

## Church History (33): An Overview of Puritanism

Beginning with this lesson, we will examine what's commonly called Puritanism. We shall first give an overview of the Puritan era, examine their primary concerns (doctrine and practice), and then survey various key figures.

### I. An Overview of Puritanism

1. *Their origins.* Puritanism (in the strict sense) was an English reformation spanning the Uniformity Acts of 1559 and 1662. "Puritanism as a movement largely began as an endeavor to reform the face of the English Church, and to do so according to the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone" (Lewis).<sup>1</sup> "Puritanism was part of the Protestant Reformation in England. While it first assumed the form of an organized movement in the 1560s, its roots reach back into the first half of the centuries in figures like Tyndale and Latimer" (Ryken).<sup>2</sup> The term "puritan" was given to such men by their opponents. "The term *Puritan* was first used in the 1560s of those English Protestants who considered the reforms under Queen Elizabeth incomplete and called for further 'purification'" (Beeke).<sup>3</sup> "The puritans wished to 'purify' the church of the remaining vestiges of Catholic ceremony, ritual, and hierarchy" (Ryken).<sup>4</sup> "The essence of Puritanism was a desire that the Reformation in the Church of England should be completed" (MLJ).<sup>5</sup>

Puritanism I define as that movement in sixteenth and seventeenth century England which sought further reformation and renewal in the Church of England than the Elizabethan settlement allowed. 'Puritan' itself was an imprecise term of contemptuous abuse which between 1564 and 1642 (these exact dates are given by Thomas Fuller and Richard Baxter) was applied to at least four overlapping groups of people—first, to clergy who scrupled some *Prayer Book* ceremonies and phrasing; second, to advocates of the Presbyterian reform programme broached by Thomas Cartwright and the 1572 *Admonition to the Parliament*; third, to clergy and laity, not necessarily nonconformists, who practiced a serious Calvinistic piety; fourth, to 'rigid Calvinists' who applauded the Synod of Dort, and were called doctrinal Puritans by other Anglicans who did not.<sup>6</sup>

"When Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and her first parliament made the Church of England Protestant again in 1559, after the brief but bloody Catholic interlude under Mary Tudor (1553-8), few of the more Protestant-minded Anglican clergy realized that the 1559 religious settlement was to become permanent. Many of them expected to see further reforms" (Needham).<sup>7</sup> The Act of Supremacy in 1559, established her as the Supreme Governor of the Church. She then reinstated the Prayer Book with certain significant changes. "Offensive references to the Pope were omitted and the words of administration of the Communion permitted a wide range of beliefs about the doctrine of the presence of Christ" (Toon).<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Prayer Book, the Act of Supremacy also mandated church decorations, wearing clerical vestments, the sign of the cross in baptism, kneeling at communion, and the keeping of various holy days. An oath was expected by all clergy, judges, and servants of the Crown. "Those who would not take the Oath of Supremacy were removed from office by the Royal

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 13

<sup>2</sup> Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 7

<sup>3</sup> Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, xv

<sup>4</sup> Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 7

<sup>5</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans and Puritanism*, 240

<sup>6</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 35

<sup>7</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:183

<sup>8</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 11

Commissioners who visited all parts of the kingdom. Royal Injunctions set out the details of Church life. These controlled the licensing of preachers, the use of official homilies, the provision of an English Bible and the *Paraphrases* of Erasmus for parish churches, the catechizing of youth, the removal of shrines and images, publication of books, the wearing of clerical dress and other matters" (Toon).<sup>9</sup> Queen Elizabeth insisted on compliance and ordered her Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker (1504-1575), to take action. "On January 25, 1565 the Queen wrote to Parker expressing alarm about the failure of clergy to dress correctly and to use the Prayer Book. She required that he and his bishops enforce conformity" (Toon).<sup>10</sup> "Parker took stern measures and in 1565, he cancelled all licenses to preach that had been granted before March of that year: for now on, licenses would be given only to those who conformed" (Needham).<sup>11</sup> Many ministers conformed to the Queen, but others refused. "This division was the most apparent in London and the University towns and only gradually became a real issue in the far corners of the land. Puritanism as a distinct movement in English Protestantism was thus born in this conflict over vestments" (Toon).<sup>12</sup>

But the issue for many of these Separatists or Puritans, wasn't merely vestments and the Prayer Book. Many came to see the entire structure of the church needed reform. One such man was Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), professor at Cambridge. "In the Spring of 1570 in a series of lectures on Acts 2, he called for the abolition of archbishops, bishops, deans and archdeacons and the rule of each local church by a presbytery. Other Puritans had been thinking on similar lines to Cartwright, and believed that the National Church could not be reformed unless its organizational structure was drastically changed" (Toon).<sup>13</sup> "For Cartwright, there was no office higher than the minister of a local congregation: all ministers were equal. Further, ministers should collectively rule the Church according to the Presbyterian form of government whose outlines Martin Bucer and John Calvin had drawn in the previous generation. More ominously for the Anglican authorities, he maintained that each congregation should choose its own minister: neither landowner nor monarch had any rights here" (Needham).<sup>14</sup> This led two Separatist or Puritan ministers in June of 1571 to write *An Admonition to Parliament*. "This was the most severe attack by Protestants on Protestants that had been published in England. Whilst the authors went triumphantly to Newgate Prison, their book went through three printings in four months." (Toon).<sup>15</sup>

"Once the Queen overcame the international threat of Catholicism by defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588, she turned her attention again to reinforce conformity within the English Church. Her new Court of High Commission under Archbishop John Whitgift (1530-1604) suspended hundreds of clergy, accusing them of sedition and disloyalty in her *Act Against Puritans* in 1593" (Kapic).<sup>16</sup> But by this time, the Puritans had strongholds in various Universities. "Cambridge and Oxford, but especially the former, were beginning by 1570 to supply the rank and file of a larger Puritan party. Young men came from some of their Colleges and Halls already accustomed to opposing aspects of ecclesiastical authority. They had been taught that the constitution of the Church was popish rather than reformed" (Toon).<sup>17</sup> "Cambridge was dominated during Elizabethan times by the teaching and preaching of such giants as

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 11-12

<sup>10</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 14

<sup>11</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:184

<sup>12</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 14

<sup>13</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 15

<sup>14</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:193-194

<sup>15</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 16

<sup>16</sup> Kelly Kapic and Randall Gleason, *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, 19

<sup>17</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism*, 16

Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), William Perkins (1558-1602), and John Preston (1587-1628)" (Horton).<sup>18</sup>

2. *Their history.* (1) Persecution and migration to the new world. From the *Act Against the Puritans* in 1593 and the Civil War in 1642, the Puritan movement both grew stronger and was severely persecuted. When King James I replaced Elizabeth in 1603, all hopes of improvement were ended. "Demanding conformity as rigorously as Elizabeth ever had, James was a disappointment for the Puritans of England, and a growing number of Puritans began to separate, some leaving the Church of England, some leaving England itself. And so, in 1620, some eager emigrants set sail for the new world aboard the *Mayflower*. It was a move that would catch the Puritan imagination: the godly fleeing oppression in England looked like Israel fleeing Egypt. And, like Israel, they were seeking a promised land of freedom. There they would create a fully reformed society, freed from the shackles of the past" (Beeke).<sup>19</sup> Things further declined when Charles I replaced James in 1625, and appointed his trusted advisor, William Laud (1573-1645), as the bishop of London in 1628. "After Charles dissolved Parliament and assumed personal rule in 1629, Bishop Laud unleashed a bitter persecution of Puritans. He prohibited the preaching of predestination, required all clergy to use the prayer book and clerical dress, and made the laity kneel while receiving Communion. After his appointment of Canterbury in 1633, he opposed the Puritan observance of the Sabbath by demanding that the Book of Sports be read from every pulpit upon threat of suspension" (Beeke).<sup>20</sup> This led to further Puritans leaving England for the new world. "During the next decade, some of the most esteemed preachers in England, including John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Thomas Shepard joined 13,000 emigrants who sailed to New England" (Beeke).<sup>21</sup>

(2) Civil war. "Back in old England, things got worse. James's son Charles I (reigned 1625-1649) began pushing a distinctly anti-Puritan agenda harder and harder. Political and religious tensions mounted until England found herself in a civil war. For a decade, England became a commonwealth under the protectorate of the Cromwells, and a place of unprecedented opportunity for the Puritans" (Beeke).<sup>22</sup> In 1642 in league with the Scottish Presbyterians and the support of the Puritan clergy, Parliament turned upon Charles plunging the country into civil war. In 1642-1651 three wars took place between the Parliamentarians and Royalists (loyal to the King). Oliver Cromwell led the newly formed army and defeated the Royalists. This resulted in the execution of Charles I and the exile of his son (Charles II). Oliver Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector from 1653 unto his death in 1658. Under Cromwell Puritanism thrived. "Cromwell's guarantee of religious freedoms allowed unprecedented growth among nearly all religious sects. Independents were promoted to positions of great power within the Puritan Commonwealth. John Owen, for example, was appointed vice-chancellor of Oxford, a former royalists stronghold" (Beeke).<sup>23</sup>

(3) Uniformity Act of 1662. When Cromwell died in 1658 his son's (Richard) failed attempt to succeed his father created a complex political crisis that allowed the Royalists to regain power. Charles II returned to England in 1660, and in 1662, he reinstated the *Act of Uniformity*. This barred thousands of Puritan ministers from their pulpits. "The *Act of Uniformity* in May 1662 required all parish clergy to submit unconditionally to the doctrine and worship of the restored Anglican Church, promise never to attempt any change to the status quo in church or state, and to receive Episcopal ordination if they

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas Horton, *The Marrow of Theology*, 3

<sup>19</sup> Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 8

<sup>20</sup> Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 8

<sup>21</sup> Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 8

<sup>22</sup> Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 8

<sup>23</sup> Joel Beeke, *Following God Fully: An Introduction to the Puritans*, 9

lacked it. In all, between 1660 and 1662, the established Church lost roughly one fifth of its ministers (Needham).<sup>24</sup>

3. *Their Standards*. Taken more broadly, the term Puritan can be applied to four categories of people: Anglicans (those who remained within the Church of England), Presbyterians, Congregationalists (Independents), and Baptists. While the latter three are more formally Puritan, the first includes such men as John Boys (1571-1625) and Edward Reynolds (1593-1676). These men, while remaining in the Church of England, shared basic theological and practical convictions as those who left. Most Puritans who left the Church became Presbyterians, and from these, some became Congregationalists and Baptists. Thus, apart from their many books, one of the greatest legacies of the Puritans were their three Confessions: the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration (1558), and the Baptist Confession of 1689. The Savoy Declaration and Baptist Confession were both written for the express purpose of showing unity with the Westminster Confession. "Both the Independents and Calvinistic Baptists stated that they embraced the Westminster Confession (albeit in slightly adapted form) to demonstrate their essential unity with their Reformed brethren on all the major issues of theology" (Needham).<sup>25</sup> Thomas Goodwin said of the Savoy: "We have therefor declared what has been our constant faith and order, to be published to the world. And to show our harmony with the most orthodox at home and abroad, we have expressed our assent to that Confession of Faith which is the latest and best."<sup>26</sup> In similar fashion, the authors of the 1689 said in the preface to their confession, "finding no defect in this regard in that fixed on by the Assembly, and, after them by those of the Congregational way, we did readily conclude it best to retain the same order in our present Confession."<sup>27</sup> "No creed of the Christian Church is comparable to that of Westminster in respect of the skill with which the fruits of fifteen centuries of Christian thought have been preserved, and at the same time examined anew and clarified in the light of that fuller understanding of God's Word which the Holy Spirit has imparted" (Murray).<sup>28</sup>

(1) The gathering of the Assembly. The Westminster Assembly was gathered by Parliament (at the start of the civil war), to originally revise the Thirty-nine Articles. The Assembly met for six years (1643-1649) in a total of 1163 sessions. Of the 104 men present, a few were moderate Anglicans and Independents, but most were Presbyterians. Scotland sent six delegates including Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie. William Twisse (1578-1646) was appointed moderator. "The Assembly was not theologically monolithic. It included Presbyterians, Independents, moderate Episcopalians, and Erasmians (those who believed that ultimate ecclesiastical authority lay with the state)" (Needham).<sup>29</sup> Most have agreed, that within the Westminster Assembly (named from the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey, where they met), we have the greatest gathering of theologians ever assembled in church history. "They were men of eminent learning and godliness, ministerial abilities and fidelity. And the Christian world, since the days of the apostles, has never had a synod of more excellent divines, than this synod, and the synod of Dort" (Baxter).<sup>30</sup>

Parliament issued on its own responsibility an ordinance, June 12, 1643, commanding that an assembly of divines should be convened at Westminster, in London, on the first day of July following, to effect a more perfect reformation of the Church of England in its liturgy, discipline, and government on the basis of the Word of God, and thus to bring it into nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches on the

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:300-301

<sup>25</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:249-250

<sup>26</sup> Preface to the Savoy Declaration of Faith

<sup>27</sup> Preface to the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689

<sup>28</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 1:317

<sup>29</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:246

<sup>30</sup> Richard Baxter, quoted by Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 1:91

Continent. The Assembly was thus created by State authority. In like manner, the ancient ecumenical councils were called by emperors, and the Synod of Dort by the government of the United Provinces. Once constituted, the Assembly was not interfered with, and enjoyed the fullest freedom of debate. Its standards were wholly the work of competent divines, and received the full and independent assent of ecclesiastical bodies.<sup>31</sup>

(2) The documents of the Assembly. In total, the Assembly produced five documents: the Form of Church Government, the Directory of Public Worship, the Confession of Faith, and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. (a) The Form of Church Government. On 12 October 1643, Parliament ordered the Assembly to cease work on the Thirty-Nine Articles and to begin to frame a common form of church government. "Of all the Westminster Standards the one which was at once the most pressing and the most difficult for the Assembly was the preparation of a platform of government for the Churches" (Warfield).<sup>32</sup> This was largely due to a small but very influential presence by the Congregationalists. "The Independents were a distinct minority, some ten or twelve members, but what they lacked in quantity they made up for in theological sharpness, eloquence, and persistence. They exercised an influence far in excess of their numbers" (Needham).<sup>33</sup> They included such men as Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, Joseph Caryl, and William Bridge. They were often called the 'dissenting brethren' in the Assembly, as they eventually agreed to disagree on this topic, but not before sending a summary of their views to Parliament. "This document was later published (1648) under the title, *The Reasons Presented by the Dissenting Brethren Against Certain Propositions Concerning Church Government, together with the Answers of the Assembly of Divines to these Reasons of Dissent.*" In the end, a modest but consistent Presbyterian church government was agreed upon by the majority and approved by Parliament.

The Independents and Erastians withdrew before the final adoption of the Form of Church Government, and left the field to the Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Church polity was at length established by the English Parliament, which ordained, June 29, 1647, that 'all parishes within England and Wales be brought under the government of congregational, classical, and national churches, according to the form of Presbyterian government agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster.' Provinces were to take the place of dioceses, and were again divided into classes or presbyteries, and these were to elect representatives to a national assembly. Presbyterianism was nominally the established religion - Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:739-740

(b) The Directory of Public Worship. "Next to the elaboration of a new scheme of government for the Church of England, the most pressing task committed to the Assembly of Divines was the preparation of a new form of worship to take the place of The Book of Common Prayer" (Warfield).<sup>34</sup> Though again, there was some debate on particulars, "the Directory for Public Worship was sent up to Parliament by the end of 1644, and in January of 1645, was established in England and Wales, and a month later it was approved and established in Scotland" (Warfield).<sup>35</sup> The Directory addresses a number of issues: Behavior in the Public Worship of God; Of Public Reading of the Holy Scripture; Of Public Prayer before the Sermon; Of the Preaching of the Word; Of Prayer after the Sermon; Of the Administration of the Sacraments; Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day; The Solemnization of Marriage;

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:730-731

<sup>32</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:36

<sup>33</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:248

<sup>34</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:45

<sup>35</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:45

Concerning Visitation of the Sick; Concerning the Burial of the Dead; Concerning Public Solemn Fasting; Concerning the Observations of Days of Public Thanksgiving; Of Singing of Psalms. It then ends with An Appendix: Touching Days and Places for Public Worship. "There is no day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued."

With regards to the preaching of the Word, the Directory asserts, "the servant of Christ is to perform his whole ministry: painfully, not doing the work of the Lord negligently; plainly, that the meanest may understand; faithfully, looking to the honor of Christ, the conversion, edification, and salvation of the people, not at his own gain or glory; wisely, framing all his doctrines, exhortations, and especially his reproofs, in such a manner as may be most likely to prevail; gravely, as becomes the word of God, shunning all such gesture, voice, and expressions, as may occasion the corruptions of men to despise him and his ministry; with loving affection, that the people may see all coming from his godly zeal, and hearty desire to do them good; as taught of God, and persuaded in his own heart, that all that he teaches is the truth of Christ."

(c) The Confession of Faith. "The Westminster Confession was the Assembly's greatest achievement. Completed in November 1646, it was a majestic monument to Reformed Orthodoxy, embracing its later characteristic framework of covenant theology. The Confession's chief source was the Irish Articles of 1615, a confession of faith drafted by Archbishop Ussher for Ireland's established Church; the Irish Articles were more fully and explicitly Reformed than the English Church's 39 Articles. The Westminster Confession largely follows the Irish Articles in the order of topics, the chapter headings, and the phraseology" (Needham).<sup>36</sup>

(d) The Shorter and Larger Catechisms. "After the Confession was finished, the new Catechism was taken up, and from September 14, 1646, to January 4, 1647, it was rapidly passed through the Assembly up to the questions which dealt with the Fourth Commandment" (Warfield).<sup>37</sup> It was at this point the Assembly became convinced it was necessary to make two Catechisms, "one more exact and comprehensive, another more easy and short for new beginners."<sup>38</sup> The Larger Catechism has 196 questions, and the Shorter Catechism has 107 questions. "Resuming on this new basis, the Shorter Catechism was finished on November 22 1647, and the Larger Catechism was finished on October 15 1648" (Warfield).<sup>39</sup> In 1693 at their General Assembly, the Baptists determined, "That a Catechism be drawn up, containing the substance of the Christian religion, for the instruction of children and servants, and that brother William Collins be desired to draw it up,"<sup>40</sup> Thus, as with their Confession of Faith, the Baptist slightly altered the Westminster Shorter Catechism. In addition to changing the questions on Baptism, they omitted the first question and added in its place five additional questions: "Q.1. *Who is the first and chiefest being?* A. God is the first and chiefest being. Q.2. *Ought everyone to believe there is a God?* A. Everyone ought to believe there is a God; and it is their great sin and folly who do not. Q.3. *How may we know there is a God?* A. The light of nature in man and the works of God plainly declare there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do it fully and effectually for the salvation of sinners. Q. 4. *What is the Word of God?* A. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, and the only certain rule of faith and obedience. Q.5. *May all men make use of the Holy Scriptures?* A. All men are not only permitted, but commanded and exhorted to read, hear, and understand the Holy Scriptures."

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<sup>36</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:248

<sup>37</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:62

<sup>38</sup> Taken from Minutes of the Assembly, quoted by B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:62

<sup>39</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 6:63

<sup>40</sup> The General Assembly of 1693, *The Baptist Confession of Faith and The Baptist Catechism*, 89-90