

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#18. Summary of The Church in the Seventeenth Century

Although The Holy Spirit has been at work all over the world, our emphasis has been on the trail of church history as seen in Western Civilization. It is for that reason that we turn our attention in this chapter to the reforming of the church in England.

The English Reformation was introduced during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), but it gained momentum under his daughter Elizabeth, who ruled from 1558-1603. Under Elizabeth, England became a Protestant nation. It is in this period that we meet the Puritans, who wanted a deeper reformation of the English church. Those who thought of further reformation as unlikely, generally fell into the sect known as Pilgrims. As the name implies, the goal of Puritans was more aggressive restructuring within the established church. The Pilgrims more or less abandoned the institutional church because they felt it was beyond saving as it existed in England.

Puritanism was revival centered and generally sought to separate itself from becoming entangled with the politics of the day. Elizabeth adopted a "middle way" posture that did not satisfy the Puritans. Many Puritans had lived as refugees in Geneva and Holland during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558), and they sought to model the church in England after the reformed churches on the continent. They were concerned about worship styles and the church being under the authority of a secular king or unsanctified bishops instead of a more theocentric or congregationalist model. Notable Puritans included John Bunyan, John Owen, Matthew Henry and William Perkins. These men believed in the primacy of preaching the Word, personal conversion, and a lifestyle of holiness. Some Puritans moved toward a Presbyterian form of government, while others were more congregational in their views.

After the death of Elizabeth, James I ruled in England. At first the Puritans hoped James would move toward further reformation, but

he renounced his Scottish Presbyterian upbringing in favor of a model of church government that would solidify his control of the churches. One notable accomplishment of James, however, was the completion of the King James Version of the Bible in 1611.

In 1625, Charles I came to power, ruling over Ireland, Scotland and England. The new king, like Rehoboam of Israel, managed the throne poorly, resulting in Civil War. Scottish Presbyterians united with English Puritans to resist Charles. Forces loyal to Charles fought against the army of Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell prevailed, and Charles was executed in 1649. From 1643 until 1652, the Westminster Assembly of Divines met to restructure the Church of England. The Assembly was a council of theologians and Parliament members who established documents supporting the goals of Puritans and Presbyterians. However, when the monarchy was restored in 1660, the documents were repudiated and the Church of England returned to a hierarchical form of government.

The actions of Puritans in the 1600's largely shaped the religious climate in America, and the Westminster Confession is still seen by many Presbyterians as "the principle subordinate standard" of the church (meaning the document is secondary only to the Bible itself).

With the Monarchy restored, Charles II began to crush dissent by forcing Puritan ministers out of their places of ministry and often jailed them. In Scotland, persecution of the Presbyterians erupted as well.

By the beginning of the 18th century, English Puritanism was fading away, but its influence had been phenomenal. Later we will learn of Puritan influence upon the Scottish Covenanters, German Pietists, and the Puritans of New England.

God was moving. It was time for The Great Awakening!