PART ONE

HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY
A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PURITANS

The Hartford Sermon Notebook is a product of the Reformation, and with the rise of humanism and the popularity of the cults of antiquity, Europeans since before the time of Luther and Calvin had been reaching back many centuries for answers to questions about their world. Donatism, with its pursuit of a perfect church on Earth, and St. Augustine’s distinction between the visible and invisible churches, are only fragmentary examples of the impact of early Christianity on what would become Protestantism, and ultimately for this book, Puritanism. In other words, Puritanism did not spontaneously erupt somewhere in England during the sixteenth century. The ideas that shaped it took centuries to grow, and in terms of the Reformation as a movement, the story of the Puritans is but one of its chapters.

In The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century, Perry Miller tells us, “The soul of Puritan theology is the hidden God, who is not fully revealed even in His own revelation. The Bible is His declared will; behind it always lies His secret will.” Miller notes that the Puritan religious ethos as determined by scripture was not restrained to Sunday devotions. Puritans used the Bible as a kind of blueprint for behavior, and not simply personal behavior, but in matters of theology, politics, economics and military exploits, the Bible was the instructive source.

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1 Edmund S. Morgan, Visible Saints: the History of a Puritan Idea (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 2–3. In addition, in an interesting article “Were There Any Puritans in New England?” The New England Quarterly 74, no. 1 (March 2001), 118–138, the historian Michael Winship argues that the very meaning of the term “Puritan” is problematic and in need of reassessment. This book uses the term “Puritan” throughout its pages. I believe “Puritan” is a recognizable historical term that, while objectionable to some, is an accepted point of reference for most historians and theologians.


3 Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson eds., The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings, 43.