

Lecture 15 – “Grace Abounding”: The Puritans

“...it is only at the tree loaded with fruit that people throw stones.” John Buchan

“To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” Ephesians 1:6

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 17, pp. 156-63

Prayer

From Richard Baxter

“Lord Jesus, take my spirit:
I trust thy love and merit:
Take home this wandering sheep,
For thou hast sought it:
This soul in safety keep,
For thou hast bought it. Amen.”

“Grace Abounding”: The Puritans

What is Puritanism? A “spiritual movement” which developed under Elizabeth I (late 16th century), blossomed in the Interregnum (1640’s and 1650’s), and withered in the persecution between the Restoration (1660) and Toleration (1689).

C. S. Lewis: We must picture the original Puritans “as the very opposite of those who bear that name today; as young, fierce, progressive intellectuals, very fashionable and up-to-date.” In *Screwtape Letters* Lewis has Screwtape say to Wormwood: “All that, your patient would probably classify as ‘puritanism’—and may I remark in passing that the value we have given to that word is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years? By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life.”

Monica Furlong: “Cheerful, vigorous, literal-minded, self-analytical, hard-working, convinced—there is something deeply formidable about the Puritan. Not the least formidable thing about him is his rigid honesty. Gosse’s mother, urged upon her death-bed to admit, in the pious phrase, that she felt ‘joy in the Lord,’ insisted that though she felt peace, she did not actually feel joy, and could not go into eternity with a lie in her mouth” (*Puritan’s Progress*).

I. Roots and Growth

- A. Puritan pioneers—William Tyndale’s reforming biblicism, John Bradford’s piety of heart and conscience, John Knox’s zeal for God’s honor, John Hooper’s commitment to the “Reformed principle,” and many others
- B. The Geneva Bible (1560)
- C. Disappointment with Elizabeth, who to the Puritans’ dismay, did not reform the church but “only swept the rubbish behind the door. The Puritan movement may be said to have sprung out of the shock of that disappointment” (William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*).
- D. Disillusionment with James I (1603-25); the Millenary Petition (1603)
- E. Despair with Charles I (1625-49); Archbishop Laud; Arminian theology; emigration; civil war
- F. Victory in the Commonwealth (1649-60)
 1. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658)

II. Blossoms and Fruit

- A. John Milton (1608-47)—*Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes*
- B. Richard Baxter (1615-91)—*The Reformed Pastor, The Saints Everlasting Rest, A Call to the Unconverted*—neo-nomianism

J. W. Alexander: “To look at his controversial works, overladen with enormous quotations from Chrysostom, Jerome, Hales, Scotus, the Reformers, and the very Jesuits, you would say that he was never out of his study: to look at his preachings, catechizings, visits, and imprisonments, you would say he was never in it. His ‘Reformed Pastor’ shows his standard in regard to pastoral fidelity; he probably came as near to it as men ever do to their standards” (*Thoughts on Preaching*).

C. S. Spurgeon to his wife one Sunday evening: “My dear, I fear I have not been as faithful in my preaching today as I should have been. I have not been as much in earnest after poor souls as God would have me be! Go to the study and fetch down Baxter’s Reformed Pastor, and read some of it to me. Perhaps that will quicken my sluggish heart.”

- C. John Owen (1616-83)—*The Death of Death in the Death of Christ, The Savoy Declaration*

- D. John Bunyan (1628-88)—*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, Pilgrim’s Progress* (Also “The Sinner and the Spider,” “The Pilgrim Hymn,” and “Mr. Bunyan’s Last Sermon”)

- E. John Flavel (1630-91)

III. Withering and Breaking

- A. The Commonwealth: What went wrong?

1. Division in Puritan ranks
2. Mixture of religion and politics

- B. The Restoration (1660); Act of Uniformity (1662) and “The Great Ejection” (1662)

“... in the hour of testing the ‘nonconformists’ gave one of the most remarkable displays of courage in the whole of English history” (Monica Furlong, *Puritan’s Progress*).

IV. The Puritan Mind and Soul

- A. Thoroughness
- B. Biblical worship
- C. Grace
- D. Law

Questions from Class

Is there neo-nomianism in Baxter?

For Further Study

**A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (1990) by J. I. Packer

**The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* edited by Arthur Bennett

A. Read St. John 6 from The Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible was produced by Marian exiles in 1560. It shows a high degree of dependence on Tyndale’s 1534 text with subtle differences. The Geneva Bible became the most popular Bible in England and America until the middle of the 17th century when the King James Version (1611) finally gained wide acceptance.

The marginal annotations are those of Laurence Tomson based on Theodore Beza’s 1574 notes. This edition of the Geneva Bible is indicative of the views of the Puritans during the first half of the 17th century. It was the version brought over on the Mayflower to the New World by the Pilgrims and provides the background for the Westminster Confession. The placing of text and commentary together advanced the Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura. The small size of the text and especially of the notes and the archaic spellings and shapes of letters make reading the Geneva Bible difficult. However, give it a try. Imagine that you are en route to New England on the Mayflower and briefly free from sea sickness while you read a chapter from the Bible—John 6.

B. Read John Flavel's "Letter to the Dearly Beloved Ministers of the Gospel" from *The Works of John Flavel* (Banner of Truth, 1968) 4: 6-16. John Flavel (d. 1691) was ejected from his ministry in 1662. In 1672 he was licensed as a Congregationalist to preach in his own house at Dartmouth, England. He was forced by persecution to move to London in 1682 but returned to Devon where he was instrumental in promoting the "Happy Union" of Presbyterians and Congregationalists in 1690-91.

Note the four themes of John Flavel's "Letter" to his fellow ministers on the occasion of the "Glorious Revolution" in 1688.

1. Joy in the new spring-time of freedom and opportunity after the "destructive winter" of restriction and persecution—a winter that had lasted for 28 years. (A new opportunity is always to be treasured.)
2. Warning to avoid "fierce contention" among true brethren "about matters not necessary to salvation." (This is so relevant to our present ecclesiastical situation.)
3. Exhortation to lay aside "all designs of smaller importance" and to concentrate on how to "gain to Christ all the souls committed to you." (Remember (historically and presently) that "the present opportunity is slippery, and may be lost.")
4. Words of wisdom for "students of theology and candidates for the ministry." (Good advice not only for those of 1688 but for us.)

C. Read the following pages from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan (1628-88) tells the story of his conversion in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. He became a Puritan preacher (a Calvinist Baptist) and suffered imprisonment at royalist hands between 1660 to 1672. In and out of prison during these years, he maintained his lively faith and wrote great devotional classics such as *The Holy War* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Produced in countless editions (I have 38!) and in many languages, *The Pilgrim's Progress* became one of the most widely read books of all time. I love all of it but have chosen my favorite passage for us to read. (You must read it all if you haven't. If you have, read it again.) Christian and Hopeful, after many trials, have come at last to the Celestial City. Two remaining difficulties face them. What are they? How do they prevail?