# Puritanism in England

In 1522 Martin Luther wrote of the corrupt governments of the western world, “Kings and princes ought to look into these (who exploit the common people) and forbid them by strict laws, but I hear that they have an interest in them, and the saying of Isaiah is fulfilled, ‘Thy princes have become companions of thieves.’ He will melt them together like lead and brass, as when a city burns, so that there shall be neither princes nor merchants any more. That time, I fear, is already at the door.”

He understood the times very well. Quickly the ideals of Protestantism swept the continent. Not many years later the most isolated citizen of England looked around him, realized he was being cheated, and hoped for a better spiritual education. Whereas in the past he had been content to go to church once or twice a year to receive an unexplainable communion, he now demanded to know the Gospel and Jesus Christ. By the mid-1500's the Bible had been printed in English by Tyndale, and Henry VIII had created his own state church to address his own excesses and those in the Catholic Church. The English people slowly emerged from the centuries of darkness to demand a spiritual rebirth.

The English Church moved slowly. Because of widespread illiteracy, few could actually read the newly translated scripture. Even by the mid-Seventeenth Century, most Englishmen gained their understanding of scripture and God’s law by hearing the preaching of the word.[i] That was the very problem as Protestantism swept western society. Ministers were not prepared by the standard education to preach, nor were they trained to inspire. As the Sixteenth Century progressed, the gap was filled with reformers, purifiers: Puritans. It was the Puritan Geneva Bible which became available about 1575, and it was the Puritan preachers which began teaching the Gospel to congregations hungry for the spoken message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Instantly there was conflict with the Government of England. Certain officials and churchmen believed that to maintain law and order in the country, the people must not be filled with new ideas and theories which would make them dissatisfied with their lot. It would take them two generations to conclude they were fighting a losing battle. The Reformation had occurred in part because of preaching--most importantly in the common language of the people. The opulence, the spoken Latin, the ceremonial extravagance were no longer appreciated by the people. Englishmen demanded to hear the pure, unceremonial language of the Scriptures which they were unable to read themselves. The problem would continue for many years.

“In 1587 John Penry surveyed parishes in the north of England and Wales, and discovered that for every parish that had a quarterly sermon, twenty had no sermons at all. “The prayers of the common people are more like spells and charms than devotions.”[ii] In many parishes the clergy could not read English, and in most reports “the churches were served by men guilty of ‘gross sins.’”[iii] As the reform movement swept the country, change slowly took place. Ministers and preachers were trained in greater numbers and were prepared to preach and teach from the scriptures. In London alone the number of graduates to become ministers of a more vocal gospel increased from 27 per cent in 1560 to 88 per cent in 1600. However, the farther north in England, the fewer preaching ministers there were. In the archdeaconry of Nottingham the number of preaching ministers was fewer than half in 1600.[iv] In York it was reported that few people actually heard the spoken gospel.

It was the Puritans who provided the stimulus for increased education and a higher standard of religious teaching. "The Puritans...erected schools in every corner, and procured a college or two to be founded in a manner solely for themselves. But above all things they laboured to gain the possession of the pulpits...the people relishing nothing besides a sermon..."[v] People began to leave their own parish churches to hear a sermon somewhere else. It was reported that Alderman Atkins in 1637 left his home parish of Norwich, Norfolk where he was the mayor.[vi] He gave as his reason for moving to London his wish to hear preaching which had largely been forbidden in Norfolk. In 1592 the Puritans reported out of 484 ministers in Norfolk only 106 actually preached a sermon. Thirty years later in puritan Norwich itself there were only 4 of 34 churches which preached Sunday morning sermons.[vii] Often parishioners would take up a collection to hire a new minister who would preach, allowing the former minister to retain his position as supported by the Church of England.

Those wishing to reform or purify existing religion became more vocal and more powerful as the Seventeenth Century advanced, eventually being led by Oliver Cromwell to reform government itself. Their ideals of democracy and religious freedom were first made known when they began electing or appointing their own local ministers, a policy continued in the New World by the Congregational Church. Most Puritans remained in England and tried to change existing policies to become more tolerant. However, the change was too slow for others. William Brewster, born in southern Yorkshire and living in Scrooby, northern Nottinghamshire, and a parson from Babworth called Richard Clyfton led a group to become Separatists from the Anglican Church. In the beginning they had tried to reform the church system, but eventually became the vocal opposition and were hunted and imprisoned.

Eventually Puritans became a political liability in England. On January 14, 1604 King James of England grew tired of the claims and counter claims that preaching and Protestantism in England was inspiring rebellion and disagreement. The Pilgrims were noted for their support of Parliament but also of freedom of religion; and in a fit of anger over the divisiveness, he proclaimed "one doctrine and one discipline, one religion in substance and ceremony." [viii] Those preachers not willing to comply to the Anglican prayer book and rules of worship were either dismissed or forced to resign. While some were imprisoned, many imigrated.[ix] The first group to leave were Brewster's followers from Babworth, Scrooby and Sturton-le-Steeple who tried first to establish themselves at Boston, Lincolnshire, and finally in the Netherlands.[x]

In July 1620 the Pilgrims in Delft, Netherlands left to join those emigrating to America in the Virginia Company. In September of that year those in Southampton and Plymouth set sail across the Atlantic; and on December 21, after three months they landed at Plymouth Rock. In the next 20 years, King Charles of England tried to maintain control of his country by levying taxes, forcing loans, making arbitrary arrests, and generally tyrannizing citizens--especially those who favored Parliament (which he dismissed for 11 years) and who had endorsed free speech and right to religious beliefs. During that time over twenty thousand Puritans, seeking religious and economic freedom, emigrated to New England.

Endnotes

i. *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, Second Edition, by Christopher Hill, Schocken Books, New York 1972, p. 49.

ii. *Memoirs of Sir Benjamin Rudyerd*, Manning, pp. 135-6, quoted in Hill, p. 58.

iii. *The Seconde Parte of a Register (1915*), Ed. A. Peel, II, pp. 174-6, quoted in Hill. p. 59.

iv. Hill, p. 60.

v. Collectanea Curiosa (1781), Ed. J. Gut6ch, I, pp. 230-1, quoted in Hill. p. 61.

vi. Hill, p. 66.

vii. Hill. P. 53.

viii. *The Story of Civilization: Part VII, The Age of Reason Begins*, by Will and Ariet Durant, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1961, p. 140.

ix. Durant, p. 140.

x. *The Pilgrim Father's Story Begins*, p. 1,2, web page of Bassetlaw, Serving North Nottinghamshire.