

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## The American Puritans: Did You Know?

Little-known or remarkable facts about the American Puritans

Cassandra Niemczyk is an independent scholar who contributed to *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Tennessee, 1991).

Critic H. L. Mencken once said, wrongly, "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." On the contrary, Puritans read good books and enjoyed music. They drank beer with meals and rum at weddings. Puritans swam and skated, hunted and fished, and played at archery and bowling (as long as the games were not in a public tavern or on Sunday).

The famous "Pilgrims," who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, were so radical they were usually disliked and sometimes hated. Unlike most Puritans, they did not seek to reform the Church of England; they thought the church was beyond help.

Most weddings in New England were performed not by ministers but by magistrates. Wedding rings, seen as "popish," were not used.

The early settlers of Massachusetts included more than 100 graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. One historian termed Massachusetts "the best-educated community the world has ever known."

In Puritan worship, a prayer could last an hour or more; a sermon, two hours. In a lifetime, a Puritan might hear 15,000 hours of preaching.

Within only six years of their arrival, while still trying to hew out an existence, the Puritans founded a religious college named Harvard. Puritans wanted highly educated ministers, not "Dumme Doggs," as they called less-trained examples.

New England residents who failed to attend worship services on Sunday morning and afternoon were fined or put into stocks. Failing to glorify God for all his good gifts was a sacrilege.

Puritan women, though they didn't receive a college education, were generally literate and often well-read. The only respectable female vocation in Puritan America was managing a household. But that "household" generally included large numbers of children, servants, apprentices, and even single men and women (who were required to live with families).

American Puritans did not celebrate religious holidays such as Easter or Christmas. The weekly "Lord's Day" was celebration enough.

New England Puritans devised an approach to church membership that prevails in many churches today. By 1640, a person seeking membership was required to testify that he or she had been converted. Consequently, many settlers never became church members, even though only members could vote in civic affairs.

To permit undistracted worship of God, the Puritans did not use choirs, polyphonic hymns, or organs; they sang a cappella and in unison. No art adorned meeting houses (but paintings hung in many homes).

There was no religious freedom in New England. Quakers and Baptists were often forced to pay higher taxes or were banished.

American Puritans were hardworking but not capitalists in the modern sense. They placed common welfare ahead of self-interest and set modest caps on profit-making. Unemployment was virtually nonexistent in New England. A visitor from abroad testified, "In seven years I never saw a beggar."

Puritans called Rhode Island "the latrine of New England" because it permitted all sorts of religious beliefs and made no religious requirements for citizenship.

Worshippers in New England were assigned seats by a committee. The best seats went to the minister and family. African-Americans and native Americans were assigned the lowest-ranked seats, usually in second-floor galleries. Men and women sat on opposite sides.

The American colonies became, in one historian's words, "the most Protestant, Reformed, and Puritan commonwealths in the world." When American colonists declared their independence in 1776, a full 75 percent came from Puritan roots.

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## The American Puritans: From the Editor - Questions You Asked

Kevin A. Miller, Executive Editor

I enjoy it whenever a reader writes or stops by our editorial offices here in Illinois. It usually leads to an enjoyable conversation about church history or magazine publishing. Often, readers ask these questions:

- **How many people subscribe to Christian History?** Five years ago, about 15,000. Today, because you've shared the magazine with friends, about 80,000.
- **Is that good? Can you survive with that number?** Industry pundits predicted a church history magazine would never survive. Thankfully, you have proven them wrong. We are able to pay our bills and continue this shared mission of making our Christian heritage known.
- **How many people work on Christian History?** Editorially, only four or five—and none of us has the luxury of devoting full-time energies to it.
- **How do you select your themes?** We survey readers, our editorial advisers, and our own staff. If a topic makes it onto the list of all three groups, we devote an issue to it.
- **Won't you run out of topics?** Not a chance. Without even trying we have listed more than a hundred topics that fascinate us. And each month we add to the list.
- **What's your theological position?** We are evangelicals with a deep love for the entire body of Christ. We try to present each person and tradition honestly, fairly, and appreciatively.
- **What are your plans for the future?** First and foremost, to continue publishing a high-quality magazine. But we hope to present church history in new ways to reach other people: study tours, books, children's programs, CD-ROM, conferences, and more. Pray for us as we discern the best ways to accomplish our mission.

Puritanical could be one of the most inaccurate labels ever devised. Far from being narrow-minded, Puritanism, as Sydney Ahlstrom wrote, "is an intellectual tradition of great profundity." Far from being cold, Puritans were what a sixteenth-century tract called "the hotter sort of Protestants."

The Puritans were people on a mission: to create a pure church and a thoroughly Christian society. "In the short term," writes theologian J.I. Packer, "they lost their battles and failed in their reforming purposes; in the long term however, they have done as much for English Christianity (not to mention that of America) as any group of would-be change agents has ever done."

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## Quest For Pure Christianity

For 100 years, the American Puritans strove to create a model Christian society.

Dr. Edwin S. Gaustad is professor emeritus of history and religion at the University of California Riverside, and author of *A Religious History of America* (Harper & Row, 1990).

**Puritanism** has become a label. For some, "what's wrong with America" is that too much Puritanism survives to haunt and inhibit their country. Other Americans, though, believe the failures of our country result from the dilution of Puritan discipline and ideals.

Whether one thinks of Puritanism as bane or blessing, this is sure: no religious experiment in the New World has had a more enduring impact upon our nation's education, literature, sense of mission, church governance, ethical responsibility, or religious vision.

This is the story of the Puritans' mission, what they termed an "errand into the wilderness."

### Purifying the Church

American Puritanism has its beginning in sixteenth-century England. King Henry VIII (who reigned from 1509 to 1547) shook the Church in England loose from its Roman Catholic moorings. The two brief reigns that followed muddied the waters: during the reign of Edward VI (1547–1553) the nation veered sharply toward Protestantism; in the reign of Mary I (1553–1558), it veered even more sharply back toward Rome.

In the long reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), citizens caught their collective breath and tried to determine, more precisely, the character of their new national church. It isn't surprising that people differed—strongly, bitterly, and even bloodily.

Some passionately sought to make the Protestant Reformation a redeeming reality in all of English life and culture, thus purifying it. They came to be called **Puritans**. The Puritans wanted to rid the Church of England of all evidences of its historic Catholic connection, and to let the New Testament determine church order and worship. As petitioners to King James I (1603–1625) put it in 1603, the true church ought not to be "governed by Popish Canons, Courts, Classes, Customs, or any human invention, but by the laws and rules which Christ hath appointed in his Testament."

But Puritans themselves soon split as to the method of purifying.

### The Pilgrims

While some worked patiently to reform the church, moving it inch by inch and year by year, others gave up hope that such a political megachurch would ever change. So they separated from the national church in order to fashion a fellowship of their own, with the New Testament as their only guide.

One Separatist congregation meeting in secret in Nottingham (north of London) hoped that the new king, James I, would be more lenient in religious matters than Elizabeth had been. But those hopes were dashed when James declared that all dissenters must conform to England's worship and submit to England's bishops, or "I will harry them out of the land, or else worse." "Worse" clearly meant "death,"

for failure to conform to the Church of England was a capital crime. Yet to conform was impossible for these men and women.

In 1607 the group fled to Holland, where they could worship in a manner that did no violence to their consciences. After some years, however, they found that solution unsatisfactory; their children, burdened with difficult labor, were growing up as Dutch young people, not as English.

Aware of English claims in the New World, the Pilgrims (as these Separatists became known) conceived the ambitious and expensive plan to start a colony across the sea. They received a land grant from the Virginia Company of London and some promise of merchant support, though neither came easily. The Pilgrims had to prove they were not radical heretics; the merchants had to be assured that some return on their investments would be forthcoming.

Being "knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord," the group of about 100 sailed from Plymouth, England, on September 6, 1620. Two months later, the **Mayflower** arrived off Cape Cod in Massachusetts, where these settlers soon established their own Plymouth.

The Virginia Company's patent extended no farther than 41 degrees latitude, roughly around the southern tip of Manhattan Island. The new arrivals thus realized they needed some instrument of civil government, especially since some of their number, not sharing the same religious fervor, had made "discontented and mutinous speeches." The resulting Mayflower Compact, dated November 11, 1620, pledged the group, "solemnly mutually in the presence of God and one another," to "covenant, and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic." The good of the colony, not the interests of any individual, was to be the guiding principle.

### **Deathly Winter**

During that first hard winter, death reduced the contingent by nearly half. Many continued to live aboard the ship. Only the intercession of the Wampanoag Indians, who taught them how to plant and fish, kept the mortality rate from growing worse.

The Pilgrim migration consisted of men and women accustomed to labor in the field. So that first spring, crops were planted, houses built, and game successfully hunted. No prolonged "starving time" haunted Plymouth as it had the earliest settlers in Virginia. Nor did the Indians attack this vulnerable group; instead they assisted them, joining in their ceremonies and feasts, including the much mythologized first Thanksgiving.

William Bradford, who was elected governor thirty times between 1622 and 1656, proved to be a steady hand in directing the colony, as well as an able historian of its courage and trials.

### **Great Migration**

England's King Charles I, who ruled from 1625 to 1649, asserted his authority over Parliament, church, and people with even more vigor than his father, James I. His archbishop, William Laud, repressed all religious dissent. Those Puritans who had not separated from the Church of England now labored for reform with increasing difficulty, and they sensed the odds of success were against them. They faced the hard alternative of conforming, at great cost to their consciences, or defying, at great cost to their lives and fortunes. They likewise chose that other way out: migration to the New World.

When, in 1629, Charles dissolved a Parliament that tried to restrain his autocratic power, Puritans in the Church of England saw little hope. Just weeks before Charles's action, some Puritans had applied for a charter under the name of the Massachusetts Bay Company. With such a document in hand, the time seemed ripe for a migration. John Winthrop—lawyer, Puritan, and soon-to-be first governor of the

Massachusetts Bay Colony—noted that God “hath disposed the hearts of so many of his wise and faithful servants, both ministers and others, not only to approve of the enterprise but to interest themselves in it.”

The sheer number of people involved distinguished this colony from earlier English efforts. About 700 sailed with Winthrop in March 1630, another 300 followed soon thereafter, and another 1,000 before the year was out. The decade of the 1630s, producing what has been called the Great Migration, saw the population of Massachusetts Bay soar to nearly 9,000. Thus, the colony did not lack labor, skills, productive farmers, and infusions of new blood.

## **City Upon a Hill**

What set Massachusetts apart from Virginia was its adherence to certain ideas that have been termed “the New England mind.”

In 1630, while still aboard the ship that brought them across the ocean, John Winthrop—though a layman—preached a sermon entitled “A Model of Christian Charity.” Just as one would avoid shipwreck at sea, said Winthrop, so they must avoid similar calamity on land. The only way to do that was to follow “the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man.” If they would so conduct themselves, “the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us.” They were “entered into covenant with [God] for this work.”

Winthrop saw the Puritan venture as a way of demonstrating how nations could prosper and be blessed. God, Winthrop said, would “make us a praise and glory,” so much so that “men will say of succeeding plantations: ‘the Lord make it like that of New England.’” In short, “we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

The weighty task of government, then, was to see that the covenant was not broken, that in both behavior and belief the Puritan settlers did nothing to offend God. The covenant bound them to know the will of God, as revealed in the Bible, and to follow that will as faithfully as human frailty would permit.

To help men and women follow God, ministers were chosen to interpret and enforce his will. Meeting houses were built in every town for collective praise and collective obedience. Church members, no less than pastors, must study their Bibles, examine their souls, and make straight their paths. The whole “fellowship of the saints” bore responsibility for the integrity of the church.

Each congregation, though, directed its own affairs, hiring or firing ministers and setting standards for church membership. Neither bishop nor synod ruled over them. Thus, the Puritans later assumed the denominational name of Congregationalists.

Sunday was a day not for recreation and sport (as James I believed), but for worship and meditation. Puritans, however, did not give attention to other holy days, or saints’ days, even Christmas, for these were lingering elements of the papal calendar. They did not kneel at the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, for that suggested the bodily presence of Christ in the Communion elements. Nor did they hear confession or treat marriage as a sacrament.

Worship must be as simple as it is sincere. No priest or bishop should stand between the believer and his or her God; no altar should suggest that the sacrifice of Christ had to be repeated; no statues or pictures or stained-glass windows should distract the worshiper from concentrating upon God and the Sacred Word; no Book of Common Prayer should tell one what or how or when to pray.

Above all, no one should suggest that salvation could be earned: it was a gift of God’s grace, wholly unmerited and freely given to those whom God elected to save. In that, as in all other dimensions of life,

the Almighty Creator, not the fickle objects of that creation, was in charge. This doctrine of predestination, often misconstrued as a mindless fatalism, was to the Puritans a comforting trust in the sovereignty of a loving God.

### **Christian Harvard**

Literacy in New England was high (though many could not write, writing and “doing sums” being a more advanced stage of education). For Puritans, who put so much stake on the Bible, reading was fundamental to Christian education. Mothers were initially the chief teachers of reading and writing in the home. Soon every New England town had its grammar school for boys, while less formal “dame schools” watched over the education of the girls.

In an astonishing act of daring, the Puritans, even in the first decade of their colony, founded a college, which would soon take the name of Harvard. Patterned after Cambridge University, from which most Puritan ministers had graduated, Harvard College faithfully reflected the Puritan community. The “rules and precepts” of 1646 stipulated that every student “shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life.” The Bible was to be read twice a day, with all students expected to be “ready to give an account of their proficiency therein.”

Harvard, though designed for the training of ministers, also offered education in the classics of antiquity, Renaissance languages, Aristotelian physics, and natural and moral philosophy. When a site for the infant college was selected across the Charles River from Boston, the town was called Cambridge, in memory of the Puritans’ English past and with large hopes for their American future.

The Puritans had left England to escape bishops and cleanse themselves of an impure worship. In Massachusetts Bay, the Puritans intended to recreate the New Testament church, to fashion what they had hoped the Church of England would turn out to be. They came not for freedom of religion in the abstract but for their freedom of religion in particular. They never intended to found a colony where all religious dissidents of whatever persuasion, or none, would flock.

Far from it, they did their best to keep “the New England Way” consistent, pure, undefiled. To do this, education was not enough; they sometimes had to purge, sometimes persecute, sometimes even hang.

### **Dangerous Dissent**

Orthodoxy was never as complete as the clergy and the magistrates would have wished. From the beginning Baptists and Quakers lived in and around the colony. Banishments and hangings only slowed their growth.

In addition, many Puritans, like all Europeans of the time, practiced magic, followed astrological charts, and kept ancient superstitions alive—much as people do today. Such popular religion did not reject Puritan orthodoxy; it merely supplemented it. The supernatural world could not be confined to the prayers of the clergy or the explicit promises of Scripture. Signs and portents, visions and wonders, fortunes told and illnesses strangely cured, private rituals to ensure the fertility of fields and marriage—these lived side-by-side with Puritan orthodoxy.

Most troublesome were people who directly challenged Puritan orthodoxy. One such challenger, Roger Williams, argued that (1) the Puritan churches could not claim to be part of the Church of England while trying all the while to transform it; (2) the civil government had no business enforcing church rules or punishing its detractors; (3) all Puritan settlers were trespassers because they had not purchased the land from Indians.

Williams presented a bill of indictment so threatening that the General Court of Massachusetts

determined in October 1635 that "the said Mr. Williams shall depart out of this jurisdiction within six weeks. "

## **Winter Refugee**

But where to go, with winter approaching, with a pregnant wife and a 2-year-old daughter? Williams eventually struck out on foot, walking south through January's bitter cold, until he crossed the Bay Colony's boundaries. For fourteen weeks, he wrote, "I knew not what neither bed nor bread did mean." He accepted meager fare from the Narragansett Indians, whose language he had learned and whose confidence he had won.

At last, Williams came to Narragansett Bay, where he bought some land from the natives and named his settlement Providence, "in a sense of God's merciful Providence unto me in my distress." And so the colony of Rhode Island was born, one open to those of any religious persuasion or none.

Another dissenter, Anne Hutchinson, posed an even greater threat to Massachusetts Puritanism. A midwife and member of Boston's congregation, Hutchinson wanted to take orthodoxy farther than it was willing to go. Salvation was by faith, not works, all agreed. But orthodoxy declared that after salvation, good works gave evidence of that salvation. Hutchinson challenged that assumption.

In doing so, Puritan leaders felt she broke the essential bond between morality and religion, thereby threatening to undermine the very foundation of Puritan society. She was branded an "antinomian," literally one who is against the law.

Worse, during her trial, Hutchinson admitted to having heard "voices," private revelations beyond the public revelation of the Bible. For Puritans, this was the ultimate presumption to be so arrogant as to claim that God spoke directly to her. She was denounced as an enthusiast—literally, one filled with God, or at least proudly pretending to be.

In 1637 the General Court brought Hutchinson to trial. John Winthrop, speaking for the Court, noted that she had "spoken diverse things ... very prejudicial to the honor of the churches and the ministers thereof." Moreover, she had "maintained a meeting and an assembly ... that has been condemned by the General Assembly." Furthermore, she had said things and done things not "comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex." The Court concluded, "She shall be banished out of our liberties and imprisoned till she be sent away."

With her family and a significant number of supporters, Hutchinson fled to Rhode Island, where they continued to worry the authorities in Massachusetts. In 1643, after she and her family moved to Long Island, a marauding band of Mohawks abruptly ended her life.

## **Waning Zeal**

As the decades passed, the Puritans' original zeal began to wane. Ministers began preaching a type of sermon, the "jeremiad," in which they lamented the loss of original fervor and exhorted people to amend their ways.

The issue of declining religious fervor came to a head in the 1660s over the issue of church membership. Initially, church membership in Massachusetts was limited to those who had a direct experience of the saving grace of God and who appeared before the church to tell of their wondrous conversion. By the 1660s, however, many of these converts' children, who had been baptized as infants, failed to tell of such conversions. Thus they could not be full members allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper.



Then, these people, though not full members themselves, brought their children to be baptized. To accept such a third-generation child for baptism was to relax the rigid rules of membership; on the other hand, to reject such an infant would reduce the scope and influence of the church over a growing society.

After much harsh debate, many churches adopted the so-called "Half-Way Covenant," broadening the parameters of the church to include these children, but at cost to their pure principles.

By 1679, Massachusetts ministers were so concerned about declining faith, they felt that God had a controversy with his people, that he no longer looked with favor upon New England. They petitioned the General Court to call a "Reforming Synod." There the ministers testified to Sabbath breaking, "Sinful Heats and Hatreds," and most of all "A public spirit ... greatly wanting in most of men."

William Bradford's compact and John Winthrop's sermon seemed, if not forgotten, certainly forsaken.

When in 1691 the witchcraft episode at Salem erupted, it seemed to provide further evidence that Satan's dominion was enlarging as the face of God turned away from New England.

A generation later, a wave of revivalism gave hope that the decline of Puritanism had been arrested or even reversed. This Great Awakening of the 1740s, recalling the vision and zeal of the 1630s, inspired many to confession of sin and godly repentance. But it was not enough.

Indeed, the Awakening, by dividing the friends of the revival from its foes, shattered the unity of the clergy and of the churches. The New England Way, which had held for more than a century, would henceforth be a personal option, but no longer a pervading social norm.

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## Ordering Their Private World

What Puritans did to grow spiritually

Dr. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe is pastor of Church of the Apostles (United Church of Christ) in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and adjunct professor of church history at Lancaster Theological Seminary. He is author of *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (North Carolina, 1982), from which portions of this article have been adapted.

Alone in the dark, Roger Clap lay lost in meditation. Barely 21, and already a member of the Dorchester Church in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he now felt a wave of uncertainty and insecurity rush over him.

"In my saddest Troubles for want of a clear Evidence of my good Estate," he wrote years later in his *Memoirs*, "I did ... Examine my self upon my Bed in the Night, concerning my spiritual Estate."

Why did these doubts persist?

An immigrant from England just that spring of 1630, Clap was acutely aware that his way of coming to Christ was not so dramatic as the conversion experiences others professed: "I could not find as others did, the Time when God wrought the Work of Conversion in my Soul, nor in many respects the Manner thereof. It caused in me much Sadness of Heart, and Doubtings how it was with me, Whether the Work of Grace were ever savingly wrought in my Heart or no?"

In his anguish, Clap turned inward, meditating on his sinfulness. Following established methods of self-examination, he put the question "to my very Heart and Soul" whether he would willingly commit a certain secret sin again.

Suddenly, he found the resolution welling up within not to commit that sin again. "At that Time my conscience did witness to me that my State was good: And God's holy Spirit did witness (I do believe) together with my Spirit, that I was a Child of God; and did fill my Heart and Soul with such a full Assurance that Christ was mine, that it did so transport me as to make me cry out upon my Bed with a loud Voice, 'He is come, He is come.' And God did melt my Heart."

The inner life of the soul—this was the beating heart of Puritanism in seventeenth-century America. While the Puritans produced volumes of theology, formulated doctrines on civil government, founded Harvard College, and established a publishing industry, the whole enterprise was geared toward one end: the conversion of sinners and their growth in piety and holiness.

### Private Practice

Puritans sought a living relationship with Jesus Christ. They practiced the spiritual life both in public worship and in "private devotion" (meaning all worship and devotional activity outside the walls of the church). Private devotion took place in secret exercises, private conference, family devotions, and private meetings.

**"Secret" or "closet" exercises.** Alone, Puritans meditated and prayed just before sleep at night, upon rising in the morning, on Saturday in preparation for the Sabbath, and on the Sabbath between services. At night they reviewed the day's behavior, gave thanks for blessings, repented of sin, submitted anew to the will of God, and embraced mortality and judgment. Upon waking, believers thanked God for life and

salvation.

Special sessions for meditative “self-examination” could be prompted by a birthday, New Year’s Day (March 25 in colonial America), or some “remarkable providence” in one’s life.

Prayer was the culminating act of secret devotion. Merchant Roger Clap urged his children, “Pray in Secret. Think with yourself, assuredly God is present tho’ none else; I will confess my Sins, and I will beg with God by Faith and Prayer. And you may every one of you prevail, if you Pray sincerely, and persevere in it.” Cotton Mather once described his prayer life: “This Morning, my heart was melted, in secret Prayer before the Lord.”

**Private conference.** Believers were specifically instructed to seek out “much conference, especially with Ministers and other experienced Christians.” These spiritual counseling sessions were used to guide individuals through the conversion experience, screen church members and lead them to public profession of faith, enable parents to bring their children and servants to the experience of grace, and encourage saints to help one another grow in grace.

Cotton Mather records in his diary that at the end of one such private conference with his daughter Katy, “I thereupon made the Child kneel down by mee; and I poured out my Cries unto the Lord, that Hee would lay His Hands upon her, and bless her and save her, and make her a Temple of His Glory. It will be so; It will be so!”

**Family devotions.** This third private exercise ideally occurred in the morning before work, briefly before meals, and in the evening. The Bible was read “in course” (chapter by chapter in sequence), a psalm was sung from the locally published **Bay Psalm Book**, and prayers were offered—inspired or guided by devotional manuals such as John Cotton’s **Milke for Babes**.

The prayers reflected a cycle of death and rebirth, evening and morning. In the evening, families confessed their sins, praying “O let us feel the Power of Christ’s Death killing sin in our mortal Bodies.” In the morning, they gave thanks for God’s grace that “renews all thy mercies upon us” and praised God because he had “elected, created, redeemed, called, justified, and sanctified” the saints.

**Neighborhood prayer meeting.** Congregations formed groups for women, young men, girls, blacks, tradesmen, and ministers. Meetings were held in homes weekly, biweekly, or monthly. “We pray, and sing, and repeat sermons, and confer together about the things of God,” explained John Eliot, one of the founding pastors and “Apostle to the Indians.” Cotton Mather boasted “thirteen or fourteen” neighborhood fellowships under his pastoral care.

If believers engaged in this full range of devotion, Eliot preached, “When thou diest, heaven will be no strange place to thee; no, thou hast been there a thousand times before.”

## Devout Diaries

New Englanders recorded their spiritual experiences in diaries. While many early diaries were lost, those that survive open a window to the spiritual ecstasy known by at least some Puritans.

Cambridge pastor Thomas Shepard says that as a young man, “I so found [God] in meditation that I was constrained to carry my book into the fields to write down what God poured in.” This “little book” did not survive, but in his later journals, Shepard recorded that often in meditating on Scripture, “my heart was sweetly ravished.”

Anne Bradstreet, whose husband, Simon, became governor of Massachusetts Bay, often wrote poems to

express and preserve her prayers.

I sought him whom my Soul did love,  
With tears I sought him earnestly;  
He bow'd his ear down from Above,  
In vain I did not seek or cry.

When she asked God "For Deliverance from a Fever," she discovered her deeper need to pray, "O, heal my Soul." Reflecting on her experience, she penned,

In my distresse I sought the Lord,  
When nought on Earth could comfort give;  
And when my Soul these things abhor'd,  
Then, Lord, thou said'st unto me, Live.

**Puritan ABCs:** The New England Primer (1683) taught both the alphabet and faith. The letter U, for example, was remembered by Uriah's beautiful wife Made David seek his Life. The primer was so popular, Benjamin Franklin was printing it nearly a century later.

### Best-Selling Sermons

New Englanders were highly literate and considered reading a means of grace. "God has blessed not only the Preaching of Sermons," ministers advised, "but the Writing of Books, for the Conversion as well as the Edification of many Readers."

Religious publications—sermons, tracts, catechisms, and devotional manuals—were best-sellers. Boston minister John Cotton, thinking of religious books as a mother's breast or a piece of fruit, counseled, "Labour so to read, as that you may suck life from it."

Children learned to read using *The New England Primer* with its theological ABCs, from A, "In Adam's Fall We sinned all," to Z, "Zacheus he Did climb the Tree His Lord to see."

Some devotional favorites were read over and over. In his youth, Boston merchant Robert Keayne hand-copied a Communion manual, "a little thin pocket book bound in leather ... which I have read over I think 100 and 100 times."

Books sometimes influenced the experience of conversion. John Brock, in his spiritual autobiography, tells how as a child "By Reading, through admonitions of Parents, in a Book called *The Practice of Piety* I found some Description, of the Misery of Men in Hell and of Happiness of the Godly which somewhat stirred me." At age 16 he received further "Encouragement and Light" toward conversion by reading Thomas Hooker's *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*.

Surprisingly, Puritan piety, while rooted firmly in the Calvinist movement, drew from Catholic and Lutheran devotionalism. When Puritans felt the need for manuals on meditation and prayer, sometimes they unashamedly copied the format, techniques, and even the contents and titles of Catholic books.

### Public Worship

With two three-hour services every Sabbath, midweek "lectures," and an occasional fast or thanksgiving

service, New Englanders spent a lot of time in the meeting house. In a typical service, psalm singing, long prayers, and Scripture readings culminated in a sixty- to ninety-minute sermon.

Puritan "plain style" preaching, as one New Englander put it, aimed at "bringing me to know my sin and the wrath of God against me ... humbling me yet more and then raising me up out of this estate" through the "plain and powerful" presentation of Jesus as Savior.

Thomas Shepard's adult catechism, *First Principles of the Oracles of God*, set forth the "order of redemption," or plan of salvation. Baptism, which was bestowed upon the children of believers, was the sacrament of "our new birth, and ingrafting into Christ." After believers joined the church covenant, they could receive the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of "our growth in Christ ... given to nourish and strengthen believers, renewing their faith unto eternall life."

When believers joined the church covenant, they presented a "relation" or narrative of their conversion. While some testified to a single conversion moment, most spoke of an ongoing journey from sin to salvation: "by degrees the Lord hath let [them] see" they belonged to Christ. A servant told of receiving "more and more light to see into my lost estate" until finally "the Lord broke my heart in the consideration of my own vileness and so I saw a necessity of Christ." This self-emptying in preparation for rebirth did not end with church membership; it continued as Puritans prepared for glory.

Nowhere is the Christian spirit of Puritan piety more evident than in the meditative poetry of minister Edward Taylor. In meditation and in prayer on Saturday night, preparing for preaching and administering the Lord's Supper the next morning, Taylor sometimes would express his sense of awe before God in verse:

***What Love is this of thing that Cannot bee***

In thine Infinity, O Lord, Confinde,

Sinless it in thy very Person see,

Infinity, and Finity Conjoyn'd?

One can imagine the pastor on his knees before the embers in the fireplace, confessing his sinfulness —"**my Lifeless Sparke! My Fireless Flame!**"—and then beseeching God, "**Lord blow the Coal: Thy Love Enflame in mee.**"

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## New England Dynasty

The lives and legacies of the Mathers, America's most influential Puritan family.

Dr. George W. Harper is professor of church history and theology at Alliance Biblical Seminary in Manila.

Mather. For many, the name conjures up Bible-thumping pastors, Puritan busybodies meddling in community life, and falsely accused "witches" made to pay for their alleged misdeeds at Salem in 1692.

But these images have little to do with reality.

For almost a century, the Mathers were leading lights in the Congregational firmament of colonial Massachusetts. Indeed, from Richard Mather's arrival in 1635, through the long, fruitful pastorate of his son Increase, to the death in 1728 of his grandson Cotton, they were a spiritual dynasty.

### Richard: Titan in Exile

"His way of preaching was very plain ... aiming to shoot his arrows, not over the **heads**, but into the **hearts** of his hearers. Yet so scripturally and powerfully did he preach his plain sermons, that ... he saw a great success of his labours, in both Englands [Old and New], converting many souls to God."

These are Cotton Mather's words, penned in praise of his grandfather Richard.

Born in 1596 near Liverpool, this patriarch of Puritanism came to faith while a teenager. His conversion experience was in the classic Puritan mold: self-righteous attempts to obey God's law, despair as he compared his feeble efforts to those of seasoned saints, and finally a breakthrough. At age 18, in the words of his grandson, "the good Spirit of God healed his broken heart, by pouring thereinto the evangelical consolations of <wa>His great and good promises."

After brief study at Oxford University, in 1619 Mather was ordained an Anglican minister. In more than a decade of pastoral ministry, he upheld Calvinist orthodoxy while keeping clear of the Anglican ceremonies he and other Puritans found objectionable.

After 1630, with William Laud's installation as Archbishop of Canterbury, theological Arminianism was ascendant, and liturgical uniformity was increasingly enforced. In 1633 Mather was briefly suspended from his position; the following year he lost it. In 1635, Richard and his family took ship for Massachusetts.

Mather was soon installed as pastor of the fledgling parish in Dorchester, just south of Boston. Of his accomplishments, three stand out:

1. He persuaded his flock to require that applicants for membership provide a convincing account of their own conversion, the goal being a church composed of "visible saints."
2. He composed the bulk of the **Cambridge Platform** (1649), a sort of **Robert's Rules of Order** for the government of New England's churches.

3. He ultimately argued for modifying the **Platform** to allow baptized non-members (who had not told of a conversion "experience") to bring their infants for baptism. This so-called "Half-Way Covenant," which eventually became nearly universal practice in the region, kept a foothold for the gospel in a rapidly secularizing community.

Richard died in 1669, one of the last of that generation of titans.

### **Increase: Voice for Orthodoxy**

Richard's son Increase has been hailed as "the greatest American Puritan" and even "the last American Puritan," though the first is hyperbole and the second is simply not true. Still, Increase Mather was a dominant figure and the leading voice for orthodox Calvinism in an era when rationalism was beginning to undermine the Bay Colony's religious foundations.

Increase attended Harvard College, receiving his B.A. in 1656. But instead of staying at Harvard to take his M.A., he enrolled at Trinity College, Dublin, from which he received the master's degree in 1658.

He declined Trinity's offer of a postgraduate fellowship in favor of service as a parish minister and military chaplain in Cromwell's England. The restoration of the monarchy (and the re-establishment of Anglicanism) under Charles II, though, dashed his plans, and in 1661 he returned to Boston.

In 1664 Increase was called to the pastorate of Boston's Second ("Old North") Church, where he remained until his death. At first he had a reputation as something of a radical, opposing the Half-Way Covenant. Eventually, though, he came to embrace his father's views.

A celebrated preacher, during his half-century at the helm of Old North he spent most of his waking hours in his study, preparing the biblically grounded, theologically sophisticated sermons his flock demanded. His delivery was free, his style plain and direct, his imagery vivid. Many of his sermons were eventually published.

Increase was appointed a (nonteaching) fellow of Harvard College and a member of the school's corporation in 1675; ten years later he was elected president. He reorganized and revitalized the college, enlisting as resident (teaching) fellows the able John Leverett and William Brattle.

But Mather insisted on retaining his pastorate in Boston, and his absence at Cambridge meant these two men wielded unusual influence. Their flirtation with broad-church rationalism ultimately led more than one of their students into the Church of England. Too many others came to embrace a dry Christian moralism that made little room for the grace of Christ.

Increase raised his voice in defense of Calvinist orthodoxy, but his absence from the campus made it impossible for him to mount a sustained offensive. Finally, in 1701, the progressives forced his ouster. This was the low point of his ministry.

Its high point had come earlier, in 1688–1691, when Increase was dispatched to London to negotiate the return of the colony's original charter, which had been rescinded by Charles II. Although Increase failed in this task, he greatly influenced the terms of the new charter granted by King William.

His death in 1723 marked the end of the middle era in New England Puritanism.

### **Cotton: Renaissance Puritan**

Cotton Mather has been mocked as the last, dullest defender of New England's dead orthodoxy and

hailed as the unwitting herald of modern American secularism. Even in his day he aroused intense loathing in some and great loyalty in others.

Born in 1663, he was named for his maternal grandfather, the learned John Cotton. The young Mather showed intellectual prowess, mastering Latin, Greek, and Hebrew as a child and graduating from Harvard at the tender age of 15.

Having experienced conversion as a teenager, he followed his father and grandfather into the ministry. Although he received offers from a number of congregations, his most determined suitors were the parishioners at Boston's North Church. In 1685 he was ordained and installed as his father's associate.

Cotton shared his father's commitment to evangelical Calvinism, taking great pains to maintain a united front with him against their adversaries. But where Increase's sermons were plain and direct, Cotton's were flowery and ornate, full of literary references and theological tangents.

Father and son also parted company in their pastoral priorities. While Increase focused on the pulpit and study, Cotton canvassed house by house across Boston, catechizing parishioners and evangelizing the unchurched. He even composed an instructional pamphlet to guide other pastors in this undertaking.

Cotton also organized lay societies, generally numbering a dozen or so members, which met in private residences once or twice a month to pray, study the Bible, and share one another's burdens. Such groups contributed greatly to the vitality of North Church.

Regrettably, most closely associated with Cotton's name today is the execution of nineteen alleged witches in Salem Village in 1692. Cotton, like most of his contemporaries, believed in witches, and he wrote in defense of witch trials. But he denounced, as did his father, the way the Salem trials were being handled, insisting on more objective proof. The united opposition of Boston's clergy was crucial to aborting the trials and saving dozens from the gallows.

Cotton authored hundreds of books on topics ranging from theology and the supernatural to medicine and local history.

But his supreme achievement lay in drawings on the perspectives of English Puritans like Richard Baxter and German Pietists like August Hermann Francke to forge a distinctively American spirituality. This new piety would finally come into its own with the flowering of evangelicalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mather's ministry bridged the gap between what was and what was to be.

For years, Cotton Mather sought New England's spiritual awakening, praying that God would again pour out his Spirit on its churches and communities. His death in 1728 brought an end to a spiritual dynasty, but within a decade came the answer to his prayers—the Great Awakening.



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 41: The American Puritans

## When the Sermon Reigned

No activity shaped Puritans more than their "plain" preaching. Here's what it was like.

Dr. Allen C. Guelzo is associate professor of history at Eastern College in St. David's, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Wesleyan, 1989<).

Despite the numerous hardships the first Puritan colonists endured on the desolate and flint-edged shores of New England, their chief joy (wrote one of the colonists) "lay not in the increase of Corne, or Wine, or Oyle." What "rejoyced the Heart of this People much" was the decision of between 80 and 90 Puritan ministers to join these colonists in their self-chosen exile from England, "preaching with all instancy the glad Tidings of the Gospell of Jesus Christ."

In that age only the tiniest minority of the people could read. An even tinier minority possessed the means to buy books. So public preaching was the clearest and most direct method for Puritanism to appeal to people's hearts and minds.

Furthermore, preaching was considered an almost-supernatural activity and an indispensable means of receiving divine grace. "The preaching of the Word is the **Scepter** of Christ's Kingdome, the **glory** of a Nation, the **Chariot** upon which life & salvation comes riding," Stephen Marshall told Parliament in November 1640. Only the preaching minister, added a note from the Geneva Bible (**the** Bible of American Puritans), had the authority to "open the gates of heaven with the word of God, which is the right key."

Whatever else the word **Puritan** meant in the 1600s in England and the New England colonies, it meant the priority of preaching in the life of a Christian community.

### All Manner of Preachers

Of the 300 or so English Protestant ministers who can be readily identified as Puritans in the Church of England in 1630, as many as a third of them (some with their entire congregations) joined the great Puritan migration to Massachusetts and its daughter colonies, Connecticut and New Haven. These preachers came in all varieties.

Thomas Hooker, who emigrated to New England in 1633, had such "a mighty vigor and fervour of spirit" in his preaching that his sermons "would put a king in his pocket."

Richard Mather of Dorchester had a "loud and big" voice and preached with "a deliberate vehemency."

John Cotton preached with "a very awful majesty." His associate, John Wilson, claimed that "Mr. Cotton preaches with such authority, demonstration, and life, that methinks, when he preaches out of any prophet or apostle, I hear him not; I hear that very prophet and apostle; yea, I hear the Lord Jesus Christ himself speaking in my heart."

Not many of the Puritans had much reputation for humor, although Samuel Moody (pastor of York, Maine, from 1698 to 1747) had a well-known talent for pulpit put-downs. When Moody was invited to preach in a neighboring parish, the pastor warned Moody that the congregation was in the annoying habit of drifting out of church before the sermon was over. Moody solved that problem by announcing at

the beginning of his sermon that he intended to speak first to the sinners in the congregation, and then to the saints.

When he had preached to "sinners" as long as he thought proper, he paused and added, "There, sinners, I have done with you now; you may take your hats and go out of the meeting house as soon as you please." No one dared leave.

### **No Exotic Words**

The Puritan sermon was set off from all other English preaching by a peculiar homiletical technique known as "the plain style"—*plain* in vocabulary, structure, subject, and style.

Most sermons of the 1600s look, to our eyes, like collections of literary essays or devotional meditations, thick with metaphor and encrusted with elaborate Latin quotations. But because Puritan preaching was intended (according to Robert Cushman) "to paint out the Gospel in plain and flat English, amongst a company of plain Englishmen," the Puritan preachers opposed elaborate and flowery literary devices.

Richard Mather "was plain, aiming to shoot his Arrows not over his peoples heads, but into their Hearts and Consciences." For that reason, Mather "studiously avoided obscure phrases, Exotick words, or an unnecessary citation of latine Sentences which some men addict themselves to the use of."

Although Ezekiel Rogers of Rowley was renowned as a "tree of knowledge," he was "so laden with fruit that he stooped for the very children to pick off the apples ready to drop into their mouths."

At the same time, the preaching handbooks most popular in New England all permitted the plain preacher an array of rhetorical devices, the favorite of which was *similitude*. This was an illustration that compared spiritual truths with everyday experiences to bring home a spiritual point.

Thomas Hooker, pastor at Hartford, Connecticut, used this simile in a sermon: "When the father is going on in his journey, if the child will not goe on, but stands gaping upon vanity, and when the father calls, he comes not, the onely way is this: the father steps aside behind a bush, and then the child runs and cries, and if he gets his father againe, he forsakes all his trifles, and walkes on more faster and more cheerefully with his father than ever.

"So when the Lord Jesus Christ sometimes makes knowne himselfe to us, and would carry us on in a Christian course cheerefully, we are playing with trifles, and grow carelesse, and cold, and worldly, and remisse in prayer, and dead hearted; the onely way to quicken us up is to hide himselfe, and to make us give ourselves for lost; & then they that could scarcely pray once a weeke, now will pray three or foure times a day."

### **Memorable Outlines**

The plain style is perhaps best known for the simple four-part outline all Puritan preachers used:

**Text:** The preacher would "open up" a text—to explain one by one all the words, ideas, and concepts within a Bible verse (or verses).

**Doctrine:** The preacher then stated in a single statement a "theological Axiom, either consisting in the express words of Scripture, or flowing from them by immediate consequence."

**Uses:** Next, the doctrine needed to be "established," or proven to be in harmony with the rest of the Bible, and its general implications explained. The preacher would refute any objections that could be

raised and point out the practical “uses” of the doctrine for consolation or correction.

**Applications:** While the “uses” were generally discussed in the third person, the “applications” dropped directly into the second person and allowed the preacher to ask whether the congregation had taken the “doctrine” to heart.

The plain sermon’s outline and logical development made memorization easy and encouraged note taking by the people for review at home.

### **Crib Notes**

The most important part of plainness in the actual delivery of a sermon was the requirement that a preacher look natural and spontaneous in preaching. Nathaniel Mather, in cautioning his nephew Cotton in 1682, explained what this meant: “By any means get to preach without any use of or help from your notes,” since “in New England, no man that I remember used them except one, and hee because of a special infirmity ... ” Mather was probably exaggerating, but only a little.

Many New England Puritans at the beginning of their ministries would write out their sermons in full, but they usually took only the most innocuous sets of notes into the pulpit. Some of the less confident crammed a great deal into these notes; some would use six to twelve small sheets, with up to two hundred words per page, cut to the size of their palms.

### **Sunday Not Enough**

Besides sermons on Sunday morning and afternoon, a weekday lecture was also expected of Puritan ministers. In the lecture, the preacher explored intricate theological problems. John Cotton devoted his Thursday lectures in Boston in 1639 and 1640 to an exposition of Revelation 13, which gave Cotton free rein to talk about eschatology. Forty years later, Samuel Willard of Boston delivered 226 lectures on the first 100 questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Other occasions for preaching included the election sermon. Beginning in 1634, and every year after 1640, the annual election day in Massachusetts was crowned with a sermon before the General Court by a prominent minister. It was clearly expected that the need for community obedience to God would be the subject of the hour (or, more often, hour and a half).

In addition, Puritan colonial governments often called for days of fasting and prayer when the colony encountered a crisis. On such days, ministers were expected to create services and sermons devoted to the crisis at hand. Just as often, the government would declare a thanksgiving day when the crisis passed, and once more, Puritan preachers would ascend their pulpits to dwell on New England’s failure or success as a “city on a hill.”

### **Purified Preaching**

Historian Harry Stout has charted how Puritan preaching shifted over the course of a century and a half. Puritan preachers of the second generation (1660–1700) were fearful that the spiritual vitality of the first generation was fading. Third-generation preachers were more likely to follow elegant English literary models. And the next generation (1730–1760), that of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening, deliberately reappropriated much of the plainness of the first generation.

The plain style, with its urge to understand Christian truth by dividing, sub-dividing, and analyzing a biblical text, has exerted a significant influence in American preaching. Even among those who have little liking for the rigors of New England Calvinism, preaching plainly for plain people “for the building up of

faith in God" still plays a silent but commanding role.

The pattern laid down by William Ames in the "Marrow of Sacred Divinity" remains the guiding star for many: "The sum of the matter is that nothing is to be allowed which does not contribute to the spiritual edification of the people, and nothing omitted by which we may surely reach that end."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## The American Puritans: Christian History Timeline

Dr. Francis J. Bremer is professor of history at Millersville (Pennsylvania) University. He is author of *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (St. Martin's, 1976).

### The Puritans

#### 1569-1619

**1569** Thomas Cartwright argues for a purified English Christianity

**1571** Parliament approves Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion

**1590** Thomas Cartwright and others arrested for trying to reform the church

**1593** Execution of two separatists

**1603** James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England

**1604** King James I thwarts most Puritan reforms in their "Millenary Petition"

**1608** Puritan separatists from town of Scrooby migrate to Netherlands to avoid persecution

#### 1620-1639

**1620** Scrooby separatists return to England and then sail for Virginia on the *Mayflower*; these Pilgrims settle outside Virginia's boundaries

**1629** Increasing pressure put on Puritans in England. New England Company reorganized as Massachusetts Bay Company

**1630** The *Arbella* and sister ships sail for Massachusetts; Governor John Winthrop makes Boston seat of colony

**1633** William Laud becomes Archbishop of Canterbury, fueling Great Migration of Puritans to New England

**1635** Roger Williams banished from Bay Colony, founds Providence the following year

**1636** Harvard College founded. Puritans from Massachusetts found Hartford, Connecticut

**1637** Native Americans and Puritans battle in Pequot War. New Haven colony founded

**1638** Anne Hutchinson banished

#### 1640-1659

**1640** *Bay Psalm Book* published

**1642** English Civil War begins; American Puritans side with Parliament against King Charles I

**1643** Parliament establishes Westminster Assembly to reform the English church

**1644** Rhode Island granted charter

**1649** Cambridge Platform defines New England congregationalism; King Charles I beheaded; Commonwealth of England proclaimed; reforming forces reign

**1650** Anne Bradstreet's poetry published in England

**1651** John Eliot founds village for praying Indians

**1653** Puritan Oliver Cromwell becomes Lord Protector of England

**1656** First Quakers in Massachusetts arrested and banished

**1658** Oliver Cromwell's death opens struggle for English supremacy

### **1660-1679**

**1660** American Puritan hopes for reform permanently dashed when Catholic Charles II crowned king of England; persecution of English Puritans resumed; many emigrate or return to New England

**1661** Executions of Quakers in Massachusetts halted by Charles II

**1662** Connecticut absorbs New Haven Colony.

***Day of Doom***, a best-selling verse jeremiad, calls for repentance. Half-Way Covenant eases requirements for church membership

**1675** Wampanoags and Puritans battle in King Philip's War

**1677** Massachusetts incorporates Maine into its jurisdiction

**1679** Reforming Synod calls for spiritual renewal and supports congregationalism

### **1680-1699**

**1684** Complaints against Bay magistrates lead to revoking of Massachusetts Charter; two years later, royal governor appointed for Dominion of New England (Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Plymouth, and Rhode Island)

**1687** Solomon Stoddard advocates open Communion, liberalizing requirements to take Communion

**1688** Glorious Revolution: Protestant William of Orange invades England, and Catholic James II flees

**1689** Boston rebellion topples the Dominion government; Act of Toleration in England eases pressure on

non-conforming Protestants

**1691** William and Mary grant Massachusetts new charter, partly restoring popular basis of government

**1692** Witchcraft trials at Salem Village

**1699** "Brattle Street Manifesto" by a new congregation greatly eases membership requirements and marks appearance of liberal faction

### **1700-1734**

**1700** Harvard liberals force out Increase Mather as college president

**1701** Yale University founded by orthodox Connecticut clergy

**1702** Cotton Mather publishes *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a history of early New England

**1708** Connecticut clergy adopt Saybrook Platform, modifying pure congregationalism

**1721** Smallpox epidemic in Boston Cotton Mather advocates inoculation

**1734** Jonathan Edwards' preaching stimulates revival at Northampton and beginning of Great Awakening

### **Other Events**

#### **1569-1619**

**1588** Spanish Armada defeated, giving England control of seas

**1589** Forks first used in French court

**1610** Henry Hudson reaches Hudson Bay

**1611** King James Version published

**1616** William Shakespeare dies

#### **1620-1639**

**1632** Maryland colony, a haven for Catholics, chartered by Charles I

**1633** Galileo forced to recant

**1634** French explorer Jean Nicolet sees Lake Michigan and thinks he has reached Asia; Oberammergau Passion Play given for first time.

#### **1640-1659**

**1644** Ming dynasty in China ends

**1646** George Fox begins ministry; start of Quaker movement

**1650** Tea first drunk in England

**1651** Thomas Hobbes's *The Leviathan*

**1654** Blaise Pascal converted

**1660-1679**

**1664** British take New Netherlands and call it New York

**1665** Great Plague of London kills nearly 70,000

**1667** John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

**1675** Spener's *Pia Desideria* signals emergence of Pietism

**1678** John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*

**1680-1699**

**1682** Peter the Great czar of Russia

**1685** George Frederick Handel born

**1687** Isaac Newton's *Principia*

**1690** John Locke's *Two Treatises on Civil Government*

**1700-1734**

**1707** Isaac Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*

**1718** In Texas, San Antonio Mission (the Alamo) is founded

**1721** J. S. Bach writes Brandenburg Concertos

**1723** Benjamin Franklin becomes printer in Philadelphia



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## The American Puritans: A Gallery of Gifted Founders

The first generation of American Puritans was extraordinarily talented. Here are five leading examples.

Mark Galli is managing editor of Christian History.

### **John Eliot** **(1604–1690)** **Apostle to the Indians**

A full 150 years before the modern missionary movement, John Eliot was successfully evangelizing native Americans. Yet forces beyond his control would destroy his life's work.

Eliot's wealthy English father sent him to Cambridge. Afterward Eliot taught grammar school and met Thomas Hooker, the man chiefly responsible for his conversion: "When I came to this blessed family I then saw, and never before, the power of godliness in its lively vigor and efficacy."

In 1631, as church leaders applied heat to English Puritans, Eliot emigrated to America. He became pastor of the church in Roxbury, composed of many of his English friends. The following year, he married Ann (Hannah) Mumford.

The main legacy of Eliot's early years is his work on the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), which put the Psalms in metrical verse. This famous hymnbook was the first book published in America.

Eliot was frugal, eating just one plain dish for dinner. Of wine he said, "It is a noble, generous liquor ... but as I remember, water was made before it." He was deeply against the use of tobacco, and wigs or long hair on men.

However, Eliot cared deeply for the Indians. At Roxbury, he began learning Algonkian, and by 1647 was preaching in the native tongue. He began translating and in 1663 published the entire Algonkian Bible—the first Bible printed in America.

Eliot helped organize towns in which native Americans managed local affairs in their own way. By 1674, there were fourteen towns with a total of 1,100 "praying Indians." He began giving some natives ministerial training.

Tragically, the bloody King Philip's War (1675–76) between Wampanoags and the English, undid all his efforts. Though the "praying Indians" supported the English, the settlers panicked and confined them to an island in Boston Harbor. The war destroyed most copies of Eliot's native American Bible and all but four of the Indian villages. More critically, it undermined the Indians' trust in the English as well as English interest in native missions.

Eliot continued to minister to broken bands of Indians until his death.

### **John Winthrop** **(1588–1649)** **Sacrificial governor**

In the late 1620s, English lawyer John Winthrop expressed the fears of many Puritans: "I am verylye persuaded God will bring some heavye affliction upon this lande [of England]. If the Lord seeth it will be good for us, he will provide a shelter and a hiding-place for us and others."

When the Lord provided that hiding place in England's American colonies, Winthrop played a significant role.

Young Winthrop entered Cambridge University in 1602. His marriage in 1605 cut short his academic pursuits. He lost two wives, one of whom bore him six children, in the next eleven years. But his marriage to Margaret Tyndal, daughter of a knight, in 1618, lasted until her death two years before his.

Winthrop considered becoming a priest but settled on law, becoming justice of the peace at Groton, and then lord of Groton Manor. He was an influential lawyer, frequently drafting petitions to Parliament.

Early on he was committed to Puritan ways. One diary entry reads: "O Lord, crucifie the world unto me, that though I cannot avoyd to live among the baites and snares of it, yet it may be so truly dead unto me and I unto it."

Winthrop debated hard about moving to America. Before leaving, he helped alter the Massachusetts Bay Charter so it could be administered locally, not in England (as the Virginia colony's was). Under the charter, Winthrop was elected governor, and in 1630, he set out with 600 to 700 people, not including his pregnant wife and three sons who were to join him later. While aboard the **Arbella**, Winthrop described a Christian commonwealth in the now-famous sermon, "A Modell of Christian Charity." New England was to be a "city upon a hill."

When Winthrop's party arrived, the colony had only about 250 people. Suddenly, it stood at 1,000, with another 1,000 arriving soon afterward. This influx and the independent charter gave John Winthrop extraordinary influence.

In the beginning, the clergy censured Winthrop for his laxity in disciplining wayward behavior (even though he had banished Roger Williams). He determined "to take a more strickt course heereafter," shown, some say, in his severity with Anne Hutchinson.

Winthrop ruled with a strong hand, partly because he felt that liberty requires secure authority. To him democracy was essentially mob rule. Though he believed in representative government, once elected, the elected should rule by their consciences.

In general Winthrop was judicious, modest, and self-sacrificing. An audit of his first years as governor revealed he donated large sums of his own money to the commonwealth. A popular magistrate, he served as governor for 12 of his 19 years in America. One of his sons and one of his grandsons were later governors of Connecticut.

**John Cotton**  
**(1584–1652)**  
**Controversial preacher**

When he was only 27, John Cotton was chosen vicar of the large and beautiful St. Botolph's Church at the English seaport of Boston, Lincolnshire. Typical of Cotton's later life, the appointment was shrouded in controversy: the election was won only because the mayor inadvertently cast his vote twice, and the bishop's approval was secured only by a bribe (of which Cotton was not aware).

Cotton, the son of a lawyer, did not have a religious awakening until his days at Emmanuel College,

Cambridge, where he lectured and served as dean.

By the time of his appointment to St. Botolph's, he was a committed Puritan. He began omitting certain practices from the order of worship, and within three years he was in trouble with the authorities. In 1632 he was summoned before the Court of High Commission, but discretion won over valor, and he sailed for America.

He arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 4, and by October 10 his reputation had won him the position of teacher of First Church.

Cotton was involved in the two earliest controversies to rack the colony. One of his members, Anne Hutchinson, claimed that Cotton and one other minister were alone, out of all the clergy of Massachusetts, "under the covenant of grace." Cotton eventually had to distance himself from her increasingly radical views on grace, which he had taught her, in England and America, in more orthodox form.

He also had a book war with Roger Williams. Cotton believed that government could enforce religious beliefs and practices. Williams fiercely objected in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644), and Cotton defended his views in *The Bloody Tenent, Washed and Made White in the Blood of the Lambe* (1650)—only to have Williams counter with *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652)!

Cotton became famous for his vivid and forceful preaching; sometimes his Sunday morning prayers and sermon lasted six hours. His catechism, *Milke for Babes* (1646), was the standard for New England children for decades.

Cotton married twice. His second wife survived him and married another American Puritan giant, Richard Mather. And his daughter Maria married Increase Mather and became the mother of Cotton Mather, two other titans of Puritan Massachusetts.

### **Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) America's first poet**

Anne Bradstreet seems to have been born in a castle, in Northampton, England, where her father was a steward for the Puritan Earl of Lincoln. She enjoyed the advantages of privilege and wealth, once noting, "When I was about seven ... I had at one time eight tutors ... in languages, music, dancing."

At age 16, Anne married Simon Bradstreet, a recent graduate of Cambridge and also a steward at the Earl's estate. Two years later, in 1630, she came to Massachusetts with a group of Puritans led by John Winthrop.

These sudden changes didn't suit her: "I changed my condition and was married, and came into this country, where I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose [in anger]," she later wrote her children. "But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined to the church at Boston."

After that, she led the demanding but relatively comfortable life of a mother (eventually bearing eight children) and wife of a husband who traveled in the highest circles of Massachusetts society. Between her domestic chores, she found time to write poetry. Her brother-in-law thought it so good, he managed to get a few of her poems printed in England, under the title, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America*.

Though she is today considered the first American poet, and though her poetry was admired by many

contemporaries, she was criticized by some for writing poetry:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue  
Who says my hand a needle better fits,  
A Poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,  
For such despite they cast on Female wits.

Still she composed poems: about nature, about marriage, about children, about faith—sometimes all at once. As one historian put it, her poetry shows “a Puritan could ... combine sexual passion, love of children and good furniture, humor—that the female Puritan, in short, could be both a Puritan and a woman of great charm.”

One of her most poignant poems was written in 1665 upon the death of an infant grandchild;

Farewel dear babe, my hearts too much content,  
Farewel sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye,  
Farewel fair flower that for a space was lent,  
Then taken away unto Eternity.  
Blest babe why should I once bewail thy fate,  
Or sigh the dayes so soon were terminate  
Sith thou art sealed in an Everlasting state.  
By nature Trees do rot when they are grown.  
And Plumbs and Apples throughly ripe do fall,  
And Cord and grass are in their season mown,  
And time brings down what is both strong and tall.  
But plants new set to be eradicate,  
And buds new blown, to have so short a date,  
Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate.

**Thomas Hooker  
(1586–1647)  
Founder of Connecticut**

Thomas Hooker traveled to America with two other Puritans, and when they arrived in 1633, the joke went around that New England now had “[John] Cotton for their clothing, Hooker for their fishing, and [Samuel] Stone for their building.”

Yet rather than stabilize the fledgling colony, as the saying suggested, Hooker's first actions seemed to threaten it.

Hooker had attended and lectured at Cambridge University's Emmanuel College, practically a Puritan institution at the time. His lectures and preaching won him wide recognition.

But by the late 1620s, Puritan views were becoming more suspect, and in 1630, an ecclesiastical court ordered Hooker before the High Commission. Instead, he forfeited bail and fled to Holland. Eventually he made his way to Massachusetts, where he was ordained as pastor of the church at Newtown (now Cambridge).

Within six months of his arrival, the townspeople sent out a party to seek a place to relocate. They said they were anxious for more land. But there is some evidence they were growing restive under the Massachusetts Bay authorities.

In 1634, the group applied to these authorities to move to the banks of the Connecticut River. John

Winthrop objected: such a move would undermine the oath the town had made of "being knit to us in one body ... to seek the welfare of this commonwealth."

In a close vote, the petition was denied. But within months, other communities began moving west, some with official permission, others without. And in May 1636, most of the town of Newtown did the same; led by Hooker, they established Hartford. ***The Fundamental Orders*** (1639), composed by Hooker, outlined a government essentially the same as the Bay colony's, though with more emphasis on the role of the people.

Hooker moderated the landmark council that formulated the ***Cambridge Platform*** (1649), a key expression of Congregational polity for all New England churches. His untimely death in 1647, of an "epidemical sickness," prevented him from seeing the fruits of his efforts.

He had married Susan Garbrand in 1621, and he left her and three children upon his death.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## Theology On Fire

**Puritans were not lukewarm about anything, let alone what they believed about God.**

Dr. J. I. Packer is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and author of numerous books, including *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Crossway, 1990).

An English Puritan preacher once exhorted his people about their neglect of the Bible. One hearer reported how the preacher "personates God to the people, telling them, 'Well, I have trusted you so long with my Bible; you have slighted it, it lies ... covered with dust and cobwebs; you care not to listen to it. Do you use my Bible so? Well, you shall have my Bible no longer.'

"And he takes up the Bible from his cushion, and seemed as if he were going away with it and carrying it from them; but immediately turns again and personates the people to God, falls down on his knees, cries and pleads most earnestly, 'Lord, whatever thou dost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods; only spare us thy Bible, only take not away thy Bible.'

"And then he personates God again to the people: 'Say you so? Well, I will try you a while longer; and here is my Bible for you. I will see how you will use it, whether you will love it more ... observe it more ... practice it more, and live more according to it.' "

In response, the people broke down and were "deluged with their own tears."

This anecdote takes us to the very heart of Puritanism—a passionate movement, and above all else, a Bible movement.

## Guide to Holiness

America's Puritans were English Puritans who had moved to "New England" in hope of achieving the corporate holiness in church and community that seemed unattainable in old England. For half a century, English Puritanism had sought further purging of England's national church, plus spiritual renewal for all Englishmen. The Puritans desired that every person, activity, and relationship might become "holiness to the Lord."

In this quest the Bible was both charter and chart.

Puritans, in their Christ-centered reading of Scripture, stressed the unity of the two testaments. They placed special significance on the Old Testament as giving God's blueprint (apart from changes of detail) for a godly church-state. Christians were to order every part of their lives according to biblical principles.

The Bible was the Creator's personal instruction to every reader, the recorded speech of the Holy Spirit. So all preaching had to be expository, with teaching and application. All sermons were to be memorized, with note-taking if necessary; "repeated" (gone over) at home; and meditated on thereafter.

Also, Christians should brood on Scripture constantly, applying all it says about relations between God and man. "I never yet observed any part of a Scripture ... " wrote John Cotton, that could not "be applied both with power and profit and delight to an honest heart."

Most Puritans saw the sufficiency of Scripture as applying to church order. Typically, the New England clergyman had gotten into trouble in old England for requiring that all ceremonies in public worship have scriptural sanction, and for refusing to conform to some Prayer Book ceremonies because they lacked it. The New England congregations were thought of as Anglican at first, but this "regulative principle"—limiting church order to what Scripture directly sanctioned—changed things. The Prayer Book was not imposed, there were no bishops, and congregational church government became the pattern.

## **Good and Severe God**

Puritans saw God scripturally as "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished ... " (Ex. 34:6–7). Puritans found this combination of goodness and severity, love and holiness, judgment and mercy, both awesome and adorable.

Thomas Hooker compared the believer's relationship to God to "a childe that travels to a Faire with his father." Even in a crowd, Hooker explained, "the child's eye is alwayes upon his father: ... the childe is carefull to keepe his father within sight and view, and then if hee bee weake and weary, his father can take him by the hand, and lead him, or take him into his armes and carry him; or if there be any thing hee wants, or would have, his father can buy it for him, bestow it upon him.

"But if the childe bee carelesse and gazeth about this thing and that thing, and never lookes after his father, hee is gone one way, and his father another, he cannot tell where to finde him: whose fault is it now? it is not because his father would not be within his sight, or because hee could not keepe within the view of him, but because hee out of carelesnesse lost the sight of his father."

Given this view of divine fatherhood, honoring, serving, loving, glorifying, and enjoying God was to the Puritans the noblest and most joyous life possible. Cotton Mather wrote in his diary of his deep desire "to love that which God loves, and hate that which God hates; to bee holy as God is holy, and like Him, a great Forgiver; and bee His Child, as much as may bee like the just at the Resurrection from the Dead. This will I seek, as the noblest Crown, that ever I can wear."

## **Vital Focus**

The focus of Puritan preaching was the regeneration and conversion of people.

Salvation began with regeneration—the supernatural re-creating of a person's motivational core. Out of this came conversion—a turning from sin to trust the promise of justification through the Cross, and to bow to the living Christ as Lord.

Regeneration-conversion was a single sequential process, a work of grace the Holy Spirit wrought through the message of law and gospel; it was named "effectual calling."

Without it, sincere commitment to God was impossible, because the unrenewed heart was ruled by the anti-God syndrome called sin. Thomas Hooker explained, "There was never any saved that was not a rebel first; nor any received to mercy, that first opposed not the mercies of God, and his grace in Christ."

The means of this grace were the Word (preached and heard, read and meditated on) plus prayer. When sought by these means, God would be found, though he remains sovereign over the when and how of the finding process. Regeneration-conversion brings believers into a covenant relationship: God becomes theirs forever, guaranteeing to keep them in faith and obedience here and to glorify them hereafter.

## Misunderstandings

American Puritan teaching on salvation has been misconceived in three ways at least.

1. ***Covenant is not a contract.*** The Puritans are said to have thought of God's covenant of grace as a contract; sinners must fulfill its conditions by making a commitment that precedes regeneration and is not entirely God's work in them.

Not so! The Puritans saw the covenant as unilaterally established by God. He alone induces conversion as he works in the heart to give the faith and repentance he requires.

In Thomas Hooker's apt words, "This is all the Lord requires of us, namely, to see our sins, to be weary of them, to be content that the Lord Jesus shall reveal to us what is amiss, and seal a pardon for it, and take it away; and further give us his grace to take down the old building, and to set up a new one in us after his image."

2. ***Preparation is not legalism.*** Puritan teaching on preparation for conversion has been misrepresented as a legalistic requirement; the sinner must undergo so much self-abasement and bewailing of sins before being permitted to believe on the Lord Jesus.

Puritans did make much of the preparatory "law-work" of conviction, compunction, and humiliation for sin. But that was simply because through this work God frees us from our natural love of sinning to embrace Christ. For Puritans, preparation deals not with the terms of the gospel, but with the method of grace in the human heart.

3. ***Changed life reveals a true conversion.*** Puritans saw that an unconverted "gospel hypocrite" might go far in his religiosity and be nearly indistinguishable from someone regenerate. Some have urged that this made it impossible for anyone to be assured of salvation, for whose heart and life are thoroughly changed?

But the Puritans insisted that desiring to please, glorify, and enjoy God above everything else—and being willing to endure any loss or pain to this end—argues a regenerate heart. Their definition is clear, and the formalist's failure to match up to it is clear too. Increase Mather pointed out that "When a man's heart within him is turned and set against sin, then he has truly experienced that conversion which the Word of God requireth."

In sum, for the Puritans, the Christian life was a hungry living out of God's grace-gift of salvation. As Thomas Shepard put it, "True grace, as it comforts, so it never fills, but puts an edge on the appetite; more of that grace, Lord!"

## Faithfulness in All Things

To practice faithfulness to God as an individual, a citizen, a worker, a family member, and a unit in the local church—this was Puritan religion in its essence.

The Puritans believed that unfaithfulness to God would bring judgment. Old England, having proved unfaithful to its calling, was now facing the barrenness and disruption of divine judgment. New England, please God, would do better.

The divinely established solidarity of the community was such that if judgment fell, all would be engulfed together. So neighbor-love and natural self-love, as well as love of God, should lead all to watch over each other so as to encourage and help each other toward godliness at all times.



The Puritans valued and intensely strove to live:

- a personal life of disciplined law-keeping and self-scrutiny, humble faith and hope, patience, penitence and prayer;
- a public life of doing good and practicing philanthropy wherever possible, while honoring God in one's family;
- a church life of worship and learning from a faithful preacher.

The Puritans held that these actions, done faithfully, would please God. And when all is said and done, if we are to judge by biblical standards, it is really impossible to doubt that they were right.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 41: The American Puritans

## Where American Puritans Lived

**To Raise a Family:** Early Puritans lived in one-room mud homes with thatched roofs. By the mid 1600s, two story wooden houses could be erected. Inside Puritan homes were the activities of a "little commonwealth": business, education, worship, and caring for one another. As one leading Puritan put it, "Families are the nurseries for church and commonwealth; ruin families and ruin all."

**To Worship:** The first meeting house of West Springfield, Massachusetts, built in 1702. Early meeting houses also held town meetings and housed gunpowder. By 1726, Cotton Mather wrote that almost every town in New England had "a modest and handsome house for the worship of God, not set off with gaudy, pompous, theatrical fineries, but suited unto the simplicity of Christian worship."

**To Govern:** Boston's first Town House (city hall) was built in 1657. Here, justice was administered. For example, it was an offense to declare a minister's sermon uninspiring or to walk in the garden on Sunday. Punishments for serious crimes: public ridicule in stocks, cutting off ears, slitting noses, boring holes in tongues, whipping, and hanging.

**Rugged Wilderness:** Early Puritan colonists stayed near the coast, for generally it was easier to travel by sea than by land. The interior was thick, unknown wilderness, populated with Indian tribes (see small caps on map). Moving even 100 miles west was like moving to a wild, far-away frontier.

**To Learn:** Harvard College in 1638, two years after its founding. Puritan society was now complete. The opening paragraph of Harvard's first commencement program reads, "After God carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses ... rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the Civill government: One of the next things we longed for ... was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the dust."

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### Witch Hunting in Salem

Why were 19 people hanged?

David D. Hall

*In February 1692, several young Salem girls, after they were caught practicing magic, claimed they had been afflicted by witches.*

*Their parents began searching for the witches, and hysteria mounted, especially as pastor Samuel Parris proclaimed, "In this very church, God knows how many Devils there are!" A public witch-hunt led to the arrest of 150 people; 19 were hanged for witchcraft, and one man was executed for refusing to testify.*

Christian History *asked historian David D. Hall to explain what motivated these troublesome proceedings. Dr. Hall is professor of American religious history at The Divinity School, Harvard University, and author of "Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England" (Knopf, 1985).*

Some twenty years before the Salem witch-hunt, a young woman living in the household of the minister of Groton, Massachusetts, began to "carry herself in a strange and unwonted manner." According to the minister, Samuel Willard, 16-year-old Elizabeth Knapp saw apparitions and experienced violent "fits" over a period of three months.

In the midst of one fit, she spoke in a "hollow" voice, and called the minister "a great black rogue" who "tell[s] the people a company of lies."

Willard answered back, "Satan, thou art a liar and a deceiver, and God will vindicate his own truth one day." Others in the room took up the confrontation, telling the Devil that "God had him in chains."

The answer came back, "For all my chain, I can knock thee in the head when I please."

Meanwhile, in her own voice Elizabeth told how the Devil had promised to make her a "witch" if she would sign a "compact" to become his servant.

#### The Difference of Salem

Events in Groton, and later in Salem, proceeded from the assumption that Satan lures certain people into compact with him, promising them, as he promised Elizabeth Knapp, that all "should be well"—they need not worry any longer about sin and salvation.

The people of Groton, however, also believed that, in the full course of God's providence, good would overcome evil. They witnessed the spiritual healing of Elizabeth as she, under the prompting of Willard, confessed that "the occasion of her fits" was "discontent" with her situation as a servant. She also said she was guilty of neglecting the means of grace. Though at times she accused an older woman in the town of causing her bewitchment, no wider witch-hunt erupted in Groton.

But witch-hunts did arise in other New England towns—Ambridge in 1659, Hartford in 1662–63, Boston in 1688, and infamously in Salem Village (now Danvers) in 1692.

One minister, Deodat Lawson, hearing of the troubles in Salem Village, came there in late March of 1692. He witnessed 12-year-old Abigail Williams "hurried with violence to and fro in the room" and "sometimes making as if she would fly." Then the names began to flow: Good wife Nourse, Good wife Corey. ... A judicial hearing quickly followed, with Abigail Williams and some nine others testifying that they had seen the "likeness" of these women praying to the Devil.

No one heeded Martha Corey when she remarked that her chorus of accusers were "poor, distracted children." Thus empowered, the accusers piled name onto name. Before the legal process was suspended in October 1692, nineteen persons had been executed.

## **Uncertainty and Anger**

What tensions rose to the surface in 1692 and resulted in this witch-hunt?

As the story of Elizabeth Knapp of Groton reveals, some tensions originated in the religious expectations of Puritanism.

One expectation was that believers fulfill, to the best of their ability, their moral duties. Another was that they examine their motives—in Puritan parlance, their "hearts"—to see whether they had sufficiently repented of sin and trusted entirely in the mercy of Christ. Puritanism intensely and regularly posed this question: Are you sincere?

Answering this question often resulted in self-doubt and uncertainty. One woman, Mary Toothaker, "had thoughts she was rather the worse for her baptism and had wished she had not been baptized because she had not improved it as she ought to have done."

Sometimes the uncertainty turned to anger, as when Elizabeth Knapp called Willard a "rogue." And sometimes the anger turned into blaming: Elizabeth, like the young women in Salem Village, blamed her inward confusion on an outside, alien figure, a witch or the Devil.

## **Accustomed to Confession**

Puritans practiced the ritual of confession, and confession became crucial to witch-hunting. To confess was to make visible the hidden sin that lurked in everyone. This was a crucial step, and well accepted, in the process of salvation. When men and women joined the church in early New England, for instance, they were asked to confess their sins.

The magistrates and ministers who questioned the accused at Salem asked them to reveal their hidden allegiance to Satan. Because Puritans felt heavily the weight of their sin, and because confession was an integral part of their lives, we should not be surprised that some fifty men and women confessed to having joined with the Devil.

The Puritans believed that God had entered into a special relationship with godly people. This relationship obliged them to purge themselves of sins, personal and communal, that inevitably accumulated. The ministers and magistrates in New England believed witchhunting, and the public executions that concluded it, cleansed the community of evil.

Some ministers, notably Cotton Mather of Boston, reasoned that the Devil would become unusually active as the return of Christ neared. The presence of witches in New England was evidence of a vast

"plot" masterminded by the Devil to overthrow the kingdom of Christ.

Because of the concern for the spiritual integrity of the community, confessing "witches" were asked to name confederates, adding fuel to the fire of accusations.

Belief in witches was not unique to the Puritans. A folklore much older than Puritanism embraced charms, fortune-telling, omens and apparitions, and village healers or "cunning people." The healers' vengeful counterparts, witches, could cause someone's chickens to sicken, cattle to run away, or children to become fatally ill.

Some Puritans turned to "cunning" people or to other folk practices. Not far away from Salem in the 1670s, a woman put a horseshoe over her front door to prevent a suspected witch from entering. When a church deacon saw the horseshoe, he tore it down. In the Salem trials, several of the men and women executed had reputations as healers and cunning folk.

### **More Than Individuals**

Who were the heroes and villains of the witch-hunt? Much blame has fallen on the contentious minister in Salem Village, Samuel Parris; the magistrates who conducted the trials; and Cotton Mather, who defended the judges against the charge they victimized innocent people.

Yet Cotton Mather and his father, Increase, helped end the trials by criticizing certain judicial procedures. And Samuel Parris and the judges were simply acting according to widely held expectations of the time.

Witch-hunting, in fact, was not unique to Puritan America. It occurred in both Catholic and Protestant regions of Europe, and the toll it exacted in New England was much smaller than in Scotland or parts of France and Germany.

Why witch-hunting became deathly in some Puritan villages but not others will likely remain a mystery. Rather than assign blame, we should understand the tragedy at Salem as the outcome of forces larger than any single individual or group.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## The Puritans Behind the Myths

And how these adventurers affect us today.

interview with Harry S. Stout

Who were the real Puritans? And why did "Puritan" become a derogatory label? In what ways have the Puritans shaped what we believe and how we live today? To answer these questions, Christian History editors Kevin Miller and Mark Galli talked with Dr. Harry S. Stout, Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Christianity at Yale University. Dr. Stout is the author of *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford, 1986).

**Christian History: What do we misunderstand about the American Puritans?**

**Harry Stout:** Most Americans picture the Puritans as people who had no humor and no compassion. In their minds, the Puritans sat in self-righteous judgment on the rest of the world. That stereotype has lent the word *puritanical* the dark meaning it assumes today.

**How would you dispel that myth?**

I would point out that the Puritans were enamored of bright clothing, and their houses were brightly painted. They had a strong sense of beauty. While they were not attracted to the visual arts, the Puritans produced great poets like Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor.

Also, the Puritans were not opposed to parties. They certainly did not have sexual hang-ups. They were not prudes.

It's true that promiscuity was absent from colonial New England. But for husband and wife, sex was important, and Puritan families were routinely large. A spouse could be punished by the authorities for withholding sex from his or her partner.

**So how did the "joyless Puritan" stereotype get started?**

It began during Prohibition. People like H. L. Mencken said, "Whom do we blame for this Victorian America we live in?" and the Puritans came out as culprits.

In fact, the Puritans were not teetotalers. Scholars estimate the Puritans had a rum-consumption rate that surpasses the alcohol-consumption rate in the twentieth century.

**Were Puritans deeply emotional people**

Yes. They were intense lovers and intense haters. They were intensely reverent.

For the Puritans, nothing was done unthinkingly or unfeelingly. They believed that their life mattered, that what they were doing was more important than anything else in the world. If you believe that, you will feel extreme emotions.

**What scared the Puritans?**

They were alarmed about secularism, though they would have called it *infidelity*. In their day, the great secularism was a form of deism that denied the divinity of Christ and undermined intimacy with God.

The Puritans also feared the rising generation would not measure up to the piety of their fathers and mothers. They often talked about loss of faith in their children.

### **Why do so many people misunderstand the Puritans?**

To understand the Puritans, you have to adopt their attitude: Life is a great adventure. The Puritans saw themselves on a group mission, like a corporate Pilgrim's Progress.

If you read the Puritans' writings as cold, theological prose, they will kill you quickly. You have to look deeper to see what's motivating them: the yearning to build a Christian civilization, a new world order. Creating this was the adventure of a lifetime.

In John Winthrop's famous speech aboard the *Arbella*, the Puritans fixed on what I would call "a world-regenerative creed." They believed, "We are reforming not only Anglicanism and Christendom but the whole world."

***To understand the Puritans, you have to adopt their attitude that life is a great adventure.***

—Harry S. Stout

### **Didn't many Puritans come to America primarily to escape persecution?**

There was persecution in England, but it was limited mostly to ministers. So it wasn't fear of persecution that drove the laity to come.

Instead, many lay people were extraordinarily loyal to their pastors and followed their pastors to the New World. It's impossible to overstate the spiritual and moral influence these ministers had over their congregations. Ministers were enormously respected, people for whom the laity literally traveled the ends of the earth. The most famous case would be Anne Hutchinson, who convinced her family to follow her minister, John Cotton, to America.

### **In history, what other groups have so thoroughly tried to create a new religious world?**

The most obvious would be the Dutch in South Africa and the Mormons in Utah. In America, only two "theocracies" have lasted for any length of time: the Puritans in New England, and the Mormons in Utah.

### **Why did the Puritan experiment finally collapse?**

The Puritans' charter was revoked in 1689, so the Puritans could no longer compel assent. They had to tolerate Quakers and Anglicans. This created a real crisis of meaning: How do we survive in a pluralistic world?

Today, we take religious toleration for granted. What would terrify us would be the exact opposite—a theocracy, such as we see in the Middle East.

### **How much have the Puritans shaped American culture?**

Though some scholars disagree, I believe Puritanism shaped American society to an extraordinary degree.

Recently, historians have pointed out—rightly, I think—that we cannot forget the contribution of Quakers, Presbyterians, native Americans, African-American slaves, and so on.

But the Puritans were more than merely one group among many. They exerted an influence in American culture disproportionate to their numbers.

For instance, they gave us a world-regenerative creed, a vision that America is "a city set upon a hill." That vision infuses American literature, foreign policy—our entire sense of identity.

Listen to Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, or Bill Clinton. They often speak of "destiny" and "providence." Or civil-rights leaders speak of a dream of equal treatment under the law. All of these people are drawing from Puritan roots, whether they know it or not.

### **In what other ways have Puritans made a major impact on modern American culture?**

The Puritans believed that education was central to the Christian life. Harvard was formed while people were digging out the first

settlements. The first classes at Harvard took place with bears running through the campus, yet classes were in Latin. The Puritan colleges were steeped in the Western Christian, classical tradition. In fact, Harvard and Yale were the only colleges in the Western world that required Hebrew.

For the next two centuries, Harvard and Yale were emulated widely—until this century, when the university became secularized.

### **What can modern Christians learn from Puritan Christianity?**

They were able to hold in tension traditions that many people consider opposites: *liberal* and *evangelical*. They eagerly studied the most recent learning, confident it could be reconciled with the evangelical teachings of the New Testament.

You always see in Puritans a passion for both the head and the heart, for both piety and intellect. That combination culminates in Jonathan Edwards. But entire generations of New Englanders tried to emphasize both head and heart.

### **What happened to this ideal?**

It's a hard one to maintain. After the American Revolution, the head moved toward Unitarianism, to a liberalism without the ballast of supernatural grace. The heart moved toward Methodist and Baptist piety. At the beginning, anyway, these movements were anti-intellectual and did not produce seminaries or colleges.

From that point on, few Christians have been able to achieve this synthesis of head and heart. Occasionally, though, you find a C. S. Lewis—a warm-hearted Christian and leading scholar.

### **If you were transported back to seventeenth-century Massachusetts, what would you find most enjoyable and most difficult**

Well, for starters, I'm sure I'd be banished. Anyone who didn't conform, such as Roger Williams, was expelled.

What I would find most exciting is to be part of something bigger than myself, to be connected to something that's going to live after I would die.

What I would find most frustrating is the idea that this larger purpose requires the coercive arm of the state.

### **How has studying the Puritans affected you personally?**

You can't read the number of Puritan sermons I've read and not confront the central question of those sermons: your mortality.

The Puritans knew that this life doesn't go on forever, and that you need to live your life in the shadow of eternity.

It's frightening to confront your mortality. Studying the Puritans made me confront what we try so hard to avoid in this society. But it confirmed in me the sense that there needs to be an eternal hope.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 41: The American Puritans

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## The American Puritans: Recommended Resources

Mark Galli is managing editor of Christian History.

For the American Puritans, the wealth of material is overwhelming. Here is an attempt to make the overwhelming manageable; the focus is on Puritanism from 1630 to 1730.

Two of the most accessible overviews complement each other nicely. Francis Bremer, in *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (St. Martin's, 1976), covers key events in an engaging narrative. Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Zondervan, 1986) discusses topically who Puritans were and what they believed.

Puritanism as an intellectual movement is covered magisterially by Perry Miller in *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953)—essential but not for the faint-hearted. A more accessible treatment is J. I. Packer's *Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Crossway, 1990).

### Puritan Faith

How did the Puritans live out their faith? Harry S. Stout studied the key role of preaching in *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford, 1977), while Horton Davies, in *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629–1730* (Peter Lang, 1990), shows why and how Puritans worshiped.

Getting more personal, David D. Hall looks at relationships between pastors and parishioners in *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (North Carolina, 1972). Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe's *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England* (North Carolina, 1982) reveals how Puritans improved their spiritual lives.

Edmund S. Morgan wrote *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England* (Greenwood, 1944, 1966) to give us a glimpse inside the Puritan home. The experience of Puritan women is revealed by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *Good Wives: Image and Reality in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (Vintage, 1980).

Want a closer look at a time when Puritan intentions went awry? Start with Larry Gragg's *The Salem Witch Crisis* (Praeger, 1992), an effective narrative of the events.

### Key People

Two books that help us look at individuals are Edmund S. Morgan's *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Little, Brown, 1958), an engaging look at the prominent Puritan governor; and Michael G. Hall's more exhaustive *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather* (Wesleyan, 1988), the archetypal Puritan preacher.

Samuel Eliot Morison, in *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930), gives quick biographies of important early Puritans. For a close look at one dissenter, see Edwin S. Gaustad's *Liberty of Conscience:*

***Roger Williams in America*** (Eerdmans, 1991).

### **By the Puritans**

Finally, hear Puritans speak for themselves in these two splendid anthologies: Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, eds., ***The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*** (Harvard, 1985) and Perry Miller, ed., ***The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*** (Doubleday, 1956).

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