

Why do we do things like that in church?

The Puritans

8.08.2004

Do you remember the days when most families in Sydney ate similar food night after night? Those days have gone. Supermarkets and immigration have changed us forever. Do you remember when there was uniformity across churches in the Sydney Diocese? Those days have gone. Most Sydney Anglican ministers are evangelicals; but the way they lead church services is full of variety, drawn from various groups of the past, who have struggled to come to terms with God and the Bible.

Ministers have treated history like a supermarket. They have taken a bit from this tradition and a bit of that and combined them into new ways of putting their faith into action in their spirituality.

To help us understand a bit more of why there are differences, today we begin a series which looks at 4 influential Christian movements, and how they put their beliefs into practice. Each struggled out of dry, academic Christianity, to seek warmth, reality and closeness with God. They have all been important in the church's history, with both good and not so good characteristics.

This series is not drawn from the Bible... it is a glance into church history. I want us to see how Christians have accented certain parts of the Bible. Also I want to better understand the richness of our heritage. For we are shaped by the past. In coming weeks, we will look at the **Pietists**, the **Pentecostals** and the **Puseyites**. Today, we look at the **Puritans**.

In 1559 England, the Act of Uniformity enforced that all English Churches used the prayer book, and ministers had to wear certain clothes. Many ministers took exception. They wanted to vary services, and emphasised that the pastor is not a sacrificing priest, but a teacher and leader.

The Puritans grew from that reaction. The movement lasted 100 years, having its high point during the Cromwell republic, but it died out in England when most Puritans fled to

America under Charles II.

Austere and sober, the Puritans are often thought of as wowsers. They wanted to cast away man-made traditions and return to a New Testament pattern of church life and government. Elizabeth I smashed their political reforms, so they reformed the church from the grass roots.

They called their Puritan Lifestyle "Godly Christian Living".

Instead of assuming that people in church were Christians, they called on people to be converted, and to grow in their knowledge and love of God.

Have you ever heard ministers preaching for 40 minutes or more? Puritans would preach for about an hour. Their preaching was based on the Bible, was full of stories and illustrations, and they applied it to people's hearts and minds. The sermons were often plain, but not dull. and they often balanced doctrine (or knowledge) with practical advice showing how to use that knowledge.

1 Corinthians 1:21 says that it is through the foolishness of preaching that God saves those who believe. The pulpit was very important. People were taught to revere what was said and they brought their friends to hear it. Through preaching, God was calling on His elect to repent and also to learn how to live.

One of their famous preachers, Richard Sibbes, said "...to preach is to woo. The preachers are... the friends of the bridegroom, that are to procure the marriage between Christ and his church; Therefore they are not only to lay open the riches of the husband, Christ, but likewise to entreat for a marriage, and to use all the gifts and parts that God has given them, to bring Christ and his church together."

Through preaching, the Bible was opened up to people. They understood that God gave them the Bible. They learnt it and found it helpful in every situation. To use a modern expression, "They owned it".

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And as they read it, they saw that mankind was lost and dead to God without Jesus Christ. Many sermons fell into a pattern. They would first of all preach God's law, for Romans 7 says that the law makes people realise they are sinners. Then, recognising their sin and their need for salvation, they should cry out for help from so majestic and powerful a God as Christ.

However, they stressed the law excessively, and people scoured their lives for sin. Life became very sober, and frivolity was wasting time, not being a good steward for God.

Coupled with this seeking for sin, was a stress on God's election of His people. They knew God chose the saved before the world was created (as in Ephesians 1). They knew the elect will never fall away and will receive the crown of glory. Many Christians began asking "Am I one of the elect?"

Instead of being directed back to the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ, who assures us that all who believe in Him will be saved, they turned their eyes away from Jesus and focused on themselves. They did this because the Bible says God's chosen people will show the fruit of the Spirit, therefore they examined themselves to see if the fruit was present.

This scouring for sin and eager seeking for fruit created a major problem. Many Christians became depressed. As they examined themselves daily, (just as we are encouraged to examine ourselves in the communion service and 1 Corinthians 11) they could see that they still sinned. They saw no improvement in themselves and therefore despaired of being elect.

Ministers constantly counselled people with depression, encouraging them to flee this world by focusing on God's love and saving grace in Christ Jesus.

Not surprisingly, this constant inner battle led to stressing the Christian battle. Using passages like Ephesians 6, where Paul describes the

armour of God, Christians had to fight the good fight with all their might. Many of those hymns about fighting the Christian fight came from a Puritan background. John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, was a Puritan.

Another Puritan stress was pastoral visiting. When the minister came, it was not a social call. It was sacred business. He counselled depressed Christians and taught the catechism. This was vital for Christian growth. The family would recite it for the minister.

They certainly knew the Bible. They knew God had brought in a new covenant with the death of Jesus. They knew that the church was the new Israel. They knew the need for a personal relationship with God, which affected every part of life, for which they were held accountable to God for the way they used every minute.

But what did they do in church? How did an hour long sermon fit in? Before coming to the building, the family would dress and pray that they would be open to hearing God speak through his word by opening their ears and hearts to His word.

The buildings and ministers had no ornaments. They knew that the church was the gathering of the people of God, not a sacred place.

So they met in halls, warehouses etc.

Coming into church, they were met with silence. There might be just a rustle of the pages of the Bible being turned and read. But people were praying or reading the Bible. The preacher would come in without choir or robes. He would give a call for worship from the Bible, followed by a "prayer of approach" (which included adoration, confession and asking for blessing on the labours of the day). This may have been followed by a read or sung Psalm. After 1 or 2 Bible readings, with optional brief explanations of them, he would preach for 1 hour. The sermon would come from the Bible, and most probably would be part of a series, preaching text by text through a book. Many of the literate

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people would take notes. Then came another long prayer, a second Psalm and benediction.

After church, they would talk about it as they went home, repeat the sermon to their families, and pray that God would help their hearts to keep it.

To be a practical Christian, as a Puritan, meant learning the Bible and catechisms. It meant living a sober life, knowing that you would have to account for every moment to God. You would long for each sermon, to learn more, so that you could teach your friends and family about the Lord, so they would come to know Him. But even though you knew that God chose His people, you would never be certain if you were one of them, for the only way you were taught to know that you were elect was to look for evidences of change in your life. So you might have long bouts of depression.

But we are not Puritans. We do have some churches in Sydney which draw very heavily from that tradition. The Banner of Truth is an organisation with very strong Puritan links.

We have drawn from the Puritans in a few ways.

We have hymns about being a faithful Christian soldier. I love preaching and working through Bible books methodically. I may give sermon outlines so you can take notes. Some people take notes anyway. This church has some religious ornamentation, but it is not very ornate, because the diocese has drawn from the puritan well for church furniture.

The Puritans stressed learning and knowing God's word, fighting the spiritual battle to soberly grow in the Lord. These are excellent features of a Godly Christian. Over the coming month, we will see how we have also drawn from other Christian traditions.