

Grace Abounding: The Puritans

Last time we looked at the Anglicans. Today we are going to look at a very distinctive part of the Church of England, the movement that we call the Puritan movement. I would like to start with a prayer from Richard Baxter, but before I do that, let me quote from one of Baxter's books (he wrote many books). One was called *How to Lead a Heavenly Life upon Earth*, and when I was reading it some time ago, I came across a statement that I thought was particularly appropriate for those of us studying in a seminary, because Baxter warns those who are employed in leading the devotions of others, especially, he says, preachers of the Gospel. This is what he says: "Oh how easily may such be deceived, while they do nothing so much as read and study of heaven and preach and pray and talk of heaven. Is not this the heavenly life?" This is really what we are doing in seminary. We are reading, talking, praying, and preaching about the Bible and about God and heaven. "Is this the heavenly life?," Baxter asks, "Alas, all this is but mere preparation. This is but collecting the materials, not erecting the building itself. It is but gathering the manna for others, and not eating and digesting it ourselves."

So that is a good statement from Richard Baxter, the Puritan, for us as we gather and prepare the manna for others, to be sure that we too are eating it ourselves. Let us now go to the prayer from Richard Baxter. Let us pray.

"Lord Jesus, take my spirit, I trust Thy loving merit, take home this wandering sheep, for Thou hast sought it. This soul in safety keep, for Thou hast bought it. Amen."

Let me share with you some quotations that I have found regarding Puritanism. This is from *USA Today*. "Every inauguration brings on a chorus of moaners determined to take the fun out of the celebration. They appear in many forms—first, the puritans, who cannot stand to see money spent on anything impractical..." This is from the writer Frederick Beatner. One of the grimmer notions that we seem to inherit from our Puritan forbears is that work is not even supposed to be glad, but rather a kind of penance, a way of working off the guilt that you accumulate during the hours when you are not working. This is from the book, *Listening to Prozac*. The author quotes someone who uses the phrase "pharmacological Puritanism" to express the judgmental quality of the objection to medication. This is from fashion designer Tom Ford: "Too much style in America is tacky. In fashion, you can really tell that America is descended from the Puritans." And this is from novelist John Mortimer: "My daughter, who I hoped would grow up like you, understanding the weakness of mankind, turned out to be a puritan."

Well, I could read many more statements like this because I have collected these through the years. I have a rather large file full of statements telling us all about Puritanism. Who are these people, the Puritans, whom all of these people are saying these bad things about? They spoil sports, they are work-obsessed, they are judgmental, and they are even tacky—according to one of the quotes I just read. In this lesson we are going to study the Puritans—the cheerful old Puritans, as J. I. Packer sometimes says just to shock people in examining their prejudices and looking at the Puritans in a new light.

We are going to study the history of the word "Puritans" to see what the word really does mean. C. S. Lewis reminds us in *The Screwtape Letters* that the devil has taken over this word, as Screwtape says to Wormwood: "The value we have given to that word is one of the really solid triumphs of the last 100 years. By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life."

An historical definition of Puritanism is “a spiritual movement that developed under Elizabeth I in the late sixteenth century,”—or as some would argue even earlier—it blossomed in the interregnum of the 1640s and the 1650s, and it withered in the persecution between the restoration of 1660 and toleration in 1689.

The Puritans, at first, were part of the Church of England. A group within the Church of England whose goal was to push the reform, which had begun and begun well under Edward VI, toward greater perfection in particularly worship and church discipline, had a movement that was concerned to establish righteousness in the culture and a movement that attempted to convert everyone to a vigorous evangelical faith. I would like to use the analogy of a plant, a tree, as we think of Puritanism growing from small beginnings to a vigorous point in its development, and then finally withering and breaking apart. All that took place in the seventeenth century, so we are going to scan the history of the seventeenth century in England to see the rise, the triumph, and the collapse of Puritanism.

First of all, in terms of roots and early growth, Puritan pioneers include such people as William Tyndale, John Bradford, John Knox, and John Hooper. William Tyndale was the Bible translator, John Bradford was one of the Arian martyrs, and John Knox was the Scottish Reformer who ministered in England during the time of Edward VI and fled the continent when Mary Tudor began her reign.

It was in Frankfurt, on the continent, that the issue developed between the Anglican side of the English church and the Puritan side of the English church. There was a man named Richard Cox who felt that the refugee church in Frankfurt should be as close as possible to the church in England. They should do, Cox said, as they had done in England. They should have the face of an English church. And John Knox replied, “The Lord granted to have the face of Christ’s church.” That was a Puritan statement already before the reign even of Queen Elizabeth. And with John Hooper we have an early English champion of the regulative principle—we will talk about that in a few minutes—the reformed principle, or the regulative principle, or it is sometimes called even the Puritan principle, which states that in worship we are only allowed to do what God commands.

Another great moment in the history of early Puritanism was the translation of the Bible into English, which was accomplished in Geneva—it is called the Genevan version—based on Tyndale’s work. What is particularly important about the Genevan version is the marginal notes that set forth Calvinism and Puritan teaching, influenced very much by the theology of John Calvin. This was the Bible beloved by the Puritans. This was the Bible brought to America on the Mayflower by the Pilgrim fathers and mothers. And this is the Bible that was used by the Westminster Divines, even though the King James Version had been translated by this time (it comes from the year 1611). But the King James Version was viewed for some time as a modern version, and people wanted to stick with the old Genevan version, and they did. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that the King James Version gained wide acceptance.

These people within the Church of England had great hopes that Queen Elizabeth would become their champion. But it was not too long into that important queen’s long reign that the Puritans realized that they were doomed to be disappointed with Queen Elizabeth. In their opinion, she did not continue and complete the good beginnings that had already been made under her half brother, Edward, but only swept the rubbish behind the door. The Puritans felt that much more had to be done to bring the English church in line with Christ’s church.

If they were disappointed with Elizabeth, they became disillusioned with the next ruler, the first of the Stuarts to rule in England, James I of England, a Scottish king reared among Scottish Presbyterians. I am

not sure if any people in England thought as James made his way south from Edinburgh to London in 1603, “God is really in this because at last we have a Presbyterian king who will be sympathetic to our ideals and hopes.” In fact, many of those Puritans did not wait for James to reach his castle, but marched out to meet him on the way to London and presented him with a petition in which they asked him to commit himself to the kind of church reform that they had long hoped and worked for. It is called the Millenary Petition because, according to tradition, 1000 Puritan ministers signed that petition asking James to continue and further the reform of the church. Well, they were soon to be greatly disappointed and disillusioned because the English Puritans learned what the Scottish Presbyterians already knew—that King James was no friend of the Reformed faith. In the Hampton court conference he made it clear that he was the king, that he preferred bishops, and that he would not tolerate any divergence in the church or in the state.

One thing he did, as I mentioned a moment ago, was authorize a new translation of the Bible, generally called in England the Authorized Version and in other places the King James Version, in the year 1611. There is a very wholesome dedication to King James in the opening pages of the King James Version of the Bible. But as somebody has said, “He will be sorely misled who extends the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy into the dedication and preface to the King James Version of the Bible.” King James was not nearly as good a king and friend of Protestant Christianity or Puritan Christianity as the dedication in the King James Bible would lead you to believe.

Well, disappointment with Queen Elizabeth, disillusionment with James I, and despair with Charles I. Despair finally came to the Puritans as they realized that their high hopes would not be realized with the reign of the Stuart kings. With Charles I there was a High Church movement that began to take over in the Church of England. Archbishop William Laud, a symbol of Puritan troubles, ruled in the church as Charles ruled in the state. Arminian theology began to infiltrate the church in England for the first time in a significant way. There was a common saying at this time: What do the Arminians hold? The answer was the best bishopries and deaneries in England. So the Arminians, with Archbishop Laud’s approval and support, began to gain places of prestige in the church.

And with that despair, many of the Puritans left. A few had left before the reign of Charles I to go to the Netherlands and then later to New England, or now to go directly to New England as thousands of Puritans had given up on old England. The immigration to New England was to be, as we will see later, just that, a New England where God would be honored and the Gospel would be preached in its purity—a light set on a hill for the nations. In the 1630s, immigration reached its highest peak, and then in the 1640s civil war broke out between the king and the Parliament. That resulted, as you know, in victory for the Parliament and the execution of the king. Charles I was put to death in the year 1649.

We talk a little bit about that victory in the period of the Commonwealth: from 1649 until 1660. For about a decade, England had no king or queen, and this is the period in English history that we call the Commonwealth. It is also the period of Puritan ascendancy. The Puritans now, rather than being a despised minority, became the ruling class in England under the famous man named Oliver Cromwell.

Cromwell was born in 1599 and died in 1658. He had a very meteoric career—he was a kind of gentleman farmer near Cambridge who was elected as a member of Parliament and then rose to be the military and political leader of a long Parliament. And then after the execution of the king and the victory of Parliament, he became the Lord Protector of England. At one point he almost became king of England—a new line of kingship would have been established with Cromwell—but he did not become king; he was Lord Protector.

I think Oliver Cromwell is one of the most misunderstood people in English history—certainly one of the most despised people in English history, even though you can see today before the houses of Parliament near Westminster Abbey that very impressive statue of Oliver Cromwell, though most people in England would not think of him as a hero but as a rebel who was responsible for the execution of the king and for the period of the Commonwealth, which is not a period that most English people look to as a great time in English history. But some people see more there in that period of the Commonwealth and certainly more in Oliver Cromwell.

Twenty months after Cromwell died, on September 3, 1658, during one of the greatest storms in memory, Charles II sat on his father's throne. Once again the Stuarts reigned in what is called the Restoration. People were singing a song about Oliver Cromwell: "Oliver Cromwell is dead and gone..." that is how the song began. But to say something about Oliver Cromwell to try to set him in more of a proper perspective, let me make several points.

First of all, he certainly was an honest man. He did not try to pretend to be something that he was not. You may know the famous story about him when a painter was painting his picture and he looked at it and said, "No, that will not do. You have to paint the warts and all. Make it look uglier, like I really am, and not so idealized as you have painted it." That story says something about Cromwell. I think he was a humble man even though he became a strong leader and almost a dictator in some ways. If you read his prayers, you sense that he was a man who was humble before the Lord. He prayed, "Lord, though I am a miserable and wretched creature, I am in covenant with You through grace, and I may, I will, come to You for Your people, pray for the people of England. Teach those who look too much on Your instruments to depend more on Yourself. Let people not look to me and the Parliament but to You as their guide and their help."

Cromwell was a great man in many ways. One of the most recent books on Oliver Cromwell by the British historian Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman*, says, "As long as the great issues of liberty and equality which Oliver raised remain unresolved, so long will he continue to fascinate, and the debate over him will continue." There are many warts as we look at Oliver Cromwell—many shortcomings, many problems, many things that he did wrong. Some of the antagonism between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland today goes back to the time of Oliver Cromwell. So I do not, by any means, want to make Cromwell sound better than he really was, but there probably is not any danger in doing that, because Cromwell is usually made to sound a lot worse than he really was, so I am trying to balance the scales just a little bit. (23.08)

So going back to our earlier metaphor of a tree, in terms of roots and growth, the Puritan movement began and grew into a great tree. During the time of the Commonwealth it had become the dominant movement religiously and politically in England.

Let me talk a little now about blossoms and fruit, just to keep the horticultural metaphor going. I am going to discuss some of the fruits of the Puritan movement. I will have to limit this list to five things due to time constraints, because I could spend many years discussing the fruit of the movement. Here are some of the great names.

John Milton was the great Puritan poet and scholar. You undoubtedly have read some of his works, which consist of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. One of Milton's biographers has written that John Milton was in all likelihood the last person to read everything that had ever been published. That is an amazing statement, and of course nobody could say anything like that today, but it is hard to imagine that even in the seventeenth century that someone could read everything that had ever

been published. I imagine that we would have to limit that to English and Latin and a few of the European languages, but publishing, at least printing, was not that old. It could be that John Milton did read everything that had been published.

I encourage you to read Milton for the greatness of his language, get caught up in his great poems and the greatness and grandeur of the ideas and the language of John Milton. But be more than a little cautious with his theology. Even though this man was a Puritan, he was tainted a bit with Arianism and Arminianism—he at least seems to be at certain points in his writing. So you do not really go to John Milton for theology; you go to him for the splendor of his imagination and the greatness of his poems.

And then there is Richard Baxter, the great preacher-pastor. He spent 15 years in the little town of Kidderminster, near Birmingham, in England. He left his mark on that place that lasted more than 100 years. He was a great preacher. Baxter's preaching aphorism was this: "First light, then heat." That is not a bad thing to remember in preaching.

Baxter was also a great pastor. One of the important books in pastoral theology is Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*. The word "reformed" does not necessarily mean the Calvinist pastor, although most of the pastors who would read this book would have been Calvinist, but reformed in the sense of revived or renewed. I was talking with one of the students just before coming here to teach, and I had not said anything about this book, but this student was saying that he had read this book and almost decided that he could not be a pastor because Richard Baxter has such a high standard and makes it seem too impossible to do. Well, read the book, but do not have that reaction, because that book is a goal that we can set before us, and few, if anyone, will ever reach that goal and its perfection. In fact, Richard Baxter himself did not.

Read Richard Baxter for evangelism—*A Call to the Unconverted*—read him for his spiritual counsel—the wonderful *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*—read him for church renewal. In *The Reformed Pastor* he so incisively touches the life and heart of ministers. Some people complained that he wrote that book in English as he wrote his other books in Latin. His response was that "if the ministers in England had sinned only in Latin, I would have admonished them in Latin. But if they will sin in English, they must hear of it in English." And he certainly lets them hear of it in English. But watch out a little bit for Baxter's theology, for his Neonomianism.

And then there is John Owen. You do not have to watch out for Owen's theology. Read John Owen for his theology. Here is the John Calvin of England in his *Death of Death: in the Death of Jesus Christ*, one of the great theological books of England. And we have the theology of John Owen in concentrated form, which is something of a miracle, in *The Savoy Declaration*, as Owen's own Puritan Westminster Confession convictions are expressed in that document, which represents English Congregationalism. Spurgeon said, "It is unnecessary to say that Owen is the prince of Divines. To master his works is to be a profound theologian." But mastering his works is a large task because Owen writes a lot and is not always easy to read. But if you can master his style, a very concise style, you will appreciate how much Owen could pack into just a few pages.

Let us move on to John Bunyan, one of my favorites. He was the tinker of Bedford who wrote a wonderful spiritual autobiography called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. And then, certainly one of the greatest books ever written was Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*—"The Westminster Confession of Faith with people in it," as someone has called it. I have 36 editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* in my library, and I try to read it once every year or two.

Finally, I have time to mention just one other great Puritan, John Flavel, called “the seamen’s preacher.” He was pastor at Dartmouth in England, ejected at the time of the restoration, but he continued to serve his seafaring congregation (even though he was locked out of his church) by preaching from a rock in the harbor. He was a plain, earnest Puritan writer, so typical of the Puritans. Flavel said, “A crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ.” I added John Flavel to this short list, which could be much longer, because of the influence he had on the old Princeton Seminary and through that on both Northern and Southern Presbyterianism.

Now let us come to the withering and the breaking of the great Puritan tree. What went wrong? The Commonwealth was the realization of a long dream that English Puritans and their allies, the Scottish Presbyterians, would be in control of the church and the state. I think two things went wrong, and we can learn from these. So let me take a few moments to set these before you.

First, there were divisions in Puritan ranks. The Puritans were better in opposition than they were in authority. They were good at pointing out what was wrong with other people, but when they gained authority they had a hard time getting along with each other. It was Presbyterians versus Independents. Cromwell’s army fought not only the Catholics in Ireland, but also the Presbyterians in Scotland. And then many other groups developed—radical groups in the Puritan movement—the Baptists, the Levellers, the Diggers, the Ranters, the Fifth Monarchists, and the Quakers. Puritanism began to splinter. The Puritans had adopted a kind of all-or-nothing approach, so they found it very difficult to compromise with people whom they probably should have compromised with in order to have a more united front and to represent more of the people of England. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote, “If the Puritans had but stood together for religious toleration in general rather than any one system, the history at that time and during the next 300 years would have been different.”

The second thing that went wrong is that there was too much of a mixture of religion and politics. Now, I certainly admire the Puritans for their concern to represent Christ over all culture, to be involved in science and education and in state craft—that is an ideal that we all hold before us with a Reformed world and life view, but John Owen himself said that the influence of civil or political intrigues and considerations undermined the Puritan movement. It is not that they made a mistake in wanting to have influence in culture. But they made a mistake in the way they attempted to go about it. Dr. Lloyd-Jones wrote, “May we learn the lesson of 1640 to 1662 and keep clear of any such worldly entanglements. Let us fight the battle of the Lord with spiritual weapons.” The Puritans were fighting the battle of the Lord with spiritual weapons but also with very real swords in their battles with the Catholics in Ireland, for instance, in which many of those people were killed by Puritans.

The restoration came in 1660 with Charles II, the son of the executed king, on the throne now of England. The Act of Uniformity in 1662 meant that all English ministers had to conform to the Anglican ideal. Those who did not or would not were ejected in the Great Ejection of 1662 when some 2000 ministers, like Flavel, left their churches and preached outdoors or wherever they could. This was the beginning of an official nonconformity in religious history in England followed by two decades of suffering and imprisonment, as in the case of John Bunyan, who was put in prison and wrote his great book at least partially during his years in prison. Finally, there was the glorious revolution of William and Mary and toleration of 1689, which we will come to later.

Let me end by giving a few words to summarize the Puritan mind and soul, as we did for the Anglicans in the previous lesson. One word we would use here is thoroughness. I used the word “comprehensiveness” for the Anglicans, but I will use “thoroughness” for the Puritans. They were thorough, or exhaustive, in anything they did or wrote about. You will realize that if you try to read

Richard Baxter's million-word book, *A Christian Directory*, or *A Sum of Practical Theology*—deals with cases of conscience, directing Christians how to use their knowledge and faith, how to improve all helps and means, how to perform all duties, and how to overcome temptations and to escape or mortify every sin—all in one book. It is a big book, and the Puritans leave no stone unturned in their attempts to deal with every single thing. Baxter could see this spirit in others, particularly in his wife; he would remind her from time to time that “overdoing is undoing. If you do too much you will not do anything,” but he never could see that in himself.

In terms of worship, with the Anglicans I stressed beauty in worship. With the Puritans, it is biblical worship. The regulative principle, or the Reformed principle, became the Puritan principle, and in the name of that principle the Puritans refused vestments and removed crosses and pictures and organs and candles and feast days, including Easter and Christmas, and the list goes on and on. The regulative principle is a very important principle, but it is not always easy to apply.

In their preaching, the Puritans were champions of grace—*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*—that was the name of Bunyan's book, and that could stand for the whole period. And they were very concerned to teach the Law, to set forth the Ten Commandments and God's requirements for Christian living. Sometimes it is thought that the Puritans fell into legalism, and they probably did. We know that Baxter did in his Neonomianism. And even in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Charles Spurgeon is disappointed when in the beginning of the story Evangelist sends poor Christian—though he is not really yet a Christian, although that is his name already—to the Wicked Gate and not directly to the Cross. Well, Bunyan does not often get it wrong, but there he perhaps did. The way from the preaching of the Gospel was a direct way, not an indirect way, to the cross.

The Puritans did stress that Law work, and they preached the Law. It is important, I think, and they did it well and they did it right, but you can preach the Law so long; you should not wait too long before you get to the Gospel. I think the Puritans left people marinating in the Law too long. They needed to let people go on to the Gospel and be forgiven when the conviction was there. But by and large, the Puritans were, as J. I. Packer put it, Law-oriented without lapsing into legalism. I would agree with that by saying the Puritans were usually Law-oriented and did not usually laps into legalism. I think there are places where we can see them lapse into legalism, but there is much good in what the Puritans did with the Law. They placed great stress on the third use of the law and gave careful teaching on what God requires.

Such emphasis can produce books that seem beyond us, and as you read the Puritans, do not allow Puritan writing to discourage you, as sometimes it can. There are many great encouraging things in the Puritans too, but the standards are so high that we can feel as though we can never make it. Of course the standards in the Bible are so high that we can feel as though we can never make it. I remember reading some lines from John Duncan, the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, who was reading the Puritan Thomas Shepard and said, “Shepard is fine, but the problem with Shepard is I wish I was as good as one of his hypocrites.” You kind of get that feeling occasionally from reading the Puritans. We have a right to criticize some of the Puritans, perhaps many of the Puritans, for pruning the tree too closely, but it is wrong to suppose that there should be no pruning. Whether we look at worship or Christian conduct, something corresponding to Puritan criticism is always needed.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Let me clarify some things. Neonomianism is the expression that is used to describe Baxter's teaching in which he attempted to answer the position in opposition to him, which seemed to be something like an easy believism—not really too much grace but grace taught in a certain way that would lead to an Antinomianism. So both in English history and in Scottish history for a long time—maybe all the way down to the present really in American history—there is that tension between Antinomianism, not thinking significantly enough of the Law, and Neonomianism, bringing the Law back in in some way that perhaps clouds what justification by grace and faith really is all about. I think that is a danger that we need to constantly be on guard against. Particularly on the Reformed side of things, we can, with our stress on the third use of the Law, bring the Law back in. It does not save us, but it keeps us saved or it does something else like that. On the Lutheran side there is the opposite problem, so we are good for each other.