

# The Puritans



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The Puritans were members of a religious reform movement known as Puritanism that arose within the Church of England in the late 16th century. They believed the Church of England was too similar to the Roman Catholic Church and should eliminate ceremonies and practices not rooted in the Bible.

Puritans felt that they had a direct covenant with God to enact these reforms. Under siege from Church and crown, certain groups of Puritans migrated to Northern English colonies in the New World in the 1620s and 1630s, laying the foundation for the religious, intellectual, and social order of New England. Aspects of Puritanism have reverberated throughout American life ever since.

## Puritans: A Definition

The roots of Puritanism are to be found in the beginnings of the English Reformation. The name “Puritans” (they were sometimes called “precisionists”) was a term of contempt assigned to the movement by its enemies. Although the epithet first emerged in the 1560s, the movement began in the 1530s, when King [Henry VIII](#) repudiated papal authority and transformed the Church of Rome into a state [Church of England](#). To Puritans, the Church of England retained too much of the liturgy and ritual of Roman Catholicism.

*Did you know? In keeping with their focus on the home, Puritan migration to the New World usually consisted of entire families, rather than the young, single men who comprised many other early European settlements.*

Well into the 16th century, many priests were barely literate and often very poor. Employment by more than one parish was common, so they moved often, preventing them from forming deep roots in their communities. Priests were immune to certain penalties of the civil law, further feeding anticlerical hostility and contributing to their isolation from the spiritual needs of the people.

# The Church of England

Through the reigns of the Protestant King Edward VI (1547-1553), who introduced the first vernacular prayer book, and the Catholic (1553-1558), who sent some dissenting clergymen to their deaths and others into exile, the Puritan movement—whether tolerated or suppressed—continued to grow. Some Puritans favored a presbyterian form of church organization; others, more radical, began to claim autonomy for individual congregations. Still others were content to remain within the structure of the national church, but set themselves against Catholic and episcopal authority.

As they gained strength, Puritans were portrayed by their enemies as hairsplitters who slavishly followed their Bibles as guides to daily life or hypocrites who cheated the very neighbors they judged inadequate Christians.

Yet the Puritan attack on the established church gained popular strength, especially in East Anglia and among the lawyers and merchants of London. The movement found wide support among these new professional classes, who saw in it a mirror for their growing discontent with economic restraints.

During the reign of Queen [Elizabeth I](#), an uneasy peace prevailed within English religious life, but the struggle over the tone and purpose of the church continued. Many men and women were more and more forced to contend with the dislocations—emotional as well as physical—that accompanied the beginnings of a market economy. Subsistence farmers were called upon to enter the world of production for profit. Under the rule of primogeniture, younger sons tended to enter the professions (especially the law) with increasing frequency and seek their livelihood in the burgeoning cities. The English countryside was plagued by scavengers, highwaymen and vagabonds—a newly visible class of the poor who strained the ancient charity laws and pressed upon the townsfolk new questions of social responsibility.

## Puritans in New England

In the early decades of the 17th century, some groups of worshipers began to separate themselves from the main body of their local parish church where preaching was inadequate and to engage an energetic “lecturer,” typically a young man with a fresh Cambridge degree, who was a lively speaker and steeped in reform theology. Some congregations went further, declared themselves separated from the national church, and remade themselves into communities of “visible saints,” withdrawn from the English City of Man into a self-proclaimed City of God.

One such faction was a group of separatist believers in the Yorkshire village of Scrooby, who, fearing for their safety, moved to Holland in 1608 and then, in 1620, to the place they called Plymouth in New England. We know them now as the Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock. A decade later, a larger, better-financed group, mostly from East Anglia, migrated to Massachusetts Bay. There, they set up gathered churches on much the same model as the transplanted church at Plymouth (with deacons, preaching elders, and, though not right away, a communion restricted to full church members, or “saints”).

## Differences Between Pilgrims and Puritans

The main difference between the Pilgrims and the Puritans is that the Puritans did not consider themselves separatists. They called themselves “nonseparating congregationalists,” by which they meant that they had not repudiated the Church of England as a false church. But in practice they acted—from the point of view of Episcopalians and even Presbyterians at home—exactly as the separatists were acting.

By the 1640s, their enterprise at Massachusetts Bay had grown to about 10,000 people. They soon outgrew the bounds of the original settlement and spread into what would become Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine, and eventually beyond the limits of New England.

# Who Were the Puritans?

The Puritan migration was overwhelmingly a migration of families (unlike other migrations to early America, which were composed largely of young unattached men). The literacy rate was high, and the intensity of devotional life, as recorded in the many surviving diaries, sermon notes, poems, and letters, was seldom to be matched in American life.

The Puritans' ecclesiastical order was as intolerant as the one they had fled. Yet, as a loosely confederated collection of gathered churches, Puritanism contained within itself the seed of its own fragmentation. Following hard upon the arrival in New England, dissident groups within the Puritan sect began to proliferate—Quakers, Antinomians, Baptists—fierce believers who carried the essential Puritan idea of the aloneness of each believer with an inscrutable God so far that even the ministry became an obstruction to faith.

## Puritanism in American Life

Puritanism gave Americans a sense of history as a progressive drama under the direction of God, in which they played a role akin to, if not prophetically aligned with, that of the Old Testament Jews as a new chosen people.

Perhaps most important, as Max Weber profoundly understood, was the strength of Puritanism as a way of coping with the contradictory requirements of Christian ethics in a world on the verge of modernity. It supplied an ethics that somehow balanced charity and self-discipline. It counseled moderation within a psychology that saw worldly prosperity as a sign of divine favor. Such ethics were particularly urgent in a New World where opportunity was rich, but the source of moral authority obscure.

By the beginning of the 18th century, Puritanism had both declined and shown its tenacity. Though “the New England Way” evolved into a relatively minor system of organizing religious experience within the broader American scene, its central themes recur in the related religious communities of Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and a whole range of evangelical Protestants.

More recently, the word “Puritan” has once again become a pejorative epithet, meaning prudish, constricted and cold—as in H. L. Mencken’s famous remark that a Puritan is one who suspects “somewhere someone is having a good time.”

Puritanism, however, had a more significant persistence in American life than as the religion of black-frocked caricatures. It survived, perhaps most conspicuously, in the secular form of self-reliance, moral rigor, and political localism that became, by the Age of Enlightenment, virtually the definition of Americanism.

Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/puritanism>