



CHAPTER 1

The Puritan Environment

The year in which Matthew Henry was born was a momentous one for the religious history of England. In that year, 1662, over 2000 pastors were ejected from their parishes in the Church of England because they refused to conform to the requirements laid upon them by the Act of Uniformity. This meant that those pastors who were labelled as nonconformists, and who became Presbyterian, Baptist or Congregational, were deprived of opportunities to minister publicly, and nonconformist students were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The fact that Matthew Henry's father, Philip Henry, was one of those ejected brought the religious issues of the day right into the family circle.

But the Great Ejection, as it was called, was only one of several important events in seventeenth-century England. It was marked by the overthrow of the monarchy and the Church of England, and then their subsequent re-establishment. The rift between Charles I and the Parliament became so great that two civil wars eventuated (1642-48), in which Royalists were pitted against Roundheads, the nickname for supporters of the Parliament. The Parliament's New Model Army was victorious and Charles I was executed in January 1649. Previously executed were Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (May 1641), and William Laud, the Archbishop of



Matthew Henry

Canterbury (January 1645). Episcopal rule in the church was set aside, and use of the Book of Common Prayer outlawed. The Westminster Assembly met from 1643 to 1658, and its greatest product, the Westminster Confession of Faith, was adopted in Scotland but not in England. The Savoy Conference was held in 1660 in an attempt to thrash out a compromise settlement that would allow many of Puritan persuasion to remain in the Church of England. That conference was unsuccessful.

However, the monarchy was re-established in 1660, and bishops, with seats in the House of Lords, regained power. Laws authorised repression of worship in which the Book of Common Prayer was not used, and many nonconformists were persecuted. But even greater change occurred in 1688. Charles II, who became King in 1660, had died in 1685 and was succeeded by his brother, James II. He was staunchly Roman Catholic, and when his second wife gave birth to a son, Protestant politicians in England moved and invited William of Orange to come and be king of England. Along with a Dutch army, he landed in Torbay, Devonshire, on 5 November 1688, and in the following year an Act of Parliament gave religious toleration to all Protestants, and the throne became and remained Protestant.

The seventeenth century was also noted as being within the Puritan period and very distinguished men taught and preached, including men like John Owen, William Perkins and William Gurnall. The Puritan period had come to a close by the time Richard Baxter died in 1692, though Matthew Henry and some of his associates carried the Puritan learning and vision over into the eighteenth century.

To define Puritanism and to delineate its commencement and end remain difficult.¹ Definition is difficult because the

1 For discussions on the meaning of the word 'Puritan', see Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), chap. 1; Basil Hall, 'Puritanism: The Problem of Definition', *Studies in Church History*, vol. 2, ed. G. J. Cumming (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), pp. 283-96; Randall C. Gleason and Kelly M. Kapic, eds., *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 15-37.



The Puritan Environment

word ‘puritan’, first used in the 1560s in England, was a word of abuse directed at a group of Christians. Shakespeare, in *Twelfth Night* (c. 1599), portrayed them as people to be despised, for example, when Maria says of Malvolio, ‘Sir, sometimes he is a kind of puritan’, Sir Andrew replies, ‘O, if I thought that, I’d beat him like a dog’.² In regard to their way of life, the Puritans were ‘precise’. Richard Rogers of Wethersfield in Essex, an influential Puritan figure, was once told by a gentleman: ‘Mr Rogers, I like you and your company very well, only you are *too precise*.’ ‘Oh, sir’, replied Rogers, ‘I serve a precise God.’ That was a fitting reply, for clearly the Puritans had a deep commitment to the Bible as God’s revealed will and they wished to conform their personal lives and the life of the church to God’s demands expressed in it. The very first sentence in William Ames’s *Marrow of Sacred Divinity* is: ‘Divinity is the doctrine of living to God’.³

Let J. I. Packer give a summary of what constituted Puritanism:



Puritanism ... was a total view of Christianity, Bible-based, church-centred, God-honouring, literate, orthodox, pastoral, and Reformational, that saw personal, domestic, professional, political, churchly, and economic existence as aspects of a single whole, and that called on everybody to order every department and every relationship of their life according to the Word of God, so that all would be sanctified and become ‘holiness to the Lord’. Puritanism’s spearhead activity was pastoral evangelism and nurture through preaching, catechising, and counselling (which Puritans themselves called casuistry), and Puritan teaching harped constantly on the themes of self-knowledge, self-humbling, and repentance; faith in, and love for, Jesus Christ the Saviour; the necessity

2 *Twelfth Night*, II.iii.128-154.

3 William Ames, *Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London: Henry Overton, 1642), p. 1. Ames (or the Latinised form of his name and by which he was widely known, Amesius) was highly influential on Reformed theology, and his *Marrow* was still being used in the training of Free Church students in Scotland until late in the nineteenth century.



Matthew Henry

of regeneration, and of sanctification (holy living, by God's power) as proof of it; the need for conscientious conformity to all God's law, and for a disciplined use of the means of grace; and the blessedness of the assurance and joy from the Holy Spirit that all faithful believers under ordinary circumstances may know. Puritans saw themselves as God's pilgrims, travelling home; God's warriors, battling against the world, the flesh and the devil; and God's servants, under order to do all the good they could as they went along.⁴

Politically the Puritan pastors were not a unified group. Some, probably the majority, were avowedly Republicans, serving as chaplains in the army of Oliver Cromwell, the Protector of England, and even, like John Howe, as the Protector's domestic chaplain. Their republicanism did not mean that they necessarily approved of the execution of Charles I. Richard Baxter noted in his autobiography that he abhorred it, and did everything in his power to prevent it. However, other Puritans were Royalists, who had no real love for Cromwell, and were very suspicious of his motives. Many others would probably have remained Royalists were it not for the ungodliness of so many in that group.

While having close doctrinal unity, the Puritans differed on many other questions, especially concerning the interaction of faith and politics, as well as the nature of the church. This fragmentation hindered their overall influence on English life. Richard Baxter and others said 'that if all the Presbyterians had been like Mr Stephen Marshall, and all the Independents like Mr Jeremiah Burroughs, and all the Episcopal men like Archbishop Ussher, the breaches of the church would soon have been healed'.⁵

4 J. I. Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer: Honouring the People of God*, vol. 4 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 24-5. The same volume contains another similar summary of Puritanism on p. 265.

5 Matthew Henry, *The Life of the Rev. Philip Henry, A.M. with Funeral Sermons for Mr and Mrs Henry* (first published 1828; reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 6. This biography was first published in 1698, and the reprint is the edition put out by J. B. Williams in 1825. It is cited hereafter as *The Life of the Rev. Philip Henry*.





The Puritan Environment

The Puritans have not been without their defenders, and in the nineteenth century none defended them so strongly as J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool (1880-1900). Writing almost 130 years ago, his words still stand true. He was writing on Richard Baxter, but in so doing he was taking a far more comprehensive view and did so as an Anglican bishop, not a nonconformist defending the Puritans. This is how he described them:



Let us settle it down in our minds that for sound doctrine, spirituality and learning combined, the Puritans stand at the head of English divines. With all their faults, weaknesses, and defects, they alone kept the lamp of pure, Evangelical religion burning in this country in the times of the Stuarts,—they alone prevented Laud's Popish inclinations carrying England back into the arms of Rome. It was they who fought the battle of religious freedom, of which we are reaping such fruits. It was they who crushed the wretched spirit of inquisitorial persecution which misguided High Churchmen tried to introduce into this land. Let us give them the honour they deserve. Let us suffer no man to speak lightly of them in our presence. Let us remember our obligations to them, reverence their memory, stand up boldly for their reputation, and never be afraid to plead their cause. It is the cause of pure, Evangelical religion. It is the cause of an open Bible and liberty to meet, and read, and pray together. It is the cause of liberty of conscience. All these are bound up with Baxter and the Puritans. Let us remember this, and give them their due.⁶

As already noted, it is hard to pinpoint the exact time the Puritan period began, and also when it finished. Certainly its origins go back as far as William Tyndale, and perhaps the year 1526, when his New Testament in English reached England, can be regarded as the starting point, though the term 'puritan' was not used until 1563. In that year Stow made a reference to 'many congregations of Anabaptysts in London who

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Facts and Men, being pages from English Church History, Some Biographical and Some Historical between 1553 and 1683, with a Preface for the Times* (London: William Hunt and Co., 1882), pp. 323-4.

cawlyd themselves Puritans or unspotted Lambs of the Lord'.⁷ With the progress of the Reformation movement in England, Queen Elizabeth I established the Elizabethan Compromise, which did not contain sufficient for those of the Reformed party, who soon would be called 'Puritans'. 'Thus it began', to use Peter Lewis' words, 'under Elizabeth I who suspected it, grew under James I who feared it, increased in power under Charles I and his Archbishop, William Laud, who despised it, gained a brief but august ascendancy under Cromwell who honoured it, and ended under Charles II and his bishops who hated it'.⁸

Clearly the term 'puritan' was strictly a reference to those within the Anglican Church who 'desired some modifications in Church government and worship'.⁹ If the strict usage is followed, this would put the end of the Puritan era at about the start of the Civil War in 1642. But the word 'Puritan' has also obtained a wider meaning and so some flexibility in usage, both as to the beginning of the period and its end, is desirable. To date the end of the Puritan period in the 1640s is probably putting the close of the era a little too early. Certainly the Puritan era had waned considerably by the time William of Orange was proclaimed King in 1688 (the so-called 'Glorious Revolution'), as the nonconformists from that point onwards had the right to preach and to establish independent churches. The terminology had also changed in that instead of 'Puritan' there is reference to Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, and Quakers. The death of Richard Baxter in 1691 marked the end of a great era of biblical scholarship, though some others lived into the next century. John Howe, for example, lived until 1705. Matthew Henry

7 Quoted in *The Century Dictionary* (London: Century Co., 1914), vol. VII under the word 'Puritan'.

8 Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Haywards Heath: Carey Publications, 1975), p. 14.

9 B. Hall, 'Puritanism: The Problem of Definition', p. 289.



The Puritan Environment

carried on that tradition as a second-generation scholar until his death in 1714, and while he did not study personally under the great scholars whose instruction so influenced his father, yet his ministry of preaching and writing continued the Puritan influence into the eighteenth century.

In a way it does not matter greatly where the exact chronological boundaries are placed in regard to the Puritans. What does matter is that the period when they were so dominant in English life exhibits Christianity as taking hold of the total life experience of many people, and that world-and-life view (to use a much more modern phrase) in turn influenced many in the British Isles, the Netherlands, and in the American colonies. While no similar period in church history can be called Puritan in the same sense, yet individuals have exhibited many of the same characteristics, including Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), and Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), whom J. I. Packer calls 'a kind of Puritan'.¹⁰

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, *Honouring the People of God: Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, vol. 4, p. 61.

