

CHARACTERISTICS of the PURITANS

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The Puritans were an interesting and unique people who exhibited a rare combination of characteristics. This combination enabled them to enjoy temporal and historic influence far beyond their numbers.

The Puritans sprang up during the Reformation. They were a small group which derived their beliefs, motivation, and vision from the Bible. While the term itself originated in 1607, the values which made up Puritanism developed beginning in the 16th century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Puritanism peaked in the mid 17th century with the overthrow of the English monarchy and the establishment of Puritan New England in the new world. The Puritans' basic belief system derived from their conviction that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that all of society should be guided by what the Bible taught. Teachings derived from other sources were subordinate to the Bible at best and to be forsaken entirely at worst. For many Puritans, the Bible was the first and even only reading they knew, though Puritans generally were much better read than their literate peers.

Many different sorts of groups developed during the Reformation. Though Puritans shared many characteristics of other new groups which sprang from the Reformation, the following set of characteristics made them unique:

- 1) A strict emphasis on the Bible as God's only guide for life.**
- 2) A highly pious life, which, while it did not require religious formal practice, did promote a high level of personal morals, prayer, and the study and guidance of scripture.**
- 3) A personal relationship with God through Christ. This often included an emotional conversion experience, as well as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Puritanism, however, did not require this existential experience for salvation; it was a characteristic shared among Puritans which was not common or even rare for other Christians.**

- 4) A belief in stewardship for all of God's creation, including the church and its relation to government. The Puritans desired to reform all of life to conform with the teachings of the Bible. This vision of church and state is what motivated the Puritan establishment of colonies in New England and the Puritan overthrow of the monarchy during the English Civil War. Puritans were vigorously anti-Catholic, but this was related to perceived extra-biblical teachings of the Catholic Church (including divine right of kings) and political interference by the Vatican and Catholic monarchies of Europe. The Puritans also tended toward comparatively tolerant treatment of Judaism, though this was not a focus of Puritanism. The Puritans desired that church and state be separated and that taxes (tithes) which supported church operations be locally controlled and managed rather than under the control of a centralized church which was the patronage of a monarch or political power.
- 5) An emphasis on education, primarily or exclusively to better understand the Bible. For example, Harvard and other Ivy League universities were established as seminaries by the Puritans.

It must be emphasized that Puritanism exhibited all five of the above descriptions simultaneously. Each of these characteristics individually were shared by other groups. Puritans mostly were members of other sects and their Puritanism was co-incidental to that membership. For example, many Puritans were Presbyterians, but most Presbyterians were not Puritans. Puritans were disproportionately Calvinists, but not all Calvinists were Puritans. During this era, many Anglican clergy were Calvinist, but did not consider themselves Puritans and many opposed Puritanism. Many Baptists and Quakers were Puritans. An influential group of Puritans were Independents, who desired liberal tolerance of religious views, the complete separation of faith from government, local control of congregations, and the abolishment of the tithe, which was a tax the government was obligated to collect to support the operations of the church. Many Independents desired that the mandatory tithe be substituted with free-will offerings. The most unique characteristic of Puritanism is the emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ and the

Holy Spirit, though, of course, most Christians enjoyed a formal relationship through the institutions of their church, community, and family.