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# A Brief Overview of the Puritan Movement

Nick Healey  
*Whitworth University*

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## A Brief Overview of the Puritan Movement

By Nick Healey

The term Puritan originated in sixteenth-century England, and it was initially a term of abuse towards nonconformist clergy in the Church of England because they insisted on the need to purify the Church. These nonconformists “preferred to think of themselves as the ‘godly’, because they sought to only live out divine precepts they had found in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> The ‘godly’ were zealous Protestants who lived a “distinctive and particularly intense variety of early modern Reformed Protestantism.”<sup>2</sup> The brand name given to the Puritans represented a particular “Protestant religiosity, social conduct, and politics.”<sup>3</sup>

Puritanism needs to be understood in light of four major aspects: chronology, ecclesiology, theology, and politics. Puritanism originated in England in the midst of the sixteenth-century English Reformation. The Puritans believed that Anglican Protestant churches were not fully reformed and so they wanted further reformation. Puritan ecclesiology was centered on the belief “that the Church of England had failed to advance the Protestant Reformation to a condition adequately attuned to the word of God.”<sup>4</sup> The Puritans wanted to correct this failure. The Puritan mission was to complete the reformation in England. For the Puritans, the testimonies of godly people in the church were more important than ceremonies and other marks of an excessively formal religion. The godly society that they strived for was similar to what was found in Calvin’s godly city of Geneva. Puritan thought was fundamentally shaped by Calvinist theology. “Most Puritans preached in common the basic tenets of Calvinist thought: human depravity, divine sovereignty, and predestination unto salvation.”<sup>5</sup> Puritan theology also drew from Luther because they affirmed his *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. They believed that “the Bible was the Christian’s only infallible authority.”<sup>6</sup> Puritan theology emphasized that the Puritans must live morally upright lives. Their theology was central to their morality and must not be seen as entirely separate.<sup>7</sup> Puritan theology also manifested itself in politics. In New England, “Puritan concern for the reform of personal lifestyle tended to extend into the realm of concern for the reform of both secular and ecclesiastical politics.”<sup>8</sup> The ultimate hope was that, “theological right might vindicate itself through political might.”<sup>9</sup>

The Puritan’s were definitely not complacent Christians; they kept themselves zealous by “insisting

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster, *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 428.

<sup>2</sup> John Coffey and Paul Chang-Ha Lim, *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Charles Pastoor and Galen K. Johnson, *Historical Dictionary of the Puritans* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Coffey and Lim, *Companion to Puritanism*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

on the need of a conversion experience in order to be truly Christian.”<sup>10</sup> Puritans understood the true nature of man to be thoroughly sinful and fallen, so they lived intense lives to combat the sinful nature of man. This intensity led the Puritans to ruthlessly examine their hearts so that they could live godly and simple lives. They lived out these godly lives as Congregationalists because they could keep the congregations more pure and simple than they could keep an institution like the Church of England.

The Puritans had a religious motivation for migrating from England to the new world. They were a “people of intense moral earnestness and great love for God.”<sup>11</sup> Out of this love they wanted to live in a place where they could worship God in every aspect of their life—which they were unable to do in England. “Willing to accept great sacrifices, they began their ‘errand into the wilderness’ for the glory of God and the extension of Christ’s kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> Puritanism may have been formed within the Church of England, but it was not contained within England. This essay will focus on the Puritan colonies within seventeenth-century New England.

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<sup>10</sup> Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 281.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing: Evangelism and Revivals in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*