

PURITANS

The Puritans were a group of people who grew discontent in the Church of England and worked towards religious, moral and societal reforms. The writings and ideas of John Calvin, a leader in the Reformation, gave rise to Protestantism and were pivotal to the Christian revolt. They contended that The Church of England had become a product of political struggles and man-made doctrines. The Puritans were one branch of dissenters who decided that the Church of England was beyond reform. Escaping persecution from church leadership and the King, they came to America.

The Puritans believed that the Bible was God's true law, and that it provided a plan for living. The established church of the day described access to God as monastic and possible only within the confines of "church authority". Puritans stripped away the traditional trappings and formalities of Christianity which had been slowly building throughout the previous 1500 years. Theirs was an attempt to "purify" the church and their own lives.

What many of us remember about the Puritans is reflective of the modern definition of the term and not of the historical account. Point one, they were not a small group of people. In England many of their persuasion sat in Parliament. So great was the struggle that England's Civil War pitted the Puritans against the Crown Forces. Though the Puritans won the fight with Oliver Cromwell's leadership, their victory was short-lived; hence their displacement to America. Point two, the witchcraft trials did not appropriately define their methods of living for the 100+ years that they formed successful communities. What it did show was the danger that their self-imposed isolation had put them in.

Most of the Puritans settled in the New England area. As they immigrated and formed individual colonies, their numbers rose from 17,800 in 1640 to 106,000 in 1700. Religious exclusiveness was the foremost principle of their society. The spiritual beliefs that they held were strong. This strength held over to include community laws and customs. Since God was at the forefront of their minds, He was to motivate all of their actions. This premise worked both for them and against them.

The common unity strengthened the community. In a foreign land surrounded with the hardships of pioneer life, their spiritual bond made them sympathetic to each other's needs. Their overall survival techniques permeated the colonies and on the whole made them more successful in several areas beyond that of the colonies established to their south.

Each church congregation was to be individually responsible to God, as was each person. The New Testament was their model and their devotion so great that it permeated their entire society. People of opposing theological views were asked to leave the community or to be converted.

Their interpretation of scriptures was a harsh one. They emphasized a redemptive piety. In principle, they emphasized conversion and not repression. Conversion was a rejection of the "worldliness" of society and a strict adherence to Biblical principles. While repression was not encouraged in principle, it was evident in their

actions. God could forgive anything, but man could forgive only by seeing a change in behavior. Actions spoke louder than words, so actions had to be constantly controlled.

The doctrine of predestination kept all Puritans constantly working to do good in this life to be chosen for the next eternal one. God had already chosen who would be in heaven or hell, and each believer had no way of knowing which group they were in. Those who were wealthy were obviously blessed by God and were in good standing with Him. The Protestant work ethic was the belief that hard work was an honor to God which would lead to a prosperous reward. Any deviations from the normal way of Puritan life met with strict disapproval and discipline. Since the church elders were also political leaders, any church infraction was also a social one. There was no margin for error.

The devil was behind every evil deed. Constant watch needed to be kept in order to stay away from his clutches. Words of hell fire and brimstone flowed from the mouths of eloquent ministers as they warned of the persuasiveness of the devil's power. The sermons of Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister, show that delivery of these sermons became an art form. They were elegant, well formed, exegetical renditions of scriptures... with a healthy dose of fear woven throughout the fabric of the literary construction. Grammar children were quizzed on the material at school and at home. This constant subjection of the probability of an unseen danger led to a scandal of epidemic proportions.

Great pains were taken to warn their members and especially their children of the dangers of the world. Religiously motivated, they were exceptional in their time for their interest in the education of their children. Reading of the Bible was necessary to living a pious life. The education of the next generation was important to further "purify" the church and perfect social living.

Three English diversions were banned in their New England colonies; drama, religious music and erotic poetry. The first and last of these led to immorality. Music in worship created a "dreamy" state which was not conducive in listening to God. Since the people were not spending their time idly indulged in trivialities, they were left with two godly diversions.

The Bible stimulated their corporate intellect by promoting discussions of literature. Greek classics of Cicero, Virgil, Terence and Ovid were taught, as well as poetry and Latin verse. They were encouraged to create their own poetry, always religious in content.

For the first time in history, free schooling was offered for all children. Puritans formed the first formal school in 1635, called the Roxbury Latin School. Four years later, the first American College was established; Harvard in Cambridge. Children aged 6-8 attended a "Dame school" where the teacher, who was usually a widow, taught reading. "Ciphering" (math) and writing were low on the academic agenda.

In 1638, the first printing press arrived. By 1700, Boston became the second largest publishing center of the English Empire. The Puritans were the first to write books for children, and to discuss the difficulties in communicating with them. At a time when other Americans were physically blazing trails through the forests, the Puritans efforts in areas of study were advancing our country intellectually.

Religion provided a stimulus and prelude for scientific thought. Of those Americans who were admitted into the scientific "Royal Society of London," the vast majority were New England Puritans.

The large number of people who ascribed to the lifestyle of the Puritans did much to firmly establish a presence on American soil. Bound together, they established a community that maintained a healthy economy, established a school system, and focused an efficient eye on political concerns. The moral character of England and America were shaped in part by the words and actions of this strong group of Christian believers called the Puritans.