

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 66

Puritans, Separatists and Pilgrims – Part One

America's religious and political heritage are rooted in the Puritans and Separatists that grew out of the English Church in the 1500's and 1600's. The Pilgrims, with their hats and big buckled shoes, were what scholars today term "Separatists" and "Puritans." The British American Puritans who stressed education as a Christian imperative started Harvard University. Of course, anyone schooled in the American education system knows their role in establishing Thanksgiving as a holiday. International travel quickly illustrates how some basic cultural morality is different in America than in Western Europe and even England. Much of these differences can fairly be traced to the Puritan influence.

Who were these folks and how do we best understand them? That is the goal of the next two Biblical Literacy lessons. This week, we begin by putting together pieces of information we have learned from earlier lessons to create the structure that with some additional information, sets out the basics of how Puritans came to be. Next week, we hope to see more fully their peculiar impact and role in America: religiously, culturally and politically.

We begin our study by remembering the state of England during the religiously turbulent times of the 1500's. The century that saw Luther nail his thesis to the Wittenberg Church door, Calvin write his Institutes of Religion, the Bible translated from Hebrew and Greek into local tongues and dialects, and the Protestants movement arise in several shapes and sizes, was also a century that saw the exploration of the new world (discovered in 1492) in unprecedented fashion. With the New World and its exploration and development came a whole new set of political and economic stresses and realities. Various European countries were struggling for world dominance in a previously unknown sense. Naval power became important in new ways. Moreover, there were entire races of people that were previously unknown, which in itself challenged religious conceptions of the day.

In England, these turbulent waters produced a severance of the Church of England from the papal authority of the Church of Rome. The Church of England was legally declared to be subject to the "God-given" ruler of England (at the time, Henry VIII). With Henry's death, the Anglican Church saw a tug of war for control and direction of the church. On one side of the rope was submission to the Roman Church and papal authority. When Edward VI, Henry's son, was on the throne, those who protested the authority of the pope and Rome (what history has

called the “Protestants”) tugged the church into its protestant beliefs. During the reign of Queen Mary I (1553-1558), the side that favored the Roman Church was in control and the Church of England was pulled back into the Catholic camp. After Mary’s brief reign, Elizabeth ascended the throne. She opted for a middle course, neither becoming fully protestant nor granting any control to Rome over the British Church.

While history has shown a degree of success for this middle road, it was not without difficulty. For the two forces of influence, Catholic and Protestant, were both trying desperately to pull the country to their side. It did not occur to either the Catholics, the Protestants, or for that matter the middle of the road Anglicans, that multiple churches could serve the country. Such a denominational mentality simply did not exist. Each branch of Christianity believed in only one church. Each branch had as its goal control of the Church of England. We best understand the Puritan movement by analyzing both of the two extreme forces applied to this religious and political tug of war. We begin by considering the huge changes to the Catholic Church since we last left her fighting against Luther and Calvin.

THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION AND COUNTER-REFORMATION

Within the Catholic Church, scholars have assigned two different phrases that defined significant aspects of Catholic history during this time. The first is the “Catholic Reformation.” This term recognizes that within the Catholic Church itself, significant reforms were ongoing during the same time as the Protestant Reformation. The first real effort to get back to Hebrew and Greek texts for scripture came from the noted Catholic scholar Desiderius Erasmus. He would write during this time “The world thirsts for the gospel truth.” Luther’s early efforts were not intended to start another branch or denomination of the faith. Luther sought to be a Catholic reformer. It was only after the pope excommunicated him that Luther’s efforts took the form of an entirely distinct branch of the Church.

Scholars use the term “Counter-Reformation” to refer to Rome’s response and reaction to the Protestant Reformation. This term more frequently considers the oppositional efforts of Rome at extinguishing, minimizing, or controlling the infectious spread of Protestant dissent.

The Catholic Reformation is often characterized as beginning in the late 1400’s. Many within the church were not blind to the abuses and scandals that we have discussed in various lessons. Voices like those of Italian priest Girolamo Savonarola called for the Church to change. Savonarola preached in his Advent sermon of 1493 that, “In the primitive Church the chalices were of wood, the prelates of gold; in these days the Church has chalices of gold and prelates of

wood!”¹ The reformation did not end with Savonarola (in fact, he was excommunicated and executed!) but continued. Many scholars see, as the apex of the reformation, the works of a Spanish soldier named Don Inigo Lopez de Loyola, or to use the name he kept in his later years, Ignatius Loyola.²

This remarkable man fought for the Spanish armies until a serious injury in May 1521. During his time of recovery, Loyola had a conversion experience and pledged his life to serving an eternal king rather than an earthly one. For Loyola, the goal of serving God by saving souls became his sole focus for the remainder of his life. On August 15, 1534, Loyola and six companions resolved to take vows of poverty and chastity and work for conversion of the heathen masses. These men became the Society of Jesus and received recognition for their order from the pope just six years later in 1540.

Loyola wrote a set of “spiritual exercises” that one could still read and apply today. This was a systematic program that was a spiritual self-improvement program. It contains a set of meditations, prayers, and mental exercises designed to last roughly over a month.

Over the remainder of Loyola’s life, the Society of Jesus grew fast in number and deeds. Throughout Europe, this self denying set of dedicated men set about opening schools, colleges, and seminaries. The order became commonly termed the Jesuits. It was the desire and goal of Loyola to see the church returned to people who put poverty and self-denial as a priority in an effort to educate and enrich the church propelling the conversion of the unfaithful.

The Jesuit movement itself took a significant role in the Counter-Reformation response to the Protestant church. Loyola died July 31, 1556 (hence his feast day is celebrated on July 31!). Jesuits, however, went on to become one of, if not the most powerful order in the Roman Church.

The Counter-Reformation, like most terms that later historians use to label an era, is applied in a number of different ways to a number of different activities. Some scholars see the first Counter-Reformation pope as Pope Paul IV (1555-1559). Pope Paul IV was certainly determined to wipe out Protestantism, as we will see in a moment. Other scholars, however, see the works of Pope Paul III (1534-1549) as the root of the Counter- Reformation. It was Paul III that called the council of

¹ Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* (London, 1896), p. 184 as given by John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation*, (New York 1969).

² St. Loyola is the patron saint for many Catholic soldiers still today. A riveting movie that recounts the different approach of two Jesuit priests in South America is *The Mission*.

Trent (1543-1563) in an effort to reform Catholic abuses like indulgences as well as to clarify perceived heresies in the Protestant movement.

It was the Council of Trent where the Church declared with finality that the Apocrypha was on equal par with the other scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Justification (right standing before God) was a significant issue on which the Council went round and round. From the perspectives of many Protestants, the Church announced a justification based on faith and good works. More accurately, the Council declared:

The essence of justification was declared to consist not in the remission of sins alone but rather in the ‘sanctification and renovation of the inner man’ by supernatural charity. Faith is not the only condition of justification, although it is the ‘beginning, foundation and root;’ no one can be certain that he is in a state of grace. The grace of justification increases through observance of the commandments of God and not simply a sign of accomplished justification. The grace of justification can be lost as a result of mortal sin (not simply by loss of faith), and it can be regained through the Sacrament of Penance.³

Trent reaffirmed the seven sacraments explaining in more theological detail the doctrine of transubstantiation. During this Council, the Church clarified positions on many other issues of Protestantism as well.

It was during this same time period that in Spain, at least, we see use of the Inquisition as a means of quieting the Protestant rebellion. The Inquisition was originally conceived and installed as a court for deterring “heretical depravity” and clerical misbehavior as early as the 1200’s. The term came from a Roman legal procedure termed *inquisitio* where one person would supervise handling of a legal case from investigation to judgment. By 1478, however, the Spanish office of Inquisitor had taken on the role of overseeing a perceived Jewish problem. In 1530 and for the next 120 years, the Inquisition in Spain attempted to stop the protestant movement from further infiltrating and corrupting the Catholic Church and the Catholic kingdoms.⁴

Here, we see several aspects of Catholicism closely linked to Spain. The powerful (both academically and ultimately influentially) Jesuit movement had its origin and roots in Spain. The Inquisition was utilized in Spain directly against the

³ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition (Thompson Gale 2003) Vol. 14, p. 170.

⁴ For example, two Lutheran groups were discovered in Seville and Valladolid (two of Spain’s largest towns) in 1558. Over the next several years, hundreds would be arrested and dozens were burned at the stake. Joseph Perez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, Yale University Press (2005).

Protestant movement, and Spain was of course, a world power with its discovery and colonization of the New World. This is important background knowledge for understanding some of the religious and political pressures in England that brought about the Puritan tug of war for control of the Anglican Church.

MEANWHILE BACK IN ENGLAND...

Now, we should reconsider in a bit more depth the situation in England. As we have studied (and referenced earlier in this lesson), Mary I reigned as monarch and Queen in England from 1553 to 1558. She had taken the seat of rulership after the premature death of Edward VI, her half brother. Edward and his “controllers” (he was, after all, under the age of 18 the entire time he ruled) had taken the Church of England into mainstream Protestantism. Mary, being a good Catholic, sought to restore Catholicism. One of the means by which she tried to achieve that goal was through marriage with the Spanish Prince Philip (later King Philip II of Spain). Spain, as noted, was a world super power. At the time, England was not even close. The kingdom lacked internal harmony, had a minimal navy, and had been racked with long extended wars.

The citizenry of England viewed the possible Spanish marriage with great distrust and anxiety. Many perceived this marriage as not only a Catholic takeover of England, but also a Spanish takeover. Although the marriage never took place, the association of Catholicism with Spanish aggression was never lost on the British populace. This religious and political force was one side of the tug of war. The expulsion of Protestants during the reign of Mary sent many into Geneva where they studied both from Calvin and others of similar thought. These learned people returned after the death of Mary, bringing with them their educated Protestantism as well as their English Bibles (the Geneva Bibles we discussed in earlier lessons). So during the reign of Elizabeth, the fear of Catholicism as well as the zeal of a learned Protestantism pulled at the Anglican Church to take it deep into Protestantism.

At first, the Protestants were so relieved to have Mary off the throne and Elizabeth on that they saw this as God’s provident provision for an earthly kingdom of righteousness and purity. John Foxe (famous for his book of martyrs) believed that Queen Elizabeth was a second Constantine for the church, and the last peaceful age of the church was coming with her reign.⁵

But, Elizabeth’s concerns were more than merely a determination of religious propriety. She ascended a throne of a nation weakened and in debt from continual warring with France. She also had a government that had overly relied on the

⁵ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan movement* (Oxford Press 1967) p. 24.

world powerhouse of Spain, which could easily set its sights on England itself. Elizabeth was determined to let neither side win this internal religious and political struggle; hence, she took her position of the “*via media*” or “middle road.”

In seeing the response of the Puritans, we need to again emphasize that it was really never considered a possibility of merely existing as an independent Christian denomination or group. Although that idea begins to come into focus over the following decades, most every Christian had a mentality of “one church” as had existed for the history of England. This was the tug of war. For the question was not whether additional churches should exist. The question was over who controlled the one church, the Catholic, the Protestants, or Queen Elizabeth and some middle ground.

Within the Protestant movement, a group arose that sought to live simply by scripture. A mantra coming out of Geneva and the Protestant movement was *sola scriptura* or “scripture alone.” Scripture was seen as the final authority for church and life. If scripture taught on a matter, then scripture had the answer. If scripture failed to teach on a matter, then the matter was probably not worth consideration!

Those who were deeply convicted of this need to live purely by scripture’s mandates were seen as having a purified approach to church and life. These folks were labeled “puritans.” The term was initially not intended as a complement, but it was such an accurate label to outside observers that it stuck.

Elizabeth never catered to Puritans, although many Catholics of her day viewed her actions as overtly Protestant. To the Puritans, however, the actions of Elizabeth seemed overtly Catholic! For example, Elizabeth began her reign appointing Matthew Parker as Archbishop of Canterbury. It was not lost on the masses that Parker had received his ordination from the pope in 1527 *before* the break with the Catholic Church. This move, in Elizabeth’s view, kept the apostolic succession of the Anglican Church in tact. To Protestants, however, it was seen as a Catholic victory.

In 1562, Elizabeth oversaw Parliament passing the *Act of Uniformity*. This law required all Anglican priests to subscribe to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (basically a liturgical worship book) as well as the 39 articles of Anglican faith. Failure to agree to these was means for losing not only one’s pulpit but freedom as well! Those that would not agree were subject to imprisonment.

The Catholics saw this as an effort to eliminate their own worship. The Puritans were not any happier! Ultimately, this act was used to persecute both Catholics and Puritans as the church sought to insulate itself politically and purge itself from what it viewed as extremism from either side.

Puritans were upset with the perceived Catholic vestments that ministers were required to wear. The idea of physically performing a cross during communion was equally distasteful and seen as merely a ritual of Catholicism and not scriptural. Many of the holidays (Christmas and Good Friday to name two) were not seen to have their origins in scripture, but rather in the Catholic Church. Accordingly, they were repulsive to many Puritans.

During Elizabeth's purge of the church, a number of Puritans became what scholars now term "Separatists." These were Puritans that thought it best just to separate out from the church and worship independently. We have the real roots of denominationalism sprouting here.

These Separatists and other Puritans were having midweek services that were termed "Prophesyings." This term was garnered from the New Testament usage of the word "prophesy" in the sense of preaching, not in the common 21st century parlance of predicting the future. The Prophesyings were times of prayer and teaching. The teaching would typically last for over an hour and would be an exposition of scripture. Needless to say, these services did not comply with the Book of Common Prayer. In 1583, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, issued an order that

all preaching, catechizing, and praying in any private house, where any are present besides the family, be utterly extinguished. That all preachers, and others in ecclesiastical orders, do at all times wear the habits [priestly garb] prescribed. That none be admitted to preach, unless he be ordained according to the manner of the Church of England.

The Puritans did not stop their house meetings, but went underground with them. Many were arrested, and many fled the English persecution.

One story that illustrates the turmoil of the time concerns a fellow named Henry Barrowe. Henry was well educated, having studied law and graduated from Cambridge. He was enjoying his worldly life of depravity when he happened by a Puritan service. To the ridicule of his companions, Henry went inside and listened. The gospel message burned into his soul and he converted on the spot. His life itself underwent an immediate 180-degree turn, and Henry became a devout Puritan. Deciding that Separatism was the correct path, Henry went to visit and consult with a well-known separatist serving time for his religious convictions. Arriving at the prison, Henry himself was arrested. The government incarcerated Henry Barrowe and Greenwood together for over five years.

(Ultimately, they would be hung together for their faith). From this imprisonment, the two produced a number of key Puritan writings that were then smuggled out.

These writings are characterized by a number of core beliefs:

1. Local church membership is not for all citizens, but rather for those who have made a personal confession of faith;
2. The ministry mandated by the crown was false and anti-Christian;
3. Using the book of common prayer, with its mandated actions and lack of spontaneous prayer and focused preaching, was false and should be forsaken, and
4. Local churches should have autonomy in picking out their preachers.

Now, these points may seem obvious and normal to many today. That is because many today have come straight out of the Puritan tradition! This we will see more as we probe this next week. For now, though, we should emphasize that the pressure on those outside Elizabeth's middle road increased. In 1592-1593 Parliament passed "An Act for the Punishment of Persons Obstinate Refusing to Come to Church." Under this act, anyone over 16 who did not come to a proper Anglican Church was to be imprisoned for up to three months. If they still refused to regularly attend Anglican services, then they were to be banished from the country. If they subsequently returned to England, then they were subject to death.

Next week, we will pick up this story and look at the changes sought during the reign of James, as well as the departure of the pilgrims and the great puritan migration to a New England.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. We have come a long way. There is a reason to pause and thank God for our religious freedom in this country. It has not been so long ago that people literally fought and gave their lives to ensure that we have the liberty to worship as we believe. Perhaps, we should look afresh at the admonition in Hebrews, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). Let us make a commitment, even as the relaxing days of summer are upon us, to reconnect at church, both in attendance and in involvement (Even mid-week services!).

2. Let us recognize that for centuries, the godly and the not so godly have been caught up in the push and pull of “who is right” and “who is wrong” as in regards scripture. Toward that end, let us follow Paul’s urging to Timothy that we “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). As we do so, let us quickly clothe ourselves with humility and love. As Paul wrote of love, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” as opposed to when we shall see Jesus face to face. Paul emphasizes that even he knew “in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

3. Let’s also be thankful for our preaching, our services of worship, our freedom to hear the message and prayers that proceed from the Spirit’s guidance. The church has many different approaches to reach the lost and edify the saved. We have the fruits of those choices. We should rejoice!