

THE PURITANS AND WOMEN:
EQUALITY UNDER GOD

By

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one

Though the Puritan culture of early New England is often maligned, the reality of these people was much more complex than their somber image suggests. Historians repeatedly try to portray them as H.L. Mencken did: "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."¹ This quip portrays the popular idea about the Puritans, but it ignores much of the history of the seventeenth century. The Puritans are also frequently accused of hating women, with the witch trials of the period held up as evidence of their misogyny. This stereotype might be true for parts of the New England society, nevertheless, it was not true of Puritan religious thought. Although their secular distinctions focused on unequal gender roles, the Puritans spiritual distinctions were between believers and non-believers. The Puritans in fact held a very positive view of Christian women and the role they played in society, though it cannot be argued that they believed that men and women were called to the same societal roles. The Puritans did, however, see the equal spiritual worth of the sexes, and they believed that both had an equal place in the Kingdom of God. The images and ideals they presented about godly women reflected this worldview.

For many years, historians tended to dismiss the

¹ Ryken, Leland. Worldly Saints. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986, p. 1.

Puritan culture as an overly strict and somber example of what too much religion will do to a community. The illustrations in school books show the people dressed in black, often with sour facial expressions. In the last forty or so years, however, the historical image has undergone a transformation, though the popular image has not. Most historians have recognized that the Puritan culture was very complicated and cannot be easily classified. Although it is tempting to focus on the negative in their sermons and writings, this strategy does not present an accurate picture. Some historical works do swing to the other extreme and portray the Puritan culture as nearly perfect, but most try to balance the images and concepts with the reality.

The Puritans who left England in the 1620s and '30s were an idealistic people. They believed that the Church of England had not really rid itself of Roman Catholic practices, and they were concerned that the true religion of Christ was not being followed. Many of them wanted to see the Church of England reform from within, but since this had not happened, they moved across the ocean to be "a Citty upon a Hill," with "the eies of all people" upon them.² The people of New England originally hoped that they could show

² Winthrop, John. "A Modell of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, The Puritans (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 199. Note - here, as elsewhere in the paper, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in the quotation have not been modernized.

the people of Old England that real change was possible.

The idealism of the Puritans extended into the society they tried to create for themselves in the New World. With their biblical models and the blessings of God, the Puritans sought to create a godly community. As historian Edward Hindson states in his Introduction to Puritan Theology, Puritanism was a doctrinal movement -- the people were focused on adhering to a set of perceived truths.³ These truths were outside and above the individual, and they reinforced the idea of an order based on ideals. The Puritans based their lives on the belief that ultimately, there really was a factual difference between right and wrong. God had established what was right, and it was the responsibility of people to honor God by following his commands. God had also established the order and hierarchy of the world, and the Bible gave instructions about these ideals. Faith in God, through Jesus Christ (which manifested itself in a life lived following God's decrees), would bring the benefits of Heaven.

Knowing that they had the responsibility of following God's commands compelled the Puritans to try to determine what God's will actually was. To do so, they turned to the Bible as the ultimate source of authority, but they also relied heavily on their ministers. They believed that

³ Hindson, Edward, ed. Introduction to Puritan Theology. Grand Rapids: Canon Press, 1976.

everyone should be able to read and understand the Bible, but through their preaching, the ministers -- often the best educated in the community -- encouraged people in the proper channels of thought. As Leland Ryken has pointed out, the Puritans' sacred and secular lives were combined, and they could never legitimately separate the two.⁴ John Demos adds that it is difficult to study only the religious part of the Puritans' lives because it "was simply too basic, too much an assumed constant of life to be rendered fully visible and self-conscious."⁵

Recently, however, new monographs demonstrate that the problem of stereotyping the Puritans is a recurring one. Carol Karlsen and John Demos both try to explain all of Puritan culture by examining their beliefs about witchcraft. Not surprisingly, they revive the negative stereotypes of the Puritans as oppressive misogynists. In The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, Karlsen links witchcraft to the image of women. "We see the connections," she states, "between Puritan ideas about women and New England's ideas about witches."⁶ She further claims that witchcraft is the key factor to understanding this time period. Demos, similarly,

⁴Ryken, Worldly Saints.

⁵Demos, John. A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony. London: Oxford UP, 1979, p. 12.

⁶Karlsen, Carol. The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England. New York: W.W. Norton, 1987, p. xiv.

studies the witchcraft cases of the seventeenth century and tries to use these cases to explain the nature of the Puritan culture. His charts do show that more women than men were suspected of witchcraft, and that more women than men were executed as witches. The monograph, however, does not take into account the larger setting of these cases.

Historian David Hall does attempt to portray witchcraft in a broader context. In Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement, Hall examines the complexity of supernatural belief during this time period. This was a superstitious culture -- almost any action, natural or from man, could be interpreted as a sign or working of God. Lightening, rain, drought, birth, death, fire, rainbows, barking dogs, and countless other occurrences had important connotations for the people of early New England. They also believed in witchcraft -- that people could use spells and curses to harm other people or property, usually for some sort of revenge. They saw witchcraft as evidence of the devil at work, giving people evil powers in exchange for their souls, but it was only one of the many "wonders" and "portents" they saw in their world every day.⁷

The theory that witchcraft defines Puritan society is problematic for a second reason. The Puritans were not alone in early New England. Although the leaders of the

⁷Hall, David. Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England. New York: Knopf, 1989.

colony and many of the earliest settlers were more dedicated to the Puritan religion, during the course of the seventeenth century the religious Puritan culture became a subgroup within New England. The Puritans tended to dominate politically and theologically, but the more common people -- including servants and those who migrated after the first wave of religious settlers -- were not as doctrinally motivated and were open to many of the superstitious ideas. Some of the Puritans were as well; Increase Mather's Remarkable Providences is good evidence of the superstitions of the Puritans, but these superstitions did not come directly from the Puritan theology itself.

The Salem trials, as well as the other witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century, were very dramatic examples of the superstitious nature of the people in New England. The trials, though, did not spring as much from the religious community as from the popular culture. The witchcraft scares reflect a piece of the puzzle of this period of American History, but they cannot be used to define the entire period. They also cannot be used alone to define the Puritan religious community since many of New England's residents were not dedicated Puritans. By focusing on witchcraft, Karlson and Demos, as well as others, have ignored the broader tradition of Puritan beliefs. Other historians, in trying to correct the negative image, have focused on the realities of daily life. In doing so, they

too have lost a part of the picture -- they have ignored the positive images of women that Puritans used to shape their everyday lives. Because the Puritans were used to looking to doctrine to answer their spiritual questions, they looked to ideals to shape their worldly lives. Both doctrine and ideals emphasized the importance of order.

Although reality rarely reflects the ideals of a society perfectly, those ideals do help shape the way the people in a society think and act. The Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay colony spoke and wrote very highly of ideal women -- at least females professing belief in Christ. Because their society was so steeped in religious principles, the most important earthly state was defined by the apparent state of one's soul. In the normal course of events, Christian women were spoken of favorably, and were thought to be just as spiritual -- and just as capable of spirituality -- as men were. This image of the capable woman was very removed from the pre-Reformation idea of women as the ruin of humanity, and the religious image, far from being misogynist, praised the role of women in the community.

two

In order to understand fully the importance of the spiritual equality in which the Puritans believed, one must

also understand the larger context of women's positions in the seventeenth century. The Reformation that began in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the church at Wittenburg had far reaching consequences for religion in Europe and, eventually, the New-World colonies. The Protestant reformers began a process of doctrinal change by challenging many of the fundamental teachings of the Roman Catholic church. Once the Protestants had severed the bonds linking the church to the papacy, the changes continued -- even unto the present day -- as more people and more factions of people presented their own interpretations of the will of God as well as their own understanding of the Bible.

The Puritans had a varied history that stretched across two centuries and two continents. Begun as a protest movement against the lingering Catholicism of the English church, the Puritans spawned a group that traveled to New England in search of a religious lifestyle. The movement modified itself and changed with distance and time, but it was still a major force shaping thought in the early New England colonies. In their views on women, the Puritans' ideas are most often compared and contrasted to contemporary Roman Catholic thoughts and to American Quaker thoughts. Other groups (such as the Lutherans or the Calvinists) have ideas that also apply to the discussion of the place of women in society and the church, but the Catholics and the Quakers are the most obvious points of reference for New England in

the seventeenth century. The Puritans were trying to escape what they perceived as bad doctrine in the former, and they asserted that the later group had abandoned doctrine altogether, thus an examination of the basic assumptions and tenets each held about women will shed more light on the relative position of Puritans in the seventeenth century.

The traditional Roman Catholic church held strongly negative views about women and sex. Women began with one strike against them, since the Catholic church blamed Eve for the original fall of mankind.⁸ In addition, the Roman Church considered the physical world as inherently corrupt and was suspicious of any kind of bodily pleasure. The Catholic ideal focused on asceticism, denying and punishing the body to get closer to the sufferings of Christ, and thus the pleasure inherent in sexual relations was condemned.

Historian Daniel Doriani says that the church fathers -- Augustine, Tertullian, and Jerome, among others -- determined that "even in marriage, even when man and wife act in order to beget children, concupiscence so attends the procreative act that there is always at least venial sin. Many theologians restricted coitus even within marriage and nearly all exalted virginity."⁹ Sex outside of marriage was a terrible sin, but even within marriage, for the purpose of

⁸Douglass, Jane Dempsey. Women, Freedom, and Calvin. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, p. 47.

⁹Doriani, Daniel. "The Puritans, Sex, and Pleasure." Westminster Theological Journal. 53(1991), p. 127.

begetting children to perpetuate the human race, the act was still considered sinful. Virginity was considered superior to marriage, and saints -- such as the Virgin Mary -- who were believed to have done so, were praised for remaining virgins even during marriage.¹⁰

The Catholic church did have to admit, however, that God had created marriage and sex. The Church declared marriage to be a sacrament, and said that it was, in worldly terms, a good thing. Augustine conceded that "Adam and Eve were a married man and woman and that they would have reproduced sexually even if they had remained sinless. In God's plan, 'the procreation of children [was] . . . part of the glory of marriage, and not of the punishment of sin.'" ¹¹ This idea, however, was not part of the official thought that exalted virginity and chastity as superior states of life and that condemned women for driving men to "powerful, scarcely controllable sexual impulse[s]." ¹² The medieval Roman Catholic church had fully integrated these thoughts into their instructions to the people. As Doriani relates, the Roman church forbade relations

during menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation; during seasons of fasting and on certain festival days; for forty days before Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas; and for three to seven days before communion. Further, casuists recommended

¹⁰Ibid., p. 128.

¹¹Ibid., p. 127.

¹²Ibid., p. 127.

abstinence "on Thursday in memory of Christ's arrest, on Friday in memory of his death, on Saturday in honour of the Virgin Mary, on Sunday in honour of the Resurrection and on Monday in commemoration of the departed."¹³

The reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries challenged this view of the world even as they challenged other doctrinal beliefs about the sacraments and salvation.

The Puritans were one of the heirs of the Reformed tradition.¹⁴ As such, they traced many of their beliefs to John Calvin and his contemporaries and followers in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. Since women were very much connected to marriage and the home, views about women improved as views about marriage improved. The earliest reformers exalted the state of marriage, and Luther was very vocal about its benefits. Historian De Lemar Jensen quotes Luther as saying that marriage was a "divinely appointed union and a blessed estate," and that "if the Pope had brought about no other calamity than this prohibition of marriage, it would be sufficient to stamp him as the Anti-Christ."¹⁵ Calvin, for his part, did not fall into the traditional trap of blaming Eve for the fall. Most often, he

¹³Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁴Hall, David D. "Understanding the Puritans." The State of American History. Herbert J. Bass, ed. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970, p. 331.

¹⁵Jensen, De Lemar. Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992, p. 82.

merely refers to the Fall, or he speaks of Adam's sin.¹⁶ The Puritans followed in this vein so completely that historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich claims that she has never found a reference to "Eve's sin" in Puritan literature.¹⁷ The Reformed tradition also viewed marriage as a positive good, sometimes hinting that it was better than virginity. At any rate, reformers did not think that virginity was a standard to which God called most people. Another legacy to the Puritans came from Martin Bucer, a contemporary of Calvin's. Bucer began the significant change in reformed thought that declared that marriage was instituted for the mutual love and affection of the spouses. Instead of merely condoning marriage for the sake of legitimate children, Bucer claimed that "The true and entire purpose of marriage is that the spouses serve one another in all love and fidelity."¹⁸ Women were expected to be good wives -- they were a help, not a burden in the world. Both parties, moreover, were supposed to be good to each other. Men, therefore, had to be responsible to and for their wives.

Despite the moderate advances in the worldly standing of women, though, most of the changes in Reformed and Puritan doctrine tended to insist on the spiritual equality of women.

¹⁶Douglass, Women, Freedom, and Calvin, p. 47.

¹⁷Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. Good Wives. New York: Knopf, 1982, p. 255n.

¹⁸Douglass, Women, Freedom, and Calvin, p. 86.

The Bible was applied equally to all Christians, though this equality was seen in the spiritual realm of life only. Under Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans, women were still not allowed to hold church office or positions of authority within the church, but they were seen as equally children of God.

Though often treated as an extension of Puritanism, the Quakers began a new tradition entirely. The focus of the Society of Friends (as they called themselves) was not on a community of believers searching for the truth and the will of God in his scriptures, as it was with the Puritans. The Friends, instead, believed in searching for the truth within each person by the direct inspiration of the Divine Light.¹⁹ What they did interpret from the Bible they believed indicated temporal as well as spiritual equality, and they used their "continuing revelation" to support this. They dismissed scriptural texts that did not support their worldview, and they created their own justification for their actions. This did not apply only to their ideas about women, however. They used the concept of the Divine Light to disavow the necessity (and the desirability) of an ordained ministry,²⁰ and they let individual feelings set much of their "doctrine."

¹⁹Dunn, Mary Maples. "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period." American Quarterly. 30(1978), p. 595.

²⁰Ibid., p. 597.

Their policies towards women were not quite as equal as is commonly believed, however. Women did have more say in Quaker communities than in Puritan ones, but they were not even temporally the equals of men. They were allowed to teach and to prophesy, and they were even given some say in governance of the society. But, their control was more over the women than the men. There were separate assemblies (meetings) for men and women, and some historians have suggested that this was more designed to keep the women quiet than to give them true authority.²¹ Women were allowed to carry out women's business and helped to regulate marriage within the Friends' community, but they were often excluded from the semi-judicial functions of the men's meetings.²² Women were given certain positions and allowed more freedom of speech and decision, but they were still limited in their power.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the roles of men and women began to change, even as religion was changing. The Reformed and Puritan positions were a radical departure from centuries of Roman Catholic teachings, and they opened the door for even greater future change. The concept of any type of gender equality was foreign to the Catholic church, so the reformers made progress in changing that worldview. The Quakers radically departed from doctrine

²¹Ibid., p. 598.

²²Ibid., p. 598-599.

as well as previous notions of order, and women in that society seemed to have greater temporal freedom than the Puritans, but both celebrated spiritual equality even if their ideas about spirituality were different.

three

The Puritans within the Massachusetts Bay Colony were a deeply religious people. They based their lives on the Bible and on faith in a sovereign God. They followed the Reformed tradition of tracing all actions to God and His will, and they held to the Westminster Confession that came from the European reformers. Their lives were centered on what they believed to be true about God, and their ideals reflected these beliefs.

The starting place for this religious view of life was the Creation as it was told about in the Bible. The first three chapters of Genesis relate how God created the world and the people within it, and many of the ideas that Puritans held about men and women, as well as the family, can be traced to this account. In A Society Ordained By God, historian James Johnson discusses Puritan marriage doctrine and views of men and women. Johnson begins by looking at the stated ends of marriage -- mutual society, relief and remedy

of sin, and procreation.²³ Interestingly, most Christians listed these same three purposes, but different groups listed them in different orders. The Puritans stressed the covenant between two people in a marriage and so put mutual society first. They based this belief on Genesis 2:18 where God stated that it was not good for man to be alone and so created Eve to be Adam's companion.²⁴ As William and Maleville Haller Point out in "The Puritan Art of Love," Adam's solitude was the first thing in creation that God declared bad.²⁵ The Catholics, on the other hand, had traditionally stressed procreation as the predominant goal, and were suspicious of any pleasure derived from marriage. They cited Genesis 1:28 -- "Be fruitful and multiply" -- as the most important justification for marriage.²⁶ Because of Genesis 2:18, Puritans viewed women as companions, not just as mothers. The Puritans were one of the very few groups to put companionship first, and they believed that the sexual pleasure within marriage was good for promoting this companionship. "God's gift to Adam was first and foremost a

²³Johnson, James. A Society Ordained By God: English Puritan Marriage Doctrine in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970, p. 22.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁵Haller, William and Maleville. "The Puritan Art of Love." Huntington Library Quarterly 5(1941-42), p. 245.

²⁶ Johnson, A Society Ordained by God, p. 22.

good wife," Johnson tells us.²⁷ Children were a second blessing, but they stemmed from the first. Eve was created for Adam as a help, not a hindrance, and the Puritans blamed Adam for the Fall. Most other protestant reformers disagreed with the Catholic view that sex was only for procreation, but they listed the remedium of sin as the best justification for marriage.

That men and women were created for separate purposes was accepted in the Puritan doctrine, but the Bible also held more important information for the religious community. The Bible told people that the most important occurrence on earth was the salvation of their souls. In the late 1600s, Cotton Mather wrote Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, to give instructions to women about how they should ideally conduct themselves. He informed young women that faith in Christ was the root of all virtue. They needed first be Christians before they could even hope to do anything else right in this world.²⁸ They were also instructed that they must fear and honor God. In a premonitory letter written to her family shortly before her death in 1681, Sarah Goodhue stressed the same thing, adding that because "death is

²⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁸ Mather, Cotton. Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion. (1741). New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978, p. 67.

sudden. . . be prepared in Christ."²⁹ Both of these authors were concerned that all people, including women, know that what one did in life would not matter unless one had faith in God.

The Puritans did care about this world as well, though. They wanted to know the order that God had established for their lives on earth, and they were concerned about their actions pleasing a holy God. In seeking these ideals, their emphasis on different points of doctrine sometimes made it appear as if they were contradicting themselves. They firmly professed to believe that God was sovereignly in control of everything, but they did not see this truth as an excuse for hyper-Calvinism (inaction on the grounds that God will do what God will do). Instead, the Puritans believed that God had appointed the means by which things would happen, as well as the ends He desired. Humans, therefore, had the responsibility of trying to follow God's commands.

In his essay, "On Common Ground," David Hall addresses the issue of contradictions in the Puritan primary literature. He states that one must realize that there was "division and discourse" within the Puritan community,³⁰ but goes on to explain that this did not mean that the Puritans

²⁹Goodhue, Sarah. The Copy of a Valedictory and Monitory Writing. New London, CT, 1773. (reprint -- the original has been lost.)

³⁰Hall, David D. "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies." William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 44 (1987), p. 199.

were hypocritical or equivocal about their beliefs.³¹ The Puritans discussed and debated ideas in order to try to get as close to the truth of God as possible. Hall quotes John Coolidge as saying that the Puritan "conflicts, dilemmas, and paradoxes are those of the Bible itself."³² Different passages led to different interpretations, and so the community tried to reconcile apparently contradictory ideas.

Although Hall emphasizes that there is no one doctrinal "key" to the understanding of Puritanism,³³ his article focuses on two conflicts that repeatedly appear in the Puritan literature. The first is between grace and legalism, grace being God's undeserved gift of salvation whereas legalism is the demand for the keeping of the law as necessary for salvation. The other conflict is that of grace and free will -- the choices that people make. The focus of this dilemma is election -- is salvation the result of God's grace in choosing the elect, or can people exercise free will and accept or reject this gift? In both cases, the Puritans seemed to contradict themselves quite regularly. Does God choose people or do people choose God? God wants people to keep the law, but is that necessary for salvation? Without a clear understanding of how the Puritans could make differing statements and not see them as contradictions, their works

³¹ Ibid., pp. 201, 217.

³² Ibid., p. 200.

³³ Ibid., p. 198.

are rendered meaningless.

There is a clear difference between grace and legalism. Puritan statements sound contradictory because, on the one hand, they preach about God's mercy and gift of salvation, nevertheless on the other they stress the importance of the law. Their answer lay in individual motivation. Did one do good works in order to get to heaven (works-righteousness), or did one do good works because he was already regenerate and wanted to honor God?³⁴ Good works are a sign of salvation in the saved, but they will never get the damned into heaven.

James Johnson, in his monograph on Puritan marriage doctrine, presents an intelligible description of how the Puritans reconciled free will and grace by his discussion on proximate and remote causes. Whereas individuals might be the immediate causes of events (hence the feeling of free will), still the Puritans, in the Reformed tradition, recognized God as the ultimate cause of everything.³⁵ Johnson uses marriage to illustrate this idea -- when two people fall in love and contract to get married, they are making the decision; God, however, first placed the love in their hearts.³⁶ Thus, the Puritans could discuss human responsibilities, including those between women and men, even

³⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

³⁵ Johnson, A Society Ordained By God, p.78.

³⁶ Ibid.

while firmly believing that God was completely in control of all situations.

The Puritans also learned from the Bible that God had created order in the world, and consequently, they placed a high value on order in their society. Structure and hierarchy were important at all levels of relationships in the world -- hence, the relationships between servants and masters were well regulated, as well as the ones between children and parents, wives and husbands, people and the church, and families and the community. In the section of her farewell letter addressed to her children, Puritan mother Sarah Goodhue instructed them to "carry well to your father, obey him, love him, follow his instructions and example, be ruled by him, take his advice, and have a care of grieving him."³⁷ However, these instructions were not limited to the children. Goodhue also asked her husband to be good to their children, and thanked him for what a kind and loving husband he had been to her.

This theme of ideal order is repeated throughout Puritan speeches and writings, though with some modification. While the Puritans valued obedience and submission to one's place in life, they also stressed the importance of the responsibility of those persons in positions of leadership and authority. If husbands treated their wives poorly, they

³⁷Goodhue, "The Copy of a Valedictory and Monitory Writing," p. 4.

should not expect the women to fulfill the virtuous and obedient ideals. In his instructions to women, Cotton Mather blamed the men for the misbehavior of women -- he saw the women with undutiful children and cruel masters as the ones who were unable to fit into the hierarchical order dictated by their society.³⁹ How could they? The people around them were not fulfilling their roles, either. If the men and children lived up to the ideals that God had set for them, the women would be able to do the same. William Secker, in a sermon given at an English Puritan wedding (and widely reprinted in the colonies and England), gave similar instructions to men -- "Is the woman to be a help to the man? Then let the man be a help to the woman."⁴⁰ He added that proper men should keep their authority by inspiring respect, not fear, in those under their headship: for "compassion may bend her, but compulsion will break her."⁴⁰ There was supposed to be order in the Puritan society, but it depended on everyone fulfilling his or her own role -- it was not simply the weak giving in to the strong or the strong overpowering the weak.

Much of the ideal structure and order of this society focused on relations within the family, which included all

³⁹Mather, Ornaments, p. 46.

⁴⁰Secker, William. A Wedding Ring Fit for the Finger, or The Salve of Divinity on the Sore of Humanity. London, 1700, p. 33.

⁴⁰Ibid.

people who lived in a household -- parents, children, other relatives, and servants. The family was the smallest possible societal unit in the colony, since a Massachusetts law dictated that single people could not live alone. Believing that all people needed some sort of order and authority in their lives, the Massachusetts communities told those people who tried to live alone that they had to find a family in which to live.⁴¹ Since, through the Bible, God had given the man authority over his family, it was the man's responsibility to keep discipline and to make sure the members of his household were educated in the ways of God. A Massachusetts law even compelled the heads of households to teach their children and apprentices to read,⁴² and it also required "that all masters of families doe once a week (at the least) catechize their children and servants in the grounds and principles of Religion." The same code provided for the examination of the children in the catechism by the government of the town.⁴³ God had first created the family in the Garden of Eden, and he only later, after the Fall, created societies out of families. Thus, the ideal family was seen as the building block of the larger society -- order in the society was based on proper order in the family.

⁴¹Morgan, Edmund S. The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980, p. 27.

⁴² Ibid., p. 87.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 88.

Without question, men and women in the Puritan society were expected to fulfill different roles. This, however, does not automatically brand the society as sexist. As Ulrich points out in her monograph on the Puritans, there is an important distinction between sex and sexism. In this culture, both men and women were supposed to know their place and their responsibilities in society. Although these ideas about women may make them appear oppressed from a twentieth century standpoint, Ulrich also observes that the "value of any activity is determined by its meaning to the participant, not to the observer."⁴⁴ Because the women for the most part did value their roles, one must remember to judge them by their own standards and not by more modern ones.

Context is also important in any understanding of role differentiation. As stated earlier, order and hierarchy were essential concepts in the Puritan society. Wives were called to be submissive, but husbands were called to be responsible. Ulrich notes that "one can be dependent without being servile or helpless."⁴⁵ In his marriage sermon, Secker emphasized this point to husbands and wives by further defining the ideal nature of their relationship. He compared their positions to that of the sun and the moon -- a greater and a lesser light. The woman was a capable ruler of the household in the absence of her husband, but her normal role placed her

⁴⁴Ulrich, Good Wives, p.42.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 37.

elsewhere.⁴⁶ Women were not incapable of these other roles, but they had been assigned -- by God -- to their position of helper.

four

Despite the societal role differentiation, though, the Puritans had a very high spiritual view of women. The state of being born a woman did not make one wicked or evil; that classification was given to everyone for being born sinners outside of Christ. Whether male or female, the ultimate quest in life was for salvation of the soul so that eternal life would continue in heaven. There was to be no ranking in Heaven, and the Puritans believed that God was just as likely to save women as He was to save men. True Christian women were ideally supposed to play a valued role in the family, and, as stated earlier, the Puritans viewed the family as the foundation of all of society. In a society that valued the standards of God, the women were believed to be just as godly and just as capable of godliness as the men of the community. Cotton Mather even claimed that there were more godly women than men -- pointing out that there were three Marys and but one John under the cross when Christ was crucified.⁴⁷ Within their roles, women were given instructions for improving

⁴⁶Secker, A Wedding Ring, p. 24.

⁴⁷Mather, Ornaments, p. 48.

themselves in righteousness, and ideal women were also held up as examples to men as to how they, too, could draw closer to God. At the 1698 funeral of Elizabeth Riscarrick, the minister Samuel Myles entreated everyone to follow her "kind, affable, and virtuous demeanor. . . [and] love of God."⁴⁸ Women's secular roles may have been different from those of the men, but because of the ideals of spiritual equality, the Puritans claimed that women were just as capable of doing good in and for the world.

The roles available to women were centered around the family and the home, but within the home these roles were extensive and had spiritual implications. Because of the emphasis the Puritans placed on family, marriage was very important, and most women were expected to get married. An unmarried woman was not independent of family -- she most often lived in her father's house or in the home of another guardian -- and her status could best be described as "pre-wife." She was expected to learn the skills necessary to become a good wife later. Marriage opened up another stage of her life -- that of mistress of a household. This definition of "mistress" encompasses the roles of the woman in charge of her household -- be she wife, mother, or widow. Women could also fall under the category of "servant," but because of the Puritan definition of household, this job made

⁴⁸Myles, Samuel. A Sermon Preach't at the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Riscarrick. Boston, 1698, p. 28.

her a dependent of the family for which she was working, and many of the expectations were the same as those for an unmarried daughter.

The ideals of what women in these positions could and should do were highly positive. Women helped men, taught children, and ruled servants. They kept their houses organized in the fear and love of God. Dedication to their roles was equated with dedication to God, and the women were believed to be just as able to fulfill their callings as the men. Their spiritual worth to God created a positive ideal of what their earthly roles should be like. These roles might have been socially unequal, but they were supposed to be valued by the community. Again, salvation was the ultimate goal for the people in this society, but salvation produced the desire and ability to live a life pleasing to God, in women as well as men.

A maid was a young, unmarried girl still living under the protection of her parents or guardian. Puritan ideals and standards for the young focused on education, and just like the male children in the household, a maid was expected to increase her knowledge of God through church attendance and Bible study within the house. From birth, both males and females were brought into the circle of the church. All children of believing parents were thought to be under God's promises to families -- such as "Believe in the Lord Jesus

and you will be saved - you and your household,"⁴⁹ and "All your sons will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children's peace."⁵⁰ In a sermon on grace, the Puritan minister Thomas Hooker argued that baptism was given to all infants, unlike the Jewish circumcision that could mark only the males in the covenant of God.⁵¹ Young women, like young men, were therefore held to the responsibility of learning to know God.

These responsibilities, however, were not limited to religious knowledge. The young woman was expected to be industrious and helpful around the house, to learn to do a good thing every day, and to improve her mind by reading books other than romances.⁵² In the Puritan community, reading was not restricted to the well-to-do or to the men; everyone was expected to learn basic skills so that they could improve their general knowledge and be able to read the scriptures, as well. Early in their history, the New England colonies established common schools open to the community at large. In addition to learning how to run a household, though, the Puritans thought a young woman could learn

⁴⁹Acts 16:31.

⁵⁰Isaiah 54:13.

⁵¹Hooker, Thomas. The Covenant of Grace Opened. London: G. Dawson, 1649, p. 6.

⁵²Mather, Cotton. Eureka: The Virtuous Woman Found. A Short Essay On the Memory of Mrs. Mary Brown. Boston, 1704, p. 2.

"arithmetick, accomptanship, chirurgery, musick [and] language."³³ Since there were not many roles open to women, the maid was thought of as a "pre-wife," but she learned more than cooking and cleaning. A maid needed to prove herself an intelligent companion to be a wife -- she was not being married to become a servant only.

The roles of wife, mother, and widow tended to overlap. At various times, these could be used to classify the status of the woman at the head of her family. Their duties varied, but such women were supposed to be respected as well as influential within the household. According to Ulrich, women were the energy behind community action, helpers to their husbands, and the peaceful organizers of the home. They were not directly involved in politics, but they could influence their own husbands. Within the house, they were supposed to be only a little lower than their husbands, serving as deputies when the men went away.³⁴ A widow often remained in charge of her household, especially if she still had minor children living at home. She was legally able to maintain her control of them and their property.

When she became a wife, a woman traded the household of her parents or guardians for that of her new husband. At least officially, the house became the wife's domain, and she was given much responsibility for her family. The Puritans

³³Mather, Ornaments, p. 83.

³⁴Ulrich, Good Wives.

claimed to believe that the woman had been created by God to be a help to the man. She was not a help in the sense of being a servant but rather in the sense of contributing to a pleasant, productive life on earth. She was created as man's companion -- on a level with him above the other creatures. The minister William Secker explained that in the garden, Adam "had many creatures to serve him, yet he wanted [lacked] a creature to solace him."⁵⁵ A man was to look to his wife as a friend and companion, and to thank God for the gift and blessing of a good wife.

The ministers taught that a good wife could help her husband in many ways. Her own fervor for God was expected to help him with his piety. Even as he was to be the spiritual head of the family, she was to be knowledgeable and encouraging. She was considered intelligent and was to use her knowledge to be good company -- to carry on conversations with her husband as a companion, not a child. She was to be the primary teacher of the next generation, as well. Her responsibility was to thoroughly teach the children about God as well as basic academics. The wife was also called to be conscientious of her husband's prosperity. Once money and property came into the house, the wife was responsible to help maintain it, not to recklessly spend it. She was to be responsible and diligent in seeing that it was spent

⁵⁵Secker, A Wedding Ring, p. 11.

properly.⁵⁶ The ministers spoke of what godly women could be like, and they encouraged a positive view of women's potential.

Death presented an opportunity for people to reinforce the ideals of the community. Once someone had died, writings and funeral sermons tended to focus on the qualities admired in the deceased, and he or she was no longer around to prove the comments false. Cotton Mather wrote about one virtuous woman, after her death, as one such ideal example to others -- both men and women. He claimed that Mary Brown's wise husband chose her "not [for] wealth, but solid worth. . . . He see's Rich Vertues, and is charmed."⁵⁷ In saying next that women should not be "empty, noisy fools,"⁵⁸ Mather implied that they were capable of being otherwise, and he used Brown's life as proof that this was the case. Brown, in her role as a proper wife was said to love, please, and prize her husband. She gave him the honor due to him as head of the household, she did everything possible to help him, and she never tried his patience. She also fed and clothed the poor, prayed frequently, loved the Lord's Day, kept the Sabbath, and was repentant and prudent. Because she died in childbed, Brown never made it to the other stages of a mistress's life -- motherhood or widowhood -- but Mather said

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 25.

⁵⁷Mather, Eureka, p. 3.

⁵⁸Ibid.

that, because of her virtuous character, she would certainly have been the perfect mournful widow as well.⁵⁹ Women were not only capable of virtue; Mather displayed Brown as an example to show that they also lived up to their potential. Mather thus furthered the positive religiously sanctioned image of women as capable humans, and encouraged all of his readers to live up to the ideals presented.

To be more generally and practically instructive, Mather wrote Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion as a handbook to inform women about how to live virtuous lives, and he focuses on Biblical and community ideals. In the section on marriage, he pointed out that obedience and submission were not the same thing as slavishness: "In every lawful Thing she submits her will and sense to his, where she cannot with calm Reasons convince him of Inexpediencies; and instead of grudging or captious contradiction, she acts as if there were but one Mind in two Bodies."⁶⁰ Women were not expected to refrain from expressing their opinions; husbands and wives were supposed to talk together. Mather was clear that wives were not equivalent to slaves, however, any final decisions were supposed to be made with the man in his role as head of the household. The wife needed to willingly accept that final decision, and she was not supposed to grumble if she did not like it. Mather stressed points similar to Secker's

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁰Mather, Ornaments, p. 89.

about the importance of a wife as a companion and mistress over the household, as well as the responsibility of the husband to his wife. Both partners needed to adhere to their prescribed roles in order to have a successful marriage.

In Puritan literature, one of the most frequently quoted passages about women was Proverbs 31:10-31 -- "The Wife of Noble Character." As the idealized woman, the wife of the passage was not portrayed as a weak or helpless woman. She supported her husband and was good to her family, and she was also seen as capable of financial business. This business centered around the home, but she was seen conducting it herself. In addition to making and selling clothes, she also bought a field and planted a vineyard. She was righteous, strong, wise, and charitable; she was well prepared for the future, and she lived in the fear and praise of the Lord. This passage was used as an image of women, but it was a positive example of what real women could be like. The Puritans encouraged the women with this passage, but they also reinforced to men the point that women had valued roles in the community.

Puritan ideals about marriage extended to the act of marriage itself. Rather than condemn this act as inherently sinful, the Puritans valued it as part of creation. The Puritans viewed intercourse as a gift within a chaste marriage, though they considered fornication and adultery to

be heinous sins.⁶¹ Men and women were prescribed equal punishments for these crimes, but for awhile, mostly men were punished for offenses.⁶² William Secker explained the passages in Paul (i.e. 1 Corinthians 7:1 "It is good for a man not to touch a woman.") by drawing a distinction between public and private good. Whereas it might be better for an individual man not to be with a woman, the essential command to all of humanity was Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone." Secker emphasized the fact that Moses spoke of man created in perfection, while Paul spoke of man corrupted by the fall.⁶³ This difference was an important distinction for a religious community that valued the state of one's soul above all else. Doriani discusses Thomas Gataker, another Puritan preacher, who told husbands that it was their duty to take physical delight in their wives. Gataker also added that it was the work of the Devil to try to take the joy out of Christianity.⁶⁴ Again, Puritan wives were seen as gifts of God, appropriate helpers, and companions. These ideas about women helped to make them a vital part of Puritan society by giving their assigned roles secular validation.

The other major role a woman could play within a family was that of mother, and there were many ideals connected with

⁶¹Mather, Eureka, p. 5.

⁶²Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, p. 194-5.

⁶³Secker, A Wedding Ring, p. 19-20.

⁶⁴Doriani, "The Puritans, Sex, and Pleasure," p. 129.

this position, as well. The responsibilities of motherhood began with pregnancy. A mother was supposed to have "Faith, Charity, Holiness, and Sobriety" during her pregnancy -- and her husband was expected to adhere to the same standards.⁶⁵ Later, she was responsible for the children's physical and moral upbringing. Servants were counted as children, also, so the mistress was to be responsible for their well being, as well. As the Puritan ideal was presented, the women were obviously thought truly capable of morality and piety, since they were given the responsibility of training all of the children -- male as well as female. In a series of questions and answers, Richard Mather also made it clear that both parents were to be responsible for the spiritual life of the child -- not just the father in the role of spiritual head of the household. After he described the duties of parents, Mather was asked about the practice of a father's covenanting in the church for his children. His response involved the nature of one parent being a Christian, and was not limited to the father.⁶⁶ This emphasis made it clear that God's covenant relationship with His people could pass through either parent if the other was not a believer -- children whose mothers belonged to the church could receive those benefits, even if their fathers did not belong to the church.

⁶⁵Mather, Ornaments, p. 102.

⁶⁶Mather, Richard. "A Disputation Concerning Church Members and Their Children." 1659, question 5.

William Secker repeated to mothers that they should be most concerned with the souls of their children. She was with them often and could teach them well about God.⁶⁷ The Puritan poetess Anne Bradstreet praised her own mother for being "A true instructor of her family."⁶⁸ In her position as mother, the Puritan woman was to bring her children up in the knowledge of God and of salvation, as well as to properly train the next generation of citizens for their roles in the community.

Ideal women were not just held up as examples to other women, they were also used to instruct men in how to live godly lives. In his eulogy of Mary Brown, Cotton Mather told men that women were good and wise, and that men should follow Brown's virtuous example.⁶⁹ Hooker told men as well as women that their dedication should be of the intensity of Ruth to Naomi: "Entreat me not to forsake thee, for where thou livest, I will live, thy people shall be my people, thy God my God, where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried, and nothing but death shall part thee and me."⁷⁰ In another sermon, Hooker told his listeners that they should

⁶⁷Secker, A Wedding Ring, p. 28.

⁶⁸Amore, Adelaide P., ed. A Woman's Inner World: Selected Poetry and Prose of Anne Bradstreet. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982, p. 6.

⁶⁹Mather, Eureka.

⁷⁰Hooker, Thomas. The Application of Redemption (1656), in Redemption: Three Sermons. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1956 p. 64.

seek after Christ like the dedicated Mary Magdalene (a former prostitute) did after the crucifixion (John 4:4-26), or like Hagar in the Old Testament looking for the well (Genesis 21:9-21).⁷¹ The ministers held up women to men as ideal examples of godliness. They did so believing that men could follow the examples of women since Christians were alike in their spiritual character, even though different in their secular roles. Cotton Mather even suggested that more women were Christians than men because their ideally submissive roles led them to a better understanding of submission in Christ. He also claimed that women, centered in the duties of the home, had more time for reflection on God and righteousness.⁷² Men needed to learn to follow the examples of women to lead to their own salvation.

Women who acted outside of their ideal societal roles are more difficult to classify. An excerpt from John Demos's Remarkable Providences gives further insight into the expectations and the believed capabilities of women.⁷³ The selection is from the excommunication trials of Ann Hibbens in 1640 and 1641. Hibbens had been responsible for contracting to have some work done in her house. It was made

⁷¹Hooker, Thomas. "The Soules Ingrafting into Christ." (1637), in Redemption: Three Sermons. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1956, p. 103-105.

⁷²Mather, Ornaments, p. 48.

⁷³Demos, John, ed. "A Sinner Cast Out." Remarkable Providences. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1991, p.262-82.

clear that her husband had given her permission to take care of this business -- a fact that was not criticized, but was seen as part of the course of village life. The problems started when Hibbens was not satisfied with the work. Although third parties came in and inspected the work, Hibbens was not satisfied when they pronounced the work acceptable. The church became involved because both of the parties belonged to the same church, and Hibbens would not be reconciled with the "brother" who had done the work. She was in trouble because she would not accept the judgement of others and the church, and she harbored discontent. Though women were capable of carrying on business, and were even allowed to raise questions, they were supposed to submit to higher authorities to have the question answered. Hibbens was not in trouble for carrying on business, therefore, but for refusing to submit to the hierarchy of the community when the people came in conflict, just as men would have been in trouble. Hibbens was accused of trying to be above her place, and, when she criticized the church for its decision, she was excommunicated for remaining unrepentant. Her husband said he would abide by the church's decision, but he asked for their prayers for himself and his wife, affirming his belief in the proper order and hierarchy of the community.⁷⁴ The ideals of women (and men) had changed since the Reformation, but the Puritans continued to insist upon

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 282.

structure and proper societal roles.

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From a twentieth century standpoint, it is extremely tempting to look at seventeenth-century Puritan society as a place hostile to the women who lived there. Women and men had very different, narrowly defined secular roles within the community. Women were taught to be submissive, and the Puritan focus on order and hierarchy tended to place women's societal roles below those of men. It is also true that more women than men were tried and executed as witches throughout the seventeenth century, as well as during the crisis at Salem. To give in to the temptation to leap to hasty conclusions, however, ignores the great complexity of the society of that time.

To begin with, men as well as women were bound by the roles in which they were supposed to live. Both were chastised when they did not stay within their roles. Each side of this can be seen in the Ann Hibbens case -- she was rebuked for not accepting the authority of the church, and her husband was admonished, as well -- not for letting her contract for the repairs on the house, but for not exercising his authority and leadership after the church became involved with the dispute. Men were also held to their responsibility as provider in the cases of illegitimate children. The woman

could name the father of her child, especially during labor, and the man she named was held to be financially responsible for the child until the age of eighteen. The man could not blame the act or the pregnancy on the woman alone, his role bound him to responsibility for his actions, as well as responsibility for the child.⁷⁵

It is also important to note again that role differences based on sex do not necessarily imply sexism in a society. Notwithstanding modern debate, sexism is not an either/or question -- no one has yet seen the society that did not have discrimination based on sex. Puritan writings reflect the fact that they highly valued the ideal roles of the women in their society, and that they considered these roles essential to the smooth operation of society. Therefore, there was not a debilitating level of sexism, at least in the ideal definition of the community -- though the practice might have been somewhat different.

As for witchcraft, whatever popular superstition abounded about portents and witches, it did not come from the Puritan theology that taught that all humans were fallen, and that all were equally in need of, and had equal opportunity for, salvation. There was nothing in the Puritan religious doctrine to implicitly link women to witches. In contrast to much of the earlier religious thought, the Puritans did not

⁷⁵Morgan, Edmund. "Puritans and Sex." New England Quarterly. 15 (1942), p. 601.

blame the fall on Eve, and hence on all women. They frequently referred to Adam's sin, and they blamed the depravity of all humans on this. Men and women were equally sinful because they were born heirs of Adam. Women were not thought to be any more or less inclined to evil actions than men were. Puritan theology declared that, under the grace of God, all were equally capable of leading godly spiritual lives. Some Puritan writers went so far as to say that women were more capable than men in this regard, and, as proof, they held up the fact that more women than men were communicant members of churches.

Finally, the religion of the Puritans was nearly unique, in its time, in its positive view of the capabilities and roles of both women and men. Women were declared partners and helpers of men, not in a derogatory sense, but with a confident belief in the goodness and rightness of the commands of God. The Puritans were one of the very few European groups to promote the ideas that the mutual companionship of marriage was good in and of itself, and that sex was a gift of God to a husband and wife. Children were a good blessing as well, but the act of marriage was not limited to that purpose. Women had different societal roles, but they were valued for the contributions they could make within those roles. The images of women presented by the theological leaders were both positive and laudatory, and the doctrine was not the source for any misogyny that might

have existed in the community.

If misogyny was present, it had to have had another source. The prevalence of women in the witchcraft cases suggests that there was still a lingering suspicion of women in the colonies, though this assumption is not without its opponents. Hall has a valid point in Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment that the culture as a whole had many superstitions -- probably left over from folklore and the European heritage of the immigrants. The Catholic religion had emphasized for over one thousand years that women were wicked and were the source of much evil in the world; the reformation ideas were less than two hundred years old. One should not be surprised that a community of immigrants had mixed ideas about the workings of the world. While most of the immigrants came from England, they did not all come from the same background, and they did not all come following the Puritan vision. Many servants and many who immigrated after the 1640s came for new opportunities, not religious convictions.

In the Reformed tradition, the Puritans professed ideas of spiritual equality for women, though they did little to change their societal roles. The ministers stressed the value of women within their roles, and they promoted the worldly goodness of women and marriage. Their doctrine cannot be deemed a failure simply because not everyone in the community adhered to it. If the community members balked at

completely honoring women for fulfilling their positions, and if they revived ideas of misogyny, it was because they did not listen to the message of the Puritan religion, not because they did. The Puritans were trying to return ideas of religion and the church back to those found in the Bible, they were not trying to create new ones. They wanted their society to reflect the will of God, not to reinterpret it, so they wanted to keep the structure of the community intact. If they "did not go far enough" for the modern vision of social equality, they adhered to a radical version of spiritual equality while also valuing worldly roles.

The seventeenth-century world valued order and hierarchy, and the Puritans were content to fit themselves into defined roles. Their theology, however, taught them that all people were equal spiritually under God, and women, as well as men, were thought to be capable of goodness and righteousness under God. Although the Puritans kept the secular role differentiation that groups like the Quakers came closer to discarding, their positive spiritual view of women led to a positive societal view of women in their roles, limited as those roles might have been.

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