

# Church History: “The Reformation” 1500-1900

(Part 7)

## The English Reformation – Part 2: Puritans

The Puritans were English Reformed Protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who sought to “purify” the Church of England from its “Catholic” practices, maintaining that the Church of England was only partially reformed.

“In its quest to reshape England, the Puritan movement passed through three rather clearly marked periods: First, under Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) it tried to purify the Church of England along the lines of Calvin’s Geneva. Second, under James I and Charles I (1603-1642) it resisted the claims of the monarchy and suffered under royal pressures designed to force conformity to a High-Church style Christianity. Third, during England’s Civil War and Oliver Cromwell’s rule (1642-1660), Puritans had a chance to shape the national church.”

“Church History” Bruce L. Shelley p.304

The idea of personal Biblical interpretation through the Holy Spirit was central to Puritan beliefs, though it was shared with most Protestants in general at that time. Puritans sought both individual and corporate conformity to the teaching of the Bible, with moral purity pursued down to the smallest detail, as well as ecclesiastical purity to the highest level. They believed that man existed for the glory of God that his first concern in life was to do God’s will and so to receive future happiness. They believed that Jesus Christ was the center of public and personal affairs, and was to be exalted above all other names.

Some Puritans are known as “non-separating Puritans,” those who were not satisfied with the Reformation of the Church of England but who remained within it, advocating further reforms. This group disagreed among themselves about how much further reformation was possible or even necessary. Others thought that the Church of England was so corrupt that true Christians should separate from it altogether; they are known as “separating Puritans” or simply “Separatists”. The term “Puritan” in the wider sense includes both groups.

Separating Puritans were called “Dissenters” especially after the English Restoration of 1660. The 1662 Uniformity Act caused almost all Puritan clergy to leave the Church of England (the so-called Great Ejection). They were removed in part because they objected to a church ruled by bishops and the requirement that all ministers of the Church of England (deacons, priests and bishops) be ordained by bishops in the Apostolic Succession. Some of these 2,000 “ejected” clergymen became nonconformist ministers (later Congregationalists, Baptist, Unitarians, Presbyterians, etc.) The movement in England changed radically at this

time. Under the Act of Uniformity 1662, the Church of England was restored to its pre-Civil War constitution with only minor changes, and the Puritans found themselves sidelined.

“(This Act) required all clergy to give their unfeigned consent and assent to everything in the Book of Common Prayer. Not far short of 2,000 clergy were unable to do this with a good conscience and they were driven from their livings into Non-conformity, often called dissent. The penalties for breaking the Act were very severe. The Five Mile Act (1665) forbade ejected clergymen to come within five miles of a city or corporate town, this was designed to deprive most of them of the power to earn a livelihood for themselves

“Sketches of Church History” S M Houghton p.161

At this point, the term “Dissenter” came to include “Puritan”, but more accurately described those (clergy or lay) who “dissented” from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

The Dissenters divided themselves from all Christians in the Church of England and established their own separatist congregations in the 1660s and 1670s. An estimated 1,800 of the ejected clergy continued in some fashion as ministers of religion, according to Richard Baxter. The government initially attempted to suppress these schismatic organizations by using the Clarendon Code, a code that legalized and regulated persecution. The Whigs opposed the court religious policies and argued that the Dissenters should be allowed to worship separately from the established Church, and this position ultimately prevailed when the Toleration act was passed in the wake of the Glorious Act of 1689. This permitted the licensing of Dissenting ministers and building of chapels. The term “Non-conformist” generally replaced the term “Dissenter” from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the best known sufferers for conscience’ sake was **John Bunyan**. Local magistrates sentenced him to imprisonment unless he told them that he would give them his promise not to preach, but this he refused to do. He remained in Bedford gaol a total of twelve years, earning his living as far as possible, by making leather boot laces. Bunyan, though a man of very little formal education, but gifted with great originality and insight, wrote in all, 68 books, the most famous being *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the best allegory ever written.

“Books by Puritans appeared in great numbers throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. **William Gurnall** produced *The Christian in Complete Armour*, a work often reprinted. **Richard Baxter** wrote *The Saints Everlasting Rest*. **Joseph Caryl** produced a very large and famous *Commentary of the Book of Job*. **John Owen** wrote volumes on Christian themes, and also a lengthy *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. As the Puritan period drew to its close **Matthew Henry** began a *Commentary on the Bible* which still ranks as one of the most useful ever written.

“Sketches of Church History” S M Houghton p.161