

10. England in the 17th century: Christian decline, Puritans and civil war

Introduction

Acknowledgements: as ever much of this material is drawn from Garry Williams' unpublished church history survey. I've also drawn material from Ros Clark's *Church under construction* and from the Core Seminars of Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

Let's PRAY and then hear a word of Scripture:

Acts 20:26-27, Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Acts 20:32, And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Today we're going to be in England in the 17th century.

But before we get stuck in let me give you two hundred years of English church history in a short poem. I'm not sure who wrote this. I picked it up first in a lecture at theological college years ago. But I've not managed to track down its author:

Harry was a Catholic (Henry VIII – 1509-47)
and Eddy was a Prot (Edward VI – 1547-53)
Mary turned the clock around (Mary – 1553-58)
but Lizzy stopped the rot. (Elizabeth I – 1558-1603)

Jimmy persecuted both (James I – 1603-25)
and Charlie lost his head. (Charles I – 1625-49)
Then Olly brought the Prots a rest (Oliver Cromwell – 1649-58)
and said, "No Kings, instead."

The people got fed up with this
and called back Charlie's son. (Charles II - 1660-85)
The Pope was more than satisfied
when Jimmy followed on. (James II – 1685-88)

Then Willy sailed across the sea (William III – 1688-1702)
and settled things for good.
A Bill of Rights said "Prots are in"
and that's how things now stood.

1. James I (1603-25)

The story of the first half of the 1600s is downright depressing if you're a Reformed Christian.

After Queen Elizabeth died the English throne was taken by the Scottish king, James VI. He became James I of England. At the time Scotland had a more reformed church and James himself professed to be a Calvinist (though he appeared to be a fairly dodgy and unpleasant individual).

The Puritans had high hopes that a Calvinist king would favour them, and initially their strength did increase. They were granted a Puritan archbishop, Abbot. In 1605 the Catholic conspiracy we call the Gunpowder Plot was exposed and became celebrated as a victory for Protestant England. In 1611 the Authorised Version of the Bible was published.

However, there were clear limits on reform and significant problems in both church and state.

- The nation faced huge financial problems under James.
- At the 1604 Hampton Court Conference James heard many of the grievances of the Puritan party in the House of Commons (e.g. they wanted to abolish the rite of confirmation, and the custom of bowing at the name of Jesus during worship. Many wanted to abolish bishops and introduce Presbyterian church government).
- The king granted none of these requests. He had a deep personal belief in the divine right of kings – the idea that monarchs are personally appointed by God himself and thus possessed almost limitless authority. And he also clearly favoured episcopal church government over the Presbyterianism of Scotland. He made some failed attempts to bring the Scottish church into conformity. He instructed Archbishop Bancroft to approve a series of canons claiming that episcopacy was of divine origin.
- James chose to freeze the 39 Articles of Religion in their 1571 form. They had clear limitations which the early reformers had expected to iron out. (See the Appendix below on the clearly Reformed but limited nature of the early English Reformation).
- Further, there was an influx of Arminianism towards the end of James' reign, with its strongly anti-Calvinist denial of God's sovereignty and a defence of free will.

Matters grew much worse, however, under Charles I and William Laud.

2. Charles I (1625-49) and William Laud

Under Charles I (James' son) Puritan reform suffered further setbacks. Charles was married to the highly unpopular French Catholic princess, Henrietta Maria. She was permitted to have a Catholic chapel. Fears grew that the next monarch might indeed be a Roman Catholic.

In 1633 William Laud was appointed Archbishop. He was an open Arminian and often suspected of being a closet Roman Catholic.

Charles and Laud together made a series of autocratic and highly unpopular moves. To most English people and to parliament Laud and Charles looked like a poisonous combination of Arminianism, Popery, and tyranny all mixed up. For example:

- Laud banned preaching on predestination.
- He stressed the divine right of bishops (following Bancroft).
- He restored ceremonies into church life that were strongly Roman Catholic in feel. Thus, the table became an "altar" once more. Communion was celebrated at the east end of the

table and not in the middle of the church. The table was separated from the people by means of a rail. It was compulsory to kneel to receive communion.

- The Puritans were deeply grieved when the king introduced legislation allowing breach of the Sabbath, which they adhered to very strictly.

Laud was a bitter and vengeful man. Apparently he was touchy about being very short! He was a great enemy of Puritanism and his ambition was to “harry them out of the land.”

So, Puritan Christians met in “Conventicles” – secret worship meetings. And Laud’s policy would lead directly to the Great Migration and the settlement of the new world. From about 1630 people began to leave for the Netherlands and then for New England. Some 10,000 fled in the 1630s under Laud – they were religious separatists looking for freedom to pursue a wholly Reformed church.

Charles and Laud alienated everyone: the people, the gentry and the nobility of England. The Earl of Bedford said of the doctrinal decline of his day that Arminianism was “the little thief put in at the window of the church to unlock the door to popery.”

Laudianism also failed among the ordinary lay people of England. There was now a strong anti-papal tradition. After all, there had been 100 years with no papal authority in England (except for the years under Mary). Roman Catholics were hated and feared by many ordinary people.

A side note: whilst being very unpopular, Laudianism has never really gone away from the Church of England. Doctrinal liberalism and High church ceremonialism have always been a cancerous feature of the denomination. In later years we would see the likes of enlightenment rationalism and the Anglo-Catholicism of the Oxford Movement leave its mark on a denomination which, from its earliest times, was never able to be fully reformed either in theory or in practice.

The coming disaster was entirely of Charles’ and Laud’s own making. The story – which culminated in Civil War – involves a complex mixture of theology, politics and warfare.

3. The English Civil War (1642-1651)

In 1628 Charles summoned parliament because he needed money. The House of Commons was clearly Calvinist and anti-Arminian. They feared an anti-Gospel king who endangered the souls of his people (How extraordinary to our ears that a body of politicians would be made up not only of Christians but of convinced and bold Calvinists). Parliament made complaint to the king, who promptly dissolved parliament. There then followed the years of personal rule, 1629-40.

In 1637 Charles sought to impose the Prayer Book and Episcopal church government on Scotland. This led to the creation of the National Covenant and the defeat of the English in war in 1639-40.

In 1640 the Short Parliament met to grant taxes to the king. But the senior clergy also met and passed the Convocation’s Canons asserting the divine right of kings and Laud’s ceremonial innovations.

There followed the Long Parliament of 1640-53, with its demands for root and branch Calvinist reform. In November 1641, for example, the Great Remonstrance sought to reject clergy who “cherish formality and superstition.”

In January 1642 Charles had attempted – and failed – to arrest five MPs in Parliament. He then left London, realising that crisis was looming. Cities and noblemen across the country began to declare themselves either for King or for Parliament. In August 1642 Charles raised his standard at Nottingham – *he* declared war.

Broadly speaking, the North and the West of England were controlled by king. Broadly, the South and the East were controlled by Parliament. Civil War – or really a series of civil wars – followed from 1642-1651.

In February 1642 a great popular petition led to the Bishops Exclusion Bill which was passed by the Commons. It banned bishops from parliament and from the privy council. Parliament needed the supported of Presbyterian Scotland and in January 1643 abolished the Episcopacy altogether.

The first wave of fighting lasting until 1645, with the First War being won by parliament at Naseby. The King was captured by the Scots, and handed over to the English parliament to be imprisoned.

Further wars followed. A succession of Royalist uprisings began the second civil war in 1648. Charles himself had been able to negotiate a secret pact with the Scots and with various other supporters. Parliament which had previously intended to restore the monarchy now hardened against the King and in 1649, after a trial for treason, Charles was executed.

The third civil war included the suppression of Royalists in Ireland and Scotland, and opposition to the troops which rallied around Charles's son, Charles II. He was defeated in 1651, which marked the end of the Civil War. He escaped to France, where he lived in exile until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

I wonder what you make of the story of the English Civil War. Would you be a cavalier or a roundhead? A royalist or a parliamentarian? Do you agree with the popular assessment that the royalists were “wrong but romantic” and the roundheads “right but repulsive”?

One of the biggest problems for Christian people then – and in certain parts of the world now – concerned whether it was even godly to fight against your rulers. Back in the 17th century it was almost unthinkable for an army to fight against their king.

As a Bible-believing Christian how would you answer these questions: What should you do with a head of state who is tyrannical, exploitative, and explicitly wants to pervert the true Christian faith for a pernicious lie? Do you submit to him? Or do you look to godly magistrates and lower rulers in order to wage a war against him? Once captured do you have the moral authority to try a monarch and – according to the law of land – put him to death for treason?

It's difficult! And so it was back then. There were theological arguments presented for the opposition to Charles I, most thoroughly by Samuel Rutherford in his book *Lex, Rex* (“The Law and the Prince”). Parliament was overwhelmingly Puritan and Calvinist. But there were some Puritans who supported the king. And there were many more who opposed his trial and his execution – in particular most of the Presbyterians. It was radical elements who had significant influence over Cromwell's New Model Army who won the day and put the king to death.

4. The Westminster Assembly (1643-49)

While the situation with the King was deteriorating and the horrors of Civil War ensuing Parliament called together the Westminster Assembly.

This was a gathering of around 150 Puritans who would meet in Westminster Abbey from 1643-1649. They met in 1,162 sessions. They produced what we now know as the Westminster Standards. This was the ultimate English statement of Reformed theology and Reformed church life. They produced works including:

- The two catechisms: the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Longer Catechism. (You might recall question 1 of the WSC: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.")
- The Directory of Worship, which in January 1645 replaced the Book of Common Prayer. (Where the BCP is a large book full of set liturgy to use in services of gathered worship, the Directory is a slim "menu" of suggestions for the local church minister to adapt. They reflect a different approach to liturgy).
- In 1648 it produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, which replaced the 39 Articles of Religion. (Where the 39 Articles are relatively brief and – in some ways – still awaiting further clarification and addition, the WCF is a much fuller and deeper expression of Reformed theology).

The Westminster "divines" were Puritans. But their make-up was not uniform. There were supposed to be both royalists and parliamentarians in their number, though the royalists never took their seats. Although they generally agreed on Calvinistic theology, they differed in their views on church government. There were moderate Episcopalians (who believed in bishops), Presbyterians (who believed in government by Presbytery), Independents (who believed in the total autonomy of every local church) and Erastians (who believed that the state should ultimately govern the church).

Supposedly the Episcopalian members were less zealous than the Presbyterians and Independents – and didn't turn up to late afternoon and evening debates on forms of church government. Lord Falkland famously observed that "those that hated the bishops hated them worse than the devil and those that loved them loved them not so well as their dinner"! Whether that's a fair assessment or not Presbyterian church government was adopted in 1646. The so-called "Elizabethan settlement" had been abolished.

Let me strongly encourage you to read the Westminster Standards. You can find them online. Especially, read the Westminster Confession of Faith. It's a theological education packaged in one lengthy doctrinal and pastoral document. It's wonderful!

5. The Commonwealth and the Protectorate (1649-1660)

The period from 1649 to 1660 is known as the interregnum, or "time between reigns." For the only time in its history England functioned like a republic with the leading general of Parliament's army, Oliver Cromwell, as her ruler. From 1653 he was titled Lord Protector. He refused to take the crown and become king.

Cromwell was a great Christian man despite the caricature which is painted of him in most popular history. It is true that he did some dreadful things, for example the terrible massacres carried out

by his forces in Ireland at Drogheda and Wexford in 1649. But we do need to remember that most of what he did was standard practice for warfare in his day.

Cromwell was a Puritan and set to a program of reformation in church and state. He granted greater religious toleration, for example.

Personally he disliked both episcopacy and Presbyterianism. He favoured independency – each congregation governing herself autonomously.

This period saw growth of Independent churches –some of which were baptistic. It's estimated that there were around 300 baptist churches by 1660 – divided between Calvinist and Arminian schools of thought. There was also the growth of radical sects and talk of common property ownership – so there was radical politics going on as well as theology.

It seemed impossible to find a form of government that didn't rely on this one individual – Oliver Cromwell. He died in 1658. He was succeeded by his son, Richard, who lacked the control need to influence Parliament and the Army. With that the Commonwealth period came to an end.

6. The Restoration of the Monarchy: King Charles II (1660-1685)

General Monck took the lead in bringing back the old form of government. The executed king's son, was crowned Charles II in May 1660. He did so on the back of one of history's most notorious acts of deceit.

On 4 April 1660 Charles made the Declaration of Breda. He offered indemnity from prosecution to supporters of parliament and religious freedom to all. Both promises were conspicuously broken. In the most obvious sign of this the body of Oliver Cromwell was disinterred, hanged, and stuck on spike outside Westminster for the next 20 years.

More seriously, Charles introduced the Clarendon Code which, from 1661-1665, largely restored the Elizabethan settlement.

This was the period in which John Bunyan, the early baptist preacher, was imprisoned for preaching at a Christian gathering not in a parish church.

In 1662 the Act of Uniformity required ministers to give total assent to the Book of Common Prayer, among other things. The Act required assent no later than St Bartholomew's Day – 24 August – the same day on which exactly 90 years earlier thousands of French Calvinists had been massacred in Paris.

Some 2,000 Puritan ministers were lost to their churches on that day, out of a total of around 6,000 ministers serving in England. It became known as the Great Ejection. It was an utter disaster to the cause of the Gospel in England. Those Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist churches that had been growing in the freedom of interregnum were driven underground. In 1665 the Five Mile Act banned clergy who had lost their jobs from even living within 5 miles of their former parishes.

You'll remember that in 1665 England was gripped by the plague. In 1666 the Great Fire decimated London. Many interpreted these events as the judgement of God.

Consider for a moment: Imagine if, on St Bartholomew's Day in 2017 you were to lose access to a Bible teaching pastor and church... possibly for the rest of your life. What would you do? Do you have the depth or maturity to stand fast? If not, then there's some serious growing that we need to do.

Or consider this: what would *you* say to your people if you were a pastor and you knew that next Sunday was your last sermon... after which you would be forbidden to preach again ever... and that there was little likelihood of being replaced in your church by a faithful pastor?

We don't have to speculate! We can read several *Sermons of the Great Ejection*. They are godly, wise, God-centred, practical, gracious and free of bitterness. They are also often extremely moving.

Thomas Lye was pastor of All Hallows, Lombard Street, in the City of London. He refused to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity and preached his last sermon on Philippians 4:1. Here are two extracts in which he speaks of the love that is shared between pastor and people, and of his attitude towards those who remained in the Church of England:

Philippians 4:1, Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and my crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved.

Blessed be God for such a people! [i.e. his church]... Pastors must love their people; do not blame them if their hearts are almost broken, when they are to part from such a people... It is true that it lies in the power of man to separate pastor and people, but not to separate their hearts. I hope there will never be a separation of love, but that our love will still continue. If we do not see one another, yet we may love one another, and pray for one another. I hope a husband does not cease from loving his wife because she is absent from him. But, oh! For my brethren, hundreds of them think that you are undone; but you are not undone...

Far be it for me to hope that those that are to take my place should not prosper. Lord, it shall be the prayer of thy servant that those that are to follow may have a double and treble portion of thy spirit, that they may be both painstaking and faithful and successful...

Thus I have now spoken something from this Scripture. I cannot speak what I desire; for besides the exhausting of my spirits, there is something to be done after, viz., a funeral sermon. I shall say no more, but only this: the God of heaven be pleased to make you mind these plain things. I can truly say this: I have not spoken one word that I remember that I would not have said to you if I had been a-dying and called to go to God as soon as I had gone out of the pulpit. The God of peace be with you. Only mind that one thing – when God does not find a tongue to speak, do not find an ear to hear, nor a heart to believe.¹

7. James II (1685-1688) and the Glorious Revolution

Charles son, James II tested the limits of religious toleration. He was strongly suspected of being a Roman Catholic. His moves towards toleration were interpreted as attempts to allow for a Catholic monarchy.

¹ *The sermons of the Great Ejection* (Banner of Truth), pp. 97,98,128-129.

So, in 1688 he was deposed. The Protestant prince William of Orange and Mary II were settled on the throne. The 1689 Bill of Rights restored some rights to non-Anglican Protestants (“non-conformists”) and effectively barred Roman Catholics from the monarchy. This was reinforced in the 1701 Act of Settlement. But non-conformists were still excluded from attending university or holding public office in England.

Conclusion: so, when *did* Puritanism end...?

The Puritans’ great desire was the greater Purity of the established Church of England. Puritanism began in the late 1500s when it was plain the Elizabeth I would not permit further reform. But when did Puritanism end?

You could say it ended in 1662 – when the Puritans were ejected from the Church of England. No longer was it possible for them to reform the denomination, because they were now outside of it.

Rarely was the term used after 1700. Though someone like Jonathan Edwards, the great New England pastor-theologian and philosopher, is often given an honourable mention as a Puritan-out-of-time. He was born in 1703 and died in 1758.

But in a sense the Puritans have never left us. They have given us an unbelievable resource of writings and sermons. We’re going to spend the next two sessions dwelling on some key features of Puritanism – we’re just going to feed our souls on it.

Later reformation and revival in the Church of England was often directly inspired by the Puritans. One hundred years later – in the mid-to-late 1700s – revival came out of nowhere seemingly... but actually men like George Whitefield and Augustus Toplady were heirs of Puritan theology and priorities.

In the 1600s... in the 1700s... there were men and women who longed for the greater purity of Christ’s Church. *Do we?*

Some sought its reformation from within; others founded new churches outside. *What will we choose to do?*

Some chose to stay in for a while; others chose to leave; all eventually were ejected. *What will we choose to do?*

And so we find ourselves here today. What should we call ourselves? Conservative evangelical... Anglican evangelical... Reformed... and may it please Christ that we also be worthy of this name: Puritan.

Appendix: the Church of England under Cranmer and under Elizabeth I – halfly reformed?

The strategy of early reformers like Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was informed by a mixture of principle and pragmatism.

Under Henry VIII he was unable to pursue outright Reformation of the church. Even under Edward VI there were various limiting factors. One of these was **the state of the English clergy**. Cranmer was unable to create a pastorate full of converted, well-educated, Reformed and godly clergy. He had to deal with ex-Roman Catholics of all shapes and sizes.

When the great bishop John Hooper surveyed the ministers in his diocese in 1551 he asked these questions:

How many commandments are there?

Where are they to be found?

Repeat them.

What are the articles of the Christian faith?

Prove them from Scripture.

Repeat the Lord's Prayer.

How do you know it is the Lord's?

Where is it to be found?

Out of 311 clergy, only 50 could answer these questions, and 19 of those did poorly. Ten did not know the Lord's prayer and eight couldn't answer a single question.

One response was to provide a series of pre-prepared sermons – known as the First Book of Homilies – in which the basics of the Gospel and Christian living were set out. Clergy (assuming they were literate) could then simply read them out.

The **39 Articles of Religion** are simultaneously are clearly Reformed document, while also testifying to the unfinished job which Cranmer and others were prevented from completing. King James I chose to freeze the development of the Articles in their 1571 form, despite many demands to expand, amend and clarify their contents.

The Articles consider: the Doctrines of God 1-5, Scripture 6-8, Sin 9-10, Salvation 11-18, The church 19-24, The sacraments 25-33 (marriage 32), Church traditions 34-36, and the State 37-39.

Unlike the Westminster Confession of Faith (which mirrors the Bible in starting with creation, fall and covenant) the 39 Articles begins with God. In so doing the Articles creators were seeking to minimise their disconnect with the church of the past by fronting what they shared with the early church creeds. In subsequent Articles moves are made against Rome and against the Protestant radicals.

Even contemporaries noted ways in which the 39 Articles could be strengthened. For example:

- On Scripture: (i) the Bible is binding not just on matters to do with salvation (as the Articles state), but on all things that the Bible speaks about. (ii) Whilst rightly ruling out repugnant interpretations of Scripture the Articles would profit from clearly explaining that Scripture's ultimate interpreter is not the church but itself, and that Scripture's authority is self-authenticating.

- On Predestination: whilst clearly Calvinist the Articles do not clearly state that God chooses freely and not on the basis of foreknown human response. This moved Archbishop Whitgift to seek to append the strongly predestinarian *Lambeth Articles*.
- Whilst a great statement especially against the false doctrines of Rome, there is little in the Articles addressing other problems. Church discipline is a very small feature, for example, and one that other Reformed churches would take much more seriously.

Cranmer and his colleagues placed great emphasis on the **liturgy of the church**. Why? An ancient saying states an important principle (and unavoidable fact) with respect to liturgy: *lex orandi, lex credenda* – the law of prayer is the law of belief. Or to put it another way, a church shows what she really believes by her words in gathered worship.

One of Cranmer's greatest legacies in this respect was the Book of Common Prayer. Together with the 39 Articles and the Ordinal (the service for the making of bishops, presbyters and deacons – technically separate from, though always published together with the BCP) it forms the doctrinal and pastoral standard of Anglicanism to this day.

In the BCP Cranmer crammed Reformed theology and pastoral thought into the services of the gathered church: morning and evening prayer, communion, baptism, marriage, burials, etc were given a clearly Reformed and Protestant hue.

Plainly, Cranmer did not perform this exercise in ignorance of the earlier Roman Catholic liturgies. And it appears that, whilst removing clear and serious error, he also sought to minimise the changes that he made. There was a good pastoral reason for this: if you were seeking to encourage lay people into Bible-believing Christianity you wouldn't want to create unnecessary offence.

However, as time moved on this pastoral reason disappeared. Should the BCP have undergone further and deeper revision? Certainly, plans were made for a 3rd edition – which never came to fruition.

Another undeniable feature of Anglicanism is that it **“went backwards” following the reign of Edward VI**. Not only was further reform prohibited, but also regressive steps were taken. For example, clerical vestments – previously prohibited – were permitted, even though to many they smacked of the priesthood and of unnecessary ceremonial. Also, the last edition of the BCP omitted the “black rubric” of 1549. This stated explicitly that in communion there is no adoration of bread and wine (which is idolatry), and that Christ's natural body is in heaven (with Calvin and against both Catholicism and Luther).

So, **is the Church of England a *via media*** – a middle way? Yes and no. It is not fair to say of the Church of England's doctrines and prayer book that they are a middle way between Protestantism and Catholicism. The intrusion of Catholic ceremonial and doctrine (under Laud in the 1600s and in the Oxford Movement of the 1800s) are just that – an unwarranted intrusion that should have been met with severe discipline, rather than inclusion. However, the Church of England does stand some way short of the full-blooded Reformed churches: its theological statements not as full and comprehensive as they could be; church membership and church discipline is treated minimally; almost uniquely among the Reformed, Anglicanism continued to operate a threefold ministry pattern (bishop, priest, deacon) rather than just two (presbyter, deacon – no bishops).