

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

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“The Puritans And Their Influence On The Great Awakening” by Rev. John Snyder

Great Movements:

As with great rivers, so with great historic religious movements, it is often difficult to trace their sources. When we consider Puritanism and the First Great Awakening, those periods of British and American church history which are so vitally connected to our own understanding of Christianity in this country, we find extra hurdles.

One problem that faces the student of history is terminology. Who were the Puritans? Were they overly harsh and narrow-minded right-wing Protestants? Were they a politically motivated sect? The very word "Puritan" was a label put upon this group by their opponents. Richard Baxter, a leading Puritan author and pastor, remarked that as a young boy he heard his parents called "Puritans" for no other reason than that they didn't indulge in alcohol nor play sports on Sunday.

In fact, Puritanism was more of a movement in the English and later the American churches rather than a tightly connected group. The title could apply to the Baptist John Bunyan (author of the *Pilgrim's Progress*), the Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford in Scotland, the Congregationalist John Owen, and the Anglican Archbishop Ussher. What connected these men? When did they influence history? What happened to them and their influence? And, of course, is there any real benefit to our considering these questions today?

The Puritans can be most simply classified as those pastors (and their parishioners) who desired to see the English Church continue in the course which was begun with the Protestant Reformation. During the early reign of Henry VIII those men who desired to see the Church purified of non-biblical traditions were often persecuted, many escaping to the Continent and coming under the influence of John Calvin and other Reformation leaders.

When Elizabeth I took the throne she shrewdly contrived a "compromise" for her country's religion. She would allow the

Thanksgiving Feast

We are working out the final details for our Thanksgiving Feast in November. We have set a tentative date of Saturday, November 21, but will notify you of time and location.

Look for sign-up sheets for food to bring. If you (or your class) has anything that you would like to present to the group (such as reciting a related poem) please get with Nichole Hardin.

Be sure to start work on your Pilgrim and Indian costumes!

Christmas Brunch

December 5th

Details to follow soon!



Reformed doctrines in the Church of England (the 39 Articles), while maintaining many of the Roman Catholic externals and traditions. This proved a wise *political* policy, but one which pleased few of the more serious-minded pastors in the land on matters of *religion*. Elizabeth preferred not to persecute those ministers who disagreed with her 'Compromise'; and, instead she saw to it that those who were committed to 'purify' the church further would never hold positions of influence in her church.

This strange situation, in which there co-existed a freedom from persecution alongside clear limitations for 'Puritans', produced the environment in which Puritanism thrived. Those who wished to continue to reform the church could preach and write but were not allowed to influence ecclesiastical decisions at the higher levels.

Thus, the Puritan pastors poured their energies into a vast and rich legacy of books which would outlive them and influence Christians for centuries to come.

The end of Puritanism as a movement came in 1666 when they were ejected from their churches. Over two thousand pastors were forced out in one day. These men were not allowed to hold any pastorate, teach in any educational institution, or even to accept positions as personal tutors to the children of the wealthy. During this persecution many chose to leave for the American colonies. It wasn't until 1688 that they were allowed a measure of religious freedom in Britain. With the passage of the Act of Toleration they were able to form their own "dissenting" churches: Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist. Thus, the attempt to purify the Church of England came to an end; and, so the century of Puritanism resulted in the formation of a number of churches outside the state church. But was this the end of the Puritan spirit and effort?

The Years that Followed:

The years that followed, referred to as the Restoration period, were marked by a rapid and shocking moral decline in Britain. It seemed as if the whole nation was bent upon reacting against Puritan moral strictness. The gin craze erupted. Cheap and unregulated liquor led to unheard of growth in alcoholism. The wealthy and educated turned their time and talents to the mockery of orthodox Christianity. Deism (the view that God was an impersonal being who did not interfere in human affairs; and, thus a view that denied all the miracles and work of Christ) became the new rage in philosophy. Immorality among clergy, the greed and laziness of non-residence (an accepted practice where a man might hold many pastorates and work in none of them, but collect a salary for all), and a rejection of many of the biblical teachings plagued the nation.

This downward spiral did shock many of the clergy and concerned citizens into action. Societies were formed which organized people into moral 'watch-groups'. The Society for the Reformation of Manners was one of the more popular

groups. New laws were enforced, often cruelly, with regard to public profanity and drunkenness. Christian books were written that explained the ethics and moral duties of those who were 'Christian'. The greatest thinkers of the English Church pumped out volumes in defense of the biblical views of God and the work of Christ, in an attempt to derail the rising popularity of Deism. But the historical facts all point to the conclusion that they were generally unsuccessful at each level. The moral decline seemed inevitable.

A Sudden Sunrise:

The dawn of hope came from an unexpected quarter. It wasn't the Presbyterians (they were heading into heresy in England at this time), or the Congregationalists or Baptists (who were locked in bitter internal theological disputes) who would come to the aid of the cause of true Christianity. It was in fact a handful of young (most in their early 20's) students preparing for the ministry in the Church of England that God raised up. These men would become the leaders of what is referred to as the Evangelical Revival in Britain, and the First Great Awakening in the American Colonies. It would be a religious movement that fundamentally changed the very moral fabric of those two great countries, evidence of which we still see today.

What does this have to do with the Puritans, most of whom had died 50 years prior to the Great Awakening? The fact is that these young leaders found little in their own churches or universities to guide them spiritually. Ostracized for their religious zeal, accused of representing a resurgence of Puritanism, these young men turned to the forgotten Puritan writings for wisdom. For example, George Whitefield, the first and most significant of the English revival men (called 'Methodists' for their methodical and serious approach to Christianity) was guided to spiritual peace by the little Puritan book, *A Sure Guide to Heaven*. Later, while recovering from an extended illness, Whitefield was given a copy of the Puritan Matthew Henry's *Bible Commentary* and spent hours each day kneeling over it as he studied his Greek New Testament. Whitefield would later attribute those hours under Henry's influence as the most formative influence on his theology outside of the Bible itself.

Whitefield would become the central figure of the Great Awakening on both sides of the Atlantic. His powerful preaching and Puritan theology made him the friend of Scottish Presbyterians, Welsh Methodists, English Methodists, and American Congregationalists. Under his preaching, all of these separate revival movements were united into one great Awakening which would last in some places for a decade or more. Whitefield's second trip to the American colonies was the most important for him personally, as he packed a great number of Puritan books with him. It was by reading these, as well as by the influence of American ministers like Jonathan Edwards, that Whitefield completed his theological pilgrimage and

embraced that high view of God which characterized the Puritans and the Great Awakening.

Other leaders in England and Wales were also greatly influenced by the Puritan writers. William Grimshaw, an Anglican priest in the north of England, found his own soul in turmoil. He could find no peace in his own good works nor his religious duties. He looked for help from contemporaries, only to be scolded for his overly sensitive conscience. It wasn't until Grimshaw picked up and studied the Puritan John Owen's book, *On Justification*, that he found true peace with God through the cross of Christ.

Grimshaw would become the third greatest preacher in England in the 18th Century (according to John Wesley). John Wesley was not converted by the Puritans (Luther's commentaries have that distinction), but he was heavily influenced by their writings in the area of practical holiness. Wesley disagreed with the Puritan view of God's sovereignty, but found their carefulness in pastoring a great help to him. He eventually published his *Christian Library* for the training of lay-preachers. It was a compilation of edited Christian classics that would fill 40+ volumes. The great majority of those classics were Puritan.

In Wales, a young school teacher was struggling with his own salvation. He went to the common Anglican books on morality, only to find that he could not find a settled peace by mere morality. He found the Puritan books a better help. He was led to see that salvation was a free gift, but a gift that would make a tremendous difference in the life of the believer. Howell Harris became one of the greatest Welsh preachers, and the primary organizer of the Welsh side of the Evangelical Revival. He kept copious notes of his daily struggles in his *Journals* (over 300 of these still exist). In these he constantly mentions Puritan authors he found helpful as guides as he steered the young Welsh converts through their own sanctification. Harris took longer than the others to come to the Puritan views of God and salvation. But his journey is carefully mapped in his journals as he tracks which



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was an Italian artist born at the very end of the 16th century. His intensely emotional realism and dramatic use of lighting had a formative influence on the Baroque school of painting.

Living 400 years ago in the time of the counter reformation; in the time of Shakespeare; Caravaggio staged scenes with lighting that inspires modern film directors. For the modern viewer, having lived with high quality images and movies; it is difficult for us to conceive the effect his realism had in its days. Famous (and notorious) while he lived, Caravaggio was forgotten almost immediately after his death, and it was only in the 20th century that his importance to the development of Western art was rediscovered. He had a profound influence on the art of Rubens and Rembrandt, two other artists that we will study this year.

Puritan book he was reading at the time and what he was learning at the time.

In America, the Puritan views were more generally held in the churches, but a deadness in their orthodoxy had crept in. Men like Jonathan Edwards found the Puritan books a great help as they combined doctrine with experience. When the First Great Awakening came under attack by its opponents, men like Edwards often went back to the Puritan writings to help explain the nature of true Christian experience as distinguished from mere emotionalism. The converts of the Great Awakening were fed a steady diet of Puritan devotional books. For instance, if one reads the *Journals* of David Brainerd, the early missionary to the American Indians, he will find Brainerd reading and applying the Puritan approach to evangelism and soul-culture. In short (and this summary is but an abbreviated treatment of 200 years of Church history), the men and women of the Evangelical Revival of the 18th Century in Great Britain and the First Great Awakening in America were the spiritual children of the Puritans. Their views of God, of their own spiritual needs, of the way a soul is saved, and the path of spiritual growth were all formed under the

influence of those Puritan writings of the 17th Century. Ministers and parishioners who found no living spiritual guides were able to find spiritual mentors in the Puritan writers. The radically changed preaching and living of the young converts was able to defeat the influence of Deism and stem the moral decline. A movement that failed to 'purify' the church of England in the 17th Century was able to bring life to all the churches in Great Britain and America in the 18th. But what value are the Puritan writings today?

Help for Today:

Any honest assessment of the American church scene would find too many parallels with the struggling English church of the early 18th Century. New intellectual challenges are flooding the universities and seminaries in place of the old Deism. The shocking moral slide in

American religious culture has been well documented. A young generation has grown up in the midst of an inadequate Christianity and will not long cling to the old church loyalties of their forefathers. There are, of course, a great variety of solutions offered. It is amazing how often these solutions remind us of the failed attempts of the early 18th century. Moral education, home-schooling, popular Christian literature, and user-friendly churches have made a minimal impact on the greater scene. The amount of effort put into moral reform is commendable. One could only wish that lessons from history would rescue us from wasted years of ineffectiveness.

The Puritan doctrines might not be what you or I would have expected to be the catalyst and guide for the greatest revivals the West has yet seen. But on closer examination, they are exactly what they needed then, and what we need now. An emphasis on the transcendent majesty of the One God, of the complete helplessness of man to change his own nature, the seriousness of sin in the light of this great Creator, the fullness and sufficiency of God's solution to our moral dilemma in the work of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the miraculous manner in which a person is brought from self-sufficiency to complete and sole dependence upon the mercy found in Christ . . . are just the kind of truths that don't change with the centuries.

Today is a day when we need giants and not mere mortals for the labor ahead of us. J.I. Packer, historian and author specializing in the 18th century, referred to those early revival leaders as spiritual giants. It is funny that he did so, considering that George Whitefield, the greatest leader during the revivals, looked back at the Puritan era and commented: "There were giants in the land in those days." Whitefield said the Puritans reached their spiritual height by feeding "on lion's marrow."

It is the same "lion's marrow" that Whitefield and his friends fed upon: it is the same we may feed upon. May God give us the wisdom and hunger of those successful revival men, the Puritans.

Further Study:

We happen to live in a day in which Puritan literature has been republished so widely that it is no longer difficult to locate their works. The creation of the Banner of Truth Trust (a publishing company devoted to re-printing Puritan and Puritan-like writings) in the last century has made their works accessible. If you are interested in reading further into the teachings and lives of the Puritans I recommend J. I. Packer's *Pursuit of Godliness*. For an exciting and wide treatment of the First Great Awakening one could not do better than the two-volume biography of *George Whitefield* by Arnold Dallimore.

Preparing for October...

Lunch:

October Headmasters

October 2nd - Robert Green

October 9th - Larry Ramsey

October 16th - Tom Thompson

October 23rd - *No one signed up*

October 30th - Matt Mackey

October 2nd -

Little Caesar's

October 9th - **Lenny's**

October 16th - **Taco Bell**

October 23rd -

Atlanta Bread (1/2 price)

October 30th - **Abner's**