

# 'Rivers and Floodtide'

- Radical faith and turbulent times in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

## FAITH STRUGGLES WITH SOCIETY

### Elizabethan church

At the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the son of Mary Queen of Scots, already James VI of Scotland, became James 1 of England. At this point the majority of those committed to the Church of England saw themselves simply as members of a national church, which was Protestant in character. Within this 'broad church', however, conflicting tides had emerged:

- **High Church:** individuals like Richard Hooker and William Laud stressed that the Anglican church, with its historic episcopate, was as apostolic and catholic as the Roman church. Those influenced by this emphasis were very sacramental in their theology and worship and saw the king and bishops as essential to church structure and function.
- **Puritan:** influenced by Calvinist ideas many saw the Anglican church as only semi-reformed, they wanted simplicity in worship and the church free from the control of the king and the bishops. There were two contrasting 'puritan' views about the church:
  - **'Presbyterian'** with elected elders overseeing churches in a geographical area, as was the case in Scotland; people like Thomas Cartwright encouraged this;
  - **'Congregational'** ['independents'] with each local church having only of committed believers and the authority to determine its own destiny independent of a 'presbytery'; this was encouraged by people like William Perkins.<sup>1</sup>

### James and conflict

James had been brought up under the influence of the Presbyterian church in Scotland which John Knox had established. The Puritans felt sure that this would make the new king favourable to the reforms they wanted in the Church of England. In 1604 met a delegation of Puritans at Hampton Court Palace to discuss what they described as biblically based reforms for the Anglican church. He saw their demand for the abolition of bishops and Presbyterian style structure as removing his power to control the church and thus 'the divine right of kings' which he cherished. His famous reply was, "No bishop, no king!" James refused all but one of the Puritan demands; he authorised a new translation of the Bible, the 'King James' version, published in 1611.

James not only crushed Puritan hopes but was determined to drive them from the church. He not only deprived them of their livings, but refused to tolerate their existence within the established church. While he agreed with them theologically he would have no church that challenged the power of the crown. The Puritans and other dissenters were driven

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<sup>1</sup> In the notes above we are using the term 'puritan' and 'independent' in particular ways; but the term 'puritan' is often used about this time to speak broadly of people wanting a more spiritual lifestyle and a more reformed church, and 'independents' could refer to many separatist groups breaking with the established church.



underground, some escaped to the Continent, but a zeal for religious reform and freedom based on scripture continued in their hopes and preaching. It was disappointment and frustration at events that led to the sailing of the 'pilgrim fathers' from Holland, via Plymouth, to New England in the 'Mayflower' on 6th September 1620, many more would follow.

## **Charles 1<sup>st</sup> and Parliament**

In 1625 James died and his son, Charles 1, came to the throne and quite simply, a bad situation became worse. Like his father, Charles also believed in the 'divine right of kings', and his archbishop, William Laud, continued the attack on Puritan influences. The Queen, Henrietta Maria, was a Catholic and Laud was suspected of Roman sympathies as he introduced increasingly 'high' practices into the church.

On the political front Charles treated Parliament with increasing contempt. The king was under pressure to raise finance to meet his commitments but the Commons made no allowance for this and deep acrimony arose. From 1629 Charles ruled without Parliament. Further political incompetence was seen in the king trying to impose English church government, liturgy and prayer book upon the Scots. They responded in fury and signed the national 'Covenant' to maintain the freedom of the church; they defended this between 1639-40 by defeating successive English armies. These events led to the English people becoming even more indignant about the kings mismanagement of affairs. A hostile Parliament was recalled in 1640 with events climaxing in January 1642 when the king attempted to arrest five members.

## **English Civil War**

On the 22nd August 1642 the king raised his standard at Nottingham and the English Civil War had begun. It was not a religious war, but over the king's right to levy taxes and the rights of Parliament as we have seen; however, religious strands were entangled in the whole event. The years between 1642-1646 saw the awful conflict. At first things went against the Parliamentarians, but under the increasing leadership of Oliver Cromwell and the 'Ironsides' of his New Model Army they began to gain a crushing victory. This Huntingdon squire was a Puritan independent. Once the king was captured there was increasing pressure for Charles' execution due to his duplicity. The Presbyterians did not want the death of the king so Cromwell and the Independents purged them from the Commons. King Charles 1 was beheaded at Whitehall on January 30th 1649.

Puritan dominance of Parliament during the years of the civil war led to the setting up of a committee to provide an alternative to the 'Thirty Nine Articles' as a basis for a united church in Britain after the war. The result of their work was the 'Westminster Confession'. It is an orderly and clear presentation of Christian truth, from a Calvinist perspective, set out as a confession of faith; it is the basis of faith of all Presbyterian churches; and viewed as one of the finest fruits of Reformed theology.

## **Cromwell and Church**

The end of the civil war presents a situation unique in church history; there is an important political state under the authority of a Christian military leader who is personally an 'independent' in his belief about the relationship between the Church and the state!



The aftermath of the war saw the bulk of the English people either moderate Anglican or Presbyterian. However, there were increasing numbers of independents, separatists and dissidents scattered throughout the nation. New laws allowed freedom of thought and worship and the English church became dominated by 'independency'; in effect a vast collection of parishes, each with a certain amount of freedom to organise religious life as it chose, with the minimum of central direction. Most people, like 'Congregationalists' and Baptists, who wanted to worship in 'gathered congregations' separate from the parochial system were free to do so. Those faithful to the defeated Anglican system were treated with reasonable tolerance, and Catholics were treated better than they had been for a century even though they had supported the king in the Civil War. More extreme sects, to which we shall refer below, faced official and unofficial persecution. Some of the great Cathedrals became meeting places for various groups; Exeter Cathedral was divided in half by a brick wall, Presbyterian one side, Independents the other! Of course in the 'Restoration' of Charles II all this will be swept away; but the religious face of England could never be the same again.

### **Commonwealth to Restoration**

The problem facing Oliver Cromwell was that, following the execution of the king in 1649; he never found a satisfactory way of ruling the national 'commonwealth' he created. There was no king, no lords nor bishops. Initially, as commander-in-chief of the army he used military power to crush the Levellers and the Irish. In 1653 he took the title 'Lord Protector' but wisely refused the crown. Cromwell's 'protectorate' was clearly marked by his independent puritan commitment and by some of the finest and coarsest aspects of his character. Amongst Cromwell's legislation were attempts to regulate the 'suitability' of the clergy; there were also laws prohibiting cock fighting, horse racing, stage plays and swearing in attempt to reform morality.

During this time we see the influence of individual Puritans like Richard Baxter who was minister of the parish church in Kidderminster between 1641-1660. He was a gentle scholar and preacher who was concerned about the whole pastoral state of the church. He worked strongly for Christian unity in an age where separation was often viewed as a virtue. He wrote with a warmth at a time when this was hardly a characteristic of the Puritan.

With Cromwell's death in 1658 the Puritan revolution was spent. There was no leader, no policy, no plans and no constitution that satisfied the nation, which began sinking into political chaos. It was the army commander George Monk who correctly assessed the popular mood for a return of the Stuart royal family. On 26th May 1660 Charles II returned to the throne at the invitation of Parliament. Not only was the monarchy restored, but so also was most of what had been removed by the Civil War. Anglicanism was reestablished with High Churchmen in the ascendancy. Old scores were settled; the 'regicides' [king-killers] were executed and the Presbyterians were given no church concessions.

In 1662 the Act of Uniformity demanded all Anglican ministers give their complete assent to the Book of Common Prayer. Over 2000 clergy, Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist, left the national church. The break between Anglican and Puritan was complete and English dissent was formally marked. It was now a time when any English person who was



not an Anglican faced serious difficulties; thousands of nonconformists died in terrible prison conditions, others faced financial ruin through having their property sequestered.

## **'WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN' <sup>2</sup>**

### **Faith and ferment**

Viewing church and society from the top down, following the Civil War, suggests a time of remarkable freedom; but to view church and society from the grass roots reveals an astonishing period of revolution. Social discontent among the bottom fifty percent of English society at the time of the Civil War was great; there was not only the huge disruption of the war but the years 1620-1650 have been described as economically among the worst in English history. Therefore the hopes of many for a new social and economic order to emerge from the conflict were high. But in the event the war only benefited the gentry and the merchants, so there was reaction. This particularly came to a head after the execution of the king.

Added to this, these were also days of intense religious excitement. There was widespread belief that the time had come for God to pour out his Spirit upon all flesh and that through the violence of the Civil War the kingdom of God would be established upon English soil and that Christ would descend to reign over it. There were ecstasies everyday and prophecies everywhere; amongst soldiers of the New Model Army, artisans in London, vagabonds and traders:

- Richard Sale walked barefoot and in sackcloth through the streets of Derby; flowers in one hand and stinking weeds in the other;
- James Milner prophesied that the 2nd December 1652 would be the first day of the New Creation and would be marked by a sheet carrying a sheep being let down from heaven.

Anarchy, communism and apocalyptic were in the air giving rise to numerous groups. There were claims to 'spirituality' in everything from holiness to lawlessness. It has been said that particularly 'between 1645-1653 there was a great overturning, questioning, revaluing of everything in England. Old institutions, old beliefs, old values came in question.'<sup>3</sup> There is a tendency to want to clearly distinguish between these groups and individuals, the reality appears to be that at the time the whole situation was much more fluid in its expression. We must also be careful in not distinguishing too strictly between religion, politics and general skepticism. Some of the main groups and influences were:

### **Levellers**

A movement that grew among radical supporters of Parliament. They demanded sovereignty be transferred to a Commons elected by all the people, with equality before the law and freedom of religion. Their name was given by their enemies who saw their aim as 'levelling human estates'; making everyone equal. Because their reforms were not acted on, with only landowners being allowed to vote, they turned to agitation in the New

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<sup>2</sup> From Christopher Hill '*The World Turned Upside Down*' Pelican 1975

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hill '*The World Turned Upside Down*' Pelican 1975; 14



Model Army. This led to mutiny in April 1649 that was crushed by force, and by 1650 leading Levellers like John Lilburne were imprisoned and the movement crushed; but its ideas were to inspire others.

### **Diggers**

Between 1649-50 a communistic movement, led by Gerrard Winstanley and others began to cultivate common land near Cobham in Surrey; also inspiring other groups elsewhere. They planted vegetables to feed the needy. Local gentry and landowners incited mobs to harass them and later the government dispersed them. They claimed the Civil War had destroyed the landowners claims and that should revert to the 'common treasury' God originally intended; the 'Norman yoke' was to be broken. There was to be social equality, education for all, and abolition of trade, universal suffrage and an imminent expectation of the Millennium. Winstanley saw the present world as 'running up like parchment in the fire, and wearing away'. Society must return to its 'virgin state'. They genuinely believed that their 'digging' was an outward manifestation of an inner confidence that the time had come for God's intervention in history.

### **Fifth Monarchists**

They emerged from within Cromwell's army and were inspired by the vision of the destruction of the four anti-God kingdoms in Daniel 2:44. They looked for the direct intervention of King Jesus into English politics to bring about the effects that democratic political methods had failed to achieve. Cromwell crushed their intrigues and their plot ultimately to murder him. In 1661 Venner headed another rising in which he and 16 others were executed.

### **Muggletonians**

They emerged about 1651 through the teaching of two obscure men, John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton; a London tailor and his cousin. They claimed to be the 'two witnesses' of Revelation 11 and to have the spirit of prophecy and visions from heaven. Muggleton said he was the 'mouth' of Reeve as Aaron had been to Moses. They saw their work as to seal the elect in preparation for the forth-coming judgment of God. They expressed the right to curse all who opposed them and declared eternal damnation to all their adversaries. They denied the Trinity and held a dualist doctrine. While they were imprisoned as nuisances, they were not without influence.

### **Seekers**

These were individuals and sometimes groups whose disenchantment with the failure of the church of their day, and through influences from the Continent, turned their back upon all the forms of organisation and ceremonies of the visible church. They taught that the true believer waits and 'seeks' for the church of apostolic power, which God will establish. They were earnest, peaceable, spiritually minded people and appear to have held large meetings in both Bristol and the north of England. As we shall see the majority were absorbed into the Quaker movement after 1652.

### **Ranters**

This was a movement of the 'free spirit'. Like some Levellers and Diggers they wished to abolish private property. Like the Seekers they denounced all outward forms of religion; emphasising instead that true religion was found in the 'indwelling spirit' that was present within each person. They were pantheists; and their exaltation of self led them to virtually



regard themselves as divine beings. However, it was their pursuit of personal and spiritual freedom that led to their most extreme beliefs and behaviour. They taught that they could know no freedom from sin unless they could freely sin without guilt. They would regularly swear and blaspheme, smoke and drink. They saw no wrong in lying, stealing or even murdering if the occasion demanded it. They taught that all men and women were but one man and woman so fornication and adultery were pure acts. They went out of their way to mock religion. Ranters were numerous and they were everywhere. They were in the Army and across the nation, and found in their thousands in London. Their emphasis on individual thought and action meant that they tended to produce a whole variety of groups around prominent leaders. They were one of the main reasons why observers at the time saw England appearing to 'swarm with sects'. They had a devastating effect upon many individuals and groups; there are frequent references to 'shattered Baptists'. Both George Fox and Richard Baxter wrote against them. Many were converted to the Quaker movement; others were severely punished by the authorities for their immoral and blasphemous acts that led to the eventual suppression of the movement.

## **'TREMBLE BEFORE THE LORD'**

### **George Fox**

George Fox was born in 1624; he came from a godly home in Fenny Drayton in Leicestershire. His remarkable life spanned all the political and religious upheavals from the reign of James 1 to that of William and Mary. From childhood he was aware and serious about spiritual things; hungry for God but perplexed by all the religious confusion around him. Having been apprenticed to a shoemaker - trader, and with no formal education, he set out, in 1643 at the age of 19 as a wondering 'seeker after truth'. Fox inquired and questioned everywhere and from everybody he met and was dismayed by the religious controversies of his day which he increasingly saw as trivial, and the failure of ministers of his day, Puritan or dissenting, to help him. He would spend hours alone studying his Bible; this gave him a prodigious knowledge of the text. He had long and deep inner struggles but slowly came to believe that a person did not need the 'steeple houses' to find God. People should rely on the Holy Spirit, the 'inner light of the living Christ', through whom they could commune directly with Jesus Christ. He said that God spoke this truth directly into an individual's heart.

### **Fox and 'Society of Friends'**

Having made this discovery of the power and life of the Spirit 'experimentally', George Fox became a travelling evangelist in 1647, believing that he had a command from God 'to turn people to that inward light, spirit and grace..' In eight years there would be 50,000 Quakers:

- In 1648 he was holding 'great meetings' in the Midlands and many were 'convinced' and become part of this 'society of friends';
- In Nottingham he was first imprisoned for speaking out in a church to challenge a clergymen;
- In 1649, prior to his imprisonment in Derby, the movement was given the nickname 'Quakers' when Fox told the judge to "tremble before the Lord";
- In 1652 he climbed Pendle Hill in Lancashire where in a vision, "the Lord let me see in what places he had a great people to be gathered";



- In Westmorland he met a group of Seekers who responded to his teaching and leadership, forming the 'Valiant Sixty' who became involved in mission and evangelism: the movement now develops a focus beyond one individual;
- In Furness he met Judge Fell and his wife Margaret; their home Swathmore Hall was to become a centre for Quaker activity and many years later, in 1669 after the Judge's death, George Fox and Margaret were to marry.

## The Quakers

In the early days, the 1650's, the Quaker movement was inevitably caught up in religious and spiritual ferment of the time. To many it was another dangerous group; to others it was truth amid confusion. Many of the early Quakers had been Seekers, Ranters or 'shattered Baptists'. That some 'ranting' ideas influenced some early Friend's groups is seen in the events surrounding James Naylor. A one time Parliamentary soldier and preacher he became a charismatic itinerant Quaker preacher and writer who suffered his share of prison. In 1656 the enthusiasm of some of his female admirers, as he entered Bristol, led the authorities believe he was reenacting Jesus' triumphal entry. He was arrested, the matter was debated in Parliament, he was pilloried and whipped through the streets. Though released, he died soon after, but left a stain on the Quaker name. However, the contrast of Quakerism to the ferment of the time is seen in the declaration, " ... had not the Quakers come the Ranters had overrun the nation".

It was George Fox's strength of character and personal qualities marked the Quaker movement and enabled it to withstand the political and religious upheavals of the times. He had a great reputation for physical and moral courage; he would always speaking the truth and refused to take oaths. He ate a frugal diet and took little sleep. Attempts were made to enlist him in the Civil War as an officer but he refused declaring that war was contrary to scripture. He treated all people as equals; refusing to remove his hat and using 'thee' and 'thou'. He personally faced imprisonment eight times, and travelled thousands of miles on both foot and horseback; he often thought himself to be near death. He constantly faced verbal abuse and physical violence from soldiers, jailers and ordinary people. All this was an example to those who followed him; by 1689 some 12,000 Quakers had suffered imprisonment, 300 dying in captivity. Like Fox the movement had great social concern: -

- Adequate wages for servants and workers;
- Justice and abolition of the death penalty;
- Care for the poor, prisoners and debtors;
- Kindness and freedom for slaves.

## William Penn

The influence and expansion of the Quakers is seen in the life of William Penn. He was born in 1644, the son of an Admiral, and grew to be a well-educated, well-travelled, fashionable young man with excellent connections to the Stuart house. In 1666, in Ireland managing family property, he became a Quaker. He was imprisoned and disowned by his family; though later reconciled. His writings, preaching, suffering and friendship with George Fox all made him an important figure among the early Friends. In 1681 Penn was offered an enormous tract of land in America in payment of a debt owed by Charles 11 to his father. The new province was called Pennsylvania ['Penn's woods'] with its capital Philadelphia ['brotherly love']. The 'Holy Experiment' with its concern to live in justice with



the native Americans and religious freedom. Events did not justify the early idealism. Despite developed in the colony and Penn's later years were dogged by financial hardship. However, it marks the influence impact of the Quakers.

In 1671 George Fox travelled to Barbados, Jamaica and the east coast of America. He also visited Holland and Germany. His life spent in travel and preaching ended in 1691 in London. In a sermon three days before his death he declared, "I am clear, I am fully clear".

## **COURAGE AND CONVICTIONS**

### **Bunyan and Baptists**

In 1628, John Bunyan, eldest son of a poor tinker was born in Elstow near Bedford. At sixteen, with little education, he was drafted into the Parliamentary army for three years to return as a tinker. These were years of godlessness, though he probably met people of faith in the army. In 1649 he married his first wife 'Mary'<sup>4</sup>, who bore him four children in their poverty before her death in 1658. Bunyan was stirred spiritually by his wife telling of her godly father, hearing believing women speaking joyfully, and listening to John Gifford, the pastor of an dissenting congregation in Bedford, preaching in 1651. It was not until 1653 that Bunyan finally believed, was baptised and moved to live in Bedford. Three years later he begins to preach in the surrounding villages. With the Restoration unauthorised preaching became a punishable offence and in November 1660 he was arrested and imprisoned for the best part of the next fourteen years. He saw preaching not only his responsibility, but as his right and privilege. In prison he made shoelaces to support his second wife of a year, the eighteen-year-old Elizabeth who fearlessly supported him, and the children. He also continued to preach and to write.

In all John Bunyan wrote more than 60 books during his lifetime. However, his confinement was to give the world the unique literary and spiritual classics; 'Grace Abounding' (1666), and 'Pilgrims Progress' (1678) one of the most widely read Christian devotional books in the English language and has since been translated into over a hundred languages. Yet Bunyan's major literary influence came through reading the Bible, however, he makes his mark in an age of Shakespeare and Milton. He also wrote against the Quakers whom he believed, along with the Ranters, were 'deceivers'; however, his attitude towards them mellowed after he spent some time with them in prison.

In 1672 Bunyan was released from prison, called to be pastor by the Bedford congregation and licensed as a preacher. The remainder of his life was spent pastoring, writing and preaching in the Bedford area with occasional visits to London churches; proving himself to be one of England's great nonconformist preachers and earning the nickname "Bishop Bunyan". The famous Puritan scholar John Owen was asked by Charles 11 how he could listen to a tinker preach, he replied, "May it please your majesty, could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, I would most gladly relinquish all my learning".

Theologically Bunyan was Puritan and Calvinist, but his concept of church was separatist and Baptist. The church in Bedford was independent in affiliation, congregational in structure and Baptist in practice. However, any believer was welcome to participate in the

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<sup>4</sup> Her name is not given, it is assumed to be Mary according to the custom of naming the eldest daughter after her mother; Bunyan's daughter was 'blind Mary'.

Lord's Supper irrespective of the manner of their baptism; this 'open communion' irritated many Baptists.

In 1688 John Bunyan was caught in the rain riding from Reading to London. He caught a fever and died in the home of a friend on August 31st. He was buried in the London cemetery of Bunhill Fields.

## **The Baptists**

The Baptists emerge out of the seventeenth century Independents, but have their roots among the sixteenth century Separatists and Brownists on the Continent who were influenced by Anabaptist ideas. In 1612 a group left Holland and led by Thomas Helwys established the first Baptist church at Spitalfields in London; they were the General (Arminian) Baptists. Between the years 1633-1638 the Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists emerge. Both streams developed widely during Cromwell's Commonwealth with some 300 Baptist churches by 1660.

## **The Covenanters**

At the Restoration king Charles promised the people of Scotland that he would uphold the 'Covenants' made by the Presbyterians who resisted his father's attempt to impose bishops and prayer book upon the nation. However, Charles only took the oath to get the Scottish crown and had no intention of keeping it; he imposed Episcopacy upon them and denounced the Covenants as illegal. This erupted into the 'killing times' in Scotland in which there was the savage repression of all dissidents. There were disastrous defeats of the Covenanters at Bothwell Bridge and Rullion Green. Forbidden to meet in public small companies of Covenanters met in the open on the misty moors and in the deep glens and ravines of the southern uplands of Scotland to escape attack from the merciless dragoons. These were days in which no less than 17,000 men and women suffered for conscience sake, many dying as martyrs, sometimes without trial, in Edinburgh.

## **William and Mary**

Charles II died in 1685 and a bad situation became worse. His brother, James II who was an avowed Catholic, made it clear to the horror of both Anglicans and dissenters alike that he was going to actively promote the Roman cause within the nation. Added to this there was Monmouth's rebellion in the west country, with its savage aftermath in the 'Bloody Assize' by Judge Jeffries. By 1688 James had alienated the majority of the nation. When a group of English politicians invited James' Dutch Protestant son-in-law, William of Orange, to mount an invasion to overthrow him few people were prepared to oppose him. Popular feeling broke into uprising and James fled to France by 1689. William and Mary took the throne, they brought stability to both church and state. There was religious toleration; Anglicanism was established, nonconformity blossomed with some 1000 places of worship being built across the country. In Scotland the Presbyterian church was established.

## **Questions**

1. What significant opportunities do you think were missed during the seventeenth century and why?



2. What are the significant features of the move of God in the eighteenth century? What can they teach us for our own day?

### Reading & Resources

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