

The early non-conformists

For some Christians the 16th century Reformation did not go far enough; they wanted to do away with religious ceremony, hierarchy and central church government, and emphasised the need for personal holiness and purity of doctrine. 'Puritan' was coined as a term of abuse applied to various groups originally within the Church of England, though later some separated from it.

They were far from being social and political separatists: they produced scientists and literary figures, were well represented at Cambridge University in particular and enjoyed the patronage of some of the nobility. They also had strong support in Parliament in the early years of Elizabeth I's reign, but despite that were unable to obtain the changes they desired.

By the early 1600s there was increasing rivalry between King James I and Parliament, but although it was largely Puritan pressure which led to James sponsoring the new translation of the Bible which appeared in 1611, non-conformist worship outside the Church of England was persecuted and many clergy within the church were deprived of their livings. Under Charles I and his Archbishop Laud of Canterbury this persecution increased and many Puritans fled abroad, especially to the Netherlands and New England.

The conflict was a major factor leading to the English Civil War of 1642-6, the Puritans largely siding with Oliver Cromwell, who ultimately triumphed. Under his rule they sought to change society, though with mixed results, as there was a backlash from those who objected to having holiness imposed on them and some faked religious zeal to gain power.

When the monarchy was restored under Charles II in the second half of the 17th century the Puritans were again persecuted. Although tolerance gradually returned, the movement began to fracture due to disagreement over church government, although significant theological works were published after this.

One group which emerged from Puritanism but developed in a different way was the Baptists, a term coined by their opponents. The Puritans continued to practise infant baptism, although there had been groups throughout church history which rejected that and there was a 16th century movement in Europe labelled Anabaptist which held to believers' only baptism and independence of the church from state control.

In 1608 John Smyth, a separatist Anglican priest who had fled persecution, baptised himself and then others of his congregation in Amsterdam, having come to the conclusion that a true church must be formed of people making a personal confession of faith and baptised as believers. Originally baptism was not by full immersion: that came about 50 years later. After Smyth's death in 1612 one of his associates, Thomas Helwys, led back to England a group which had split from Smyth's former congregation and formed a church in Spitalfields in London. This was the first General Baptist church, but by the late 1630s there were also some Particular Baptist churches, which held to a more Calvinistic understanding of doctrine.

Early Baptist services were quite long, consisting of congregational participation and sometimes several sermons, initially with no music or singing. One account is of a service from 8.00 am to 12.00 noon followed by another from 2.00 pm to 5.00 or 6.00 pm! In the 1670s singing of Psalms and other songs was introduced, leading to controversy and splits in congregations, but gradually this was accepted as part of worship and in 1691 the first Baptist hymn book was produced.

Although congregations were independent, it was soon recognised that there was a need to mutual support, and co-operation developed into the first Baptist Association in the 1640s and later groupings, which also helped to establish theology.

Like the Puritans, the Baptists largely sided with and enjoyed favour from Oliver Cromwell but suffered persecution when the monarchy was restored. For example, John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was imprisoned for the best part of 12 years for unlicensed preaching, and although in 1672 Charles II allowed non-conformists to license places of worship he revoked this three years later, and it was only with the Act of Toleration in 1689 under the Protestant William and Mary that there was much more religious freedom. By this time the Baptist church had grown significantly, but theological differences led to divisions as General Baptists became more liberal and Particular Baptists stricter.

But that takes us into the 18th century with its Evangelical Awakening, and that is another story for another time.