

Living in a Godly Marriage

Deepen Your Christian Life

From the late 1500s to the early 1700s, Puritan ministers wrote thousands of Christian books that contain massive amounts of biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical instruction to energize and deepen your Christian life. During that period, thousands of volumes coming off English presses consisted of Puritan sermon material popularized in book form. Unfortunately, many believers today find it difficult to read the antiquarian Puritan language and, when they attempt to do so, find themselves more frustrated than energized.

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Living in a Godly Marriage

with Study Questions

Joel R. Beeke and James A. La Belle



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Living in a Godly Marriage

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For

William VanDoodewaard

faithful friend and colleague,
with gratitude for your quiet integrity,
hard and able work,
and your spirit of willingness to help.

— JRB



For

Johnny and Julie Davis,

my dear friends.
May your marriage be filled with the joys
and marked by the blessings
of marrying in the Lord.

— JAL

Foreword

Old stereotypes die hard. Often it is far easier to hang on to misguided caricature than do the tough digging for the truth. The words “Puritan” and “puritanical” offer a good case in point. In the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, for example, after a standard historical explanation of these terms has been given, it is noted that the adjective “puritanical” means “one opposed to pleasure.” No surprise then that the Puritans are regularly pilloried by our pleasure-loving culture. Sure, some words that have distinct historical associations lose them after they enter into common currency; but not so with these words and their cognates. The journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) best summed up our culture’s perspective on Puritanism when he defined it as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy” and observed that “there is only one honest impulse at the bottom of Puritanism, and that is the impulse to punish the man with a superior capacity for happiness.” But the truth, when examined, is quite different. As Marxist historian Christopher Hill (1912–2003), an expert in seventeenth-century British history, once observed, “very few of the so-called ‘Puritans’ were ‘Puritanical.’” Granted, instances of dreary kill-joys can be found in their ranks, but they are not to be taken as representative of the whole.

The Puritans were serious people, but knew when to laugh. Smiles and laughter, Richard Bernard (1568–1641) maintained, were part of a good life. And Bernard’s contemporary Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) was confident that “joy is the habitation of the righteous.” And as for sex, William Gouge (1575–1653), a prominent Puritan, could encourage married couples to engage in sexual intercourse with “delight, readily and cheerfully,” since it was essential to marriage. Another Puritan

leader, Richard Baxter (1615–1691), could urge married couples to remember that there is nothing the human “heart is so inordinately set upon as delight.” Husband and wife should thus take pleasure in each other. Take joy in your wife, Baxter urged husbands, and then quoted the Bible, “Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times, and be thou ravished always with her love.” In fact, as this new study of marriage by Joel R. Beeke and James A. La Belle abundantly demonstrates, the Puritan practice of and perspective on marriage contains desperately needed wisdom for our contemporary culture.

The Puritans were strong in the weakest areas of modern marital thought. They thought long and hard about this divine institution since marriage had been a major battleground in the western European world since the sixteenth-century Reformation. As a result, they are, as noted, thoroughly biblical in their understanding of sexuality within marriage but also solidly scriptural in their condemnation of sexual immorality—both of which our age desperately needs to hear. The Puritans are also strong, and rightly so, on the duties and responsibilities of married life, which cuts against the grain of so much of modern thinking where “duty” is a concept much out of favor. I have long regarded Puritan literature on the matter of marriage as some of the most profound textual material available on this subject in the English language, and, in many respects, a largely overlooked resource for Christian living today—and this book richly confirms this conviction. In a day when marriage is once again a battlefield, this study is must reading.

—Michael A. G. Haykin
The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary

Biographical Introduction

The Puritans believed that godly marriages were foundational for the future life of families, churches, and nations. Therefore, they wrote prolifically on the subject of marriage, seeking to bring biblical reformation to this subject in a comprehensive way. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other previous Reformers had begun this task, but the Puritans took it much further, writing a number of detailed treatises on how to live as godly spouses. Out of the wealth of material available to us from the seventeenth century, we have gathered together their insights in this book.

In this introduction, we will briefly summarize the early English authors whom we cite. We list them in alphabetical order. More information about most of them and their writings may be found in *Meet the Puritans*.¹

Early English Authors

Henry Ainsworth (1569–1622) was a brilliant scholar of the Hebrew Old Testament. As a Congregationalist who separated from the Church of England, he left his homeland to pastor a church in the Netherlands. He is best known for his *Annotations* on the Pentateuch, Psalms, and Song of Songs.

Vincent Alsop (1630–1703), a vigorous and sometimes polemical advocate of Reformed Puritanism, served in the Church of England until ejected from his pulpit in 1662. In addition to his various polemical publications is a short treatise on Titus 2:10 titled *Practical Godliness*.

1. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

Isaac Ambrose (1604–1664), a warm-hearted Presbyterian minister, also served in the Church of England until 1662. His book *Looking unto Jesus* is a classic of Christ-centered Puritan devotions. Other writings, *Prima*, *Ultima*, and *Media*, deal with regeneration, death, heaven, hell, and spiritual growth in this present life.

William Ames (1576–1633) was a systematic theologian of the first rank, as seen in his *Marrow of Divinity*. He also wrote practical divinity, such as his *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*. A Puritan and Congregationalist, he too left England to serve in the Netherlands. His books influenced the Puritans of New England and the Dutch Further Reformation.

Richard Baxter (1615–1691), one of the most prolific of the Puritans, was a Presbyterian whose parish ministry at Kidderminster was instrumental in reviving the whole town. Although his views of justification and the atonement were outside the Reformed mainstream, his practical writings, such as his *Christian Directory* and *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, are full of insight, comfort, and practical directions.

Robert Bolton (1572–1631) was a gifted scholar and faithful minister whose own heart had been broken over his sins while studying at Oxford. He became a true physician of souls, mingling biblical doctrine with practical counsel to guide sinners to walk before God with a clear conscience.

Thomas Boston (1676–1732) is somewhat unusual among the others listed here, being a Scottish Presbyterian who ministered in the early eighteenth century. Though he pastored small parishes in Simprin and Ettrick and suffered much from the mental illness of his wife, Boston poured his life into a loving discipline of preaching the Word. He stood for the doctrine of salvation by grace alone in the controversy over Edward Fisher's book, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Boston's sermons on the Shorter Catechism form a comprehensive and experiential systematic theology. His *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* profoundly shaped British and American Christians with its teachings on sin, regeneration, union with Christ, heaven, and hell.

Immanuel Bourne (1590–1672) served as a minister of the Church of England. He sided with the Presbyterians at the beginning of the

Civil War, but conformed at the restoration of the monarchy. His book on marriage, *A Golden Chain of Directions*, was highly recommended by the Presbyterian Puritan Henry Wilkinson.

Nicholas Byfield (1579–1622) faithfully ministered to the parish in Chester, England, despite suffering chronically with kidney stones—which eventually killed him. He wrote several books, including a commentary on 1 Peter, but is best known for his exposition of Colossians, composed of sermons preached intermittently over a period of seven years.

Thomas Gataker (1574–1654), minister and linguist, served in the Westminster Assembly—one of the few divines who favored episcopacy—and wrote the *Annotations* on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations. He wrote several theological and polemical works in English and Latin. He also produced a critical edition of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. A number of Gataker's sermons were collected and published as *Certain Sermons*.

William Gouge (1575–1653), another excellent scholar and member of the Westminster Assembly, preached for forty-five years as the lecturer of St. Anne Blackfriars, London. He published a major commentary on Hebrews, a study of spiritual warfare titled *The Whole Armour of God*, and a classic on family life, *Of Domestic Duties* (modernized recently under the title *Building a Godly Home* in three volumes). This was the major Puritan classic on marriage and child-rearing.

Richard Greenham (c. 1542–1594) was a pioneer in Puritan practical theology, forged in the hardships of his ministry at the village of Dry Dayton. He trained men like Arthur Hildersham and Henry Smith, and influenced many other ministers to apply the gospel to conscience and life. His collected *Works* are full of the wisdom of a model pastor.

William Greenhill (1598–1671) fled to the Netherlands with Jeremiah Burroughs in the late 1630s on account of his Puritanism, where they led a Congregational church. Returning to England, Greenhill participated in the Westminster Assembly and served as a Congregationalist pastor. His large commentary on Ezekiel exhibits much spiritual insight.

Ezekiel Hopkins (1634–1690) served in the Church of England, conforming after the Restoration. In 1681, he was appointed bishop of Derry in Northern Ireland. His *Works* contain many edifying treatises on topics such as the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the doctrines of sin, the covenants, regeneration, practical Christianity, and the "almost Christian."

Thomas Manton (1620–1677), a Presbyterian Puritan, favored the return of the monarchy, but was ejected from his ministry because of his refusal to conform to the Act of Uniformity (1662). Much of his *Works* consists of expository sermons through portions of Scripture, including Psalm 119, Isaiah 53, Matthew 25, John 17, Romans 6 and 8, 2 Thessalonians 2, Hebrews 11, James, and Jude.

John Maynard (1600–1665), another Westminster divine, ministered in Mayfield, Sussex, until ejected from his office. In addition to some sermons preached before Parliament, his published works include meditations on the six days of creation and a treatise on the harmony of the law and gospel.

William Perkins (1558–1602) was a patriarch in late Elizabethan Puritanism. His sermons at St. Andrew's Church influenced many students at Cambridge. Today he is best known for his practical treatise on double predestination, *A Golden Chain*. His writings include commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, Galatians, Hebrews 11, Revelation 1–3; expositions on the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer; polemical writings against Roman Catholicism; and many treatises on practical Christian living and ministry. They have been translated into multiple European languages and influenced the international Reformed movement. The complete *Works of William Perkins* are now being reprinted by Reformation Heritage Books.

George Petter (c. 1586–1654), after completing his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge, became minister of the village of Bread (Brede) in Sussex, where he served for forty-four years. His brother said that "he conversed much with dead men in his study," and his diligence produced a large commentary on the Gospel of Mark.

Edward Reyner (1600–1660) served as a lecturer (preacher) at Lincoln for more than three decades, except for a brief period in the

tumultuous times of the English Civil Wars. He was congregational in ecclesiology. His book *Precepts for Christian Practice* was reprinted several times in the mid-seventeenth century. He also wrote *Considerations Concerning Marriage*.

Daniel Rogers (1573–1652) was a minister of the Church of England until suspended by Archbishop Laud in 1629 for a refusal to conform. He wrote a massive book, *Naaman the Syrian, His Disease and Cure*, and a substantial book on marriage, *Matrimonial Honour*.

Henry Scudder (c. 1585–1652) was a faithful pastor and Westminster divine. His book *The Christian's Daily Walk* became a classic in English devotional literature (and, in Dutch translation, in the Netherlands), winning praise from Richard Baxter and John Owen.

William Secker (d. 1681?) was the minister of All-Hallows Church in Tottenham, Middlesex (now North London). He published a wedding sermon, *A Wedding Ring Fit for the Finger, or the Salve of Divinity on the Sore of Humanity*, and a volume of sermons, *The Nonsuch Professor in His Meridian Glory, Or the Singular Actions of Sanctified Christians*.

Henry Smith (1560–1591), was a “silver-tongued” Elizabethan preacher mentored by Richard Greenham. Smith did not agree with all the practices of the Church of England, but remained within it, agitating not for structural change so much as spiritual renewal. His published *Works* consist of a collection of fifty-six sermons and went through many editions.

Richard Steele (1629–1692), a Presbyterian minister, suffered ejection for his failure to conform to the Act of Uniformity, harassment by authorities, false accusations against his character, and tuberculosis. Nevertheless, he persevered in faith and the ministry of the word. His published writings include a practical guide for Christians at work, *The Religious Tradesman*, as well as his sermon at the Morning Exercises on the duties of husbands and wives.

Richard Stock (c. 1569–1626), after completing his studies at Cambridge, was the pastor of All-Hallows Church on Bread Street, London. He was a friend of John Davenant and Thomas Gataker, and John Milton grew up in his church. Stock was remembered as “a burning and shining light,” both in the truth of his preaching and the holiness of

his life. He translated a book by William Whitaker and wrote books on repentance, the doctrine of God, and the prophecy of Malachi.

George Swinnock (c. 1627–1673) ministered in Buckinghamshire until ejected from his position by the Act of Uniformity. He continued to preach privately and to write. Swinnock's writings are not as doctrinally rich as some Puritans, but display a rare talent in illustration. His *magnum opus* is *The Christian Man's Calling*, a practical consideration of how godliness should shape every facet of life.

Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667) was a minister of the Church of England, famous for his devotional spirituality. He was not a Puritan, but being a favorite of Archbishop Laud, he was not well treated during the Puritan Commonwealth. After the Restoration he became a bishop in Northern Ireland and opposed local Presbyterians. His most famous writings were directions for *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*. Among a series of sermons originally published in 1673 is a message titled, "The Marriage Ring: Or, The Mysteriousness and Duties of Marriage," which we have taken liberty to quote in this book since it is so puritan-minded in substance.

William Whately (1583–1639) was a Puritan preacher known as "The Roaring Boy of Banbury," not for a lack of thought and method, but for the energy with which he delivered his sermons. He authored a number of books, including treatises on marriage, the Ten Commandments, and the new birth.

Andrew Willet (1562–1621) was a Reformed English minister and polemicist against Roman Catholicism. Scholars debate whether to consider him a Puritan, even though his writings certainly reflect a puritan way of thinking. He devoted himself to eight hours of study each day, yet maintained an active family life and productive ministry. He wrote a six-part exposition (*Hexapla*) of each of the following: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Samuel, Daniel, and Romans.

Contemporary Style

We have footnoted direct quotations from these authors, using the abbreviations listed in the table in the next section. Much of the other material in the book summarizes their thoughts in a contemporary form. Due to the target audience of these books—the layperson—we

have minimized footnote use. On occasion, we have also used other authors to augment our theme; they are footnoted in full. Modern spelling and punctuation are used throughout. Study questions are offered at the end of each chapter to facilitate group study.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our faithful Lord and Savior, the great Bridegroom of His church, for His marital love toward His own. Without Him being the perfect Husband, and Scripture's clear testimony of that fact in Ephesians 5 and many other places, the Puritan understanding of marriage would have been seriously flawed. We look forward to knowing Him better in heaven's eternal, utopian marriage, where Jesus Christ shall truly be all-in-all (Col. 3:11).

We would like to thank our special wives, Mary Beeke and Chantry La Belle, for their loving example of reflecting the church's relationship to Christ as loyal and precious helpmeets. We also thank our dear children for their loving support of our writing ministry. Many thanks to Michael Haykin for his helpful foreword to this book; to Phyllis TenElshof, Greg Bailey, and Misty Bourne for their helpful editing assistance; and to Gary and Linda den Hollander, our excellent proofreading/type-setting couple; as well as Amy Zevenbergen for her cover design.

If this book assists you to understand better the purposes, goals, and duties of marriage, and moves you to live more godly in your marriage in and through Christ Jesus to God's glory, our labor will be well rewarded.

—Joel R. Beeke and James A. La Belle

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Introduction

Marriage is under attack today, both from without and within. All around us we are witnessing the dissolution and attempted eradication of marriage as created by God and celebrated in His Word. What was once defined as “a communion of life between man and woman joined together according to the ordinance of God”¹ is being redefined today. What our forebears understood to be the fundamental institution of not only every society but of the human race² is now being relegated by many to a page in history reserved for the outgrown and useless. What constitutes marriage today, as is evident in the notions and expectations of many people who marry, is often hardly recognizable from the standpoint of God’s original ordinance on marriage.

The attack on marriage from *within* is the poisonous fruit of our innate rebellion against God. We are born at enmity with God and rebel against His law by nature (Rom. 8:7–8). There is no fear of God before our eyes (Rom. 3:18) and we do not want Him to reign over us (Luke 19:14). His ways are distasteful to our selfish interests. His law is abhorrent to our pursuit of freedom. His sovereignty is loathsome to our belief in human autonomy. Therefore marriage instituted by God’s sovereignty, designed according to God’s ways, regulated by God’s laws,

1. Smith, 1:5.

2. Marriage is “the first relation that was in the world, and from which all others do proceed.... The laws of heaven with respect to [marriage], if observed, would make happy societies, families, &c., and when neglected keep the world in wild disorder” (Boston, 2:212). Cf. also Gataker, 3; Reyner, iii, 45; Steele, *Puritans Sermons*, 2:272.

and aimed at God's glory is often either put on the potter's wheel of man-centeredness and given a new look or entirely rejected simply because it is "of God."

Ironically, most people want the benefits of marriage, such as sexual intimacy, companionship, the comfort of someone with whom to share their joys and sorrows, and children to nurture, carry on the family name, and inherit their estate. But they do not want what they consider to be the yoke, the restrictions, the commitment, and the duties that come with marriage done God's way. They do not want God looking over their shoulders telling them how to "do" marriage. So they oppose marriage as God appointed it and seek to refashion it after their own image, giving free reign to sinful desires, ascribing authority to their own opinions, and doing what is right in their own eyes.

This attack on marriage from within is coupled with an attack from *without* by a culture in which the commitment and boundaries of marriage are considered not only a restraint on personal freedom but also a killjoy. This view regards marriage God's way as a miserable enterprise. Added to this contempt for marriage is the notion that marriage God's way is out of date. We have grown up; we have moved on as a culture and left behind the ball-and-chain marriage of a previous generation. In its place we approve "friendship with benefits," living together, and open relationships in which partners are free to have other sexual partners.

While many are jettisoning marriage and want to get beyond it, others are perverting marriage by redefining it as a union of people in homosexual relationships. These people want both acceptance in the public arena and the right to marry. For them, the "maturing" of our society would mean accepting their sexual orientation as a viable alternative lifestyle and redefining marriage to legally constitute their relationship as a marriage.

Who cannot see that this is an attempt not merely to change God's view of marriage but to eventually eradicate it? What if the attempt is successful? Already the family, the church, our society, and culture at large are suffering because of the attack on marriage. Where will we end up if this rebellion against God continues? Can we kick against the goads without injury or consequences? Marriage was the first human

relationship instituted in the world and is therefore the fountain from which all others proceed; its dissolution *cannot* occur without serious consequences for every other relationship in society. The rush to legalize homosexual relationships as marriages suffers from both blindness and numbness—blindness to the dangerous ramifications of the act and numbness to the cries of conscience that such a thing ought not to be done.

Something must be done to recover marriage and restore it to its God-ordained blessedness to family, church, and society, and that something must be done *now*. The rapidly changing landscape of marriage cries out for someone to rescue it and put it back on track before it spins out of control. But what can we do to effect this rescue? How can we restore marriage as an ordinance of God instituted for our good and His glory? How can we restore marriage to its rightful place as a boon to the family, the church, society at large, and the whole world?

Restoration begins with a recovery of what God's Word teaches about marriage. God not only created marriage but created it for His glory. The only hope we have for the restoration of marriage is to go to His Word and let it serve as the final authority for marriage. In His Word God tells us how to think about marriage, how to prepare for marriage, upon what foundation to build a godly marriage, the duties to which marriage obligates us and how properly to perform them, what struggles to expect in marriage and how to address them, and how to persevere in a difficult marriage. God has not left us in the dark on so important and foundational an ordinance as marriage. He has told us what it is, why He created it, how to enjoy it, and how to glorify Him in it.

To discover what God's Word teaches about marriage we will mine the writings and sermons of many Puritans. These Puritans were ministers of the Word from an earlier century who not only manifested a thoroughly biblical understanding of marriage but also called people to enjoy the bountiful blessings of matrimony by aligning their marriages with God's Word and living in them for God's glory.

With their help, we will unfold what Scripture teaches about this fundamental relationship between husband and wife. Whether you are

preparing for marriage, are recently married, or are celebrating many years of marriage, it is our prayer that God will enlighten your mind about His purpose for marriage and enable you to enjoy the rich and delightful blessings of marriage by conforming to His will, for He has tied His blessings to your duties.