

The Puritans and the LCJE

by Arthur F. Glasser

More than twenty years ago I acquired two books. Both were about the Puritans. Being of a mildly Reformed persuasion, I was primarily interested in the one dealing with the Puritan approach to revivals and eschatology. It was written by Iain Murray¹, an English scholar who is just about the outstanding interpreter of Reformed Theology in the business today, although I must hasten to add that he is almost too rigidly committed to the distinctives of John Calvin. The other book, edited by Peter Toon², is a collection of six separate essays on Puritan eschatology. I was drawn to those two books because at the time I was quite restless over my rather simplistic approach to questions concerning the millennium. They did not really solve my problem, hence were set aside and virtually forgotten, except for one impression that remained: how strange that the Puritans seemed preoccupied with calling for Jewish evangelism.

During my first years at Fuller, I became so involved in administrative work and Asian church problems, that the Puritans and their serious grappling with the same Jewish issues that the Apostle Paul explored in Romans 9-11, were almost forgotten. Then came the first Lausanne Consultation for World Evangelism in 1974. While there I noted that a workshop had been scheduled to deal with Jewish evangelism. I recalled my seminary days working weekends for the New York Bible Society, distributing Gospel portions to the Jewish people in Manhattan. On impulse I attended and found a small group quite keyed up over the challenge that had been sounded in a plenary session earlier

churches in the northern countries of continental Europe. Their avowed purpose was to reform the established Church of England so that Protestantism would triumph throughout the British Isles after the pattern developed by the Continental Reformers, especially by John Calvin. These Puritans had been impressed not only by the relation between spiritual awakenings at the grass roots level of society and the collapse of papal control over national churches. They also began to see in this biblical renewal the potential dynamism for carrying to completion the missionary purpose of God.

The Puritan era in 17th century England was a time of political chaos and of civil war, but it was also a time of intense spiritual inquiry. The heady optimism of the Puritans drove many people to their Bibles to focus particular attention on eschatological themes to feed their sense of God's coming triumph in history. As Neander stated, "Strong and certain was the conviction of the Christians that the Church would come forth triumphant out of its conflicts," and since its destination was to become a world-transforming principle, it "would attain to domination of the world" (quoted by Murray 1971: xii). One of the martyrs during this period, James Renwick, stated: "There have been great and glorious days of the gospel in this land; but they have been small in comparison of what shall be" (ibid.: xiii).

Second, what were Puritans like? You know how Puritans are caricatured by today's sophisticates. The depiction is of humorless souls, devoid of joy, indifferent to beauty, hopelessly self-righteous and highly critical of all deviations from their particular standards and life style. Actually, they sought not only to bring purity and vitality to the old medieval Church of England, but to transform by personal example and

promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Furthermore, we must realize that in their day, as Murray states so vividly,

The Jews, despised and downtrodden, heard no word of hope from the professing Church, and the unevangelized world living beyond the narrow borders of Christendom received no messengers of the gospel of peace (1971: 39).

What is of special interest to us is that early in the Puritan movement, it became almost commonplace to speak of a future conversion of the Jewish people. Through widespread study of Romans 11, the conviction grew that although "hardening had come upon part of Israel," this was only "until the full number of the Gentiles" would take place during the course of the Church Age. It was then that salvation would come to "all Israel" and their divine calling "would be part of a new and brighter era of history, and not the end" (ibid., 46). The earliest (1620) and most popular Puritan exposition of Romans (by Elnathan Parr) reacted strongly against the Continental theologians who argued that "the fullness of the Gentiles," not only preceded God's summons to the Jewish people, but marked the completion of his saving work among the Gentiles. Parr wrote:

The casting off of the Jews was our Calling; but the Calling of the Jews shall not be our casting off, but our greater enriching in grace, and that two ways: First, in regard of the company of believers, when the thousands of Israel shall come in, which shall doubtless cause many Gentiles which now lie in ignorance, error and doubt, to receive the Gospel and join with them. The world shall then be a golden world, rich in golden men, saith Ambrose. Secondly, in respect of the graces, which shall then in more abundance be rained down upon the Church (quoted by Murray 1971: 47).

Fourth, what did the Puritans then do? It follows that they gave themselves to prayer "for the Church of God, that the Jews might be converted, and that the gospel might be preached to the remainder of the Gentile nations" (Murray 1971: 99). "Days of prayer and humiliation" were kept in Scotland, "that the promised conversion of God's ancient people would be hastened" (p. 100). Page after page in these books speak of the intensity of Puritan prayer along these lines. The 18th century Evangelical Awakening associated with John Wesley's "Methodist" societies is regarded as the beginning of a period of unprecedented blessing resulting from their fervent intercession. Already, by 1740, Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) was writing that the long-expected revival was beginning to break forth on the people.

The approach of better times for Christianity may be compared to the gradual peep of verdure through the dissolving snow, with here and there a green patch more or less conspicuous. . . . [Even so, he lamented] at present the age of missions to the heathen and to the Jews is not fully arrived. . . . But though it is too early for the general [i.e., eschatological] conversion of Jews and Gentiles, it appears a sin of omission on the part of Protestant churches, that they have not begun long ago to send missions to both (quoted by Murray, p. 132).

The evangelical movement was gathering momentum. The great evangelist of the 18th century, George Whitefield (1714-1770) saw so many come to Christ through the Great Awakening in America (1740-1745) and through several successive periods of revival in England, Wales and Scotland, that he began to preach that the anticipation of yet greater revivals is a biblical duty (p. 149). Many other leaders called the people "to expect, hope, long, and pray for larger and more extensive showers of divine influence than any former age had experienced" (p. 150). Carey took up this burden and incorporated it in his Enquiry

From the certainty of this goal being reached, they constantly drew the energy and conviction that their labor was not in vain "in the Lord."

Fifth, then came the dispensationalists. Although the Puritans sought to grapple with the implications of the six occurrences of the phrase "a thousand years" in Revelation 20:1-10, and although they differed widely and wildly over what this meant, the millennial idea did not divert them from their importunate prayer for church renewal, for Jewish evangelism and for Gentile ingathering. And always their ultimate hope--nothing less than "life from the dead" for all peoples. They kept their priorities straight. Those that followed them throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries likewise majored in major themes and likewise refused to be regarded as militants for any position touching the millennium.

But toward the middle of the 19th century, something happened through the so-called "prophetic conferences" organized by the dispensationalist followers of Edward Irving (1792-1834), a deposed minister of the Church of Scotland, and John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), an ex-Anglican priest. These conferences radically disturbed evangelical unity. At these exciting gatherings a fundamental thesis was popularized that "the Second Coming of the Lord is the point de vue, the vantage ground . . . from which, and from which alone, the whole purpose of God can be contemplated and understood" (p. 193). A new set of postulates was advanced:

- 1) That Christendom was apostate, and all true believers should separate themselves from its corrupting influence.
- 2) That the progress of evil, rather than the spread of the gospel throughout the nations, is what the future portends.

Conclusion: Now I have no desire to explore all the exegetical and theological matters that have shaped and enlarged the Puritan understanding of the missionary task. Nor do I desire to explore the alleged validities of dispensationalism as it first burst upon the evangelical scene. And I have no desire to detail the ongoing revisionism and fragmentation of what was once a relatively homogeneous dispensational movement. These tasks have already been tackled by scholars far more competent than I.

My purpose in choosing these two books for discussion in this session has a more fundamental objective. I just want you to know that my former indifference to the church scene, my failure to pray and work for church renewal and revival, and finally, my tendency to regard Jewish evangelism in isolation from God's larger purpose for the nations--all these have been given a sharp jolt through re-reading these two books. I've realized anew that I must continue to study what the Scriptures have to say about these themes. Have you had some of the same problems as I with eschatology? If so, let's all get to work and study our Bibles! We cannot spend too much time searching for fresh insights into those passages that God earlier used to awaken our interest in and concern for the evangelization of the Jewish people.

Notes:

1 Iain Murray, The Puritan Hope (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971).

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3 Faith and Renewal, Vol. 17, No. 4, January/February 1993, pp. 26, 27.

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