puritan Samuel Sewall was agitating against slavery in *The Selling of Joseph*. Jonathan Edwards owned slaves, yet Thabiti Anyabwile has said in a recent [paper](#) that Edwards condemned the slave trade and denied that Africans and Native Americans were inferior to white people. His son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., took the next logical step and advocated against slavery (*The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of the Africans* [preached in 1791]).

In New York, the Scottish minister Alexander McCleod invoked Exodus 21:16 in *Negro Slavery Unjustified* (1802) to lead the Reformed Presbyterians (present day RCPNA) to condemn slavery as “treason against heaven.” McCleod did not live in the Puritan era, but he operated under the same theology that characterized the Puritan movement.

In hindsight we groan over the many years that black slaves had to wait before Christians woke up to a consistent application of their theological principles. Our nation continues to suffer the tragic consequences of this blindness. But we must not reject the theology of the Puritans or the Puritans themselves for their slowness and tunnel-vision in this matter. In every age and culture, true Christians have blindspots such that they tolerate or even promote sins which they should abominate and combat. Our own age no doubt has many. Rather than turning aside from the Puritans, we should recognize their faults but continue to study and learn from them. They lived in a time of amazing doctrinal light and spiritual revival, and we would do well if we could follow them insofar as they followed Christ.