

## **The Puritan Family.**

### **Introduction:**

Early December in the year of grace 1641, and, its been a quiet week in Weston Parva, quiet for everyone but Abigail Adams<sup>1</sup>, mistress of Manor Farm. Poor Abigail has recently discovered new depths to the meaning of the word exhaustion. Ten days ago, she presented her husband Richard with her first child, a fine son. The birth was not easy. (The little lad was a strapping seven and a half pounds.) Since then, every night has been punctuated by his lusty demands for milk and attention. Just nineteen, she had wed in the autumn of the previous year. For all her undoubted pluck, Abigail was finding the combination of marriage and motherhood a little fatiguing. Weston Parva is one of a clutch of villages familiarly known as the Westons, located in the Eastern part of the ancient, if small county of Bedworthshire. (The others are Weston Magna and Weston Episcopi.) Bedworthshire, with its county town of Bedworth, a Parliamentary borough, is located between Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. Its western border is not far from the Northamptonshire heights, but in the East it is fenland. Like the shires to the South and East, it is Puritan country. When Civil War broke out, the stout farmers and minor gentry of Bedworthshire sent their quota to the army of the Eastern Association. Just now, Richard Adams was often filled with solemn wonder as his beefy paw closed around the tiny hand of his little son. Within a twelvemonth it would close around the hilt of a broadsword as he took his place among the heavy cavalry whose disciplined onslaught carried the day at Marston Moor.

Richard and Abigail knew what a family was. They would have been frankly baffled by the late twentieth century view that the exploration of alternative lifestyles has produced many types of family, all worthy of equal esteem. The Puritan family consisted of the union of one man and one woman and their natural children, though it could be extended to include the children of former marriages, elderly parents and domestics. To the Puritan mind, this was fitting. They could see similar families in the pages of Scripture and the apostle Paul himself structured his exhortations to the Spirit-filled family around the pattern of husbands and wives, parents and children and masters and servants.<sup>2</sup> Richard and Abigail also knew what a family was for. It was of course the most basic social unit, the essential building block for all civic and religious societies, a microcosm both of Church and Commonwealth. Nevertheless, as Leland Ryken has observed, "the primary purpose of a family is to glorify God."<sup>3</sup>

### **Husbands and Wives:**

A family begins when a young couple marry. Had Richard and Abigail lived early in the previous century, they would have struggled with the legacy of centuries of

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Adams, her husband Richard and all their relatives are fictional characters, though intended to be typical. In the same way, Bedworthshire and all the locations attributed to it do not in fact exist.

<sup>3</sup> Leland Ryken, "Worldly Saints" (Zondervan, 1986), p.73.

teaching, which still survives in the Roman Catholic world, that those who marry condemn themselves to being God's second best. The Reformation however, overturned the view that marriage was a safety net for those who could not cope with the spiritually exalted path of celibacy. "In general", says Ryken, "the Puritans affirmed what the Catholics denied and denied what the Catholics had traditionally affirmed."<sup>4</sup> A new consensus had emerged. A man could marry a wife and both could glorify God together without feeling that they had chosen a soft option. Puritan commentators were agreed: in turning the Medieval fixation with celibacy and virginity on its head, they were turning everything the right way up, restoring a wholesome commitment to Biblical sanity by ditching a man-made tradition which had caused untold harm for centuries. "It was the Devil that brought in a base esteem of that honourable condition" wrote Richard Sibbes.<sup>5</sup> According to Thomas Gataker, "The marriage bed .... is of itself free from filth .... But saith the Spirit of Satan, speaking by these men, or beasts rather: marriage is dishonourable."<sup>6</sup> For his part, Richard was heartily glad that Providence had appointed his lot in England. How miserable to live where Rome held sway! Aspire to the priesthood and you were denied the blessing of a companion to share your joys and trials. Abigail was equally glad that she had grown up in Protestant England. She felt sorry for women in lands such as Spain and Portugal. Did not Rome teach that for the man who strove for spiritual excellence, women were a snare, a source of temptation? She was confident that the Reformation had exalted the place of women. She knew that she was not an obstacle in the path of her husband's progress. Richard had told her more than once that she was his greatest asset in the quest for godliness. He would have agreed enthusiastically with John Dod and Robert Cleaver: "Thy wife is ordained for man: like a little Zoar, a city of refuge to fly to in all his troubles: and there is no peace comparable unto her but the peace of conscience."<sup>7</sup> Years later, writing from New England, John Cotton made the same point: "Women are creatures without which there is no comfortable living for man .... They are a sort of blasphemers then who despise and decry them, and call them a *necessary Evil*, for they are a *necessary Good*."<sup>8</sup> All of this is light years away from Thomas Aquinas' view that the birth of a girl is the result of a male embryo going wrong.<sup>9</sup>

As the leaven of restored Biblicism which was the legacy of the Reformation worked its way through English society, another change became apparent. What was the primary purpose for which God ordained marriage? The Roman Catholic answer was the procreation of children. This is reflected in the Book of Common Prayer, which lists three reasons for matrimony in this order: children, chastity and the comfort of companionship. Richard and Abigail were married by their parish minister, the godly and conscientious Master Cox<sup>10</sup> whose nonconformity had involved him in a running feud with his diocesan, the bishop of Ely. The reverend Mister Cox had suggested that

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Ryken, op. cit., p.42.

<sup>7</sup> John Dod and Robert Cleaver, "A Godly Form of Household Government" (1598), p.125.

<sup>9</sup> Attributed in J. I. Packer, "Among God's Giants" (Kingsway, 1991), p.342.

what came third in the Prayer Book ought to come first<sup>11</sup> and had amended the order for their wedding. Abigail was pleased that Richard gave enthusiastic support. A man might choose a mare as breeding stock, but this was no compliment to a woman. It pleased her mightily to think however, that Richard wanted her to join him in an exclusive pact of friendship. In due course, the Westminster Confession was to improve on the Anglican order: "Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with a holy seed, and for preventing of uncleanness."<sup>12</sup>

By the time Richard and Abigail came to tie the knot, there was a substantial body of literature available to help those contemplating marriage. Literate husbands and wives could choose from William Perkins "Christian Economy" (1590), William Whately's "Care-cloth: a Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage" (1624) Matthew Griffith's "Bethel, or a Form for Families" (1634) and in later years, section II of Richard Baxter's "A Christian Directory", subtitled "Christian Economics". In 1672, Baxter published his "Poor Man's Family Book". His preface explains that "This Book was intended for the use of Poor Families which have neither money to buy many, nor time to read them ...."<sup>13</sup> It opens with a typically pungent exhortation to the rich to purchase copies for those who could not afford them. Every landlord was exhorted to buy one for each of his poor tenants. "The price of one ordinary dish of meat will buy a book: and to abate for every tenant, but one dish in your lives, is no great self-denial."<sup>14</sup> The book takes the form of a series of nine dialogues between a faithful pastor and one of his parishioners. The first four are primarily evangelistic and detail the way that the pastor persuades his neighbour to arrive at a settled profession of faith by renewing his baptismal covenant. The reader is left with the impression that Baxter himself must have been absolutely relentless in his pursuit of lost souls. The next dialogues concern instructions for the newly-converted. It is only the final third of the book which goes into detail about family life. What Baxter calls "The Seventh day's Conference" is entitled: "Of a Holy Family and How to Govern it, and Perform the Duty of all Family Relations and Others."

A notable addition to the list was written by William Gouge. It was called "Domestical Duties" and was published in 1634. Richard actually owned a copy. His uncle on his father's side, Ebenezer Adams, was one of the two burgesses summoned to represent Bedworth during the infamous Short Parliament of 1640. Knowing that his favourite nephew had recently entered upon the married state, Ebenezer went to Edward Brewster's book-shop, which traded under the sign of the Bible near the North door of St Paul's Church and purchased a copy. Richard was delighted with the gift. It appealed to him for several reasons. In the first place, it was a sustained exposition of Scripture, opening up Ephesians 5:21-6:9 in detail with many practical applications. The helpful indices at the front meant that practical advice could be quickly located on particular areas of married life. How should one handle an

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<sup>11</sup> Master Cox may well have been conversant with "The Book of Matrimony" written by the Reformer, Thomas Becon in 1564. Becon said that God's first reason for inventing marriage was "avoidance of solitariness."

<sup>13</sup> Richard Baxter, "Poor Man's Family Book" (2nd edn., 1675), preface.

interfering mother-in-law or a fractious servant? It was all covered! Richard also appreciated "Domestical Duties" because it was never glib. No easy answers to the complexities of human relationships were offered. He particularly liked the stress on the inward aspects of family life. One cannot guarantee that others will behave as they ought, but discipline one's own reactions, school the heart to respond in a considered and calm fashion to the hurly-burly of family life and the battle is half-won. Over the years, Richard turned to Gouge again and again and often had cause to thank God for his uncle's forethought.

Richard had admired Abigail from afar for some time before their marriage and had nervously asked his father's opinion. While it was not unknown for would-be suitors to take the initiative, it was somewhat unusual. (Richard feared that at twenty-four, his father might pre-empt him and propose a bride he did not want.) Thankfully, his father backed Richard's judgement and agreed to broker the marriage with Abigail's parents, a godly family of good standing in the village. In an age of arranged marriages, not all fathers were as discreet as Mister Adams. Gouge counselled, "I deny not but parents may use all manner of fair means to move their children to yield to that which they see good for them: but if they cannot move them to yield, to refer the matter to God, and not against their children's minds to force them."<sup>15</sup> Abigail, while far from plain, was not strikingly beautiful, but then, Richard was no oil-painting either. A brawny young man with craggy features, he admired her chiefly for her combination of piety and steadiness. His parents were also pleased that she seemed to offer the prospect of a good match in other ways. Gouge had advised, "...the match provided must not be too near of kin, of a contrary religion, of too unequal an age, of a great disparity in estate. These things will hinder love and cause disdain and hatred of one another."<sup>16</sup> All of this is a reminder that the Puritan attitude to guidance was a lot more hard-headed than the mysticism which often clouds the issue today. Nevertheless, for all their tough-minded, Biblically informed approach, the Puritans had met examples of those would-be wooers who go looking for signs. Thomas Gataker knew a man who "would test any woman on whom he had cast his roving eye ... by asking her in sermon time, where the minister's text was. If she not only told him the text, but offered him her Bible, she was the woman who was to be his wife." Gataker thought this procedure both irreverent and asinine.<sup>17</sup>

The procedure for getting married in Puritan England began with a contract of espousals. This corresponded roughly to a modern engagement but it was much more binding. Sexual intercourse with a third party during this period was classed as adultery. Secondly, the contract was announced publicly by publishing the banns on three successive Sundays in Church. Seventeenth century ideas of what constituted a long engagement were rather different from those which prevail at the end of the twentieth. Gouge felt that provided the necessary three weeks for the banns had been observed, no-one could accuse the couple of undue haste. The wedding itself brought the contract into operation. This would be followed by feasting and celebration, usually at the home of the groom. One wonders at this distance whether the Puritan

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<sup>15</sup> William Gouge, "Domestical Duties" (1634), pp.572-573.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Gataker, "A Marriage Prayer" (1624), p.16.

notion of a good time was perhaps a little ponderous. One way of having fun at the reception, according to Gouge, was that "witty questions and doubtful riddles may be propounded."<sup>18</sup> The final element was of course the consummation.

The Puritans had a relaxed and uncomplicated attitude to married love. Sex within marriage, which they termed "due benevolence", was a cause for heartfelt gratitude to God. Here is another contrast with the thought-world of Medieval Catholicism. Before the Reformation, sexual relations, even within marriage were regarded with some distaste. If at all possible, couples should contain themselves except for the procreation of children. Even then, Erasmus argued for complete sexual abstinence within marriage.<sup>19</sup> It is hardly surprising that such views were held given that Origen and Chrysostom argued that Adam and Eve did not have sexual relations before the fall. Gregory of Nyssa took the matter a step further by suggesting that if the Fall had never taken place, mankind would have been propagated by what Ryken calls "some harmless mode of vegetation."<sup>20</sup> By comparison, the Puritans believed that faithfulness within marriage was itself a form of chastity. Gouge wrote, "...they that keep the laws of wedlock are as chaste as they that contain. Here, ... note the dotage of our adversaries, who think there is no chastity but of single persons."<sup>21</sup> When we examine the position advocated by Gouge, the old stereotype that the Puritans were repressed killjoys will not stand up. "...It is called benevolence because it must be performed with good will and delight, willingly, readily and cheerfully, ... it is said to be due because it is a debt which the wife oweth to the husband and he to her."<sup>22</sup> The idea that both parties were under a solemn obligation to meet one another's need for sexual fulfilment was taken seriously. When a husband in New England neglected his wife, she complained first to her pastor and then to the congregation. The Church excommunicated him!<sup>23</sup> Once every allowance has been made for this boisterous and playful view of sex, it was sex within marriage nonetheless. Gouge for instance, was emphatic that the marriage of one man and one woman is the only God-given context for a sexual relationship. The seventeenth century was certainly not ignorant of the existence of homosexuality: "Contrary are those unnatural commixions of parties of the same sex: which the Apostle reckoneth up as judgements on the heathen ...."<sup>24</sup> Passing references in Gouge condemning bestiality<sup>25</sup> and paedophilia<sup>26</sup> are a sad reminder that human hearts were as twisted then as now.

Prior to their wedding day, Richard and Abigail had given much thought to the outworking of their relationship. They had meditated on the relevant Scriptures and spent a lifetime watching their own parents. Richard expected to be head of the family, but confidently anticipated that Abigail would increasingly become its heart.

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Ryken, *op. cit.*, p.42.

<sup>21</sup> Gouge, *op. cit.*, p.218.

<sup>23</sup> Chad Powers Smith, "Yankees and God" (New York, Hermitage House, 1954), p.11.

<sup>25</sup> Gouge, *loc. cit.*

He believed that his household was a microcosm both of Church and Commonwealth and that God had delegated his own authority so that each husband was a prophet to teach his family, a priest to pray for it and a King to rule over it. Abigail heartily concurred. Nothing must undermine her husband's authority! It was a deferential age and body language was a way of showing respect, so Abigail would do her reverence by standing when her husband entered a room, and curtseying on formal occasions such as his homecoming after a journey. He, in return, would reverence her by bowing. Names were important too. Like most fond couples, they had pet names for one another, though Abigail would not shorten Richard's name to Dick as his brothers did: she thought it common. Pet names however, were reserved for quiet moments when the servants were out of earshot. Abigail took Gouge's advice seriously: wives should not call their spouses "ducks", "chicks", "sweet" or "pigsnie"<sup>27</sup> when others were present. It would not do to make the sovereign of his own little kingdom look ridiculous in front of the domestics! He was Master Adams, or the Master, just as he always affirmed her in return by calling her the Mistress. In the same way, she was determined that her little son would not be allowed to speak slightly of his father. On all but the most informal occasions, he would be taught to address him as "Sir".

This might seem a long way from the studied informality of the late twentieth century, but as Ryken observes, "Modelled on Christ's headship of the Church, the husband's headship, according to the Puritans, is not a ticket to privilege but a charge to responsibility."<sup>28</sup> In any case, Richard was continually astonished that Abigail had accepted him. That a spirited and capable girl of such evident piety should freely submit herself to the authority of a sinner such as he was left him grateful but quite baffled. He was altogether unworthy of her. He understood too that his authority had to be exercised within limits laid down by the Word of God. He had no right to violate her conscience or require her to do anything which God forbade. He had read with some surprise Gouge's stricture that, "If an husband shall command his wife to go to Mass, to a stage play, to play at dice, to prostitute her body to uncleanness, to go garishly and whorishly attired, to sell by scant weights, short measures or the like, she ought not to do so."<sup>29</sup> Richard quite agreed that in such cases, a wife should modestly but firmly demur. What left him speechless was the thought that some husbands must clearly do such things. Why else would godly Master Gouge inveigh against them? Only a few weeks before, Richard had been profoundly disturbed. In conversation with Thomas Bywater, a near neighbour who farmed over towards Weston Episcopi, Bywater casually let slip that he had found it necessary to beat his wife. "True", he had said, "a man must love his wife as he loves his own body,<sup>30</sup> nourishing and cherishing her as he would his own flesh, but would a man not go to the barber-surgeon to lance a boil, or take some foul-tasting infusion as physic for the distempers of the body? A shrewish or disobedient wife requires a like painful remedy." Richard found it hard to be civil to the man. Even if the wife was at fault and the man was not putting a gloss on his own intemperate passions, he deserved to be beaten himself for not having chosen a better!<sup>31</sup> How could a man share the most tender and intimate

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in J. I. Packer, "Among God's Giants" (Kingsway, 1991), p.355.

<sup>29</sup> Gouge, *op. cit.*, p.331.

<sup>31</sup> I discovered this idea in the course of my reading, but cannot locate the

moments with the companion of his prayers only to take a stick to her? As godly Henry Smith said, "her cheek was meant for thy lips, not for thy fist!"

Richard had enormous respect for his wife's abilities. He could manage the farm and the hands, but figures were a closed book to him so casting the accounts was left to Abigail. Like Samuel Sewall, he could confidently delegate financial matters to his wife for the common-senses reason that she had "a better faculty than I at managing affairs".<sup>32</sup> It seems likely that Richard and Mr Sewall were not isolated examples. Ryken records that when Richard Mather's wife died, he thought the affliction "the more grievous, in that she being a woman of singular prudence for the management of affairs, had taken off from her husband all secular cares."<sup>33</sup>

This is not to say that every Puritan marriage was an essay in human perfection and domestic bliss. Though outward things have changed, the dynamics of family relationships have changed little in three centuries. Gouge warned against pernicky, fault-finding husbands. Then there were those touchy, irascible men who "upon every surmise and slight report are ready to make challenges of fight and to enter into single combats and duels on pretence of maintaining their wives honour."<sup>34</sup> Other men would credit any accusation of wifely infidelity and flare up in a jealous rage. Married partners fell out in the seventeenth century as they do today over preferring one set of in-laws over against the other or failing to treat all children equally, including those from former marriages. Gouge described another tendency, which still exists: "they must forbear to twit one another in the teeth with the husbands or wives of other persons: or with their own former husbands or wives .... Comparisons in this kind are very odious. They stir up much passion and cause great contentions."<sup>35</sup> Certainly the "two women in the same kitchen" syndrome existed then. William Whately, known as "the roaring boy of Banbury", advised that wherever possible, newly-weds should not live in either of their parents homes: "As the young bees do seek unto themselves another hive so let the young couple another house .... that whatsoever come, they may never fall into that unhappiness of all unhappinesses, of either being tormentors of their parents or tormented by them."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, for all the evidence of human frailty, the literature of the period abounds with evidence that Puritan marriages were characterised by love. On one occasion, Thomas Hooker wished to illustrate the ordinances of the gospel as love-tokens from the Lord to his people. He chose to do so by describing a wife's love for her husband: "As a wife deals with the letters of her husband that is in a far country; she finds many sweet inklings of his love, and she will read these letters often, and daily; she would talk with her husband afar off, and see him in the letters. "Oh", saith

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source. I think it ought to be attributed either to Henry Smith or Richard Baxter, but cannot be certain.

<sup>33</sup> Increase Mather, "The life and Death of That Reverend Man of God, Mr Richard Mather" (Morgan, loc. cit.), quoted in a footnote in Ryken, op. cit., p.240.

<sup>35</sup> Gouge, op. cit., p.231.

she, "thus and thus he thought when he writ these lines", and then she thinks he speaks to her again. She reads these letters only because she would be with her husband a little, and have a little parley with him in his pen, though not in his presence: so these ordinances are but the Lord's love-letters."<sup>37</sup> In similar vein, speaking of the Lord's covenant love for his people, Hooker illustrated his theme with reference to the husband: "The man whose heart is endeared to the woman he loves, he dreams of her in the night, hath her in his eye and apprehension when he awakes, museth on her as he sits at table, walks with her when he travels and parlies with her in each place where he comes."<sup>38</sup> These illustrations would not have carried much weight unless Hooker could rely on the fact that such marriages were common among his readers. They would have known what he meant because such tender love was a reality in their own homes. In 1642, Daniel Rogers, the son of John Rogers of Dedham in Essex, wrote: "marriage love is ofttime a secret work of God, pitching the heart of one party upon another for no known cause; and therefore when this strong lodestone attracts each to the other, no further questions need to be made but such a man and such a woman's match were made in heaven, and God hath brought them together."<sup>39</sup> Both Richard and Abigail would have agreed with a right good will!<sup>40</sup>

### **Parents and Children:**

Puritan parents were enjoined to care for their children even *in utero*. Husbands were encouraged to take special care of their wives once it became apparent that they were "with child". Every effort should be made, not to bring about a miscarriage through some piece of careless behaviour. As for attempting to procure an abortion, "they who purposely take things to make away their children in their womb", said Gouge, "are in far higher degree guilty of blood: yea even of wilful murder. For that which hath received a soul formed in it by God, if it be unjustly cast away, shall be revenged."<sup>41</sup> Ante-natal welfare included praying for the child. Gouge argued that those who could not bring themselves to pray for the soul of an unborn child would probably never get round to praying for it during its lifetime. "Some think it needless to pray for a child before it be born, not considering that in sin it be conceived. When it is born, they refer this duty to the midwife, whereas it properly apertaineth 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."<sup>42</sup> The duty of care continued with the birth of the child. Then as now, unmarried young women who were frightened to face the music would sometimes conceal a pregnancy, deliver the baby in secret and leave it for someone to find. Gouge described this as "the practice of such lewd and unnatural women, as leave their new-born children under stalls, at men's doors, in Church porches, yea many times in open field."<sup>43</sup> Incidentally, Gouge devoted a surprising amount of space, eleven pages in all, to making a strong case that

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hooker, "The Soul's Humiliation" (1638), pp.73ff.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Rogers, "Matrimonial Honour" (1642), p.148.

<sup>41</sup> Gouge, op. cit., p.514.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.514.

mothers should suckle their children themselves and not farm them out to wet-nurses. His argument covered much of the ground which is covered now in the breast v. bottle debate. It ranged from practical considerations (If mother fed her own child it would be healthier. Wet nurses were often poor country women, not always themselves well-nourished and with far too much to do.) to the emotional (Gouge had his own quaint way of describing what is now called bonding: "Together with the milk passeth some smack of the affection and disposition of the mother."<sup>44</sup>) Quoting Lamentations 4:3, he also made the point that if sea monsters suckle their own young, it is unnatural for human mothers to withhold their milk from their children.<sup>45</sup>

Puritans had no sympathy with the traditional practice of having the new mother "churched", but, as these were days when the Baptist presence in England was still relatively small, the overwhelming bulk of them would certainly make conscience of having the infant sealed with the covenant sign in Baptism, if the health of mother and child allowed, on the first Lord's Day after the birth. (Richard would have found it faintly disturbing had anyone told him that in later times, the fen counties would be peopled with a dubious brood he had been taught to call "Anabaptists". Service in the New Model Army was to expose him to actual contact with such people. He was agreeably surprised to find that some of them were godly.) Baptism necessarily raised the issue of a choice of name. Prior to the Reformation, English children, like many in Southern Europe to this day, were often named after the Saint on whose day their date of birth fell. From the mid sixteenth century however, parish registers show a riot of new names drawn from the Scriptures. Isolated incidents occur of enthusiastic but ill-informed choices such as Pharaoh and Barrabas. Some of the godly took the view that only Biblical names should be used, or stretching a point, the kind of names which really amounted to pious exhortations such as "Joy in Trials". Abigail wanted her little boy to be christened Richard. But what would Mr Cox think? There was a rumour that some years before, a minister named Edmund Snape had refused to give a boy-child that name because it cannot be found in Scripture.<sup>46</sup> In the event, Mr Cox took the same line as Gouge, that some allowance must be made for "usual names of the country, which custom hath made familiar, as Henry, Edward, Robert, William and such like among us."<sup>47</sup> And was not Richard a right good English name? What clinched it for the boy's father was that memories were still ripe in the fen counties of the fragrant ministry of Richard Greenham of Dry Drayton. He had served God in his generation and been called Richard to boot. Why should there not be another such?

The nurture of children was a matter of walking a tightrope between two extremes: neglect or undue harshness on the one hand and indulgence, what the Puritans quaintly termed "cockering" on the other. By modern standards, they veered more towards rigour and high expectations than spoiling their offspring. This is largely

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., loc. cit. Much of Gouge's argument centres around an incredulity that any mother could do otherwise. What are breasts for?

<sup>47</sup> Gouge, op. cit., p.530. Gouge may not have realised that his own christian name, William, was French in origin, having come to England after the Norman Conquest. That this is also true of Richard would have disconcerted Mr Adams père had he known it

explained by the fact that a yawning chasm separates two distinct views of childhood. Many moderns, especially in the world of education, are convinced of the innate goodness of children. Youngsters flourish when restraints are removed. Take away inhibiting factors and the child will realise its potential. Richard and Abigail would have been flabbergasted. On the day of his son's birth, he had knelt at the bedside and sang from Psalm 127. Children are a heritage from the Lord! The fruit of the womb is his reward. Nevertheless, for all the potential locked up in his tiny frame, the little mite was born in sin and shapen in iniquity.<sup>48</sup> Children are, to quote Samuel Willard, "innocent vipers"<sup>49</sup>. Ryken sums up the gulf which separates the seventeenth century from the twentieth as follows: "Either children are born good and can be allowed to follow their instinctive bent, or they are born sinful and in need of redirection. Our culture generally accepts the former principle, the Puritans the latter."<sup>50</sup> Abigail sometimes felt so besotted with her little boy that she wondered how she would ever bring herself to punish him. But she knew her duty and was determined to steel herself to it. Love to the child himself dictated that the very last thing that should happen was that he be brought up with no restraint other than his own appetites and desires.

The Puritan approach to discipline can sometimes seem unrelenting. Sometimes one hears the voice of sweet reasonableness: "No parent may hope to weaken and destroy the corruption that is in his child's heart", wrote Arthur Hildersham, "though he teaches him never so well, and uses all the allurements he can to draw him to goodness, if he does not also correct him and use the rod sometimes."<sup>51</sup> Then again, one also hears on occasion a more grim tone: "Better whipped than damned" said Cotton Mather.<sup>52</sup> In the same way, while the fear of spoiling a child through over-indulgence is a Biblically informed fear, Gouge's stricture on hugging a child infrequently on the grounds that overdoing cuddles is "mere apish kindness .... for apes kill their young ones with hugging"<sup>53</sup> seems overstated. "Over much lenity", he said, "is very great cruelty."<sup>54</sup> At the same time, parents were counselled to recognise that children have different temperaments and that discipline must be fitted to the child. If admonition proved ineffective and corporal punishment was required, it should be mitigated with respect to the age and constitution of the child and be preceded by prayer and an explanation as to why it was deemed necessary. Parents should, at such times, afflict their own hearts and reflect on the possibility that they had passed their own faults on to their offspring. Justice surely demanded greater severity for the same sin in oneself than in the child. There was a parallel strand of teaching that children should learn to take punishment patiently. In a fallen world, even good parents would make mistakes and together with the general infirmities of a

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<sup>49</sup> Samuel Willard, "The Mourners Cordial Against Excessive Sorrows" in David E. Stannard, "The Puritan Way of Death" (New York 1977), p.52.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur Hildersham, in a sermon entitled "Disciplining Children" published as Ch.6 in a collection called "The Godly Family" (Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p.120.

<sup>53</sup> Gouge, op. cit., p507.

parent's nature, such things as "weakness of judgement, slipperiness of memory, violence of passion with the like"<sup>55</sup>, children should look upon it all philosophically, using these things as a spur to understand and pray for their mothers and fathers, who in any case were enjoined by the apostle not to exasperate them.<sup>56</sup>

In the light of all this, it has to be said that though much was expected, children were allowed their childhood. Gouge saw the temporal care of children as falling under four headings. Three of them were food, apparel and means to recover health when sick. The other was recreation. Gouge noted with approval Zechariah's prophecy that one of the blessings which would come upon Israel in the time of God's favour was that children would play in her streets.<sup>57</sup> He clearly saw no incongruity in children enjoying innocent amusements. Richard Adams secretly cherished hopes of introducing his son in due course to the reflective sport of bowls, so good for encouraging godly conversation, and though the longbow was going out of favour, he thought toxophily a fine sport for a boy. Then there was the bucolic horseplay which he had enjoyed as a lad, leaping over the ditches which drained the fens, leap-frog, good-natured bouts of wrestling: a lad could not be at his books all day.

Nevertheless, while good clean fun was one thing, children must not become workshy. An essential part of a child's upbringing was fitting him for a calling. Gouge noted that some "parents suffer their children to live like little masters at home and pass over all their youth in idleness. Thus they prove very drones and caterpillars in the commonwealth."<sup>58</sup> Certain callings were not even considered. Gouge lamented those parents who "bring up their children in unwarrantable and unlawful callings, as to be of Popish and idolatrous orders; to attend upon Papists; to be stage players, keepers of dice-houses etc. Some (which is horrible to think of) train up their daughters to be common strumpets: and some (which is yet more horrible) train up their children to be sorcerers and witches. How can they in these keep a good conscience, when the very works of their calling are sin? Is not this to thrust them headlong into Hell?"<sup>59</sup> even so, there was more at stake than simply choosing a calling where a young person could serve the Lord with a clear conscience. "The calling must be fit for the child who is trained up to it. As there are diverse callings, so there are divers abilities of sundry children: some are fittest for callings of wit and learning; others for callings that require an able and strong body."<sup>60</sup> Some parents fail to recognise this. Gouge noted that they "have no respect at all to the fitness of the calling: as when they train up children of able bodies, but dull and slow capacity, of a stuttering tongue and other like imperfections, to learning, wherein they prove very dunces, .... or when they train up children which have a great inclination to learning, and are very fit thereunto, in some other trade."<sup>61</sup> As for those parents whose only consideration in placing their children was to maximise their own income, this was to stunt the development of young lives for the sake of parental avarice. It was too soon

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.476.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.534.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.544.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.544.

for Richard Adams to have gained much idea of his son's capabilities. If he was anything like his father, he would take to animal husbandry like a duck to water, but Richard knew himself well enough to know that he was not a natural scholar. The Latin driven home with many a flourish of the cane in his boyhood had largely disappeared. Grace in the heart had taught him to value spiritual books, but much though he loved his volume of Mr Perkins' sermons, he knew himself to be ponderous and slow. Abigail had nimble wits. Who knows, if the lad were to take after his mother and if the Lord were to call him by grace, there might even be a minister in the family.

So much more could be said, but one priority was outstanding: everything must be done to help the child come to faith in Christ. Richard Mather imagined children on Judgement Day reproaching their parents: "All this that we here suffer is through you: you should have taught us the things of God and you did not; you should have restrained us from sin and corrected us, and you did not; you were the means of our original corruption and guiltiness, and yet you never showed any competent care that we might be delivered from it .... Woe unto us that we had such carnal and careless parents, and woe unto you that had no more compassion and pity to prevent the everlasting misery of your own children."<sup>62</sup> In his "Poor Man's Family Book", Baxter has his Pastor say: "Oh that I could speak to what is deeply upon my heart to all the parents of the Land! I would be bold to tell them that multitudes are more cruel than bears and lions to their own children."<sup>63</sup> (This with reference to those parents who have their children christened and take them to Church but do not instruct them at home.) "Piety", said Gouge, "is the best thing a parent can teach his child."<sup>64</sup> The parent who surrendered this task to the parish minister was guilty of a grave dereliction of duty. Baxter's Pastor said: "Parents, Schoolmasters and Pastors have all their several parts to do; and no one's work goeth on well without the rest. But the parents is the first and greatest of all."<sup>65</sup> Gouge encouraged parents to teach their children the Bible as soon as possible, together with some simple catechism, though they should have the wisdom to recognise that children learn at different speeds. Baxter argued that children should be taught to memorise the Baptismal Covenant, two short catechisms, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. All of these were thoughtfully included in an appendix to the Poor Man's Family Book. Baxter's treatment of the spiritual nurture of children is typically relentless. His strictures include the following: "Wisely break them from their own wills. .... As you love their souls, keep them as far from temptation as you can. .... Be sure that you engage you children in good company and keep them as much as possible out of bad. .... Keep a special watch upon their tongues. .... Labour to make time-wasting odious to them. And set death still before their eyes: and ask them oft whether they are ready to die."<sup>66</sup> In addition to all this, children must be brought to the public worship of God "even while they are very young."<sup>67</sup> Bringing up children in the seventeenth century clearly demanded large quantities of time, effort and vigilance.

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<sup>63</sup> Baxter, op. cit., p.293.

<sup>65</sup> Baxter, op. cit., p.295.

<sup>67</sup> Arthur Hildersham, op. cit., p125.

Among other things it inevitably meant that Puritan fathers, and ideally mothers too, would need to take time out to learn the faith they were required to teach.

This brings us to the subject of family worship. "If God be not the master of your family", said Baxter, "the Devil will: and if God be not first served in it, the flesh and the world will."<sup>68</sup> We can assume that the pattern must have fallen roughly into line with Philip Henry's ideal: "Those do well that pray morning and evening in their families; those do better that pray and read the Scriptures; but those do best that pray and read and sing the Psalms."<sup>69</sup> Some 17th century parents must have felt ill-equipped for such labours so the manuals thoughtfully provided examples of pattern prayers which husbands, wives, children and servants all might use. To the modern reader, these prayers are remarkably long, intense and packed with content, given that they were intended as guidance for nervous beginners. The spiritual benefits of family worship were obvious. Children were exposed to large quantities of Christian teaching and were able to observe the reality of their parents intense personal piety at first hand. Richard and Abigail Adams felt that the discipline was good for their own souls too. They would have agreed with John Angier, the vicar of Denton in Lancashire: "The more we worship God in secret, the fitter we shall be for family worship, and the more we worship God in our families, the fitter shall we be for public worship."<sup>70</sup>

Family worship could become a powerful instrument for social change. A little down the road to Weston Magna from Manor farm stood a small cottage. The poor couple who lived there could not read. Abigail pleaded with Richard that they be allowed to join the family for prayers each evening and he had agreed. These modest beginnings were what Laudian Bishops stigmatised as conventicles. In the Adams' home it was simply an ad hoc response to meet a need. In some parts of England, it was a stark necessity. In the East Midlands and East Anglia, one did not have to travel too far to hear a parish minister who would not merely read the offices but preach the Word of God. Some paid more heed to the bishop in matters of conformity to the vestments rubric and the Prayer Book than others, and there were patches of barren territory, but compared with the north-west, the Eastern counties were a favoured land. In Lancashire and Cheshire, painstaking and faithful servants of the Word were few. Family devotions became a substitute for preaching which was not available in parish churches. Simple compassion included asking the neighbours in. If this meant occasional appearances in court and fines for holding conventicles, so be it. In effect, family worship was a way of bypassing a corrupt establishment and ensuring the continuity of evangelical religion in areas where the supply of worthy ministers was short. Oliver Heywood, writing of events near Bolton in the early seventeenth century, notes that his father: "associated himself with God's people, promoted days of fasting and of prayer, conference and other Christian exercises. In my childhood I can remember many days of that nature and the apparitor searching them out and one appointed in the entry to deafen the noise of such as were praying in the parlour."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Cited in an article by Elizabeth Braund, "Daily Life Among the Puritans" in the Free Grace Record for 1958, p.169.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in R. C. Richardson, "Puritanism in north-west England" (Manchester, 1972), p.89.

## **Masters and Servants:**

The Puritan family would often include an establishment of domestics. Even a modest home might have a live-in maid. Richard's father had included a number of servants in his portion, including a husband and wife with three children of their own. Richard secretly felt something of a fraud when this man, who was ten years his senior, knuckled his forehead and called him Master. No one seriously questioned servitude as an institution in seventeenth century England. It was still a pre-Industrial society and clear resonances with the pattern of Israelite society were very apparent. Boaz, the squire of Bethlehem, would have been a type instantly recognisable in Bedworthshire. Actually, Richard saw Boaz as something of a role model. What mattered was that master and man each fulfil his role in the God-appointed scheme of things. For the time of his engagement, a servant was expected to provide loyal and diligent service. A believing servant would work conscientiously believing that God had appointed his place and knowing that the eye of the Almighty was upon him throughout the term of his indentures. "Idleness", said Gouge, "is plain theft."<sup>72</sup> Even a poor master was entitled to due deference. Peevishness was to be born philosophically, probably along the lines of the old saw often quoted in the Armed Forces: "If you can't take a joke you shouldn't have joined." Servants were also expected to be discreet, knowing how to hold their tongues and not, as Gouge has it, "blabbing abroad all such things as servants know concerning their master ... whereby it cometh to pass, that all the secrets of an house are soon known about the whole town or city."<sup>73</sup> It is perhaps worth bearing in mind that while society was hierarchical, it had not yet become the highly stratified Victorian world of Quality upstairs and menials downstairs. Jack and his master rubbed shoulders throughout the day and the rough camaraderie of shared work must have helped to smooth relationships. At Manor Farm, the hands had observed Richard skid on the floor of the byre and sit squarely amid the refuse. He laughed at his discomfiture in such a frank and free manner that they felt included in the joke and knew they had permission to join in the merriment. Fie on the man who thinks himself too grand to mind a good natured chuckle. In any case, their laughter was partly sympathy. They'd all done it themselves and knew how it felt. In the same way, the maids could not resent Mistress Abigail, not after they'd seen that she was not too dignified to handle a scrubbing brush, even when her time was almost upon her.

It was all part of remembering that servants were men and women too. They bore the image of God and had souls as well as masters. They deserved square treatment: a decent allocation of sleep, good food in reasonable measure, fair wages, even a little modest recreation. Masters needed to be sparing with correction and moderate it according to age and status. (It was generally acknowledged that corporal punishment ceased to be appropriate once a servant had reached manhood and that chastising the maidservants was a task for the mistress, not the master.) Verbal rebukes were to be administered in private and certainly not in the heat of passion. Time off on the Lord's day to attend Public Worship was a must. The fact that such strictures were necessary

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.638.

obviously suggests that here and there, servants were exploited. They were not to be dragooned into marriage, especially to cover up indiscreet behaviour on the part of the master or his sons, and if they sought permission to marry themselves, masters would be well-advised in most normal situations to agree.

It was expected that domestics would attend family worship. "The way to frame a good servant" said Thomas Taylor, "is to make him God's servant."<sup>74</sup> The effects could be very gratifying. William Gouge was known to have mentored a succession of spiritually educated and discriminating servants. Christopher Hill cites one Roger Clap of Exeter, apprenticed into "as famous a family for religion as ever I knew." The whole household, including a dozen servants, "had a conference upon a question propounded once a week."<sup>75</sup> Richardson quotes a remarkable instance of what grace and nurture can do with unpromising material. John Bruen Esq., of Stapleford in Cheshire had a servant named Robert Passfield. He was: "a man utterly unlearned, being unable to read a sentence or write a syllable, yet he was so taught of God that by his own industry and God's blessing upon his mind and memory he grew in grace as he did in years and became ripe in understanding and mighty in the Scriptures. He was so well acquainted with the history of the Bible, and the sum and substance of every book and chapter, that hardly could any ask him where such a saying or sentence were, but he would with very little ado tell them in what book and chapter they might find it. Insomuch that he became a very profitable index to the family to call to mind what they had learned and to recover what they had lost by slip of memory, and not only so but a godly instructor and teacher of young professors also to acquaint them with the word and to exercise their hearts unto godliness. .... Now if that which I have often heard be true, that .... a good text man is a good divine, then may old Robert in our country proceedings be allowed for a divine and a doctor also."<sup>76</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

"According to L. P. Hartley, "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." In any assessment of the Puritan family we are inevitably left with certain unanswered questions. Most of the information available to us concerns the literate and the relatively well-to-do. Granted the elevating effects of godliness on a man of humble origins like Robert Passfield, it remains true that the copious literature produced by the ministers of the day could not be read by everyone in seventeenth century England. Gouge, Baxter and their colleagues told their contemporaries what a godly family ought to be like. For information as to what such families actually were, we are in the hands of those able to keep a diary. John Hutchinson, governor of Nottingham Castle and town until the Restoration has been immortalised by the memoir composed by his wife, Lucy.<sup>77</sup> How many husbands and fathers were like him? We cannot know for certain. In particular, we cannot know how far experimental godliness affected that proportion of the population submerged from sight by illiteracy and poverty. "For the poor - who probably numbered over a third of

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<sup>75</sup> Hill, op. cit., pp.452-453.

<sup>77</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, "Memoirs of the life of Colonel Hutchinson" (Dent-Dutton).

the population", says Richardson, "family life was hardly permitted to exist in view of the great social and economic disabilities to which they were subject."<sup>78</sup> What went on in the homes of those too poor even to obtain a copy of Baxter's "Poor Man's Family Book", or those unable to read the copy presented, so Baxter hoped, by a godly landlord? Even for the literate, Bible reading and teaching children their catechism demands time. For those preoccupied with mere survival, this must have been a sparse commodity.

Another question mark hangs over the family life of domestics. Certainly many of them were married and had children of their own. What we don't know and cannot tell at this distance is how far they were able to pursue a family life of their own, independent of the life of the household they served. Were such people content to be part of someone else's godly family or did they yearn to build one on their own account? This study has made use of the fictional case of Richard and Abigail Adams confident that such people did serve God and their generation in the Eastern Counties of England. But how far was their situation typical? It has been argued that it only applies in a restricted number of situations, especially in pastoral areas where partible inheritance prevailed over primogeniture and the farm, rather than the village was the main economic unit.<sup>79</sup> This becomes even more of an issue for Christians on the brink of the third millennium. Our society is urban not rural, post-industrial rather than agricultural. Few of us have servants and nowadays, close relatives may well be dispersed over the whole country and even beyond it rather than limited to a few square miles in a single shire. Richard and Abigail anticipated that as age and ill-health required, the older generation would move in to Manor Farm and that eventually, four generations might live under the same thatched roof. That is by no means common today. We cannot simply ape the Puritans by attempting to replicate the detail of their situations.

Packer regards the Puritans as "the creators of the English Christian marriage, the English Christian family and the English Christian home."<sup>80</sup> Where we can learn from them is by recovering their expectation that faithfulness to God in the commonplace things of life will be rewarded, that it is a high and noble aim to attempt the difficult balancing act of seeing that every relationship is honoured, that we meet our obligations to God, to the local church, community and Commonwealth, that we honour and serve spouse, parents, children, employers and employees, in other words that we do the ordinary things well in dependence on God knowing that he honours those who honour him.

### **Epilogue:**

Manor Farmhouse still stands. The great trusses of bog oak have defied the fenland winters for upwards of four long centuries. The thatch, last replaced twenty years ago will certainly stand good for at least another twenty. No-one farms Richard Adams' old acres however, for they are dotted with mock-tudor commuter homes built by Bellway. The old house, very much a *des res*, is now owned by a high-flying couple.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.94.

He commutes to Canary Wharf each day, she is a software consultant in Cambridge. When they arrive home each evening they are often so stressed they argue with each other, their children and the nanny. They never bother with the Parish church, where godly master Cox' old pulpit is occupied by a disciple of Don Cupitt who believes that God only exists as a historical construct in the minds of human beings and who is lobbying hard to secure official approval for the ordination of homosexuals. So let us go back once more to the place where we began. Its been a quiet week in Weston Parva. Little Richard now nuzzles contentedly at his mother's breast. The stir has woken the master. December nights are cold, so Richard got out of bed padded across to the great chest given him by his father and fetches a blanket. Smiling broadly at a tired wife and a bloated but now peaceful little boy, he placed the blanket around mother's shoulders and climbed back into bed. "I do love thee, Richard" said a sleepy Abigail. "And I thee, lass, aye and the boy too. The Lord has dealt kindly with thee and me. It were well for England if every man had a wife such as thou art." How sobering to reflect that the future of this, or any other nation depends under God on the quality of its husbands and fathers, its wives and mothers.

**Synopsis:**

This paper attempts to paint a portrait of a typical Puritan Family through the lives of a fictional couple, Richard and Abigail Adams. It describes their access to a widespread literature on the subject, especially William Gouge's "Domestic Discipline". It examines family life through a series of interconnected relationships, those of husband and wife, parents and children and masters and servants. In doing so, it draws on a number of sources and attempts some evaluation of the lessons for modern Christians.

(81 words.)