

# **“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”**

## **Sunday School Notes**

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### **CLASS 14: 17<sup>th</sup> Century England, Puritans & The Westminster Confession**

When you hear the word “Puritan” what do you think? Sour, angry kill joys with black robes? Witch-hunters, heretic rooters? Preachers of 3 hour sermons? Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, etc. paint pretty negative pictures.

Puritan is the term of insult applied to a huge group of people in England for about 100 yrs. (between 1560 to 1660), and in the American colonies from roughly 1620 to 1720, who pushed for further reforms than the Church of England was willing to give. For your average Englishman during Elizabeth’s reign, there were the Catholic papists on the one side and the nitpicking Puritans on the other side. The Puritans weren’t happy that the church still looked too Catholic and hadn’t gone as far as Luther and Calvin and the Continental Reformers had gone. Plus, they railed against the theaters and the alehouses because of how they brought down the morality of the people.

In case you’re wondering, though, the Puritans are the good guys. We identify very much with them in the PCA. Maybe not the shutting down the theaters, but the strong emphasis on Biblically-based expository sermons with Calvinist doctrine, and godly lives to match their professions of faith. Were the Puritans obsessed with sin? They were concerned, but just as much as their own sin as other’s, and in a way that honored the Bible and pointed to the Savior. They very much wanted to proclaim as well as live out the glory of the Word of God. And they didn’t believe that a citizen was automatically a member of the church. Though most Puritans believed in infant baptism, they believed that you had to embrace the covenant of God, not automatically assume you were saved because of your church membership.

Puritans is an umbrella term that encompassed Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Independents, and Congregationalists.

The short summary of the English Puritans is that they failed in everything and never achieved much reform in the Church of England. But the broader answer is that they gave us wonderful theology and writings, were very influential in the Westminster documents, and they gave wonderful Scriptural preaching in the New World, which was the soil from which the Great Awakening sprang. You can still buy their books and learn great theology from them.

Timeline:

1559 – The Law Of Conformity passed under Queen Elizabeth. Anglicanism is the religion of England (again), taking back over from Catholicism. Puritans liked the Catholics being out, but don’t feel that the reforming goes far enough.

1593 – The Act Against Puritans makes attending Anglican services mandatory. This is the last decade of Elizabeth’s 45 year reign. Elizabeth had had it with the Puritans and their dissatisfaction; England was Protestant, what more did they want? Why were they meeting in little groups? Why were they publishing tracts against the church? Just stop!

1603 – James VI of Scotland succeeds Elizabeth, becoming James I of England. He was reared Protestant and there were great hopes that he would be sympathetic to the Puritan's wishes. He did arrange for a time in 1604 for them to bring their issues, but they were subtle, not bringing their arguments with the force of John Knox, which is who James was used to! James did not want Presbyterianism in England because he knew he would lose his control, so he ignored the Puritans.

1605 – Gunpowder Plot – a Catholic plot to kill the king and blow up the Houses of Parliament is foiled. This makes the Puritans look better.

1608 – FOUNDING OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH: Considerable differences of opinion about founding of Baptist denomination. But best consensus is: A man named John Smyth was a Puritan who went to Holland and baptized himself, starting the Baptist church. Thomas Helwys led a group back to England, and the first General Baptist Church commenced in London in 1612. They were called *General Baptists* because they held to general atonement, that salvation is generally available to everyone. The *Particular Baptists* started in 1641, because they believed salvation is only available to the elect. In later weeks we'll talk about famous Baptists like William Carey & Charles Spurgeon. The First Baptist Church in America was in Providence, RI started by Roger Williams in 1639.

1618 – Book of Sports issued by James; proclaimed it legal to play sports on the Sabbath, which irked the Puritans. They had to begrudgingly read it from the pulpit.

1620 – The *Mayflower* sails to Massachusetts; felt like Israel leaving Egypt for a land of freedom. Of course, as Puritans left England, their numbers became smaller and they had less influence.

1625 – Charles I becomes King, he marries a French princess who brings Catholic priests with her. Public sentiment turns against him towards the Puritans. He appoints an awful Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, who goes out of his way to agitate people, even arrests and tortures 3 of the most critical Puritans, but that made the public angry.

1640s – Civil war between Charles I and Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell (who was a Puritan, a Congregationalist). Charles had tried to arrest some members of the House of Commons who opposed him and charge them with treason, sparked the war.

Charles decides to make Scotland use the Prayer Book and look more like Anglicans, but at a Church in Edinburgh, the Scottish Presbyterians signed the National Covenant (some signing in blood) pledging themselves to Presbyterianism, and resisting Charles I and his wanting to move things back in a Catholic direction. That's why you will hear them called Covenanters. They beat back two of Charles' armies. Scottish Presbyterians would tie red pieces of cloth around their necks to identify themselves with their commitment to the Reformed faith; they were literally called "rednecks."

#### 1643 – 49 – **The Westminster Assembly**

Parliament abolished the Episcopal system. Then they summoned an assembly by an official Act of Parliament to draw up a Presbyterian system. Over 120 Puritan theologians and 30 laypeople, mostly English (but some Scots) gathered in Westminster to write the documents for the creation of a new, and properly reformed, national church. The doctrine was strictly Calvinistic. 1,163 sessions in all! They met in the Jerusalem Chamber in Westminster Abbey and produced 4 Documents: the Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms based off that, and the Directory for Public

Worship. And Parliament had ordered them to work on the church government and worship piece, the Directory of Public Worship, which becomes the “forgotten” document.

1649 – Charles I beheaded

1650s – Oliver Cromwell named Lord Protector of England until his death in 1658. An era of religious freedom, new sects emerge (Quakers, Muggletonians who taught that only Jesus was God), and Jews are allowed back into England. However, morality was enforced in closing down theaters, adultery was a capital crime, Sabbath-keeping was enforced, etc. People started to tire of the Puritans, and they soon wanted a king again (Cromwell had refused the crown).

1660 – “The Restoration” – After a decade without a king, Charles II is proclaimed king of England. This basically kills Puritanism. He had 14 illegitimate children with 7 different mistresses.

1662 – 1/5 of the clergy ejected for refusing the Prayer Book; persecution of non-conformists. 20,000 Puritans sent to jail over the next 20 years.

Eventually what killed out the Puritan movement is their being excluded from the universities, because Puritanism was such an educated, Bible-strong movement, when new ministers were not trained up, they couldn’t keep going. By 1700, no one talked about Puritans anymore in England.

The Church of England returns to its Episcopal system, though the Scots made the Westminster Confession binding on their churches.

The “bloodless revolution” of William & Mary: powers of the monarchy greatly limited, religious freedom granted in the 1689 Act of Toleration.

### **NOTABLE ENGLISH PURITANS:**

Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) – The “First” Puritan, called the “honey mouthed” preacher in Cambridge and London, wrote *The Bruised Reed*, which was instrumental in Richard Baxter’s conversion. Such an effective evangelist that hardened sinners would avoid him knowing he would convert them.

William Ames (1576-1633) - Very politically vocal during his time in Cambridge, asked to leave and job prospects were blocked by those who didn’t agree with him. Moved to Holland, there for the Arminius controversy and the Synod of Dordt in the 1610s. Wrote “The Marrow of Theology” meaning that theology should not be dry, but exciting, felt deep in our bones.

John Milton (1608-1674) – Great Poet of the Puritan period. Went blind in his mid-40s, transcribed his great works, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, others that helped teach Puritan theology. Went from Anglican to Presbyterian to independent, with heretical Arian leanings, rejecting predestination.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) – Anglican pastor, perhaps the most fruitful Puritan pastorate anywhere, converting almost the whole town of Kidderminster. He would go from house to house and spend an hour with each family, getting in about 15 visits per week. Works included *The Reformed Pastor* and *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*.

John Owen (1616-1683) – The Calvin of England, because he wrote the best systematic theology of the Puritans. A pastor early in his career, then a professor at Oxford, also one of Cromwell's chaplains. Works include massive commentary on Hebrews & *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ & The Mortification of Sin*.

John Bunyan (1628-1688) – Fought in the Parliamentary army against Charles I. Spent 12 years in prison after the Restoration for not agreeing to refrain from preaching the Gospel; you had to have a license from the Church of England and he was too Protestant for that. After his release, he becomes pastor of Bedford Baptist Church, but serves another stint in prison for over 6 months. Works include *The Pilgrim's Progress* (the #2 most published book in the English language, next to the Bible) and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. If you pricked him, Bible texts would flow out of his veins, having memorized a lot of Scripture while in prison.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) – We still use his commentary on the entire Bible. A Presbyterian. His father had been one of the Nonconformists ejected from his pulpit after the Restoration. Matthew was homeschooled in Bible and theology, a combination of teaching by his father and self-teaching.

1618 – 1658: The Thirty Years War was between Calvinists and Catholics on the Continent. Germany was left devastated, but it did mark the end of religious wars in Europe.

One story from 30 Years War: The King of Bohemia and the Roman Catholic emperor of Germany in the 1620s was named Ferdinand, and he wanted to crush all the Protestants. He killed tens of thousands in Bohemia, and was overrunning the free cities of Germany too. Gustavus Adolphus, the Protestant king of Sweden decided to get into the act. In 1630, at 35 years old, he was sickened by the reports of the bloodshed, so he sailed his armies across the sea and attacked Ferdinand's. Meanwhile, when Ferdinand's troops took the city of Magdeburg, they killed 30,000 people there - men, women & children, and the German people woke up and rallied around the Swedes. At Breitenfeld, Gustavus and his Swedes liberated most of the German Protestants by defeating the king's army. He was cut down in another battle, but saved the Reformation on the continent.

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