

# Grace Reformed Baptist Church

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## School of Theology

18<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> July 2011

The fifth annual School of Theology was held in Palmerston North from the 18th to 21st of July 2011, hosted by Grace Reformed Baptist Church. Dr. James Renihan returned to teach another class, this one entitled "Puritanism in Context." There were 19 men in attendance this year. Men came from all across New Zealand, including Palmerston North, Christchurch, Wellington, New Plymouth, Hamilton and Dunedin, as well as Australia, Fiji, and the United States. The whole week was a wonderful time of fellowship and study.

The course consisted of an introduction and eight units. The introduction addressed questions of methodology. We sought to find a balance between the extreme approach of seeing the events of Puritan era as simply the result of various economic, cultural, political, etc. factors (the historicist view), or on the other hand, the extreme of trying to over interpret the events in light of Providence to the neglect of the "secondary causes" (the providentialist view). Rather than using only one of the approaches, we recognized that we must use multiple lenses so that we can best understand this period of time. The introduction also very generally identified Puritanism as "The English version of continental Protestantism." We struggled to formulate an appropriate definition of Puritanism that was large enough to encompass all of the various people that should be rightly included in the movement, but we noted that Puritanism is particularly characterized by a devotion to scripture and a desire for the glory of God that culminates in right worship of God. Finally, in the introduction, we gave the Puritan era the general dates of 1548-1699.

Unit One was a brief overview of the whole Puritan period giving us the big picture of what was happening in England at that time and showing what life was like for the average person during this time period. Unit Two told the story of how the reformation came through England. Truly God uses mysterious ways to bring about his purposes. It was largely through the actions of wicked men and women such as Henry VIII and Bloody Mary that God brought the reformation to England. Henry's desire to separate from Rome so that he could separate from his wife led to the formation of the church of England, and Bloody Mary's cruel persecution of protestants cemented a hatred for Rome in the hearts of the English people.

In Unit Three we discussed the Monarchy in England throughout the Puritan era and how the monarchy affected Puritanism. Each monarch seems to have had a different opinion on Puritanism and instituted different policies. Some were openly favorable and supportive, others were aggressively hostile. Unit Four went into greater depth on the Civil Wars. Dr. Renihan argued that this period may be the most important period for the discussion of Puritanism in Context. It was during this period that the conflict in England between the King and parliament came to a climax and the Puritans were heavily involved in the events that transpired. This was also the time when the Westminster Assembly was called and a more concerted effort was made to reform the Church of England. Also during this period there came a measure of religious toleration to many groups.

Because this class is about Puritanism in Context, we focused on the Puritans in relation to the events around them as well as their connections to church history. For this reason, Unit Five explored the relationship between the Puritans and the Church Fathers. We determined that the Puritans were heavily dependent on the Church Fathers, but that we must be careful about how we try to document their use of the Fathers. They did not follow the same kind of citation practices that we follow and so we should not treat them as though they do. Unit Six followed this with a discussion of how the Puritans viewed and used the "Schoolmen" (medieval theologians). We found that they had a nuanced approach that included both appreciation and criticism. They were very firm in criticizing their Roman errors, but they also were able to appreciate those places in the Schoolmen that were helpful and useful. There were some Schoolmen who were held in high regard such as Bernard of Clairvaux.

Following this train of thought, Unit Seven discussed the Puritans and the Reformers. We saw that the Puritans were very much in line with what the reformers taught and what the reformers emphasized. Very often they even approached theological questions or issues the same way that the reformers did. We made a special note that it is wrong for us to try to create a divide between the reformers and those who came immediately after them. The theology and the emphases of the reformers were continued and built upon by their followers. Our last unit, Unit Eight, examined the Puritans and the Post-Reformation Theologians. In this unit we especially focused on the Synod of Dort and the role of the English representatives that attended the synod. The men in the delegation were from the Church of England and not Puritans. However, there were still some prominent Puritans who had an influence of the Synod, most notably William Ames.

As the class was finishing there was opportunity for some question and answer time. This led to Dr. Renihan providing a recommended reading list that could serve as an introduction to the writings of the Puritans: Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, Thomas Watson's 3 volumes on the shorter Catechism (A Body of Divinity, The Lord's Prayer, and The Ten Commandments), The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment by Jeremiah Burroughs, The Mystery of Providence by John Flavel, The Mortification of Sin by John Owen (in Volume 6 of his works), and The Bruised Reed by Richard Sibbes.

A special thank you is due to Dr. Renihan for coming to teach the course, for Dafydd Hughes and Ian Fuller for their work in preparation for the class as well as their work during the week of the class, and especially to the ladies, Maria, Kath, and Muriel, who worked all day every day to ensure that we were comfortable, well fed, and taken care of (and also to Robyn, Louise and Rufina who assisted in the background with catering). We thank God for what he did in and through the Puritans and may he help us to learn from their strengths and their weaknesses.

**A report by Micah Renihan**

IRBS intern at Grace Baptist Church, Christchurch

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