

Year at a Glance	
Nov 9-Dec 14	Early Church Age
Jan 4-Feb 8	Post-Nicene Age
Feb 15-Mar 22	Medieval Age
Mar 29-May 10	Reformation Age
May 17-May 31	Great Awakening to Today

Reformation Age	
Mar 29	"Martin Luther and Protestantism" (chapter 24)
Apr 5	Easter (no class)
Apr 12	"John Calvin" (chapter 26)
Apr 19	"The Anabaptists" (chapter 25)
Apr 26	"The Church of England" (chapter 27)
May 3	"The Catholic Reformation/America and Asia" (chapters 28-29)
May 10	"Puritanism/Denominations" (chapter 30-31)

What happens when a movement that seems defeated suddenly stages a dramatic comeback? That question framed last week's lesson as we explored the **Counter-Reformation—the Roman Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation**—and how, after an early Protestant "blowout," Catholicism regained strength and momentum in the sixteenth century.

We began by looking at the **rise of the Jesuits**, especially through the life of **Ignatius of Loyola**. A former soldier turned "soldier of the church," Loyola founded the Society of Jesus, a highly disciplined and educated order marked by **absolute obedience to the Catholic Church**. Their influence spread through rigorous training, education, and **global missions**, led by figures like Francis **Xavier**. At the same time, we noted concerns about their methods, particularly **casuistry**, which often blurred moral clarity by focusing on exceptions rather than straightforward obedience. Alongside the Jesuits, Catholic **mystics** like **Teresa of Ávila** highlighted an intense inward spirituality, though still shaped by a **theology of grace mixed with works and lacking assurance of salvation**.

We then turned to the role of the papacy and the long-delayed but decisive Council of Trent (1545–1564). Though early reform efforts were weak, **Pope Paul III** eventually helped launch meaningful change, especially after the sobering impact of the **Sack of Rome**. The **Council of Trent** became the defining moment of the Counter-Reformation, solidifying Catholic doctrine and practice for centuries to come. **It reaffirmed papal authority, clarified the Catholic position on Scripture and tradition, and set forth a view of justification that combined faith and works**. In response, Protestant leaders like Calvin and Chemnitz clearly articulated the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, grounded in the imputed righteousness of Christ.

We did not get to the second half of the lesson on "Opening the Rock"—the **expansion of Catholic missions into America and Asia**—but I encouraged you to read through that section on your own, as it raises important questions about missions, culture, and the danger of confusing the gospel with political or cultural power.

The Reformation Age

“Puritanism and Denominations”¹

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Prayer from Oliver Cromwell: “Lord, though I am a miserable and wretched creature, I am in covenant with You through grace, and I may, I will, come to You for Your people. Pray for the people of England. Teach those who look too much on Your instruments to depend more on Yourself. Let people not look to me and the Parliament but to You as their guide and their help.”

The **Puritans longed for a pure church**, a holy nation, and a society governed by the Word of God. They crossed oceans, suffered imprisonment, challenged kings, and preached tirelessly because they believed England and the world could be transformed through biblical truth.

Yet one of the great **ironies** of church history is this: **the very movement that sought religious purity helped give rise to denominational Christianity**. The Puritans did not intend to create a world filled with Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, and countless denominations. They wanted one purified church. **But their commitment to Scripture, conscience, conversion, and reform unintentionally opened the door to increasing religious diversity.**

Few movements in church history are more **misunderstood** than Puritanism. Today the word “Puritan” often describes someone rigid, joyless, judgmental, or opposed to pleasure. **H. L. Mencken famously defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”**

C. S. Lewis observed in *The Screwtape Letters* that one of Satan’s great victories was turning the word “Puritan” into a term of mockery. Lewis has **Screwtape** say: “The value we have given to that word [‘Puritan’] is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years. By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life.”

But the historical Puritans were **far more complex than modern caricatures suggest**. **J.I. Packer** liked to speak of **“the cheerful old Puritans”** to challenge the stereotype that they were merely gloomy legalists. In reality, the Puritans believed deeply in joy, assurance, family worship, friendship, beauty, and delight in Christ—even while taking sin and holiness with profound seriousness.

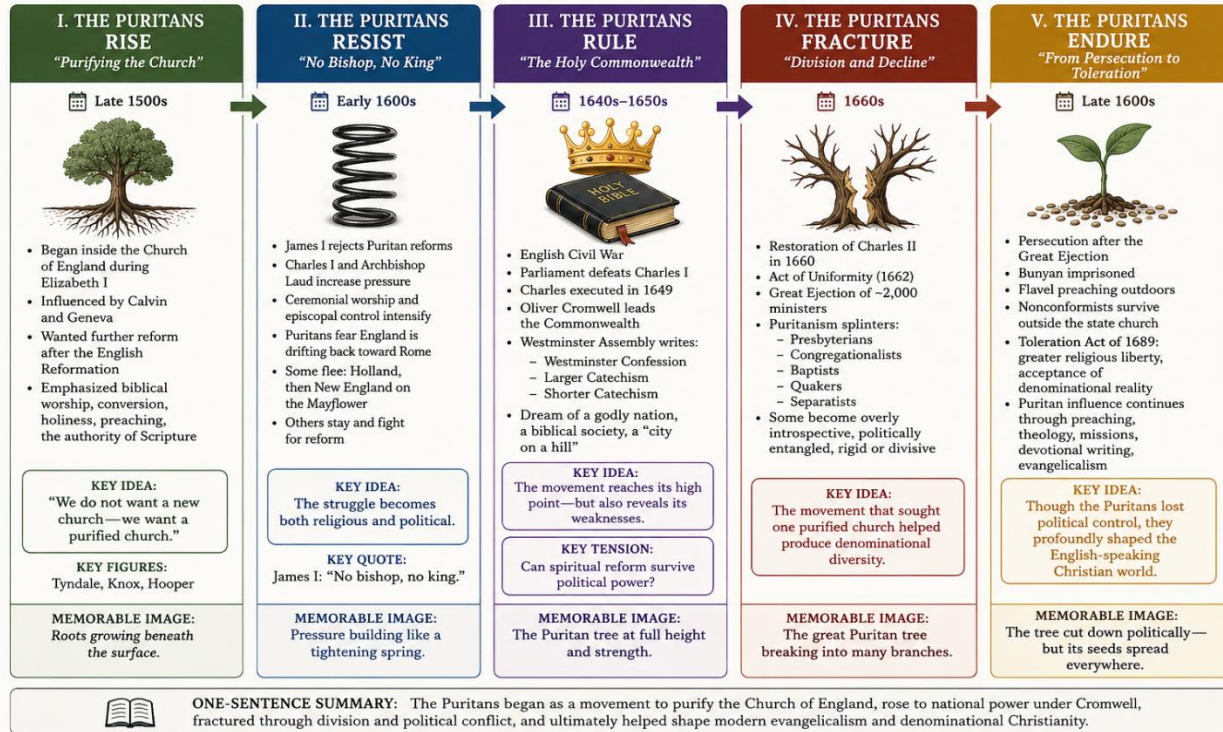
The Puritans produced some of the greatest pastors, theologians, evangelists, writers, and missionaries in church history. Men like Richard Baxter, John Owen, **John Bunyan**, **John Flavel**, Thomas Goodwin, and John Milton still influence Christians today. **Yet the Puritan story is also one of tension and failure.** Their movement struggled with political power, internal division, and the relationship between religious conviction and religious liberty. Their legacy ultimately helped shape the denominational world in which we now live.

Thesis: Puritanism was a passionate movement for biblical holiness, heartfelt Christianity, and national reform whose strengths and failures helped shape both modern evangelicalism and denominational Christianity.

¹ The lesson is based partially upon Bruce Shelley and David Calhoun.

THE STORY OF ENGLISH PURITANISM

“From Reform to Revolution to Fragmentation”



I. The Puritans Desired a Church Governed by Scripture

A. The Puritans arose within the Church of England

The Puritan movement developed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I after the English Reformation. The Puritans were not initially separatists. Most of them remained within the Church of England and sought to “purify” it from remaining Roman Catholic influences.

They believed the English Reformation had begun well under Edward VI but had stopped short of full biblical reform.

Many early Puritans had spent time in **Geneva during the reign of Bloody Mary. There they were deeply influenced by John Calvin and the Reformed movement.** They returned convinced that Scripture should govern every area of life, worship [*regulative principle*], and church government.

John Hooper — An early English reformer and Marian martyr whose opposition to ceremonial vestments and insistence on biblical simplicity in worship helped foreshadow later Puritan convictions.

B. The Puritans were “people of the Book”

The Puritans loved Scripture. They especially cherished the **Geneva Bible**, with its study notes, verse divisions, and Calvinistic theology. They believed the Bible gave guidance not only for salvation but also for worship, church government, family life, and society.

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.”

The Puritans believed that true Christianity required more than outward religion. **A person must experience genuine conversion.**

They emphasized:

- New birth
- Repentance
- Faith in Christ
- Personal holiness
- The work of the Holy Spirit
- Heart religion

Puritan preaching was aimed not merely at the head but at the heart.

C. The Puritans believed God’s people should shape society

The Puritans did not believe Christianity was merely private.

They believed **nations themselves should honor God.**

When **John Cotton** preached to the Puritan settlers sailing to New England in 1630, he **compared them to Israel** entering the Promised Land. They believed they were building a “city on a hill,” a society governed by biblical truth.

Matthew 5:14 You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

The Puritans believed the Gospel should shape families, churches, education, government, morality, worship, and culture.

D. Strengths of Puritanism

The Puritans left behind remarkable strengths that still benefit the church today.

1. Seriousness about holiness

Hebrews 12:14 “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

2. Rich theological depth
3. Passionate preaching
4. Careful pastoral ministry
5. Commitment to family worship
6. Emphasis on conversion and assurance
7. A comprehensive Christian worldview

J. I. Packer famously called them “the redwoods of the Christian life.”

II. The Puritans Struggled Against Kings and Religious

A. Conflict with the monarchy

The Puritans increasingly clashed with English monarchs.

James I rejected Puritan reforms at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604.

In 1603, roughly one thousand Puritan ministers presented James I with the “**Millenary Petition**,” hoping the new king would further reform the Church of England according to Scripture.

James considered some of their requests at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, but ultimately rejected most Puritan reforms. He famously defended the divine right of kings and preferred rule through bishops.

When Puritans pushed for further reform, James responded: “No bishop, no king,” meaning that if the authority of bishops in the church was removed, the authority of the king in the nation would eventually be weakened as well.

Charles I intensified the conflict.

Under **Archbishop William Laud**, the Church of England moved toward a more ceremonial and authoritarian form of worship.

Puritans objected to ceremonial worship, stained glass and crucifixes, altars, priestly garments, mandatory prayer book worship, and episcopal control.

The Puritans feared England was drifting back toward Roman Catholicism.

B. Some Puritans separated entirely

Not all Puritans stayed within the Church of England. Some became **Separatists**.

These believers concluded the Church of England was beyond reform.

Some groups fled to Holland for religious freedom. From there, some eventually sailed to America aboard the **Mayflower in 1620**.

Others moved toward believer's baptism and eventually formed the **first English Baptist churches**.

This illustrates an important reality: The Puritans' commitment to Scripture sometimes pushed them toward increasing fragmentation.

Once Scripture and conscience became supreme, believers often arrived at different conclusions.

C. The Puritans eventually went to war

Conflict between Parliament and King Charles I erupted into the **English Civil War**.

Oliver Cromwell emerged as one of the great military leaders of the age. Cromwell's "**Ironsides**" believed they were fighting not merely a political battle but a holy cause.



Oliver Cromwell remains one of the most controversial men in English history. To some he was a defender of liberty and Protestantism; to others, a religious fanatic and military dictator. Yet even critics often acknowledged his sincerity. When a painter tried to flatter Cromwell by softening his appearance, Cromwell reportedly replied, "**Paint me warts and all.**" He did not want an idealized portrait.

That honesty and seriousness reflected much of the Puritan spirit itself—earnest, flawed, intense, and deeply convinced that England stood under the authority of God.

The Puritans saw themselves as defending biblical truth, Protestantism, Parliament, religious reform, and liberty from tyranny.

The Westminster Assembly met during this period and produced **the Westminster Confession of Faith**, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. These documents remain foundational for many Reformed churches today.

D. The danger of mixing political power with spiritual mission

The Puritans desired to honor Christ in society, but they often struggled to distinguish spiritual authority from political power.

Eventually **King Charles I was executed in 1649**. This shocked much of England.

Many began to view the Puritans not as reformers but as dangerous religious fanatics.

The Puritans had difficulty managing power once they possessed it. David Calhoun observes that they were often better in opposition than in authority.

This remains a warning to Christians today.

John 18:36 - Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

III. The Puritan Experiment Produced Both Great _____ and Serious _____

A. Puritanism produced extraordinary spiritual fruit. The Puritans gave the church:

- **Rich theology** — The Puritans produced theological works like the Westminster Confession of Faith and John Owen's writings on sin, salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- **Powerful preaching** — Preachers like Richard Baxter and Thomas Watson preached verse-by-verse sermons that called people to repentance, holiness, and faith in Christ.
- **Evangelistic zeal** — Puritans regularly urged people to examine whether they had truly been converted and pleaded with unbelievers to come to Christ.
- **Deep devotional writing** — Books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Jeremiah Burroughs' *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* helped believers grow spiritually.
- **Pastoral wisdom** — Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* taught ministers how to lovingly shepherd and personally disciple their people.
- **Missions vision** — Puritans such as John Eliot preached the Gospel to Native Americans and translated the Bible into Algonquin.
- **Christian education** — The Puritans founded Harvard College in 1636 to train ministers and promote a thoroughly Christian education.

Consider some of the great Puritan figures:

- **Richard Baxter** — The faithful pastor of Kidderminster, Baxter became known for practical pastoral ministry and spiritual counsel. He urged pastors to preach "as a dying man to dying men" and warned ministers that it is possible to spend one's life "gathering manna for others" without feeding one's own soul. His books, especially *The Reformed Pastor*, deeply shaped Protestant pastoral ministry.

- **John Owen** — Often regarded as the greatest English theologian of the Puritan era, Owen combined profound theological depth with serious concern for holiness and assurance. His writings on sin, the atonement, and communion with God remain influential today. Owen famously warned believers: “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.”
- **John Bunyan** — A poor tinker from Bedford who spent years imprisoned for unauthorized preaching, Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the most influential Christian books ever written outside the Bible. Through the journey of “Christian,” Bunyan portrayed the Christian life as a pilgrimage filled with temptation, suffering, perseverance, and grace.
- **Thomas Goodwin** — Sometimes called “the great doctor of the heart,” Goodwin wrote with unusual warmth about Christ’s compassion toward weak and struggling believers. In works like *The Heart of Christ in Heaven Toward Sinners on Earth*, he emphasized the tenderness, mercy, and sympathy of Christ toward His people, helping balance the more severe and introspective tendencies found in some Puritan writers.
- **John Flavel** — Known as “the seamen’s preacher,” Flavel faithfully ministered to sailors and coastal communities in Dartmouth. After being ejected from his church in 1662, he continued preaching secretly, sometimes outdoors near the harbor to gathered seamen. Flavel believed that “a crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ.”
- **John Milton** — The great Puritan poet and scholar, Milton authored *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. His writings combined immense literary brilliance with deep reflection on sin, temptation, Satan, and the purposes of God. Though not always theologically precise, Milton’s imagination and command of language profoundly shaped English literature.

The Puritans profoundly shaped evangelical Christianity, Reformed theology, American culture, education, missions, and family worship.

B. Yet Puritanism also fractured internally

Puritanism eventually divided into multiple groups: Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Separatists, Independents

Their shared commitment to Scripture did not eliminate disagreement.

Instead, differing interpretations multiplied.

This exposed an important reality: Even sincere Christians committed to biblical authority will disagree on important matters.

C. Religious conformity proved impossible to maintain

The Puritans originally wanted a unified Christian society. But enforcing uniformity became increasingly difficult.

In both England and America, diversity expanded.

The American colonies especially became home to: Puritans, Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Catholics, Dutch Reformed believers, Lutherans

Eventually many concluded that the cost of enforcing religious conformity was simply too high.

Wars, persecution, imprisonment, and political conflict exhausted Europe.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) began largely as a conflict between Protestant and Catholic powers within the Holy Roman Empire, but it eventually grew into one of the most destructive wars in European history. Entire regions of Germany were devastated by warfare, famine, disease, and political chaos. Millions died, and many Europeans became exhausted by generations of religious conflict and attempts to enforce religious uniformity.

The war ended with the **Peace of Westphalia in 1648**. While it did not create modern religious freedom in the full sense, it marked an important turning point. Increasingly, European leaders recognized that Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Protestants would have to coexist despite their theological differences. **The dream of a completely unified Christian Europe under one confession was fading, and the foundations for the modern denominational world were beginning to emerge.**

In England, this gradual shift appeared in the **Toleration Act of 1689**, passed after the Glorious Revolution. While the Church of England remained the established church, many Protestant dissenters such as Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians were now permitted to worship legally outside the state church. Full religious equality did not yet exist, but the act marked an important step away from enforced religious uniformity and toward the denominational world that would increasingly characterize Protestant Christianity.

D. Some Puritans drifted toward excessive introspection and legalism

In their desire to oppose antinomianism and promote holiness, **some Puritans placed heavy emphasis on self-examination and evidences of conversion**. At times, believers could become so focused on searching for signs of genuine faith that they struggled to rest fully in Christ and enjoy assurance of salvation. Richard **Baxter** especially moved in a **neonomian** direction, stressing sincere obedience

in ways that risked blurring the distinction between justification and sanctification and clouding assurance.

The Puritans were often profoundly helpful in exposing sin and calling Christians to holiness, yet some writers could become so searching and demanding that tender consciences were left discouraged rather than comforted. David Calhoun quotes the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian **John Duncan**, who joked after reading the **Puritan Thomas Shepard**, “**I wish I was as good as one of his hypocrites.**” Even admirers of the Puritans recognized this tendency toward excessive introspection.

Yet even here, the Puritans remind us of an important truth modern Christianity often forgets: saving faith produces a transformed life. It is difficult not to admire their seriousness about God. They may at times have overcorrected, but they genuinely believed eternity was real, sin was deadly, and holiness mattered.

The tensions within later Puritanism did not disappear after the seventeenth century. In **Scotland**, ministers like **Thomas Boston** and the “**Marrow Brethren**” fought to preserve the freeness of the Gospel against forms of legalism and neonomianism that had begun influencing parts of Reformed theology. Their controversy showed that Protestants continued wrestling with how to preach both holiness and free grace.

Out of these divisions and conflicts, a new understanding of **denominational** Christianity gradually emerged.

IV. Puritanism Helped Give Rise to _____ Christianity

A. The rise of denominations was not originally viewed positively²

Most Christians throughout history assumed one nation should have one church.

Both Catholics and Reformers believed religious unity was essential to social stability.

The Reformers themselves often suppressed dissent.

The modern idea of widespread denominational diversity would have shocked most sixteenth-century Christians.

B. Yet Puritan ideas unintentionally opened the door

Several Puritan convictions helped prepare the way for denominationalism.

1. Scripture above church tradition

² See [Sinclair Ferguson's "address" on "The Whole Christ."](#)

If Scripture alone is supreme, believers will continually examine and challenge church structures.

2. Conscience matters

Christians increasingly insisted they must obey God rather than merely human authority.

Acts 5:29 - "But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'"

3. True Christianity is inward before it is institutional

The Puritans emphasized regeneration and genuine faith.

They increasingly distinguished between **the true spiritual church** and **external institutions**.

4. No church perfectly represents Christ

This idea became foundational to denominational thinking.

The church universal could exist even when Christians belonged to differing structures.

C. The denominational model/theory emerged

Eventually Christians developed the concept of denominations.

A denomination was understood not as the whole church but as one branch of the larger body of Christ.

This differed from sectarianism. A sect says: "We **alone** are **the true church**."

Denominationalism says: "We are **part** of the true church."

This was a major shift in Christian history.

D. The strengths and weaknesses of denominationalism

Strengths:

- Greater religious liberty
- Freedom of conscience
- Less persecution
- Cooperation across traditions
- Recognition that no church is perfect

Weaknesses:

- Endless fragmentation
- Consumer Christianity

- Weak ecclesiology
- Doctrinal confusion
- Loss of visible unity

1 Corinthians 1:10 - “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Christians today must wrestle honestly with both the blessings and dangers of denominational life.

V. _____ for the Church Today

A. We should **admire** the Puritans’ seriousness about God

The Puritans remind modern Christians that Christianity is not casual.

They took Scripture seriously, holiness seriously, worship seriously, sin seriously, heaven seriously, preaching seriously.

Modern evangelicalism often suffers from shallowness.

The Puritans challenge us to recover depth.

B. We should **avoid** their errors

The Puritans sometimes confused church and state, used political power unwisely, lacked charity toward fellow believers, became overly rigid, and divided unnecessarily.

Christians must balance conviction and humility, truth and love, holiness and grace, and courage and gentleness.

C. We should recognize that unity must be grounded in **truth**

True Christian unity cannot be built merely upon vague spirituality.

Ephesians 4:1 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Biblical unity requires shared truth, a shared Gospel, shared submission to Christ, and shared love for one another.

D. The church must continually **reform** itself according to Scripture

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda (“The church reformed, always reforming.”)

One of the lasting strengths of Puritanism was its desire for continual reform.

The church must always ask:

- Are we faithful to Scripture?
- Are we merely preserving tradition?
- Are we spiritually alive?
- Are we preaching the Gospel clearly?
- Are we pursuing holiness?

The Puritans were right to insist that external religion without genuine spiritual life is deadly.

Conclusion

The Puritans dreamed of building a pure church and a godly society. They crossed oceans, challenged kings, wrote theological masterpieces, preached Christ passionately, and sought to apply Scripture to every part of life. Yet one of the great ironies of history is that the movement most committed to religious purity helped produce the denominational diversity that now defines modern Christianity. Their commitment to Scripture, conscience, and conversion opened doors they never intended to open.

Still, the Puritans leave us with enduring lessons. They remind us that Christianity must be deeply biblical, centered on grace, serious about holiness, concerned for the heart, bold in public witness, careful with power, and humble about our own limitations. They warn us about the dangers of pride, division, legalism, and the misuse of political power, yet they also challenge the shallow and casual Christianity so common today. The Puritans were not perfect, but they were earnest believers who longed to honor Christ fully. And in an age that often treats God lightly, their seriousness about eternity, holiness, and the glory of Christ still speaks powerfully today.

The Puritans may not have built the pure society they envisioned, but they left behind a vision of serious, God-centered Christianity that still challenges the church today.

Next Week: “Aiming at the Foundations: The Cult of Reason” (chapter 32 in the 2nd Edition)

May 17	“The Cult of Reason” (chapters 31, <u>32</u> , 33)
May 24	“The Great Awakening” (chapters <u>34</u> , <u>35</u> , 36)
May 31	“A Christian America” (chapters 37, 38, <u>39</u>)