The correct definition of Puritanism has been such a complex issue since the initial research of the movement that one prominent scholar remarked that it would be possible one day to write a complete dissertation on the subject. This is just what Randall Pederson of the University of Leiden has done, resulting in the addition of a new volume to Brill’s Studies in Church History. While some scholars of early modern English religion have abandoned the search for a correct definition of Puritanism and posit that there are two or more forms of Puritanism, others have attempted to articulate the components of a distinct Puritan style of practical divinity.

Pederson seeks to advance this research by a study of three Puritans who represent several strains within Stuart Puritanism: John Downame (1571-1652), Francis Rous (1580/81), and Tobias Crisp (1600-1642/43). Whereas Downame belongs to the dominant strain of precisionism, which combines a reformed-orthodox theology with a carefully ordered lifestyle, Rous is a prominent representative of the mystical strain. His reformed-orthodox theology is coupled with a decidedly subjective spirituality that is influenced by several medieval mystical works. Tobias Crisp, the third author, reveals antinomian traits in emphasizing, rather than precisionism, salvation through Christ and the inner work of God’s Spirit. Pederson investigates whether these writers were so diverse that they hardly have anything in common, or whether there was some sort of theological and spiritual common denominator.

On the one hand, these Puritan authors are indeed of one mind in embracing the same reformed-orthodox doctrines regarding God, predestination, covenant, and grace. On the other hand, they demonstrate diversity, especially with regard to the relationship between justification, sanctification, law and gospel, and the Christian life. The similarities between the three authors, according to Pederson, are useful for detecting a discernable and distinct Puritan style among the members of the movement, whereas the differences make it clear that Puritanism was a broad movement containing divergent emphases. Pederson uses a two-pronged approach.

In regard to Familienähnlichkeit, he identifies distinct theological and social similarities between Puritans of divergent persuasions, but in terms of the greater narrative of Puritanism he asserts that these Puritans were united in their quest to reform their church and society. His conclusion is that even though Puritans were diverse and articulated at times competing ideas, and even though they were often embroiled in controversy with one another, there was still significant unity among them. Historically they were united in that they were...
clearly progenitors of a movement for further reform, and theologically they were united in that they exemplified a distinct style of divinity and piety.

The terms ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’ imply a deep and intense devotion, an interest in Reformed piety, and a strong adherence to reformed orthodoxy, all of which were woven into a distinct style, resulting in precisionism. English Puritanism, then, should be seen as a discernable and distinct lifestyle practiced by its members—a lifestyle that manifested itself during a specific period of history and coalesced in a reform of morals and manners.

This is a very important study by virtue of its conclusion that the terms ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’ should be retained as a helpful, useful, and essential description of a group of early modern English reformers; at the same time, the study acknowledges that practical theological differences among them were on a number of occasions very real. Pederson’s research and its definition of the early modern English reform movement can therefore be useful as a stepping stone toward future Puritan research.

However, as can be expected, notwithstanding Pederson’s thorough research, not all problems are hereby solved. How are we to assess radical Puritanism, as, for example, in the cases of John Goodwin, John Milton, John Eaton, and Lodwick Muggleton? Here Pederson’s position is ambivalent. On the one hand, he considers them as dissidents who were more nuanced than their confessional counterparts, because they neither belonged to mainstream Puritanism nor were they orthodox Reformed.

On the other hand, radical Puritanism emerged in response to and out of frustration with the mainstream tradition, especially in regard to the issue of assurance and comfort for the afflicted conscience. While mainstream Puritanism reached a consensus in the Westminster Confession, those radicals and revolutionaries who challenged the confessional mainstream and moved beyond its boundaries became so splintered and fractured that they never achieved this consensus. However, they were nevertheless related to this confessional mainstream. In light of this relationship, ‘Puritanism’ is best understood “as a rather broad conglomerate of tendencies and trajectories of such overlapping strains as precisionism, mysticism, antinomism and neonomism” (p. 228).

Therefore, even though it clearly remains somewhat challenging to define the exact parameters of Puritanism, the great profit of Pederson’s study for future research is that in the final analysis it provides us with a very useful tool to differentiate within this early modern English movement, while at the same time affirming its common ground.