

The Messenger



*“Consider the lilies
how they grow:
they toil not, they spin not;
and yet I say unto you,
that Solomon in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.”*

Luke 12:27

THIS ISSUE

- 2 Church News
- 3 A Good Custom
- 4 Puritans in Brazil?
- 6 Reflections On Synod 2007
- 9 Gleanings From The Churches
- 10 Introducing the Murray Family
- 11 Scottish Heritage (8)
- 14 Free Church of Scotland
- 16 News Notes & Comments
- 18 Youth Page
- 20 Announcements

The Official Publication of the Free Reformed Churches



Puritans in Brazil?

Brazil - A Vast Country

Brazil is a nation about the size of the USA with a population of close to 200 million people. While predominantly Roman Catholic, there is also a fast growing evangelical constituency consisting of Pentecostals and Presbyterians, as well as numerous sects and cults. Last but not least, there is also a small but steadily increasing number of Reformed-Puritan Christians. You won't find the latter category listed in any government or even church directories. But they are there. We have met them. We have worshipped with them. We have preached and lectured to them, thanking and praising the Lord for what He is evidently doing among them.

An Attractive Invitation

Earlier this year, I received an invitation via Dr. Beeke of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary to join him and Rev. Sherman Ishbell of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) to give a series of lectures on Puritan theology at the 16th Reformed Puritan Symposium, an annual conference sponsored by the Reformed Puritan Project. I gladly accepted this invitation and together with my wife, Ricky, we left for Brazil on June 21 and spent three weeks in that beautiful country.

The conferences were held at two locations, the first in Belem in the north, where the mighty Amazon River empties into



the Atlantic Ocean. The Belem conference was hosted by the John Knox Presbyterian Church, whose pastor, Paulo Anglada, has been greatly used by the Lord to build this church from a handful of converts to a thriving congregation numbering about 200. An interesting detail is that this minister obtained his ThM degree at the University of Potchefstroom in South Africa under the direction of Prof. L. Floor, formerly a minister in our sister churches in the Netherlands. The second conference was held in Maragogi, in a hotel on the Atlantic Coast about 130 kilometres south of Recife.

The Puritan Project

The Puritan Project was born out of a concern for the purity of the church, particularly the Presbyterian Church, a denomination of about 800,000 members. This church, planted in Brazil in the 1850s by missionaries from the Presbyterian Church in the USA, never became very strong in Reformed doctrine and life. Although officially subscribing to the Westminster Standards, the Brazilian Presbyterian Church was from the beginning infected by certain liberal and Arminian errors, which were never adequately dealt with and corrected. As a result, the denomination continued to decline theologically and ethically to the point where by the end of the 20th century, true Reformed preaching and vital godliness had become the exception rather than the rule.

This sad situation prompted a number of concerned members to address what they regarded as a spiritual crisis in their denomination. Led by Dr. Manoel Canuto, a leading surgeon in his field (at whose home we stayed several days) and others, a committee was formed to organize the *Projeto Puritanos* (Puritan Project). Its purpose was to promote the Reformed/Puritan faith within the Presbyterian and Evangelical community.

The Justification for this Project

In a brochure, translated from the Portuguese,

we read the following explanation why this project was launched. The Puritan Project proposes 1) to spread the Reformed faith; 2) to make the Brazilian evangelical community aware of how far they have drifted from the Reformed doctrines; 3) to awaken evangelical leaders to the importance of these doctrines for Christian growth and the growth of the kingdom of God by emphasizing the sovereignty of God over His creation and the salvation of sinners; 4) to revive in our day the Reformed faith as practiced by the Christian communities during the golden age of the church and preached by the principal Protestant leaders of the past; 5) to illustrate the need of a reformation in the Brazilian church today, causing her to always turn to biblical truths, thereby making the Reformed watchword a reality: "The Church Reformed and always reforming."

Elaborating on why they took this action, the authors state that for several generations the doctrinal truths of the Reformation and the spiritual fervour and balance that adorned these truths have been disappearing from the evangelical Brazilian scene. Very little has been seen of the Reformed doctrine in Brazil in its experiential and practical form. The lack of knowledge of biblical, doctrinal truth that was rediscovered by the Protestant Reformation has resulted in a twisted liturgy that is more concerned with pleasing human feelings than pleasing God and is far from the regulative principle of worship as outlined in the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Worship services today reflect a strong Pentecostal influence, are without biblical foundation or warrant and are pragmatic, geared to the emotions and far from what the apostle Paul meant when he said, "Let all things be done decently and in good order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

Cooperation of Presbyterians and Reformed

Whether all these accusations are true we are not in a position to verify. But the people we



talked to seemed very sincere and we were all the more confirmed in our positive assessment of the Puritan Project when we met a missionary from the Canadian Reformed Church, Rev. Ken Wieske, who serves a number of churches and preaching stations in the Recife area. Pastor Wieske supports the Puritan Project and he has seen many lives changed through the Reformed and Puritan literature that has been made available in recent years. Although he represents the more continental Reformed approach to worship, which differs in some ways from the Presbyterian view, especially when it comes to the regulative principle, there are many areas in which the two can and do work together. For instance, missionary Wieske was present at both conferences and served as translator of many of the lectures, as he is fluent in Portuguese. In his church, which we attended, they enthusiastically and loudly sing psalms (using the Genevan tunes with a syncopated rhythm) and hymns, while in some of the Puritan Project congregations they sing only psalms a capella.

Evaluation

Although we are unable to evaluate the condition of the Presbyterian churches in Brazil, the fact remains that the impact of the Puritan Project is considerable. Many Reformed and Puritan works have been translated into Portuguese and are readily available in book stores. It was exciting to see rows upon rows of Calvin's Institutes and Hendriksen's commentaries, as well as Owen, Sibbes, Spurgeon, R.C. Sproul, Lloyd-Jones and many more authors, which were not only being perused but also purchased. Both in the John Knox Presbyterian bookstore affiliated with the church in Belem and at the conference in the Maragogi hotel we saw adults as well as young people carrying armfuls of books. We even saw a 10-year old clutching a copy of Johannes Vos' commentary on the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession, which had recently been translated into Portuguese.

We heard of lives that were changed radically as a result of reading this kind of God-honouring literature. These books are also finding their way into evangelical, Pentecostal and other charismatic circles. Especially the Pentecostals are interested in the Puritans because they offer the true biblical experiential religion they are looking for and have not been able to find in their own churches. Some of them are now pastors starting new churches in various places in Brazil.

You may wonder how we learned all this, seeing that we did not understand the Portuguese language. Well, all along, for months prior to our trip, Mr. Olin Coleman communicated with us by email and phone to arrange all the details of our trip (accommodations and 11 different air plane trips to and in Brazil). Olin Coleman is a former missionary and seminary teacher in Brazil. Although in his mid-seventies and now living in the United States with his wife, he loves Brazil and the Puritan Project. He knows the language, the country and the culture and is a close friend of Dr. Canuta and his wife (also a medical doctor). Olin accompanied us most of the time, staying with us at various places of accommodation, explaining strange customs and being a wonderful wise and Christian friend for us.



Success Comes at a Price

It is to be expected that the spread of Reformed and Puritan literature comes at a price. The Puritan Project is welcomed by many but it also has its detractors. Many in the Presbyterian and evangelical churches feel threatened by doctrines that emphasize man's total depravity and his absolute dependence on God's grace for salvation. As a result, some of the leaders of the Puritan project have been disciplined and others ostracized by their churches. This happened to Dr. Manoel Canuto. He was placed under church discipline as an elder, and although the General Assembly revoked the local council's decision, forcing it to lift the censure, he was made to feel most unwelcome and transferred his membership to another Presbyterian church, more sympathetic to the Puritan Project.

Another example is that of pastor Josafa Vasconcelos, his wife and family of young adults. This godly servant of God spent the last few days of our stay in Brazil with us, showing us some of the sights of the beautiful and historic city of Salvador. He told us what price he had to pay for his Puritan convictions. About 15 years ago he was a well-known evangelist, preaching to upwards of 60,000 people in sport stadiums. His message during that time was quite Arminian and it always ended with an altar call, asking people to "make a decision for Christ." After some time he came to see how wrong his approach to evangelism was because he noticed that very few if any of his "converts" showed evidence of a changed life. After much prayer, searching the Scriptures and contact with Puritan-minded Christians, the Lord taught him the true way of salvation. Immediately his messages changed and people began to notice the new emphasis and did not like what they heard. Almost overnight he lost many friends, fame and fortune and had to start over again, preaching to very small groups, which led to the institution of a congregation where true biblical preaching is welcome. We spent a Lord's day in this church and were invited to bring the Word at both services (pastor Josafa translating) and Ricky later speaking to the women.

Many Impressions

We left Brazil with many impressions, most of them positive. The people we met were very friendly and helpful, loved to talk and socialize (even if we had to use sign language) and made us feel very welcome and appreciated. We were most amazed, however, to see how God is at work in that vast country. True, it is only a small beginning but one that has great potential for growth. Just as the Banner of Truth Trust in England started reprinting and publishing Reformed and Puritan literature in the 1950s, one title at a time, resulting eventually in a flood of books that were distributed all over the English speaking world, so now many of those same works are being made available in Portuguese, Spanish and many other languages. Surely, the Lord is involved in all of this! It is His truth and it will stand forever. May He continue to bless the Puritan Project in Brazil and similar projects around the world so that many may come to a saving knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. Let us pray that God's promise that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9), may soon be fulfilled.

We visited Brazil from June 22 to July 13, both of us speaking to people who were interested in the Puritans. It was an incredible experience."

