

What Is Puritanism?

The history, and differences, of English and American Puritanism

By Henry Bowden

Puritans was the name given in the 16th century to the more extreme Protestants within the Church of England who thought the English Reformation had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrines and structure of the church; they wanted to purify their national church by eliminating every shred of Catholic influence. In the 17th century many Puritans emigrated to the New World, where they sought to found a holy commonwealth in New England. Puritanism remained the dominant cultural force in that area into the 19th century.

English Puritanism

Associated exclusively with no single theology or definition of the church — although many were Calvinists — the English Puritans were known at first for their extremely critical attitude regarding the religious compromises made during the reign of Elizabeth I. Many of them were graduates of Cambridge University, and they became Anglican priests to make changes in their local churches. They encouraged direct personal religious experience, sincere moral conduct, and simple worship services. Worship was the area in which Puritans tried to change things most; their efforts in that direction were sustained by intense theological convictions and definite expectations about how seriously Christianity should be taken as the focus of human existence.

After James I became king of England in 1603, Puritan leaders asked him to grant several reforms. At the Hampton Court Conference (1604), however, he rejected most of their proposals, which included abolition of bishops. Puritanism, best expressed by William Ames and later by Richard Baxter, gained much popular support early in the 17th century. The government and the church hierarchy, however, especially under Archbishop William Laud, became increasingly repressive, causing many Puritans to emigrate. Those who remained formed a powerful element within the parliamentary party that defeated Charles I in the English Civil War. After the war the Puritans remained dominant in England until 1660, but they quarreled among themselves (Presbyterian dominance gave way to Independent, or congregational, control under Oliver Cromwell) and proved even more intolerant than the old hierarchy. The restoration of the monarchy (1660) also restored Anglicanism, and the Puritan clergy were expelled from the Church of England under the terms of the Act of Uniformity (1662). Thereafter English Puritans were classified as Nonconformists.

American Puritanism

Early in the 17th century some Puritan groups separated from the Church of England. Among these were the Pilgrims, who in 1620 founded Plymouth Colony. Ten years later, under the auspices of the Massachusetts Bay Company, the first major Puritan migration to New England

took place. The Puritans brought strong religious impulses to bear in all colonies north of Virginia, but New England was their stronghold, and the Congregationalist churches established there were able to perpetuate their viewpoint about a Christian society for more than 200 years.

Richard Mather and John Cotton provided clerical leadership in the dominant Puritan colony planted on Massachusetts Bay. Thomas Hooker was an example of those who settled new areas farther west according to traditional Puritan standards. Even though he broke with the authorities of the Massachusetts colony over questions of religious freedom, Roger Williams was also a true Puritan in his zeal for personal godliness and doctrinal correctness. Most of these men held ideas in the mainstream of Calvinistic thought. In addition to believing in the absolute sovereignty of God, the total depravity of man, and the complete dependence of human beings on divine grace for salvation, they stressed the importance of personal religious experience. These Puritans insisted that they, as God's elect, had the duty to direct national affairs according to God's will as revealed in the Bible. This union of church and state to form a holy commonwealth gave Puritanism direct and exclusive control over most colonial activity until commercial and political changes forced them to relinquish it at the end of the 17th century.

Because of its diffuse nature, when Puritanism began to decline in America is difficult to say. Some would hold that it lost its influence in New England by the early 18th century, but Jonathan Edwards and his able disciple Samuel Hopkins revived Puritan thought and kept it alive until 1800. Others would point to the gradual decline in power of Congregationalism, but Presbyterians under the leadership of Jonathan Dickinson and Baptists led by the example of Isaac Backus (1724–1806) revitalized Puritan ideals in several denominational forms through the 18th century.

During the whole colonial period Puritanism had direct impact on both religious thought and cultural patterns in America. In the 19th century its influence was indirect, but it can still be seen at work stressing the importance of education in religious leadership and demanding that religious motivations be tested by applying them to practical situations.

Henry Warner Bowden

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