

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Review & Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_rande_01.php

PURITAN RULE IN COLONIAL VIRGINIA.

BY REV. J. S. DILL, D.D.

BOWLING GREEN, KY.

In this good year of our Lord, 1907, at Norfolk, Va., we are celebrating the Tercentenary of the settlement of Jamestown. Of all the great movements in the opening years of the seventeenth century, that look to the empire of the new world, none was more important than the permanent settling of communities upon those magnificent water-ways that unite to form the harbor of Hampton Roads, through which is now passing the commerce of a great nation. If the approaching exposition shall lead us not only to the display of the marvelous material developments of our own times, but to a better understanding of the men and measures of those early days we celebrate, it will prove a wise expenditure of time and money. This paper proposes to deal with that most unique period of our Colonial history when Puritan governors ruled in cavalier Virginia.

The year 1641 marks an important era in the history of the English people. To this year belongs the great massacre in Ireland, when, under pretext of royal edict, Catholic hands were crimsoned with Protestant blood. The blood of 50,000 victims cried out from the ground, and the unspeakable horror fired the English heart. The strong and rapidly growing Puritan element in the nation, so slow to arouse and so hard to curb when once awakened, now leaped forth in its power. In the House of Commons there was at once precipitated a colossal struggle, and before the close of the year there arose the two great parties—Cavaliers and Roundheads. The war of words became a war of swords. Cromwell with his invincible ironsides swept all before him, and the bloody struggle only found its end when, on January 30th, 1649, the head of Charles the First rolled from the block, and Puritan rule in England was fully established.

This struggle, with its outcome in England, forms no small factor in the growth of some of the institutions which the Anglo-Saxon now holds dear. The great Puritan movement of the seventeenth century, with John Milton as its intellectual advocate, and Oliver Cromwell as its political leader, has made its impress upon the ages. Nor was its power confined to England. Its glory flashed over Europe, and many struggling hearts in political and religious darkness, saw a great light. The waves of its influence rolled across the Atlantic and touched the shores of the new world, where struggled the infant colonies. It is about the history and influence of this Puritan movement in the Cavalier colony of Old Virginia that we are now concerned.

In this study it is worth while to gather such facts as we can as to the coming of any of the Puritans into Virginia before the time of the English Commonwealth. John H. Latané, in a paper published in the Johns Hopkins Series of University Studies and entitled, "Early Relations Between Maryland and Virginia," furnishes us some interesting facts. Jamestown was founded in 1607, and there is evidence that as early as 1611 a small band of Puritans was sent out by the London Company. With other colonists they were under command of Sir Thomas Dale, who formed a settlement 12 miles below Richmond. It was called Henricopolis, but soon contracted to Henrico. (Latané pp. 34 and 35). With Dale came Alexander Whitaker, styled the Apostle of Virginia, who, if not an out-and-out Puritan, seems to have had strong leanings in that direction. His father is said to have been a Puritan divine.

In 1619, in what is now the Isle of Wight County, on a creek that still bears his name, Capt. Christopher Lawne formed an important Puritan settlement. (Latané p. 36.) In 1621 the London Company confirmed to Edward Bennett a patent for having planted 200 persons in Isle of Wight County. Fifty acres being allowed for each person, this patent would embrace 10,000 acres of

land. (Latané p. 37.) Edward Bennett was a wealthy merchant of London, and did not himself come to Virginia, but sent out these colonists in the care of Robert and Richard Bennett, his nephews. There is every evidence that this was a strong Puritan settlement, and that Wm. Bennett, another kinsman of the London merchant, was their preacher. Hard by the Bennett plantation, there settled the following year still another band of Puritans, brought out by Nathaniel Basse. (Latané p. 37.) In 1621 there also settled a small Puritan colony at New Port News. Daniel Gookin was at the head of this party. After receiving a grant of 2,500 acres in what is now Nansemond County, Gookin removed to that section. (Latané p. 38.) Still later, in 1637, Richard Bennett received a patent for 2,000 acres of land, and located it in Nansemond County between Nansemond River and a small stream called Bennett's Creek. The tract of land is still referred to in legal documents as Bennett's pasture. This Bennett becomes a conspicuous figure in the subsequent history. Thus we find four important Puritan settlements, all located in what was then called Warrosquoyacke Shire, but now occupied by Isle of Wight and Nansemond Counties. The bad tobacco in this particular section was very favorable to the growth of the Puritans. The logic of this was that the Church of England parson received as his wages a stipulated amount of tobacco, and he naturally sought the parish that made to him the best returns. A century later, Col. Byrd, writing in his diary concerning the Quakers in this same section, bears the following testimony: "This persuasion prevails much in the lower end of Nansemond County, for want of ministers to pilot the people a decenter way to heaven. The ill reputation of the tobacco in these lower parishes makes the clergy unwilling to accept them, unless it be such whose abilities are as mean as their pay."

The broad policy of the London Company, anxious for the rapid growth of their colony, also greatly encouraged these Puritan settlements. By 1638 they numbered not

less than 1,000, which was not less than one-seventh of the entire population of the country. (John Fiske, *Virginia and her Neighbors.*) Among them, there were not a few of good culture and gentle blood. This was at a time when the sharp lines were not drawn between Puritan and Cavalier, and quite a number remained with the English Church with the hopes of reformation from within. They sympathized especially with Puritan politics. In 1629, Richard Bennett and Nathaniel Basse appear as members of the House of Burgesses from Warrosquoyacke. (*Hening Statutes at Large. Vol. I. p. 139.*)

During this early period there is no evidence of persecution against the Puritans. Laws are indeed passed announcing the settled policy of uniformity to the canons and constitution of the Church of England, but no effort is made to enforce the law. (*Hening I p. 155.*) It has even been thought by some that the laws were not of serious intent, but were designed for the ears of the High Church officials in England.

In the year 1642, Wm. Berkley was commissioned as Governor of Virginia, and with his advent there came a disastrous change to the Virginia Puritans. Berkley was a Cavalier of the most radical type. Royalist and Churchman to the core, he hated, with cruel hatred, every thing that smacked of Puritanism. It chanced that in this same year, the Puritans, zealous for the advancement of their faith, sent a petition to the Elders of Boston, begging that they send them, "a supply of faithful ministers to place over their congregations." This petition was signed by Bennett, Gookin, and others, and was carried by Phillip Bennett in person. It was favorably received and three Puritan ministers, John Knowles, Wm. Thompson and Thomas James, were set apart to the important mission. From Gov. Winthrop they bore a letter to Gov. Berkley. The hot-headed Cavalier received the letter with very scant courtesy indeed, for instead of protection he gave them persecution. At the very next meeting of the assembly, March, 1643, a law was enacted

declaring that all ministers shall be required to conform to the Church of England, and not otherwise be admitted to teach or preach publicly or privately, and all nonconformists be compelled to depart the Colony with all convenience. (Hening I, p. 277.) This forced the New England preachers to return home, but not before they had preached from house to house and won many converts. The next year witnessed a great Indian massacre, and some interpreted it as a providential visitation for persecuting the New England preachers. This led to a great spiritual change in Thomas Harrison, Gov. Berkley's own chaplain, who turned Puritan, and took charge of the Nansemond congregation. Active measures against them then ceased for a season. In 1647 another law was enacted against nonconformists, and the following year Harrison was banished, taking refuge in New England, while Richard Bennett and Wm. Durant, also banished, found safety in Maryland. Special overtures had been made by the Maryland authorities to the sorely-pressed Puritans of Virginia, and Bennett was soon followed by over 300 emigrants.

But matters soon came to a great crisis in England. Charles I was beheaded and the English Commonwealth established. But instead of making friends with the new authorities in England, Berkley proceeds to pass the most defiant acts. It was ordered that any person defending the late traitorous proceedings against the king shall be adjudged accessory, post factum, to his death, and that to doubt the inherent right of Charles II to the succession shall be adjudged high treason. (Hening I, p. 360.) This action made sad havoc with the Puritans still in Virginia for two full years passed, after the death of Charles I, before the English Commonwealth could find time to give attention to its possessions across the sea. In the early Spring of 1652 there at last appeared at Jamestown a vessel, sent out by Cromwell's government, to subdue the rebellious colony. The commission-

ers of Parliament named to execute this plan had at its head none other than the banished Puritan, Richard Bennett. The colony is summoned to surrender, and the Roundhead and Cavalier stand face to face on Virginia soil. Truly the time of reckoning must be at hand. The Cavalier had made some show of resistance, but before coming to battle, a conference being arranged between the opponents, terms of settlement were agreed upon, and Virginia quietly bowed to the authority of the English Commonwealth.

To account for this bloodless victory, several things need to be remembered. The colony was too weak to promise itself any hope of success in armed resistance. Then, too, while Berkley had driven out the most pronounced of the Puritans, there still remained some with decided political Puritan sentiments, and the advice of these would not be without its weight in the Assembly. But of special importance were the liberal terms which the Commissioners stood ready to grant. The official document signed by Richard Bennett, Wm. Claiborne and Edmond Curtis, and constituting the basis of settlement is one of the most remarkable papers of that age. The following are its main features, (Hening I, p. 363):

1. The submission of the colony to be regarded as a voluntary act, and not constrained by a conquest upon the country.

2. The Grand Assembly to transact the affairs of the Colony of Virginia, wherein nothing is to be done contrary to the government of England.

3. A full indemnity for all past acts against the Commonwealth.

4. To have and enjoy the ancient bounds and limits granted by the charters of the former kings.

5. That all patents remain in full force and strength.

6. That the people of Virginia have free trade as the people of England.

7. That they be free from all taxes, customs, etc., and none to be imposed without the consent of the Grand

Assembly; and forts, castles, and garrisons not to be maintained without their consent.

8. Those who refuse to subscribe to said engagement to be allowed a year to remove themselves and their estates, and during this year to have equal justice.

9. The book of Common Prayer to be allowed for one year, and ministers continued in their places.

Upon such favorable terms as these the Cavalier Governor was forced to retire to private life, and for eight years there was Puritan rule in the Old Dominion. Berkeley sold his Jamestown home, and retired to his Greenspring plantation, where in sumptuous style he entertained his Cavalier friends. He was at first allowed one year in which to settle his affairs and leave the colony; but the time was extended and he remained unmolested. Not even Gov. Bennett, who had suffered so much at his hands, exercised toward him the least resentment. It furnished a lofty example of true nobility.

Bennett was promptly elected the first Puritan governor. (Hening I, p. 371.) This office he held for three years and was then sent to London as agent of the colony in important business. Edward Diggs was his successor, and he was in turn succeeded by Samuel Matthews. At the death of Matthews in 1659, the Puritan rule in Virginia closed. At this juncture Richard Cromwell resigned the Protectorate, and the kingly rule was restored in the person of Charles II. We are now concerned in indicating some of the distinctive features of this eight years of Puritan supremacy.

1. As to suffrage every freeman was allowed the privilege of voting. For this the Puritans deserved no special credit. In the first years of the infant colony there was universal suffrage, and it was in existence at the time the Puritans came into power. Universal suffrage was the natural result of the conditions of those early days when there were very few voters at best, just as at first the number of members sent from a county to the House of Burgesses was not limited, because there were so few to

come. As the colony increased, the question of limited suffrage became an issue. It was during Puritan rule in 1654 that the first act limiting the suffrage was passed. It was restricted to all housekeepers, "whether freeholders, leaseholders, or otherwise tenants." (Hening I, p. 412.) That for which the administration does deserve credit is that the very next year they repealed the act and restored universal suffrage, and this they did by distinctly asserting "that they conceived it something hard and unagreeable to reason that any person shall pay equal taxes and yet have no vote in elections." (Hening I, p. 403 and 475.) Universal suffrage continued until 1670, under Berkley's second administration, when it was limited to freeholders and householders. Under Bacon's rebellion, in what is known as Bacon's Laws, it was again restored, but only to be promptly swept away when the rebellion was subdued. Limited suffrage, with increased restrictions, then continued in Virginia, not only through the colonial period, but for fifty years after the Revolutionary War. It was in 1830 that Virginia passed its act of universal suffrage. The new constitution of Virginia (1902) has again limited the suffrage, and in a great and populous country like the United States has now become, a limited suffrage is likely to prevail.

2. As to government it was thoroughly representative. Up to the time of the Puritan supremacy the governor held his commission solely from the king. He was always one of the king's favorites sent to the colony for this special purpose. Immediately upon the restoration of the monarchy the king again assumed this power. During Puritan rule the Governor and Council were elected by the House of Burgesses. The whole governing power was resident in the Grand Assembly, and the Assembly elected by a system of universal suffrage. It was especially provided that the right of election of all offices of this colony "be and appertain to the Burgesses, the representatives of the people." (Hening I, p. 372.) The House of Burgesses was, during this period, very proud

of this privilege and very fond of asserting it. During its session of 1658, there came a severe clash between the Burgesses, and the Governor and Council. (Hening I, p. 489.) For some cause the Governor issued an order dissolving the House of Burgesses. They in reply announced themselves undissolved, and took the firm stand that no power extant in Virginia could dissolve them except their own. They issued an order that any Burgess who should leave the house at that juncture "be censured as a person betraying the trust reposed in him by his country." (Hening I, p. 500.) In this contest the Assembly was victorious and the Governor yielded. The Assembly then gave a practical illustration of their power by declaring all former elections null and void, and at once re-electing Matthews and his council. This representative character of the government is further evident in the seventh article of settlement, in which it is provided that there shall be no taxes and no garrisons maintained without consent of the Grand Assembly, the representatives of the people. This particular article, however, when considered by the English Parliament was not ratified. It was referred to the committee on Naval Affairs, and we have no evidence of a report for or against. We have no record of infringement of the article, and we do find that the Assembly itself legislated as to taxes and custom duties. After Puritan rule there is a lapse of 115 years before Virginia again enjoys representative government. The next time they exercised the privilege it was on the verge of a great revolution. The House of Burgesses again elected its own governor. He was a man from the people, and his name was Patrick Henry.

3. As to commerce, they enjoyed free trade as distinctly provided in the settlement. The planters were unwise enough to confine themselves to the cultivation of one crop. It was as hard to persuade them to plant anything but tobacco, as it has been to induce the Southern farmer to plant anything but cotton. Their prosperity, therefore, depended on the price of tobacco, and the price

of tobacco depended on an unobstructed admission to the markets of the world. "Free trade in the widest sense of the term, if not absolutely essential to the prosperity of the Virginian, was at least highly promotive of his welfare." (Bruce's Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. I, p. 345.) As soon as the Virginia trade became of appreciable value, there began schemes on the part of the mother country to monopolize this trade. All sorts of plans were proposed and attempted by which to require the planters to ship their tobacco only in English vessels and to English merchants. All sorts of counter schemes were devised by planters and Dutch traders, even to smuggling, to prevent the English monopoly. In 1651, six months before the settlement between the Colony and the Commonwealth, Parliament passed the first of the odious acts of navigation. This provided that all goods of Asia, America or Africa should be introduced into England only in English vessels. This was especially aimed at the Dutch carrying trade, and finally precipitated war with that country. But before the act could be put into effect Virginia surrendered to the commissioners of Parliament, and the commissioners who were men in sympathy with the needs of the planters, Bennett and Claiborne themselves being large planters, very readily granted the rights of free trade.

The existence of the rigid navigation act gave frequent occasion to English traders to attempt to infringe Virginia's right to free trade, but from beginning to end of Puritan rule, the local courts and House of Burgesses held stiffly for this guaranteed right. (Hening I, p. 413.) In 1652, Walter Chiles loaded his ship from the Eastern shore, with intent of sailing to Brazil. Richard Husband, a ship-master, seized his vessel and cargo. Chiles appealed to the local court, alleging that the absolute right of free trade had been conferred on the people of the colony. This reason was admitted to be just and sound, and Husband required to restore the ship and car-

go. (Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia*, page 350.) In 1660, such was the interference with this right by masters of English vessels, that the Assembly found it necessary to reaffirm their right, and passed a law to protect foreign traders. The act compelled every master of a vessel entering Virginia waters to give a heavy bond not to molest any person in trading in conformity with the colonial law. (Hening I, p. 535.) The Assembly, however, did show some deference to the English act of navigation by imposing a special tax on tobacco exported in foreign bottoms and not destined for English markets.

Whatever privileges of free trade were enjoyed during this time were entirely swept away after the restoration. One of the first laws under Charles II was a still more rigid navigation act, both as to exports and imports, and it bore with great heaviness on the Virginia planters. This was among the irritating causes that fanned the flame of Bacon's rebellion in 1676, and the same sort of restrictive legislation produced the revolution of 1776.

4. As to religion they enjoyed a large freedom. It will be remembered that under the Berkley administration, during the decade preceding the Cromwellian rule there was severe persecution of the Puritans. It will also be remembered that according to the terms of settlement by the Puritan commissioners it was permitted that the book of common prayer might be used for one year, with reference to the consent of the major part of the parish. (Hening I, p. 364.) This limitation to one year was never enforced, and there is every evidence that during the Puritan administration there was much freedom in matters of conscience. There was but little legislation on religion, and this is itself favorable to liberty. The legislation we do find is also in the right direction. There is a quaint law belonging to this time in which a reward of 20 pounds sterling is offered for importing a good minister into the country. It is not specified whether he is to be Puritan or Churchman, and only indicates that ministerial services were at a premium. While Puritan rule

is at high tide, the House of Burgesses in 1657 frames a full revision of the entire colonial code, in 131 acts. The first three acts of this code are upon religion and morals. The first act is headed, "Church Government Settled," and I quote its first paragraph: "Be it enacted by this present Grand Assembly concerning Church Government, that all matters concerning the vestry, their agreements with their ministers, touching the church wardens, the poor and other things concerning the parishes and parishoners, be referred to their own ordering and disposing, from time to time as they shall think fit." (Hening I, p. 433.) The second act is against drunkenness and other immoralities, and prescribes heavy penalties. The third is a rigid Sabbath law with penalty for desecration. It also enjoins the church officers to take care that the people do repair to their several churches on each Lord's day, but for non-attendance there is affixed no penalty, as in earlier colonial law.

Credit for this large liberty of conscience may be due in part to the fact that while there was Puritan ascendancy in the government, the large majority of the people still believed in the Book of Common Prayer. Persecution would therefore be a difficult task, and these two influences would make an easy compromise in favor of religious liberty. But large credit is due, and ought to be accorded, to that type of Puritanism which was impersonated in Virginia in the character of Richard Bennett.

Mr. Campbell is the most accurate and fairminded of the historians on the colonial period. These characteristics of Puritan rule which I have thus elaborated, he clearly sets forth in a paragraph as follows: "The administration of the colonial government of the Commonwealth of England, was judicious and beneficent; the people were free, harmonious, and prosperous. During this interval she enjoyed free trade, legislative independence, civil and religious freedom, republican institutions and internal peace. The governors, Bennett and Diggs and Matthews, by their patriotic virtues, enjoyed the con-

fidence, affection and respect of the people. No extravagance, rapacity, corruption, or extortion was charged against their administration; intolerance and persecution were unknown. But rapine, corruption, extortion, intolerance and persecution were all soon to be revived under the restored dynasty of the Stuarts." (Campbell, p. 242.)

The transition from Puritan rule back to Cavalier supremacy is an interesting phase of our subject. The death of Gov. Matthews in 1659, and the resignation of Richard Cromwell the same year, left Virginia without Governor and England without a ruler. Then it was that Virginia's Assembly called Berkley from his retirement, and elected him governor. The stories so long current for history, that Berkley raised the royal flag and proclaimed Charles II king, before ever he was so recognized in England, contradicts every official document of the times. He accepted his authority from the House of Burgesses exactly as did Richard Bennett. He issued writs only in the name of the Assembly, and not until he received his commission from Charles II did he raise the royal standard. To account for Berkley's election by the Assembly, we have only to remember that during Cromwell's rule in England many Cavaliers emigrated to Virginia, and that here as in England, there was, after Oliver Cromwell's death, a reaction to royalty. By actual count I find that of the 43 Burgesses enrolled in 1659-60, and who elected Berkley, only 13 were names returned from the previous year. Evidently the Cavalier is again in the ascendency. But there is still recognition of the Puritans, for the name of Richard Bennett stands first in the new council.

A concluding query claims our attention. Have there been any abiding influences flowing from this Puritan element in colonial Virginia? I think we may safely agree that the Episcopal Church has itself felt the contact in some degree. I have mentioned that there were Puritans of a mild type who never separated themselves from

the established church. I have now to record that after the restoration, it seems that many of the Puritans gradually yielded to conformity. The Episcopal Church, absorbing this element, would feel its influence. There was no bishop in Virginia until after the Revolutionary War, and not even a commissary of the Bishop of London until near the close of the seventeenth century. The sentiment of the people, therefore, controlled the forms of worship, and a spirit of moderate Puritanism continued to dominate both clergy and laity. (Latané, p. 63.) In 1724, 75 years after Puritan rule, Rev. Hugh Jones, writing of his own times, tells us that there were alterations and omissions in the liturgy, that for a long time surplices had fallen into disuse and could be introduced only with difficulty, that the people were accustomed to receive the communion in their seats, and it was no easy matter to bring them to the Lord's table decently upon their knees. (Present State of Virginia, p. 69.) It was many years before these things could be corrected in the diocese of Virginia, and it is still recognized that in this State the Episcopal Church is extremely low-church. I take it that one of the factors to account for this conservatism may be found in the early Puritanism of the colony.

I think that we might also agree that Puritanism had a part in that undercurrent of democracy that now and then manifested itself throughout colonial times, and finally gave the world the model republic. I give it as my conviction that the blending of what was best in the two opposing characters, Cavalier and Puritan, has produced in Virginia a noble type of manhood. There was not only the contact of mind and life, but the power of mingled blood. In the veins of many a Virginian today there is blended the Puritan with the Cavalier blood. This is not a fancy. It rests upon genealogical tables. Annie Bennett, the daughter of Richard Bennett, the staunch Puritan, married Theodoric Bland of Westover. (R. A. Brock, *Virginia and Virginians.*) To this union may be traced the honored Virginia names of Harrison, Randolph and

Lee. In as much as the Lees of Virginia are the direct descendents of Richard Bennett, is it too much to say that the blending of the blood of Puritan and Cavalier has, on Virginia soil, found fruitage in the noblest type of Christian manhood the world has ever seen? Is it too much to say that the Puritanism we find in colonial Virginia is one of the factors that has given to the world, "the true Virginia gentleman?"