

CHURCH HISTORY III

WEEK 4: THE PURITANS AND THE 17TH CENTURY¹

INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when you hear the word “Puritan” today? Someone may be described as “puritanical” and it’s not a compliment. **H.L. Mencken**, a journalist for the Baltimore Sun in the early 20th century, said “*A Puritan was someone who feared that someone, somewhere, somehow might be having fun.*” **Garrison Keiler**, of Lake Wobegon fame, said that the Puritans came to America in the hopes of discovering greater restrictions than were permissible under English law.

These are just two examples of the popular negative stereotypes of the Puritans. This morning we want to explore more deeply: *who were the Puritans?*

They were a group of English clergy and lay people, who from about 1550 to 1662, the time of the Reformation to the Restoration of the Monarchy, were intent on purifying the Church of England by shaping it in structure and vision to the Bible. *They are the reformers of the reformation.*

Why should we care about the Puritans? Their thought and practice are precursors to us. They have had a large influence on how we as a church operate.

TWO REFORMATION PRINCIPLES WHICH WERE KEY FOR PURITANS

a. Theology of Justification

- a. The reformation of Luther, Calvin and others restored the great, Biblical idea that Justification is received only by faith.
- b. Good works are evidence but are not effective in justifying. The righteousness is not our own, it is the righteousness of Christ.

b. Theology of Scripture & Centrality of Preaching - Sola Scriptura

- a. Previously, the Roman Catholic church insisted that the Bible submitted to the authority of the Church, banning translation into vernacular languages and keeping it in the hands of the clergy.
- b. The Reformers argued Sola Scriptura, the opposite, that the church, the people of God, must submit to the authority of the Bible.

¹ <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/church-history/>

- c. They translated it into common languages so that people could read it for themselves. The church gets its authority from the Bible.
- d. With the bible in the people's hands, the interpretation of it by the pastor became the focus of the Puritan churches.
- e. So the sermon, the exposition and preaching of the Bible, took center stage in the life of the church, in the life of the Puritans. The church was to be an assembly of God's people, regenerated by his Spirit, bound together by his Spirit and sustained by his Word.

CONSEQUENCES OF SOLA FIDA AND SOLA SCRIPTURA ON THE CHURCH

a. The Church Service

- a. This centrality of Scripture dramatically changed their service. Previously, in Roman Catholicism: the mass and infant baptism, not the preaching of God's word, were the means of salvation.
- b. Architecture: baptismal fountain at the door of the church, altar for the mass was at the center; pulpit pushed off to the side.
- c. Sermons, if there was one, lasted 5 to 10 minutes. Now the preaching of the Word of God moved to the center, to take place from an elevated pulpit instead of the altar.

b. The Pastor

- a. As you might imagine this also dramatically changed the role of the pastor.
- b. Instead performing the mass or reading a brief homily, he was to preach and shepherd God's flock.
 - i. Thus arose an intense concern for training men for ministry and ensuring that only gifted, trained men served as pastors.
 - ii. In the 16th century, they had their work cut out for them. In 1551, Bishop John Hooper surveyed the ministers in his diocese and asked the following questions:
 1. How many commandments are there?
 2. Where are they to be found?
 3. Repeat them.
 4. What are the articles of the Christian faith?
 5. Prove them from Scripture.
 6. Repeat the Lord's Prayer.
 7. How do you know it is the Lord's?
 8. Where is it to be found?
 - iii. Out of 311 clergy, only 50 could answer these questions and 19 of those did poorly.
 - iv. 10 did not know the Lord's prayer and 8 couldn't answer a single question.

THE PURITAN STORY: JAMES I

- a. Last week we talked about the shape of the Church of England as it developed under the reign of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth.
- b. During the Elizabethan period the Church maintained a balance between a reformed, moderately Calvinist theology with a practice and government that appeared more Romish.
- c. Many Puritans wanted reform and wanted to abolish the bishops and have presbyteries and some were even Congregationalists. Some Puritans were content to stay within the Anglican Settlement as well.
- d. Elizabeth died in 1603 with no children, and her rightful heir was James VI of Scotland/ James I of England (he held both monarchies at the same time; his great grandmother was Henry VIII's sister. Scotland's church was already Presbyterian at that time (John Knox had founded it in the 1500s) – so Puritans looked with great hope at what would happen with James' ascension.

Puritans under James

- a. In 1603 the Puritans submit to him a list of things they want to see reformed: e.g. banishment of Catholic rite of confirmation, bowing at the name of Jesus during worship, etc.
- b. In Scotland, he had to submit to the session of a local church – he needed the episcopacy to secure his authority.
 - a. They wanted preaching ministers in churches, instead of just reading the Book of Common Prayer.
- c. Lastly, the Puritans wanted to replace the episcopal system of church government with a presbyterian one.
- d. 1604 – Hampton Court Conference– King James hears grievances (many Puritans in House of Commons) (this was big – first public demand for reform), none of which he granted, but did establish a project to produce the KJV bible.
- e. The same year he had the archbishop, Richard Bancroft, approve a series of canons that episcopacy was an institution of divine origin.
- f. The Puritans were mostly let down by James, except for the commissioning of the KJV Bible.

Charles I

- a. James died and his son, Charles I came to the throne. Under Charles, Puritan reform suffered a setback as he married a Roman Catholic, the sister of King Louis XIII of France, so he was sympathetic to a lot of Catholic teaching.

- b. There was also a growing Arminian presence in the Church of England, that challenged the theology of Calvinism, but also emphasized more ceremonial worship, use of the sacraments and a high view of clerical vocation – which looked to many like a Romish drift (the Arminians had contempt for the Reformation).
- c. William Laud (1633 – Archbishop of Canterbury) – Openly was an Arminian and often suspected of being a Catholic, Laud was the great enemy of Puritanism in England during this time.
 - a. He ordered death warrants and mutilation against Puritans. His signature phrase was “harry them out of the land” - *a policy that resulted in the Great Migration*, much of which was to America.
- d. What follows during the middle of the 1600s is a complex series of events that led to a war between Parliament and the King.
 - a. As Parliament became more and more heavily Puritan, they won, and Charles was tried and beheaded. Charles continually dismissed and reconvened Parliament many times to try and deal with a rebellion in Scotland – eventually the House of Commons, which was heavily Puritan, was able to.

Westminster Assembly

- a. One major event in the story of puritanism occurred near the outbreak of the English Civil War. Throughout the English Civil War (1642-1648), under the direction of Parliament, over one hundred Puritan leaders assembled at Westminster Abbey to draft a new confession of faith for the national Church.
- b. Although they generally agreed on Calvinistic theology, differences arose between the majority who advocated a national Presbyterian Church, and a small but vocal minority of Independents, led by Thomas Goodwin, who argued for the right of congregations to govern themselves.
- c. They finally reached a compromise that advocated the voluntary formation of congregational presbyteries throughout the country.
- d. The Church of Scotland immediately approved the Westminster Confession upon its completion in 1647, followed by Congregationalists in New England in 1648.
- e. A decade later, English Congregationalists meeting in London adopted the Westminster Confession in their Savoy Declaration (1658) with only minor modifications on church government.

Oliver Cromwell

- a. The period from 1649 to 1660 is known as the *time between reigns* during which England functioned like a republic with the leading general of Parliament’s army, Oliver Cromwell at the helm as Lord Protector.
- b. Cromwell was a Puritan and set out to reform church and state, granting greater religious toleration, but died in 1658. Charles II, son of Charles I (who was beheaded) took the throne to restore order.

Charles II

- a. With Charles II came a return to the episcopacy structure for the church and a return to the *Book of Common Prayer*. He picked up where his dad had left off, harassing the Puritans (as they had multiplied like rabbits from 1649 – 1660), out of England.
- b. He passed a law that every minister must agree to the every word of the *Book of Common Prayer* by St. Bartholomew's Day 1662 or you must resign your pulpit.
 - a. On the 24th of August, 2000 of the 6000 pastors in England resigned.
- c. This is known as the **Great Ejection** and was a real blow to three denominations that had been growing, the Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians – these ejected pastors began to spread these churches illegally throughout England.
- d. This in many ways is the end of the Puritan period, because they were kicked out of the churches, no longer to purify them but to plant new churches.
 - a. Between 1662 and the 1870s, you could not be educated at Cambridge or Oxford if you objected to the *Book of Common Prayer*, so 1662 is the end of Puritan formal education.

Puritans in America

- a. By early 1600s (end of Elizabeth, start of James) many Puritans saw little hope for reforming the Church of England, so they began to look elsewhere to establish their own model a purely Protestant, reformed Christian community.
- b. They wanted it to serve as a model, so it had to be far enough away for freedom, but close enough to be observed. The solution was North America.
- c. *Wall St. Journal* piece: The Desolate Wilderness, piece written in the 1600s based on the records of the Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford, printed every year since 1961:

The next day they went on board, and their friends with them, where truly doleful was the sight of that sad and mournful parting, to hear what sighs and sobs and prayers did sound amongst them; what tears did gush from every eye, and pithy speeches pierced each other's heart, that sundry of the strangers that stood on the Key as spectators could not refrain from tears. But the tide (which stays for no man) calling them away, that were thus loath to depart, their Reverend Pastor, falling down on his knees, and they all with him, with watery cheeks commended them with the most fervent prayers unto the Lord and His blessing; and then with mutual embraces and many tears they took their leaves one of another, which proved to be the last leave to many of them.

- d. In 1628 the first to go created the Massachusetts Bay Company, and took their charter with them to establish its headquarters in America, to avoid English interference.
- e. Sailed on the *Arbella*, led by John Winthrop:

Winthrop described himself and his people as “a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ.” And while he believed that “the Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways,” Winthrop also invoked divine judgment on himself and his fellow Christians should they break their covenant with God.

“...we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

- f. They did not seek a break with the Church of England – still members of that Church – just to be a model. This was not arrogance but it was a humble mission as they recognized that though they hoped to be a light to the world, if they were not faithful to God, he would remove his blessing and they would fail.
 - a. This is the Great Migration, when 10,000 Puritans fled during Laud’s reign in the 1630s.

Pilgrims

- a. The Pilgrims were different from the Puritans because they were separatists, they did not seek to reform the Church of England, or to be a model for it, they sought to be independent, to separate from it.
- b. They had originally left England for Netherlands around 1608 but dissatisfied, they set sail for America on the Mayflower, landing in 1620 at Plymouth. So this settlement actually predated Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- c. They wound up north of their intended landing spot with the Virginia Company of London (Jamestown in 1608 was the first permanent English settlement in North America). Meanwhile other Puritans spread out – Thomas Hooker founded Hartford, Connecticut in 1636 and John Davenport founded New Haven in 1638.
- d. Yet with the peace in the 1650s many Puritans moved back to England, but then the Restoration period sent many back to America.

Covenant and Half-Way Covenant

- a. Central to the Puritan vision for the church and the Christian life was the covenant. Churches, families, government, and society were organized around the idea of covenant.

- b. The Puritans' idea was this: God makes a covenant with nations when they glorify him – so if disaster strikes, then it was a warning that people were not living up to their covenant obligations – so they would call on everyone to fast and repent.
 - a. You can see how this covenant view envisions a society that is holistically Christian, where both secular and sacred life are tied together in a sacred covenant between the people and with God.
- c. A practical outworking of this was the Puritan meeting house was in the center of town and where the church gathered and the community conducted business.
- d. **The entry point into this covenant society was infant baptism** – through baptism you became a member of the church, and therefore qualified to participate in government and vote.
 - a. This worked without a problem in the first generation because most Puritans were converted Christians – but this changed over time.
- e. **Half-Way Covenant**
 - a. Baptism was understood as a seal of the covenant of grace – but in the second generation, many who were baptized were not professing Christ. Then *they* had children, so the Puritans faced a dilemma:
 - i. They wanted to keep the church membership as truly converted Christians.
 - ii. They also wanted to maintain the church influence over the people and society.
 - b. Solution...Half-Way Covenant (1662) which allowed children of unconverted members of the church to still be baptized, but not take the Lord's supper – a half-way membership that preserved the interlocking system of individual, church, and society.
 - c. Unfortunately, this also reveals how quickly the Puritans were compromising with the world.
 - d. Another mark of this drift from Puritan principles was that they founded Harvard in 1636 to educate ministers but by 1701 they founded Yale because Harvard had drifted so far from Puritan principles.
 - e. So by 1700 in America, Puritanism had died as a reform movement, but in its evangelical piety, it would live on – which we will talk about next week.

Puritan Writings

- a. If you have read anything by the Puritans, you know they can be a bit difficult at times to read. When they wrote about something they really wrote about it. Looking at it from a slightly different angle...and they do it again and again.
- b. What they do is take an idea and treat it like a precious gem, and they stare at it, the way the light is refracted through it, and then after an exhaustive examination, they turn it just ever so slightly, and repeat the process.

- c. So reading the Puritans is a meditative practice. Slow down and meditate on the glory of God on His complexities and mercies and magnificence...focus on quality and not quantity. Many of them were written as sermons, so try reading them out loud.
- d. The most famous is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which is a story. Bunyan was a Baptist and a tinkerer that repaired pots. But he was also a gifted preacher – Charles II once heard Bunyan preaching and asked John Owen why everyone went to hear a tinkerer preach. Owen replied, “Sire, I would give all my learning to be able to preach one sermon like that man.”

Other Great Puritan Writings

- a. **John Owen:** Mortification of Sin
- b. **Richard Baxter:** A Call to the Unconverted: “Our telling you of your misery is not to make you miserable, but to drive you out to seek for mercy. It is you who have brought this death on yourselves. We tell you also of another death, [one] even remediless, and much greater torment that will fall on those who will not be converted.”
- c. **Valley of Vision:** A modern collection of Puritan prayers, organized and categorized according to type.
- d. **Richard Sibbes:** Known among his contemporaries as “The Sweet Dropper,” Puritan pastor renowned for his preaching.
 - a. *The Bruised Reed.* This book centers around the third verse in Isaiah 42. It reads, "A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth."
 - b. Breaking that verse down, Sibbes does a masterful job of comforting and encouraging Christians in their walk with Christ.
- e. A lot of their writings were forgotten during the centuries after them, MLJ does a very important work in the 20th century helping to start the Banner of Truth trust, which became a very important repository and publishing house for many Puritan writings.

Puritan Spirituality and Theology

- a. J.I. Packer suggests six areas in which the Puritans can instruct us today.
 - a. “integration of their daily lives”: Everything they thought, said and did was seen as sacred, all facets of life for the Glory of God
 - b. “the quality of their spiritual experience”: They constantly meditated on Scripture and on the Lord, and engaged in intense self-examination in light of these truths
 - c. “passion for effective action”: Packer writes, “They were men of action in the pure Reformed mold – crusading activists without a jot of self-reliance; workers for God who depended utterly on God to

work in and through them, and who always gave God the praise for anything they did that in retrospect seemed to them to have been right.”

- d. “program for family stability”: Love and commitment between husband and wife & passion and devotion to the development of their children
 - e. “sense of human worth”: Every humans dignity because they are created in the image of God
 - f. “ideal of church renewal”: Always sought God’s reforming and reviving work through the local church
- b. Packer summarizes: *“Puritanism was essentially a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival; and in addition...it was a world-view, a total Christian philosophy.”*

Conclusion

- a. **Sovereignty of God:** Fire reformed faith, they disagreed over church governance but not over the absolute sovereignty of God – the covenant was established by God, not a contract that we can break, but one unilaterally established and maintained by God
- b. **Heart & Head:** They did not see the heart and head as separate, just as they did not see any parts of the Christian life as separate – their knowledge of God stirred their love and passion for God and vice versa
- c. **Pastoral Theology:** They were doctors of the soul, caring well for Christians by examining the condition of each one’s soul and asking tough questions about their lives and if their were signs of the God’s grace and renewal in their lives.

These men, though flawed as are all, are excellent models for us in their zeal for Scripture, understanding of the Gospel, and commitment to thoroughly reforming their lives and the life of the church – all to the glory of God.