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THERE WERE SOME ANGLICAN PURITANS ALSO

By David Hilton

In the Winter 2008 issue of the 'Churchman,' Brian H. Cosby, an American Presbyterian, discusses the definition of 'Puritan' and 'Puritanism,' looking at definitions given by both Christian writers on the Puritans and by secular historians.

Until recently my own views, coming from a Presbyterian and free Evangelical background, would have coincided with the conclusions of most of the writers referred to. However, now having encountered the beliefs and lives of Reformed Anglicans in the late 16th and early 17th Century, such as John Jewel, John Whitgift, Edmund Grindal, William Whitaker, John Davenant, Joseph Hall, James Ussher and Daniel Featley, convinces me that these godly Calvinists belong to the 'Puritan brotherhood.'

For anyone wanting to know about these men, I would suggest reading the brief biographies of them by George M. Ella in 'Mountain Movers – Champions of the Faith' (see below for further details). Whitaker, Davenant and Hall are included in Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson's excellent guide, 'Meet the Puritans,' published by Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Anglican Puritans referred to above, as well as many others such as William Perkins, Richard Sibbes and John Preston, remained contentedly in the Church of England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. Many of them did desire to a greater or a lesser extent further reformation of the Church in accordance with Scripture, but they were prepared to wait for a change of mind and heart by the monarch. Even Thomas Cartwright who argued for what he believed were the benefits of Presbyterian church government over the Anglican form of Episcopacy, still remained within the Church of England.

It was the attempt by Archbishop Laud, backed politically by Charles I and Thomas Wentworth, to alter the Reformed character of the Church of England, which forced most Puritans into dissent and rebellion, leaving a substantial minority of Puritans remaining loyal to the Church of England they served, but hoping for better days. Political revolution radicalised the Puritan majority, and split it from the Anglican Puritan minority.

Sadly, differences on church government divided the Puritan brotherhood, and the attempt to impose Presbyterianism broke up Puritan unity. Anglican Puritans were persecuted till rescued by Oliver Cromwell's toleration policy. The division of the Puritan body of the 'godly' into factions so weakened it that the Laudians were easily able at the Restoration to seize control of the Church of England, and alter its Reformed character. It was now the turn of Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist Puritans to be persecuted.

Taking into account the splits in the Puritan movement during the reigns of Charles I and Charles II, and during the Civil War, the Commonwealth and the Protectorate, over church government and politics, we should speak of 'Anglican Puritans', 'Presbyterian Puritans', 'Congregational Puritans' and 'Baptist Puritans,' instead of denying that Anglican Calvinists were indeed 'true Puritans.'

We should also view 'Puritanism' as a British rather than just an English movement. By 'British' I include the American colonies, as well as England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. James I, Charles I and Charles II governed all these nations and colonies.

Crawford Gribben, in his book 'The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church' (published by Evangelical Press 2003) shows how events in Ireland, particularly the Laudian persecution of Reformed Anglicans and Presbyterians alike, impacted both on Scotland and England, with the signing of the Scottish National Covenant and the distrust of Charles I by the Long Parliament.

As far as the American colonies are concerned, Puritan ministers not only moved from England to New England, but some moved the other way. Richard Mather was an Anglican Puritan in Toxteth, before Laud's persecution led him to become a congregational Puritan in Massachusetts. Mather continued to keep in contact with his Toxteth parishioners.

For our own identity, I think that it is important to appreciate the continuity between Puritanism and Evangelicalism. 18th Century Evangelicals were spiritually strengthened and influenced by the Puritan literature which they read. With the term 'Evangelical' being so broadened today to include many who are neither 'Reformed' nor 'Puritan,' those of us who want to remain faithful to the teaching and practice of Scripture, should regard ourselves as 'Reformed' and 'Puritan.'

Most writers referred to by Cosby have chosen Puritan characteristics from Civil War or Restoration times. I prefer to start with Puritanism pre-1625 rather than post-1625, before Laud began his attempts to suppress it. The characteristics of Puritanism are best defined from when the Puritans were largely united rather than when they were divided over church government and politics. This can be best seen in the Anglican Puritans I have mentioned.

The beliefs of these men can best be seen in the Lambeth Articles of 1595, produced by Whitgift and Whitaker, and the contribution of the Anglican delegates, especially Davenant and Hall, to the Synod of Dort in 1618. It is also seen in Ussher's Irish Articles of 1615, which have theological affinities with the later Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith. All of these affirm that the 39 Articles are Calvinistic, as Augustus Montague Toplady correctly argued in the 18th Century.

These Puritans vigorously opposed Laudianism, Arminianism and Roman Catholicism. They were 'the hotter sort of Protestants.'

Another characteristic of Puritanism is that the Puritans were vitally concerned with evangelism as well as Christian nurture. Puritans were deeply interested in the doctrine and practice of sanctification, as well as with how the church was to be pastored and governed. They emphasised the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures.

If these characteristics of the Puritans are our priorities, then we are the heirs of this noble Puritan brotherhood. They can be demonstrated equally in the Church of England and the Free Churches.

David Hilton is a Lay Preacher and retired civil servant living in Wellingborough, Northants.

George Ella's books 'Mountain Movers - Champions of the Faith' and 'More Mountain Movers' are both available from Go Publications. The Puritans mentioned are mainly in the first volume whilst the second deals more with Champions of the Faith from the mid 16th century. The books normally retail at £13.95 each but Go Publications are offering a special deal to Cross†Way readers of £9.95 each plus postage. Go Publications, The Cairn, Hill Top Eggleston, Co. Durham DL12 0AU. Tel: 01833 650797. Remember to mention Cross†Way when you contact them in order to get the discount.