

## EPWORTH LEAGUE TOPICS

### Epoch Makers, in Church History

#### XI. John Bunyan, the Puritan

TOPIC FOR THIRD WEEK IN MARCH.

Ephesians V.

FREDERICK E. MALOTT.

Whoever would understand the England of today must study to know the England of the seventeenth century—Puritan England. That was the period during which the struggle that won us our civil and religious liberty was waged. Rare times they were, the times of that stirring and romantic era, and rare men they produced. Lord Macaulay devotes the greater part of his brilliant history of England to that period. John Richard Greene finds it the most fertile period for political ideas England has ever known. A new moral world arose during that period and with it a new political world, less wrapped perhaps in the mystery and splendor which poets love, but healthier and more really national. It was a century during which the grandeur of the people as a whole was first recognized and for that the English-speaking world may thank Puritanism. But back of Puritanism was another cause.

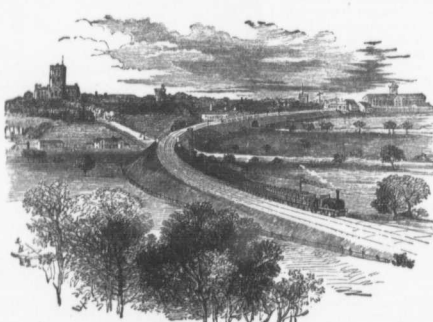
When we look about for the causes of the religious and political change that came over England at that time we find one cause that was adequate. About the middle of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the people of England became the people of a book and that book was the Bible. It was the one book that all Englishmen read. It was read at church, it was read at home, and everywhere its words, as they fell on ears that were not deadened to their force and meaning, kindled a startling enthusiasm. Three results followed. The language of the English Bible became the standard English of that and a later day. All literature took on a new tinge. Authors began to borrow its allusions and illustrations. But far greater than its effect upon literature and language was its effect upon the character and life of the people at large. Elizabeth and her successors tried with varying success to silence the voice of the Puritan preachers, but it was impossible for them to silence the voice of the Book they had opened to the people. The Bible became the great preacher of justice and mercy and truth, and its effect was amazing. The whole temper of the nation was changed. A new conception of life and man superseded the old. A new moral and religious impulse spread throughout every class. "The whole nation became a church."

One result of this new life was seen in the demand for a simpler and purer form of worship. This was urged especially by the ministers who had fled to the Continent during the reign of Mary Tudor. At Frankfurt and Geneva they had found a refuge. There they came into contact with ministers of the Reformed churches of the continent. From men like Calvin they learned to regard the use of vestments by priests, the burdening of religion with rites and ceremonies and the elevation of bishops above the other orders of the ministry as contrary to the usage of the early Church and opposed to the spirit of Christianity.

On the accession of Elizabeth these men returned to England and endeavored to reform the liturgy and worship of the Church of England by purging it of all

traces of Romanism. For their pains they were at once dubbed with a nickname. They were called "Puritans." Like many another name it has become, from a by-word and a reproach, a name of honor. The English-speaking world of today may thank Puritanism for many of its priceless privileges and possessions.

To their sorrow the Puritan ministers found Elizabeth inclined to retrograde rather than advance. She was fond of pomp and show. The brilliant vestments of the clergy pleased her. More-



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over, desiring to retain as many as possible of her Roman Catholic subjects in the new, national Church, she had the prayer book modified to meet their views. She conceived a violent dislike for the Puritans. She resented their efforts at reform. Bills were passed requiring, under heavy penalties for disobedience, that all clergymen should use the vestments and the ritual. Attendance at church was demanded of all adults. In this way she proposed to have uniformity of worship throughout her realm. But she little knew the temper of her subjects. Puritanism was more widespread than she knew. Resistance began to be made on every hand. Then began that period of persecution that lasted throughout the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, Charles I, Charles II, and James II, and only ended, so far as the Puritans were concerned, with the revolution of 1688.

It is impossible in this brief article to trace the whole course of Puritan history. Suffice it to say that it was to the Puritans, chiefly, that we owe the persistent and finally victorious struggle for civil and religious liberty that marked the seventeenth century. It was to the great Puritan, middle-class Englishmen that credit is due of restoring the tyranny of the Stuart sovereigns of England. Persecution drove many of the best citizens of England to the new world, where they formed the basal and best element in the population of the New England States. But enough of them remained in England to wage war for civil and religious freedom. Once Puritanism took the sword and tried by force and violence to establish the Kingdom of God. Brave soldiers those sturdy, God-fearing farmers and tradesmen made. Rupert's cavaliers were no match for Cromwell's Ironsides. But the greatest victories of Puritanism were not won with the sword. To all appearance Puritanism went down to defeat at the Restoration in 1660. But the moment of its seeming defeat was the time of its real victory. Its political experiment was indeed a failure, but the sphere of its sway was widened by its political defeat.

On the accession of Charles II, the army that might have terrorized England, and, like the army of Rome, have set up its own Dictator, quietly dispersed, and the men went back to their farms and their shops again and were known by no other sign than their greater sobriety and industry. As soon as the wild orgy of the Restoration was over, men began to see that nothing that was really worthy in the work of Puritanism had been undone. "The revels of Whitehall, the skepticism and debauchery of courtiers, the corruption of statesmen left the masses of Englishmen what Puritanism had made them, serious, earnest, sober in life and conduct, firm in their love of Protestantism and of freedom."

In the Revolution of 1688 Puritanism did the work of civil liberty it had failed to do in that of 1642. It wrought out through John Wesley and the revivals of the eighteenth century the work of religious reform which its earlier efforts had failed to accomplish.

Slowly but steadily it introduced its own seriousness and purity into English society, English literature and English politics.

Five things the Puritans did for us. They gave us the idea of citizenship. They denied the divine right of kings, but they taught the divine right of citizenship. They taught us the value of our Protestantism and preserved it for us at the time when it might easily have lapsed again into Romanism. They gave religion a first place in their lives. The fear of God ruled them. They allowed nothing to silence the voice of conscience. They reformed manners and dress and today we wear our clothes according to the Puritan style; we dress simply and plainly as they did, our manners are direct and plain. What we need is a renaissance of Puritan morality in public and in private life. The Puritan had defects, but they were personal and passing compared with his untarnished idealities and his virtue virtues. Our civilization suffers from the curse of Mammon. We witness Epicureanism in private conduct, corruption in public morals, dissolving beliefs in religion. This is an age of the reign and worship of material success. We measure our worth by our pocketbooks. We are losing sight of the Eternal. We need a revival of Puritan morality.

Puritanism produced the greatest men of the seventeenth century. Think of Hampden, Pym, Elliott, Hutchinson, Cromwell! Think of Coverdale, Fox, Barrow, Greenwood, Cotton, Roger Williams, Owen, Howe and Baxter! But in that galaxy of great names produced by Puritanism none shine with greater lustre than its two great literary geniuses, John Milton and John Bunyan, the one

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