

Lecture 1- Common threads in times of decline

(Church at the end of the 17th Century)

This steep ravine of spiritual decline toward end of the 17th and 19th centuries are vaguely attributed to the Enlightenment and Darwinianism respectively, but closer inspection shows alarming trends in the churches that parallel our present decline in church life.

Various hostile forces were at play in the last quarter of the 17th and early 18th centuries, the combination of which brought to an end one of the most profitable and spiritually enriching periods of Christian Church history in these islands and indeed beyond.

The purpose of this lecture is to examine the nature of some of these forces, and notice in them, various characteristics, which parallel our own period of decline and other periods of decline in Church history. There are certain characteristics wiles of the devil, and there are common threads of his activity which can be identified and repeatedly crop up at various times in the history of the Church.

We are going to be looking in this first lecture today at the way they appeared at the end of the 17th and early 18th centuries.

In our second lecture God willing, we will try and identify some of the similar characteristics which appeared at the end of the 19th century.

General Introduction

Turning now to the 17th century and the latter part of that century, that is from 1660 to the early part of the 18th century. We begin by briefly mentioning some of the relevant characteristics of the time.

After the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1659, he was succeeded by his son Richard but for reasons we need not to go into in this lecture, this did not work out and Richard Cromwell resigned in 1660. After this there was a move to restore the monarchy, in the person of Charles II who had been living in exile in France.

In anticipation of the likelihood of his return, Charles II removed to Holland, (significantly a Protestant country), from which he published his famous Declaration of Breda. In this declaration he promised that if allowed to return as a King he would give, to quote, "*Liberty to tender consciences over differences of opinion in*

matters of religion, so long as these differences did not disturb the peace of the kingdom."

Many of the Presbyterian persuasion welcomed these promises and sad to say, foolishly believed them. On the basis of these false promises Charles II returned to England as king on 29th May 1660.

On his return he packed the Parliament with his own supporters and friends, and it became known as the Cavalier Parliament.

They made laws which were very hard against the Puritans. In Scotland he sent Lauderdale to govern for him there. Lauderdale assisted by Claverhouse tortured and put to death Presbyterians who would not conform to the Episcopalian system.

The persecution of non-conformists began very quickly. Bunyan was first arrested in November 1660. The mob was stirred up to break the windows of non-conformist chapels, and blow bugles outside to disrupt services. All M.P.'s were required to take communion after the Anglican order by a certain date or be dismissed. Letters were fabricated implicating non-conformist plots to overthrow the government and posted from abroad and then "discovered" by government agents.

Meanwhile in England his return set in motion a series of events which led to the Great Ejection of 1662 in which an attempt was made to utterly root out and destroy all that the Puritans had achieved and to silence all remaining elements and representatives of that godly persuasion.

We know the 1662 Ejections were just the beginning and were followed by other acts such as...The Five Mile Act, The Conventicle Act etc.

These events are well summed up in the introduction to the records of the Axminster Ecclesia.

The Restoration of the Monarchy following the Commonwealth of 1649 - 60 by the return of Charles II from exile in the Netherlands. The King was then 30 years of age, a clever cynic, a Roman Catholic at heart, and an absolutist in his understanding of his Royal office. For reasons of expediency he had promised by the Declaration of Breda (April 1660) pardon for those who had fought against his father, the Restoration of Parliament, and "*A liberty to tender consciences, and that no man shall be disquieted or called into question for differences of opinion in matters of religion*". The promise of religious freedom was systematically broken during the next few years of the Cavalier Parliament which passed the Clarendon Code, comprising,

- (1) The Corporation (1661) which obliged all members of municipal corporations to receive communion according to the forms of the Church of England;
- (2) The Act of Uniformity (1662).
- (3) The First Conventicle Act (1664).No services outside the Church of England allowed.

(4) The 5 Mile Act (1665). Banning ejected ministers from coming within 5miles of a substantial town also any parish where they had previously ministered.

(5) And also the Second Conventicle Act (1670).

The political object of this legislation was to break the influence of Puritanism on national life by giving the Anglican Church the monopoly of higher education, so making it impossible for Puritans to reach eminence in any profession. To a great extent the aim was achieved, although Puritanism continue to exist and to comprise of vital factor in the national character. It is noteworthy that whereas many nobles and gentry had adhered to Puritanism before the Clarendon Code, very few were found in their circles thereafter.

The Axminster Ecclesiastical 1660 – 1698 footnote pages 6-7.

We have been witnessing a similar hostility towards Christianity by the so called liberal Establishment today.

The result of The Act of Uniformity was that nearly 2000 ministers were dismissed from their charges. These were able and godly men of great ability, arguably the best in the Church at that time. **It is estimated that approximately 1/5 of the ministers of the Established Church lost their living as a result of this policy.** We must remember that at this time the Established Church had within it many of Presbyterians, a significant number of Independents and even a few of Baptist persuasion.

Lessons.... Many enemies cannot destroy the Gospel.

During Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate-ship Episcopacy was abolished and the National Church pulpits were occupied by Presbyterians, as well as Independents and Baptists that were willing to work under such a system: not all Independents and Baptists were willing and remained outside the Cromwell's system on voluntarist grounds.

(Commemorations Studies in Christian Thought and History Alan P. Sell p.123).

At least 7 Baptists who were serving in the Established Church were ejected in 1662. (ibid p. 128).

As regards overall numbers of the various individuals from all denominations ejected it has been estimated that given that the population of England at that time was much smaller than it is now, an equivalent number today would be roundabout 30,000. If we think of the number of people here present today and then multiply that accordingly we get some idea of the numbers represented by this 2000 in 1662.

Lesson...We can reflect on what the tone of the spiritual life of this country would be if such vast numbers today would be prepared to stand for the truth of the Gospel no matter what the cost.

We are going to be in this lecture looking at the corruptions of this particular time, and this can be depressing, but we are doing so in order to learn lessons for today. But as we look at the failures of the period commencing 1660 and following into the early 18th century **we need to keep in mind that alongside this were stirring examples of heroic faith, and massive conviction and notable examples of devotion and self-sacrifice.**

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These men lost their positions, technically because they would not give ascent to various clauses and statements in the Book of Common Prayer. There were other issues as well as we shall see, but essentially it all boiled down to the fact that they would not compromise their evangelical faith, that is their strict adherence to Biblical truth and doctrine to that which had become very much the spirit of the age.

We need to realise that it is not possible in a short lecture to set out in any real detail the complexity of the issues involved in all this. We have not time to properly examine the aims and ambitions of all the parties involved.

We need to remember that there was a close relationship of Church and State which complicated matters at this point of time. We cannot go into all the implications of this but we have to have in the back of our mind the fact that most people for many centuries leading up to the 17th century saw this as the norm.

We might also have in mind that the idea of the unity of the realm especially in matters and forms of religious worship was an idea handed down from the Middle Ages and was still widely held. Not only so but intolerance in such matters was regarded as a virtue and liberty of conscience was held by many to be an excuse for licence and immorality.

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However having said all this what we are looking at here fundamentally is a battle of truth against error, and of loyalty to the Gospel against unbelief and unworthy compromise.

Hensley Henson a non -evangelical Anglican of the early part of the 20th century succinctly and accurately summed up the real nature of the Act of Uniformity as follows:

“The victims of the Act of Uniformity were not ejected from the National Church for disobedience to the Prayer Book alone, but for refusing to lay a guilt on their consciences by uttering an evident falsehood, and for refusing to acquiesce in a sacrilegious farce.”

We may mention several aspects of this:

The first being the requirement that they give their unfeigned assent and consent to everything contained in the newly revised 1662 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. There had been something like 600 alterations, major and minor made in the Book of Common Prayer in 1662. At first some ministers could not even get hold of a copy to view or read it before they were asked to give their unfeigned assent to everything that was in it.

Also we may note previously the other Acts which enjoined the use of the Book of Common Prayer, did not require those ministers who used it to give unfeigned assent and consent to everything that was in it. Discussions on the contents of the book could go on and divergences of views could be held, within the obligations of the previous requirements regarding its use. Now however every minister was required to not only to use it but agree with the sum total of its contents.

Secondly in order to continue to minister within the Church of England everyone had to renounce their allegiance to the Solemn League and Covenant, which had been drawn up and subscribed to in the years 1643 and 1644. *The Solemn League and Covenant* was set for the defence of the Protestant Reformed Religion and to root out popery, prelacy, and whatever is contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness. It was also pledged to preserve the rights of the Parliaments, liberties, and royalty and to expose all enemies of reformed religion and of peace. Those who had signed it had done so as solemn oath, but they were now being called to forswear their oath.

Thirdly, under the Act of 1662 it had to be accepted that no one could minister in the Church of England unless he had been ordained by a Bishop. This was the first time in the history of the English Church that such a requirement had been formally decreed. This was a new thing and there were those within the Established Church at that time who were very able ministers but had never been ordained by Bishop.

The whole aim and Intention of this was to root out and get rid of everyone who did not share Laudian or High Church views. The Anglicanism of Archbishop Laud taught that bishops were an essential element of the true Church, that a common liturgy enforced was essential, that the Eucharist or Lord's Supper as we would call it, was the central element in worship, this opposed to the Puritan view of course that preaching held the central place.

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We can get further insight into why the Puritans rejected these measures if we glance at the 8 objections raised to the proposals to introduce a revised version of The Book of Common Prayer in 1661. The statement of the Savoy Conference which had met to discuss these proposals registered these 8 major objections.

1. **They objected** to the proposal that no minister be admitted to baptise without using the sign of the cross.
2. **They objected** to the requirement that no minister be admitted to officiate without wearing the surplice.

3. **They objected** to the rule that non-should receive the Lord's supper without receiving it kneeling.
4. **They objected** to the requirement that ministers be obliged to pronounce all baptised persons regenerated by the Holy Ghost, whether they be children of Christians or not.
5. **They objected** to the ruling that ministers be obliged to deliver the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ to the unfit, that is to unconverted individuals.
6. **They objected** to ministers being required to pronounce absolutions.
7. **They objected** to being forced in conducting the burial service to regard all those buried as true Christians. This partly arose from the idea that the State and the Church were coextensive and the idea that everybody born in a "Christian" country is by that very fact therefore a real Christian.
8. **They objected** to being required to agree that there is nothing in the Common Prayer Book, or the Book of Ordination, or The 39 Articles contrary to the Word of God.

They also objected to other matters as well such as the fact that there were various set readings with in the prayer taken from the apocryphal books of Scripture. They also objected to some of the special days that were required to be kept in the church year for example January 30th commemorating what was described as the day of King Charles the Martyr. They also objected to the fact that 29 May was to be kept as the day of the birth and restoration of Charles II who was styled as *"our most religious King."*

Another matter which they were concerned about would have included:

The firm belief that the authority of the visible Church in matters concerning its Faith and Order were distinct from, and not subordinate to the civil authority. In short they were opposing a ritualistic and formal interpretation of Christianity.

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Charles II was generally speaking a man of bad character it was later discovered that he was receiving financial and military backing from the French to facilitate a reintroduction of Roman Catholicism into England. He had a hidden agenda. He manipulated this situation to try ultimately to achieve this end. Beware of those in society or Church with a hidden malicious agenda. There are not a few fitting this description today.

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Though we are looking at a falling away, and even some of the failings of good men, throughout this period, we would emphasise at the very beginning that there were many that were extremely faithful, enduring many deprivations and troubles harassments even imprisonments and death throughout this time.

Attempts have been made by various authorities to estimate the number of Nonconformists who suffered imprisonment and death during this reign. The number of persons who suffered in various ways is given at 68,000. No fewer than 8000 are said to have perished in prison. Bunyan was in prison for 12 years, and Joseph Wright of Maidstone for 20 years.

(See The Romance of Nonconformity, Joseph Ritson p. 120).

See also A History of the Puritans Neal p.124.

Also The Broadmead Records.

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Our task in this lecture is to briefly try and highlight some of the factors which characterized the spiritual decline of this period.

Let us first be clear.

1. It was a time marked by large scale rejection of God's Word, sound theology, fervent Gospel preaching, private Bible reading, and devout Christian living.

Whatever weaknesses there were in the time of strong Puritan influence, (i.e. the time immediately preceding the period we are now looking at), it cannot in anyway be denied that it was a high and noble point in our nation's spiritual and moral history. .

Puritanism produced a genuine humility of spirit. It produced men and women who walked humbly with God. It produced a great receptivity towards God's Word and the desire to be taught, corrected and directed by the mind of God, in every aspect of life.

Now however times had changed. Neal in his History of the Puritans says:

Religion, which had been in vogue in the late times, was now universally discountenanced; the name of it was hardly mentioned but with contempt, in a health or a play. Those who observed the Sabbath, and scrupled profane swearing and drinking healths, were exposed under the opprobrious names of Puritans, Fanatics, Presbyterians, Republicans, seditious persons etc.

p. 107.

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Men were rejecting the vision of the Puritans and seeking to destroy their influence.

How do we account for this apostasy?

Perhaps we might say there were some amongst the ranks of the Puritans, perhaps a significant number of influential individuals who were not truly

converted. We can perhaps account for this by saying again; that during the 17th century there had grown up a strong connection between religion and politics.

1. We have to remember that there were many in the country who were disgruntled with the Stuart kings, particularly Charles I, as also there were many who did not like the manner in which policies of Archbishop Laud were imposed.

This meant there was some who gravitated towards the Puritans, who were more interested in their opposition to the ideas of Charles I and others than they were to Puritan godliness and spiritual things.

What we might suggest is that some of these unconverted folk at the time of the Restoration grew discontented with Puritanism's holy demands and changed sides.

There is an important note in this respect in the records of the Axminster Ecclesia (p.7).

It is noteworthy that whereas many nobles and gentry had adhered to Puritanism before the Clarendon Code, very few were found in its circles thereafter.

"Demas hath forsaken us loving this present world."

2 Timothy 4:10.

2. But also there is evidence that there were ministers within the Church that compromised and changed with the wind like the Vicar of Bray in the well-known song.

V.H.H. Green in his Religion at Oxford and Cambridge speaking of the situation at Oxford described some who had previously complied with Puritan discipline, now being eager to prove their newfound loyalty to *the spirit of the age.*

Those that hated the tavern or an alehouse formally, now frequented them and thrust themselves into the company of royalists (such that had formally seemed scandalous to them) purposely that the world might see their good wishes to their new cause. And forthwith they put on a cassock reaching into their heels, tied close with a sanctified circingle.... Others that had bore the faces of demure saints, would now and then put out a bawdy expression, and, as occasion served, a pretty little oath... At their coming into the pulpit they knelt down and used some private ejaculations, which was so far from being done in the late times that it was ridiculous so to do. They left off their long extempore prayers and conformed to a short prayer with a formal repetition of those whom they were to pray for and the naming of the persons or persons (as if God did not know their minds.)... They quoted also in their sermons the Fathers and the School-men and framed their sermons (which were before very practical and commonly full of dire damnation to a polite, quaint discourse.

Religion at Oxford and Cambridge V.H.H. Green p. 157.

See also The History of the Puritans Neil p.107.

Lessons.

1. **Let us beware of marrying the spirit of the age. “ He who marries the spirit of the age will be a widower tomorrow.”Dean Inge**
2. **Guard the membership of our Churches. While we cannot see into the depths of a man’s heart we should nevertheless be careful to maintain the purity of our church membership roles.**

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There were also amongst the genuinely converted Puritans who willingly compromised on certain issues in order as they believed to further their cause.

We have to remember again that at this time there was a very strong, and we could say a dangerous combining of religion and politics. The concept was very much in the mind of most parties involved at this time; that is the concept of a national church.

Good men were seeking to bring this about, for example the famous Archbishop Ussher produced a compromise scheme aimed at a union between Presbyterianism and Episcopacy. The idea was to combine the benefits of Episcopacy with the excellences of Presbyterianism. **The Presbyterians were willing to make great sacrifices to achieve this**, they were; one could say very reasonable men. **But one may respectfully say that they were willing to make too many sacrifices of their principles.** For example, they were willing under this compromise to acknowledge the King, *“To be supreme Governor over all persons and in all things and causes as well ecclesiastical as civil”*. John Knox would never have said such a thing but some of the English Presbyterians at this time were willing to do so.

Some Presbyterians leaders agreed to become bishops within the Established Church. Reynolds did become Bishop of Norwich and Baxter and Calamy agreed to become bishops if the King’s promise became Law.

The King didn’t keep his promise, and particularly under the influence of the then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Gilbert Sheldon the whole scheme fell apart.

It appears that some amongst the Presbyterians were willing to make as many concessions as they could in order to remain part of the Established Church. They did not want to be simply tolerated outside the Establishment. *One of the differences between the Presbyterians and the Independents and Baptist was that the Presbyterians wanted comprehension within the Established Church, whereas the Independents and Baptist simply wanted freedom of worship or toleration.* In reality the Presbyterians and Anglicans were thinking in the same way as Calvin and Zwingli did at the time of the Reformation that it

was the task of the state to enforce religious orthodoxy. (See Commemorations p.114). The relationship of church and state is a very important issue today.

We can see the highest motives in these actions from one perspective, but we can also see dangerous and wrong motives in what they were seeking to do.

Lessons

1. The truth often demands that we “*go outside the camp*” in order to preserve and keep the purity of doctrine and practice according to the Word of God and our consciences.

2. Here as always the temptation to compromise our views in order to gain temporal advantage is not consistent with faith in God. General Monck for example really was the individual that made it possible for Charles II to return with all his Laudian entourage. One of the reasons why he did this was that he thought it would give advantage to the Presbyterians cause.

3. Here also we have a warning of the dangers of unholy alliances, and a too great a bringing together of religion and politics. The policy of applying to the world for help or compromising our faith with erroneous views in order that we may somehow win advantage is very dangerous and we are warned against such a policy in many passages in the Old and the New Testament. Such policies are frowned on by God and in the long run do not bring blessing.

4. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.

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These times also afford us a lesson in keeping our sights on the main issue of preaching the Gospel.

The breadth of the Puritan vision was extremely large time fails me frustratingly to tell you something of what this vision was.

1. One element of that vision was particularly emphasised by John Knox and it was to bring about national moral Reformation and communal godliness.

It was a most commendable ideal and aim.

All we can say is that point came when perhaps the Puritans did not use the best and wisest way of achieving their aim, believing that godly behaviour could be imposed upon people by Acts of Parliament.

They were wrong in that they had an old Testament view of the church not the new Testament view. They viewed the Church as a theocracy.

They should have viewed the Church as the called of God, not the total state.

(see John Brown, The English Puritans, pp. 138,139, 143,144).

As a result, (though again we emphasise, with the best of motives), Acts were passed in Parliament that many perceived to be and described as Puritan tyranny.

This way of proceeding again was a result of a too strong connection between Church and State. Whilst I'm sure none of us believe in a thoroughly secular state, nevertheless we would question the use of the civil power to impose godliness upon the ungodly.

Though it certainly it would not have been perceived like this by the Puritans, nevertheless we might say that they were using worldly methods to achieve spiritual ends.

During the latter part of the Protectorate, much legislation regarding public morals was passed and rigorously imposed.

There was a reaction against this, which must inevitably have contributed towards the troubles in the 1660s. It is true that by 1660 many in the land had become disillusioned with the Puritan theocracy.

Lessons ... Again this highlights dangers our churches can easily fall into.

1. That is to promote morality, without genuine spiritual experience, forgetting that conversion is the root of all true upright living.

2. Another aspect we might touch on under this heading would be that; too many churches today are diverted from their main aim, that of glorifying God in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and putting their main energies into social reform.

Though legitimate motives abound to attend to the social mandate there remains the danger of an over- emphasising on the secondary, we can so easily get things out of proportion, and the secondary actually becomes the sole- mandate, and only function of the church's ministry at the expense of Gospel preaching. This we will see to have been particular characteristic of the late 19th century and early 20th century church as we shall look at in the next lecture. The Church must not usurp the role of the State nor the State usurp the role of the Church. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's", the Church and the State have their distinct but complementary roles. Back in 1869, R. W. Dale of Birmingham with whom we may disagree on many things and who himself had an immense social concern, nevertheless rightly sounded out the importance of this distinction and what the chief focus of the church should be. He said....'If the state is to be rescued from the darkest dangers which threaten it, we must preach Christ- Christ not merely as the supreme revelation of God- Christ not merely as the

sacrifice for human sin – Christ not merely as the head of the Church, but Christ as the ruler of all men, the regenerator of nations, the Saviour of society. ' (quoted in Commemorations p 115).

The Church has a distinct and prophetic role and she must not lose it.

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Another element that we can touch on at this point is the attitude of the Congregationalists, or Independents as they were then called in the matter of creeds and confessions.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Presbyterians together the Independents/Congregationalists drew up the Westminster Confession, and the Independents/Congregationalists drew up the Savoy Declaration (1658). Later the Baptists 1689.

There were elements in both parties Presbyterians and Independents that were suspicious of too detailed doctrinal statements of faith.

The great and excellent Richard Baxter on the Presbyterian side in 1654 was part of the committee set up by Oliver Cromwell to draw up a statement of fundamentals to serve as the basis on which toleration could be exercised.

Baxter suggested that all that was necessary for this basis would be, The Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, arguing that these set out all the essential and fundamental doctrines of the faith, not least all that is necessary to salvation.

He was criticised for this however, it being pointed out that the terms were so wide that they could include Papists and Socinians.

Baxter replied, "*Composing and so imposing our creeds and Confessions in our own words and phrases.... O what mischief has the Church of Christ suffered by the enlarging of her creed... Every new article that was added to the Creed was a new engine to stretch the brains of believers, and in the issue to rend out the bowels of the Church.*"

Reliquiae Baxterianae ii p. 523 quoted by Hywel Jones in By Schisms Rent Asunder, Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, Westminster 1969 p.37.

E.J. Poole Connor reminds us in his, *The Apostasy of English Nonconformity* (pp.15-16), that particularly among the Independents, that though they affirmed their Puritan creed most strongly, they also taught that the Holy Spirit in the Church was so real, "*as to render creeds and canons and the like unnecessary, and that God had continually "more light and truth to bring forth from his Word,"*

Though we can have great sympathy with this view and realise that there are important truths contained in it, there are also inherent dangers. These were

to become apparent even in the time we are speaking of now, but much more so in the late Victorian period that we shall look at in our next lecture.

Lesson. There is such a thing as, "The faith once given to the saints."

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We might be tempted to wonder at the speed in which people turned away from the glorious Puritan age in the early 1660s.

We might note here how important it is to continually and constantly teach and refresh the minds of our people in regard to the truth. Tell me the story often for I forget so soon is a very important lesson.

This sadly however knowing as we do human nature, should not surprise us. The people of Israel of old time, delivered from slavery and oppression in Egypt, witnesses of the mighty deliverance is of God, the miraculous opening of Red Sea, the recipients of the 10 Commandments, witnessed Moses striking the rock in the water lifeline flowing out from it, eating daily the manna from heaven coming to the very borders of the Promised Land, nevertheless when called to go in and possess it, given the absolute guarantee of God that they would do so, yet believed the negative reports of the 10 spies, and turned their backs on all that had been done. Such is the blindness of fallen men. Men who heard Christ's speak as never man had yet spoken and witnessed his life and witnessed his mighty miracles, yet cried out, "*We want Barabbas*" and sent him to the cross.

Sadly the Church of Jesus Christ knows periods of apostasy. We are all conscious of this, *Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.*

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Another of the characteristics of this age which followed the Puritan era was that bad men gained hold of the reins of power.

Charles II, having got his way, for all his pretence to be sympathetic towards Presbyterianism and "*the tender consciences of his people*" when it suited his purpose proved himself to be a debauched and extravagant king, utterly carnal in his ways, regularly taking prostitutes and mistresses on his Royal jaunts. This was the man the Anglicans recognised and described as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England!

We have already noted something of his intrigues to reintroduce Roman Catholicism into England.

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We may also glance at this point at the character of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Gilbert Sheldon appointed at this time.

John Stoughton in his History of Religion in England gives us this brief sketch.

Sheldon according to Burnet, was esteemed a learned man before the Wars, but he afterwards engaged so deeply in politics that scarcely any trace remained of what he had been. He was a very dextrous man in business, had a great quickness of apprehension, and a very true judgement. He was a generous and charitable man. He had great pleasantness of conversation, perhaps too great. He had an art, which was peculiar to him, of treating all who came to him in a most obliging manner, but few depended much on his professions of friendship. He seemed not to have a deep sense of religion, if any at all; and spoke of it most commonly, as an engine of government or a matter of policy. By this means, the King came to look on him as a wise and honest clergyman.

He thoroughly understood human nature, and knew exactly how to make himself agreeable to those whom he wished to please.

No convictions of doctrine, no zeal for discipline, influenced him in his proceedings against Dissenters, and he must be reckoned as having belonged to that most odious class of persecutors, "who persecute without the excuse of religious bigotry."

As a man of the world, he was averse to their profession of spiritual religion, being totally unable to understand it,

Religion in England, The Church of the Restoration, John Staunton p. 459 – 60.

Skeat and Miall in their History of the Free Churches in England, commented.

Sheldon, in spiritual power, could never have successfully competed with any of the men whom he had aided to cast out of the Church period he, and the majority of his Episcopal brethren, were ecclesiastics only – unscrupulous politicians with clerical titles, who, to aid their own ambitious purposes, banded themselves together to uphold the worst of all English governments.

p.58.

Lesson.

We must be most careful who we appoint as leaders in our churches. Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. Sheldon's ambition was to "Harry the Puritans out of the land." We must pray that God will give us Godly leaders.

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Another characteristic of the period was that doctrinally clarity was lost, in particular a loss of the doctrine of justification by faith alone within the Anglican church.

Some have described this last part of the 17th century as a period of "spiritual entropy." That is the dissipation of, or the running down of spiritual energy. **This can be manifested in several ways and one of them is the tendency to allow theological positions to become twisted, and debased or even changed into something which is opposite to what they previously were.**

For example at the beginning of the 17th century, following on from the Reformation, there was great clarity throughout the Protestant Churches in Britain in regard to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Throughout the period of the Puritans, immediately preceding, the Restoration this doctrine had been clearly taught.

However there were those within the Established Church, who were not Puritans in theology, men like Jeremy Taylor and George Bull and others that are often known as the Caroline divines who had become unclear in their definition of the meaning of faith.

Their understanding of the meaning of faith seems to have been that faith had within it a kind of merit, it possessed a kind of good which by virtue of its righteousness, merited justification. They still spoke of justification by faith, but they erroneously thought that in some way a man's faith was a good work meriting his justification.

There were many reasons for this and again we have not time to go into them except to say that it is a trait of human nature to prefer a man-made moralism to spiritual Evangelical faith. Bunyan was very much aware of this when he painted the picture of Mr. Worldly Wiseman. There was a fear of antinomianism among some good men and this affected some of the High Anglicans like Jeremy Taylor, as well as some of the High Calvinists amongst the dissenters.

Some came to call this period being called by some of "*The Age of Moralism.*" In some ways this is a misleading title, because of the age was a very immoral one generally speaking, but it applies to those within the Established Church, who were simply trying to remedy the situation, by preaching a so-called gospel of moralism. This loss of an understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith amongst many Anglicans blighted the church right up to the time of the Evangelical awakening in the 1730s.

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But the Restoration period was not only an age of moralism within the Established Church, but there was also another powerful force coming from another direction and gaining influence within other sections of the Established Church and eventually amongst the Non-conformists, that is a predominant emphasis upon reason.

We in this period are entering from another perspective the "Age of Reason". For the place of reason in Christian understanding see Vishal always gone over) and were largely made debate Mangalwadi in The book that made our World p.77

The secular Renaissance of the previous century had introduced the idea of a positive estimate of human nature which ran completely contrary to the Biblical view, that was emphasized by the Reformers and of course held by the Puritans and all believers up until then, I refer to the fact that man is a fallen creature. At the time we are looking at confidence in man and his powers were on the rise.

Add to this a century of religious upheaval and change, when doctrinal differences and controversies, had caused people to regard religious debate and heated discussion as a far greater danger than atheism itself, though I think we ought to have in mind a realisation that most people at that time had little experience, knowledge or understanding of what atheism really was.

Others were influenced by current popular philosophers who were essentially relativists. They said that come what may men would argue about anything. Much of this they said was futile and inconclusive, it was much better to agree to differ and get on with life.

Many in the mellow mood of doubt had no way of understanding the commitment and martyr spirit of their forefathers.

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Furthermore scientists at this time were also making great strides in the understanding of the universe. They came to see the constancy and order of the universe. They came to conceive of the universe as one great machine operating according to un-alterable laws. It came to be believed that all things could be understood and measured by the yardstick of human reason. The universe they said *is like a smooth running machine with all its parts co-ordinated by one grand design, then man only has to think clearly to find life's meaning and true happiness. This fundamental idea - that man has the ability to find the truth by the use of his senses and reason alone - gave rise to the label, The Age of REASON.*

Intellectuals were arguing something like this: Man is no sinner. He is a reasonable creature. He needs the grace of God less than common sense.

Church History in Plain Language. Bruce L Shelley p.314

Sadly what we find especially here in Great Britain that the Church in various ways sought to harmonize itself to the spirit of the age in regard to this matter.

Church leaders began to accommodate the Christian faith to the *spirit of the age* by showing that Christianity was entirely reasonable and rational. Christianity of course sets a high value on reason but it also recognises reasons limitations.

In this period many in the Church of England, abandoned the Puritanism of the earlier part of the century, and indeed the High Church Laudianism of that same period, and entered into what they called, *the sunlight of moderation and sweet reasonableness*. Those who followed this path were known as **the Latitudinarians**. They opposed what they regarded as an excessive religion of the heart, they toned down doctrinal distinctives, they were embarrassed by doctrinal divisions and sought to foster a unity based on rationality and common sense.

John Tillotson who was arguably the most accomplished preacher among the Latitudinarians argued that there was nothing more rational than, "*Pleasing God by doing what he commands and avoiding what he forbids*". (In assessing Tillotson bear in mind his sympathy towards the Puritans, he had formerly identified with them and Neal speaks of him with appreciation. P.93)

Tillotson and his fellow Latitudinarians argued that virtuous behaviour ensured both temporal and eternal happiness. Moreover by inducing benevolence, equity, and civility, in the form of righteous deeds and virtuous behaviour – they argued that religion was the greatest friend to all temporal interests; and what is more, the charitable and pious believer “lays the foundation of his future happiness to all eternity.

The Latitudinarians, like their high Church counterparts were a type of Rational Arminians, emphasizing virtuous living over concern for doctrinal or theological belief.

Some of these preachers like Tillotson were perhaps in their own minds seeking to defend Christianity against a growing materialistic outlook, but by their over accommodation to the spirit of the age they were getting dangerously close to reducing Christianity to a form of humanitarian moralism. And They were clearly denying their congregations the opportunity to clearly hear the Gospel proclaimed.

There is a clarity of thought and argument in Tillotson’s sermons and he does defend some of the great doctrines but there is a coldness about them, a dryness, a lack of passion, as is also true of some pulpits today.

See definition of Latitudinarianism in Evangelicalism in England E.J. Poole –Connor pp.134-5.

Others took the views of the earlier Latitudinarians much further, John Locke the renowned philosopher, (and indeed to be respected for many of his views regarding religious liberty and toleration etc.), nevertheless was a firm advocate of this Latitudinarian, or as some have called it, “simplified version of Christianity”. In his Reasonableness of Christianity published in 1695 he sought to reduce Christian doctrine to a few essentials, such as belief in Jesus as the Messiah on the evidence of fulfilled prophecy, and his working of miracles, emphasising that all this was not contrary to reason.

He does recognise that God makes himself known through Revelation nevertheless his main emphasis in the book is on stressing that reason affirms these things to be so.

The point I want to make about this book here however is his definition of faith, he describes it as “*a firm ascent of the mind or belief in Jesus as the Messiah.*” He is speaking in terms of faith as a kind of intellectual assent, and he goes on to say that salvation is obtained by a sincere endeavour after righteousness through the obeying of God’s law. But he also goes on to say that this faith in Christ is counted in place of perfect obedience, and the work of Christ makes up what is lacking in our own efforts.

Lessons

1.The danger of understanding Faith as a mere intellectual assent is not uncommon definition of faith in the teaching of some today. Though they could not be accused of latitudinarianism in doctrine, sadly today there are many who call themselves Orthodox Christians, or even Orthodox Calvinists, who seem content, to admire, and the fascinated by the glorious doctrines of the Reformation, and yet to

remain unaffected or unmoved by the power and effects as well as the demands of these doctrines in their everyday lives.

2. Belief that faith carries within it a virtue which merits grace, is also not uncommon today. A teaching that salvation by works is as prevalent in some churches today as it ever was in the days of Pelagius.

3. Another is that one error leads to another, for example John Tolland added to these views and developed them a stage further to what we might describe as a full Deistic position in his book "Christianity - Not Mysterious, published in 1696, and Mathew Tindal in his book, "Christianity as old as creation," actually went so far as to say that after God created the universe, he then left it to fend for itself. Dr Samuel Clarke the Royal Chaplain and Rector of St James, Westminster published a book entitled, "The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity" in which he revived the ancient heresy of Arianism.

What these men were doing is that they were modifying or adapting the teachings of Christianity to the spirit of the age in which they lived. Again we may remember Dean Inge's famous line, "He who marries the spirit of the age will be a widower tomorrow."

4. Error not opposed by true Scriptural teaching becomes greater error.

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If we continue with the theme of the age of reason for a while longer, and say it was an age when, men were trying to bring everything down into the confines of what human reason could grasp and with: we can identify other areas affected by this approach.

Within the Presbyterian Churches it seriously affected their belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. We find many churches of this period gradually sliding into Unitarianism.

Pool- Connor comments:

A large portion of the Presbyterian churches settled down into Unitarianism..... One after another of them in the West of England went over to that body, carrying chapel properties with them. In London, in Lancashire, Cheshire, a similar phenomenon was witnessed..... The Church of the Westminster Assemblies Catechism and Confession became in many cases the Church of a vague humanitarianism, a Church whose members had eliminated from their beliefs every characteristic Christian doctrine except the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus."

This kind of thing also affected not a few Congregational churches also.

Evangelicalism in England p 142.

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We may now turn and notice how the spirit of the age, (and we are just concentrating on rationalism for a moment, affected some of the Baptist churches at this time.

We are seeing that by the end of the 17th century the crippling touch of rationalism was clearly apparent within the churches, touching not only the Anglican church but those of the Puritan tradition also. All these various tendencies, Latitudinarianism, Deism, Arianism, and Legalism etc. were all challenging in one way or another the concept of the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

It is not surprising then to find those in the Reformed tradition opposing these trends. We find some of these amongst the Particular Baptists, but sad to say, that though they acted with the best will and the best motives their reaction against the rationalism of their time was in itself rationalistic.

Carried some Calvinistic churches into hyper- Calvinism. Time again does not allow me to enlarge upon this.

These men took the doctrines of God's sovereignty and electing grace to the very heights of their rationalistic logical application. In so doing they lost sight of the great commission and the command of our Lord to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature and the Free offer of the Gospel.

Rationalistic logic caused them to pry over much into the mind purpose of God, beyond that which is revealed to us in Scripture. There are antinomies in Scripture beyond which our finite minds cannot pass in this world.

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The Age of Reason... Gave rise to an inadequate doctrine of Scripture. Another characteristic problem of the Restoration Church in this last quarter of the 17th century, was its view of Scripture.

It was generally agreed that Scripture was the Word of God and authoritative. They however often placed the authority of Scripture alongside the authority of reason. **I think we could say that technically they would rightly place the authority of Scripture above that of reason. But It is clear however that they did not always do this in practice and that gradually the authority of reason was becoming predominant.** Men like Locke and Tillotson accepted the concept of Revelation and contended that they were drawing their Christianity from a "reasonable" reading of Scripture and not from reason alone. But in practice it seemed reason held the day. (Rack p.32).

No one would deny that in interpreting Scripture we need to use our God given reason, the Christian believes that God has made man a rational creature, with the capacity to think and to reason. We must use our reason to judge for example whether or not a thing is credible or incredible, likely or unlikely, good or bad etc. however Revelation must always take the highest placed above reason. We do not decry reason, reason has its place, **but reason alone cannot**

reveal to us the mind of God. “The world by wisdom, knew not God”.

.....

The denial of the work of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture

The Puritans spoke of, “God revealing himself through Christ in the Scriptures by means of the Holy Spirit”, and here we can highlight another aspect of the inadequate view of Scripture found in the writings of some of these Restoration divines, and their successors in the early part of the 18th century.

In the process of linking together too much the connection between Revelation and reason, they fell into the definite error of concluding that reason was enough to rightly interpret Scripture. Their serious and deadening error at this point was that they put reason in the place of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They later came to call the early part of the 18th century the glacial epoch of the English Church and here was an important aspect of the reason why.

If we turn to the writings of the later Leaders of the Evangelical Revival in the 18th-Century, we see them one by one refuting all these serious errors. We may remember Wesley’s famous hymn.

Come Divine Interpreter,

Give us eyes Thy book to read.

Jonathan Edwards also has a sermon on, the relationship of reason to faith. It is entitled, *What Reason Teaches*. In this sermon he constantly reminds his hearers,

“That limited human reason is incapable in its own power to comprehend fully the mind of God.

.....

A denial of the real authority of Holy Scripture

Edward was clearly confronting this serious error which had found its way into the New England Churches from old England i.e. that man by his reason alone could discern the mind of God or know of a way of salvation.

Edwards goes on to say: *human reason must always bow to divine revelation and the authority of Scripture when presented with “the high and abstract mysteries of the Deity, the prime and most abstract of all beings.*

He is stressing the point that ministers as God’s messengers and ambassadors must always subordinate their imperfect and finite thought to the wisdom of the Bible.

Ministers at all costs must rely on what is revealed and discovered to the mind by divine understanding infinitely superior to theirs, and this revelation they are to make the rule in their preaching... Ministers are not to make those things that seem right to their own reason a rule in their interpreting a revelation, but the revelation is to be the rule of its own interpretation. The way that they must interpret Scriptures is not to compare the dictates of the Spirit of God in his revelation with what their own reason say’s and then to seek such an interpretation as shall be agreeable to their understanding.

Repeatedly Edwards asserts that limited human reason is incapable in its own power to comprehend fully the mind of God.

For Edwards Revelation was given to be a rule to reason, a guide to our understanding, and not our understanding to be a rule and guide to Revelation. Implicit in this principle is a proper modesty and humility in reference to God.

Edwards said; that faithful messengers of God must never forget the great and reasonable truth that divine revelation does not go begging for credit/ acceptance and validity by approbation/ approval of human understanding.

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We must not neglect the ministry of warning.

An example could be given from George Whitfield who offered a very stern warning from a more general perspective against the reading of Tillotson's sermons and others of this school and got himself into enormous trouble for his strong language of warning.

While in Charleston, South Carolina he published a letter entitled, *To a Friend in London, Concerning, Archbishop Tillotson.*

Arnold Dallimore makes this comment on the letter:

"Though Dr. Tillotson (1630 – 94) had been dead for nearly half a century, his memory was still highly honoured in both Britain and America. Since Tillotson's writings were a direct contradiction of the Biblical teaching regarding the new birth, Whitefield had looked on them as a snare to the souls of men. But having recently heard the testimony of a wealthy South Carolina planter, Hugh Bryan, who stated that he had been kept in ignorance of the Gospel for years by reading Tillotson, he deemed it his responsibility to expose such a danger.

"Any spiritual man who reads them may easily see that the Archbishop knew of no other than a bare historical faith; and as to the method of our acceptance before God, and our justification by faith alone (which is the doctrine of the Scripture and of the Church of England), he certainly was as ignorant thereof as Mohammed himself."

Whitfield was brought to book by some for his harsh criticism of Tillotson. He may have been somewhat unfair to Tillotson the man but the warning nevertheless was timely and important. He found theological colleges in America at that time steeped in the teachings of latitudinarianism.

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Summing Up.

It was as if at that time the Church had made a pact with the world not to ruffle its feathers too much so long as the world continued its support.

We can also note that it was generally an age of confusion. We have seen the descent of some into Unitarianism, which stemmed from the Church's captivity to the dominant idea, of submitting all teaching to the bar of human reason.

We could have noted the further descent into Deism and mention those who argued against it. See Dalimore pp.20---

There are many other repercussions of these kind of teachings and attitudes that we could have drawn out. It could be argued that Tillotson's view of Scripture was that he believed that the sentiments of Scripture were inspired but that the inspiration did not extend to the very words of Scripture.

We see in this period the danger of the Procrustean bed, trimming everything to the measure of a dominant idea, in this case reason or some particular fashion of the age. The usurping of the Authority of Scripture was challenged and creedal statements came to be regarded as divisive and restrictive and these attitudes led to the dismissal of the authority and the value of the great Puritan preachers of that time. It was a move away from scriptural, experiential Christianity into a dry as dust intellectualism. We are not surprised either to find in 1707 then John Mill a so-called biblical scholar claiming that he had found 30,000 variant readings of the New Testament, and thus placed in the minds of some, doubt in regard to the supreme standard and authority of Scripture.

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As an example of the confusion which reigned in this period later in the 1730s Bishop Gibson said that he felt he was fighting on three fronts:

1. Against those who are rejecting special Revelation.
2. Those trusting in Christ as their whole duty and so excusing themselves from the moral law.
3. Those who affirm that the observance of the law is sufficient for salvation and so ignored the benefits of Christ's redemption.

However we may add that the bishops own ideas of the nature of Christianity were far from perfect, he is said to have believed that faith in Christ is the foundation of the Christians title to heaven, but that repentance and good works are necessary conditions of obtaining it.

See Henry Rack on The Loss of Justification by Faith pp.27... Reasonable Enthusiast.

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It was a period of intense suffering and persecution of godly men and women.

There is much noble faithfulness that we can admire and seek to emulate in those who remained true throughout this period and many of the great and leading names amongst the Puritans would be amongst them.

Hundreds of believers suffered greatly throughout this time and a number of them died in prison. .

For an example of the kind of constant harassment of these congregations by the authorities, we can read, **The Broadmead Records** where we see just what these persecutions meant in the daily life of an ordinary congregation. Reading these records reveals that sometimes on Lord's Day after Lord's Day, and meeting after meeting the authorities broke into services, often violently, carrying people off to periods in prison and making life in every way tense and difficult for believers.

Benjamin Keach spoke of the "Ten hot persecutions," of these 20 years. The hottest he said, which was the last, and took place in the early 1680s nearly 20 years after they began.

Incidentally, but significantly Dallimore adds that these terrible times of persecution became the occasion of a great volume of prayer by the believing remnant, men were forbidden to preach, but they could not be stopped from praying - and only eternity will reveal the relationship between this burden of persecution and the revival which followed in the third decade of the next century.

.....

The lessons of this age are manifold, essentially we have seen how prone man is to turn away from the truths of God, but this turning follows a discernible pattern i.e. a despising of Scripture, "Hath God said?" The idea that man can live without God, or form his own kind of religion, going to the hill of morality instead at of the hill Calvary, the weakness of the Church trying to accommodate to the spirit of the age, compromising with the world, courting the world to gain its favour, going as it were to Egypt for help.

On the positive side, the age displays the glorious example of faithfulness in spite of persecution and loss, perseverance when all seems lost, believing that in due season we shall reap if we faint not. (Spurgeon illustration from the days of Napoleon.)

One of the greatest lessons must be that the faithfulness of the few under God's blessing led to the great revival of the 1730s.

In the Old Testament there were peaks and troughs in the ongoing workings of God's purposes, it has been the same all through Church history, but the gates of hell have not prevailed against the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, the darkest night always comes before the dawn. I like to remind friends that in 1500 the prospects of Christianity looked bleak, it was the darkest night before the dawn of the Reformation broke, and we all know, *the crowning day is coming, by and by.*