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J.I. Packer on the English Puritans

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J. I. Packer defends the English Puritans in “[Physicians of the Soul](#),” an article published in the Winter 2006 issue of *Christian History* magazine. Packer sets the record straight on a number of issues. Consider these statements:

Their dream was holiness in their own lives and in the lives of those around them. The Puritans didn't talk about the “state”; they simply talked about conducting all of life in a way that honored God and respected other people. That was their idea of community. The perfect church was a church containing families that practiced holiness and worshipped with a purged liturgy under the leadership of a minister who was a powerful preacher of the Bible.

H. L. Mencken once said, “Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” That is nonsense. The Puritans were in fact pleasant people, cheerful people. Many of them had a teasing wit and the capacity to laugh and make others laugh. It's not the case, either, that all of them dressed in black and made themselves stand out as if they were going to a funeral. John Owen, when he was Oxford's vice-chancellor, was much criticized for being a natty dresser!

They also devised a style of preaching that England had never experienced before. It was expository, but it was plain and searching, whereas the preaching of Anglican divines was more often than not a way of showing off their learning. Here is what the Puritans did best—preaching the Bible, preaching the gospel.

From the middle of the 19th century on, popular devotion became man-centered, and the Puritan way of being God-centered (doxological) has been marginalized. The Puritans wrote about the challenges of living to God in a conflicted age like ours, in which there are spiritual battles to be fought. They were thorough in their Christianity in a way that few since their time have matched. But there has been a modern resurgence of interest in the Puritans. Their books have become available again and have found a public. Seminaries have courses on Puritan theology and devotion. In its own way, Puritanism is now once again quite a power in the evangelical world. Christians have become disenchanted with the sort of devotional literature that was abroad when I was a young believer. They want something with more backbone.

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