

Church History (37): Puritanism in North America

Having considered the English Puritans, in this lesson we want to consider those who left England for search of religious freedom in North America. We shall consider the primary reasons they came, the principle groups that formed, and their social views on education, poverty, and charity.

I. Puritanism in North America

1. *Primary reasons.* It was during the reign of King James I (1603-1625), that many within the Church of England, fled to Holland for religious liberty. "Within England two groups developed. One group was led by John Smyth (1570-1612) and Thomas Helwys (1575-1616), and the other by John Robinson (1575-1625). The Smyth-Helwys group arrived in Amsterdam in 1607 and the Robinson group followed in 1609" (Needham).¹ While in Holland, and under the influence of the Mennonites, both Smyth and Helwys became Baptist. "Soon John Smyth concluded that the Mennonites were right about believers' baptism, and persuaded Helwys and the other Separatists of their group to follow his lead. Further, Smyth's engagement with the Mennonites had also prompted him to reject Reformed views of sin and grace in favor of the more Semi-Pelagian views of Mennonites" (Needham).² Eventually, Smyth and Helwys differed on certain aspects of baptism, and Helwys returned with his group to England in 1611, becoming "the first known Baptist church on English soil" (Needham).³ The other body of Separatist exiles, led by John Robinson, ultimately settled at Leyden (Leiden) in 1609. "Unlike the Smyth-Helwys group, Robinson's group of exiles never abandoned infant baptism or Calvinism. In 1620, part of Robinson's church, under the leadership of William Bradford (1590-1657) and William Brewster (1560-1643), emigrated to North America. They were motivated by economic hardship in the Dutch Republic, fear of the consequences of the Thirty Years' War, and anxiety for their children, exposed on all sides to an alien culture with its fair share of temptations" (Needham).⁴ Thus, with Robinson's blessing, 28 adult members of the church and their children, booked passage on an English ship, the Mayflower, which sailed from Plymouth (a port city in southwest England) on September 6th 1620.

William Bradford, the first Governor of Plymouth (New England), wrote a *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, and provided four reasons they chose to leave Leyden and journey to North America. "First, they saw by experience that the hardships of the country were such that comparatively few others would join them, and fewer still would bide it out and remain with them."⁵ "Second, they saw that though the people generally bore thee difficulties very cheerfully, and with resolute courage, being in the best strength of their years; yet old age began to steal on many of them, and their great and continual labors, without other crosses and sorrows, hastened it before their time; so that it was not only probable, but certain, that in a few more years they would be in danger of scattering by the necessities pressing upon them."⁶ "Thirdly, as necessity was a task-master over them, so they themselves were forced to be, not only over their servants, but in a sort over their dearest children; which not a little wounded the hearts of many a loving father and mother, and produced many sad and sorrowful effects."⁷ "Last and not least, they cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations, or at least of making some way towards it, for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance

¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:219

² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:219-220

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:220

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:221

⁵ William Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, 19

⁶ William Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, 20

⁷ William Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, 20-21

of so great a work. These, and some other similar reasons, moved them to resolve upon their removal, which they afterwards prosecuted in the face of great difficulties."⁸

2. *Principal groups.* Early southern colonies were Virginia, Jamestown, and Maryland, and northern colonies were Plymouth, Massachusetts, Connecticut (New Haven), Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. The former (southern) were largely Anglican and Roman Catholic, whereas the latter (northern), were primarily Congregational, Presbyterian, and Baptist. "It should be noted that the Pilgrim Fathers were not the first English settlers in North America, nor even the first settlers with a serious Christian faith. The Virginia colony of Jamestown, founded 13 years earlier, may have been primarily merchant, but it took religion very seriously" (Needham).⁹ This colony was more Anglican than Puritan, whereas Bradford and his group, were Puritan and Congregational. "Within several decades, there were three more 'religious' colonies—Massachusetts, New Haven, and Connecticut, settled by English Puritans who had taken the plunge into Separatism. It has been estimated that something like 20,000 such emigrants arrived on North America's east coast in the 'Great Migration' of 1630-1640, to escape from an Anglican Church they found increasingly distasteful" (Needham).¹⁰ "It was not until the London Company landed its first colonists at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 did permanent settlements begin drawing Englishmen to the New World. The Pilgrims landed in 1620, and ten year later the Massachusetts Bay Company began attracting thousands of frustrated Puritans to Boston and its surrounding towns. Between 1629 and 1642 some twenty-five thousand Puritans migrated to New England" (Shelley).¹¹ From Plymouth, the early settlers (Separatists) moved to Massachusetts (1630), Connecticut and Rhode Island (1636).

(1) Massachusetts. In 1629 King Charles I, gave Massachusetts Bay Colony permission to establish a colony in New England. Thus, nearly a thousand Puritan families came to the new world in 1630, under the leadership of John Winthrop. Boston and Charleston were among the communities established. By the 1640s, Massachusetts Bay contained more than 20,000 inhabitants. Under the leadership of John Winthrop, Massachusetts Bay became the strictest of all colonies. Only members of the church could own land or hold political office. In 1648, other New England colonies along with Massachusetts Bay, adopted the *Cambridge Platform*, establishing a Congregational Church government. "After the publication of the Westminster Confession, and at the request of the Massachusetts General Court, the New England churches sent elected lay and ministerial officers to convene in a synod, known as the Cambridge Synod because it met in the Cambridge meetinghouse" (Wesley).¹² The preface to the *Platform* says of the WCF, "we give our professed and hearty assent and attestation to the whole confession of faith—for substance of doctrine—excepting only some sections in the 25th, 30th, and 31st chapters of their confession, which concern points of controversy in church discipline, touching which we refer ourselves to the draft of church discipline in the ensuing treatise."¹³ Thus, the WCF was formally adopted by the New England Churches, with Cambridge Platform serving as a supplement for Church government.

Now, by this our professed consent and free concurrence with them in all the doctrines of religion, we hope it may appear to the world that as we are a remnant of the people of the same nation with them, so we are professors of the same common faith and fellow heirs of the same common salvation. Yea moreover, as this our profession of the same

⁸ William Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Settlement*, 21-22

⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:223

¹⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:223

¹¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 317

¹² Alice Wesley, Introduction from the *Cambridge Platform: A Contemporary Reader's Edition*, viii

¹³ Preface to *Cambridge Platform*, 3-4

faith with them will exempt us, even in their judgments, from suspicion of heresy, so we trust it may exempt us in the like sort from suspicion of schism. That, though we are forced to dissent from them in matters of church discipline, yet our dissent is not taken up out of arrogance of spirit in ourselves, whom they see willingly condescend to learn of them, neither is it carried with uncharitable censoriousness towards them, both which are the proper and essential characters of schism, but in meekness of wisdom, as we walk along with them and follow them, as they follow Christ.¹⁴

Upon arriving on the shores of the new world, Winthrop preached a famous sermon entitled, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, wherein he described Massachusetts as a *City upon a Hill*. His main doctrine was, *GOD ALMIGHTY in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in submission*. He then examined four things about Christian love: the persons (who we are to love); the work (the manifestation of love); the end (the purpose of love); and the means (how we are to love). As Winthrop believed there was no separation between church and state, the state punished violations of all Ten Commandments. Furthermore, as only Congregationalists could join the church, only Congregationalists were welcome in Massachusetts. All others, Baptists, Anabaptists, Quakers, and Anglicans, were banished to other colonies. Winthrop decreed in 1645, "If any person or persons within this jurisdiction shall either openly condemn or oppose the baptizing of infants, or go about secretly to seduce others from the approbation or use thereof, every such person or persons shall be sentenced to banishment."¹⁵ Thus, in September of 1651, three Baptist ministers from Rhode Island, John Clarke, John Crandall, and Obadiah Holmes, entered Boston to visit a fellow Baptist. They were arrested, tried, and found guilty of "seducing others" and especially "re-baptizing of others." As punishment for such crimes was banishment, and given the fact that they already lived outside Massachusetts, all three men were fined. "All the fines provided for a hard alternative: to be paid in full or else the culprit was to be well whipped" (Gaustad).¹⁶ Clarke and Crandall both eventually paid their fines, but Holmes refused. Thus, Holmes was publically whipped in the market place of Boston. While his clothes were being stripped from him, Holmes said, "I am now come to be baptized in afflictions by your hands, that so I may have further fellowship with my Lord. I am not ashamed of His sufferings, for by His stripes am I healed."¹⁷

John Cotton served as the pastor of the First Church of Boston from 1633-52. He wrote several treatises explaining and defending Congregational polity, including *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (1645) and *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (1648). His catechism, *Milk for Babes, drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments* (1646), was widely used throughout New England for the instruction of children. He also published several expositions of Scripture, including *Song of Solomon* (1552), *Ecclesiastes* (1554), and *I John* (1657). "Cotton remained at First Church until his death on December 23, 1652. He was survived by his second wife, Sarah, and several children. One son, Seaborn, so named because he was born on their voyage to America, graduated from Harvard and became a minister at Hampton, New Hampshire, for 26 years. Another son, John, Jr., became minister at Plymouth, Massachusetts and Charleston, South Carolina. A daughter, Mariah, married Increase Mather, and was the mother of Cotton Mather. Increase and Cotton Mather, both noted New England theologians, took up Cotton's mantle" (Beeke).¹⁸ Another influential pastor in Massachusetts was Thomas Shepard (1605-1649). Shepard came to America in 1635, and became pastor of the newly

¹⁴ Preface to *Cambridge Platform*, 4-5

¹⁵ As quoted by Edwin Gaustad, *Baptist Piety*, 16

¹⁶ Edwin Gaustad, *Baptist Piety*, 26

¹⁷ Edwin Gaustad, *Baptist Piety*, 29

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 160

established Congregational church in Newtown (now Cambridge), Massachusetts, where he remained until his death. "In Cambridge, Shepard acquired a reputation for effectiveness as an evangelist. Cotton Mather called him 'Pastor Evangelicus' and Edward Johnson, the chronicler of early New England, memorialized him as 'that gracious, sweet, heavenly-minded and soul-ravishing minister, in whose soul the Lord shed His love so abundantly that thousands of souls have cause to bless God for him'" (Beeke).¹⁹ Shepard is most known today for his exposition of the parable of the ten virgins. "In forty-one heart-searching sermons on Matthew 25:1-13, Shephard considers the difference between true and spurious conversions. This book is of particular importance today in confronting the prevailing climate of easy believism" (Beeke).²⁰

(2) Connecticut. In 1636, Thomas Hooker (1566-1647), Samuel Stone (1602-1663), and thirty-five families, left Massachusetts to found Hartford and the Connecticut Colony. Hooker left largely because of strong differences with John Winthrop and John Cotton over voting. "The counsel which prevailed in Boston, influenced by the assumption that at various points a Christian state should follow the OT theocracy, restricted suffrage to church members and was ready to deal with differences of religious opinion by force of law" (Murray).²¹ "Advocates of that position, led by Winthrop, were vehemently opposed to the democratic political theory that Hooker favored. Winthrop and Hooker debated this issue at great length, personally and in written correspondence" (Beeke).²² Simply put, Hooker believed there should be more of a distinction between the magistrate and church and thus, all men should be able to vote, irrespective of their relation to the church. His views were made known in a sermon preached on May 31, 1638 from Deuteronomy 1:13, "Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you." It was here that Hooker made clear distinctions between politics (magistrate) and religion (church). Hooker provided three doctrines from his text that formed the backbone to his sermon: "First Doctrinal Statement: The choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by God's own allowance." "Second Doctrinal Statement: The privilege of election which belongs to the people must not be exercised according to their whims but according to the blessed will and law of God." "Third Doctrinal Statement: Those who have power to appoint officers and magistrates have it in their power also to set the bounds and limits of the power and places unto which they call them." "When the General Court of Connecticut began drafting a constitution, Hooker peached a sermon on Deuteronomy 1:13, which advocated democratic principles. The constitution that Connecticut adopted in 1639, called the *Fundamental Orders*, embodied those democratic views" (Beeke).²³

(3) Rhode Island. "The intolerance that reigned in the Puritan colonies forced some to abandon them. Most famous among these was Roger Williams (1603-1683)" (Gonzalez).²⁴ "Roger Williams came to Massachusetts in 1631. He accepted a call to pastor the church in Salem in 1634. He came into conflict with Governor Winthrop and other Massachusetts Bay officials. He questioned the validity of infant baptism, denied that Puritan New England was particularly special in God's eyes, and insisted that the civil magistrates had no authority in matters of religion and conscience" (Carden).²⁵ "Williams was convinced that magistrates should be granted authority to enforce only those commandments that had to do with the ordering of society, and not those that had to do with an individual's relationship with

¹⁹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 526

²⁰ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 528

²¹ Ian Murray, quoted by Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 355

²² Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 355

²³ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 356

²⁴ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:284

²⁵ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 199

God" (Gonzalez).²⁶ Isaac Backus, in his *A History of New England Baptists*, provided two reasons Williams created controversy in Salem: "1. Because he refused to join with the congregation of Boston, because they would not make a public declaration of their repentance, for holding communion with the church of England while they lived there. 2. Because he declared it his opinion, that the civil magistrate might not punish any breach of the first table."²⁷ In 1636, Williams was eventually banished from the Bay Colony, and so he and some of his followers, established the settlement of Providence, southwest of Boston. "In 1644 Williams was able to receive from the Parliament a patent uniting and recognizing Providence and a few other scattered settlements, thus forming the basis for the colony of Rhode Island" (Carden).²⁸

"Not long after his settlement at Providence, Mr. Williams, with several of his brethren, embraced the views of the Baptists. Wishing to be baptized by immersion, they were at first not a little embarrassed for want of a person whom they deemed qualified to administer the ordinance; and the result of considerable consultation on the subject was that, in March, 1639, they appointed Mr. Ezekiel Holliman to baptize Mr. Williams, who in return, baptized Mr. Holliman and ten others. These were soon joined by twelve other persons, who came to the settlement for the sake of liberty of conscience. And thus commenced the first Baptist Church on this continent" (Sprague).²⁹ "The advanced views of Williams in regard to the need of personal regeneration in a Christian and his utter rejection of infant baptism, show clearly the grounds of his baptism by Holliman. In a letter to George Fox, written later in life, he states that a Gospel Church must be made up of such regenerate men, and calls them 'actual believers, true disciples and converts, living stones, such as can give some account how the grace of God has appeared unto them and wrought that heavenly change in them'" (Armitage).³⁰

3. *Social views.* (1) Education. "The Puritans regarded education as essential—not as an end in itself, but as a means of religious knowledge which could lead to the salvation of one's soul. The quest for learning was made possible in part because of the Puritans' refusal to compartmentalize life into things secular and sacred. From their perspective, all of life and learning was worth exploring; true knowledge possessed unity and meaning since it was a creation of God" (Carden).³¹ Families were responsible to teach younger children, with particular attention to "their ability to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country." "Parents could be fined if they were found wanting in the carrying out of their instructional duties" (Carden).³² Grammar schools were established in towns of one hundred households. After seven or eight years, boys that did well in grammar school might become candidates for Harvard College. "Within six years of the founding of Boston, Harvard College was established in nearby Cambridge as a training ground for the colony's future ministry. Harvard was in many respects a prototype of the Christian liberal arts colleges of our own day" (Carden).³³ Yale was established in 1701.

(2) Poverty. "The first generation of New England Puritans was of the opinion that piety did not guarantee success, and success was not necessarily an indication of piety. Poverty, therefore, was not to be viewed as punishment from the hand of God. Sermons indicate that the clergy made a significant distinction between the 'worthy' poor and the 'idle' poor whose plight was essentially their own doing and

²⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2:284

²⁷ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England Baptists*, 1:42

²⁸ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 200

²⁹ William Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, 1:14

³⁰ Thomas Armitage, *The History of the Baptists*, 2:661

³¹ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 185

³² Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 186

³³ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 213

who could, if so inclined, exert themselves to better their positions" (Carden).³⁴ "For those who were alcoholics or of 'disorderly' temperament, and refused to work, towns built workhouses, with strict rules. For example, two by-laws of an early workhouse were: 'Every person who may be received into said workhouse or be a member thereof must obey the orders and regulations thereof and the commands of the master, and will be required by him diligently to work and labor as he shall direct, according to age, health and capacity. Every person who shall absent himself from the said workhouse shall be deemed to be an idle, stubborn and disorderly person, and punished accordingly'" (Olasky).³⁵ "Individuals and churches could and did help the 'worthy poor' out of tight jams. But mandated 'outdoor relief'—provision outside the poorhouse—was seen as making it too easy to avoid the responsibilities charged to every human being" (Olasky).³⁶ In addition to social and religious help, the "worthy" poor was to be assisted by family members. "Parents, grandparents, and children of 'every poor, old, blind, lame and impotent person, or other poor person not able to work' should 'relieve and maintain every such poor person,' unless they themselves were economically incapable. Those immediate relatives who would not offer such support were fined heavily. And thus, the final leg of a stool on which every poor person could sit—a three-legged stool of family, church, and neighborhood—was put in place" (Olasky).³⁷

(3) Charity. "Sermons indicate that the clergy were concerned not only about the behavior of the poor but also about the behavior of the rich. The ministry was well aware of the power and influence of the wealthy merchant class. In essence, the clergy urged the wealthy to do works of charity" (Carden).³⁸ In a sermon on 1John 3:17 ('whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him'), John Cotton answered this question: "To whom shall we be helpful? To every brother who has need. (i) Beggars who are unable to labor, and would gladly labor, must be relieved, or those who, though they do labor, yet cannot get a living. (ii) A brother who has need; those who are poor indeed, who have neither hands, friends, nor maintenance. A man is said to be in need not only when he is utterly cast down, but when his is falling. (iii) We must aid every brother, one as well as another."³⁹ But early colonial charity was limited to the "worthy" poor. "In colonial America, emphasis on a theistic God of both justice and mercy led to an understanding of compassion that was hard-headed but warmhearted. Since justice meant punishment for wrongdoing, it was right for the slothful to suffer. And since mercy meant rapid response when people turned away from past practice, malign neglect of those willing to change also was wrong" (Olasky).⁴⁰ "Colonial compassion was cautious. Cotton Mather warned his church members in 1698, 'Instead of exhorting you to augment your charity, I will rather utter an exhortation that you may not abuse your charity by misapplying it.' Mather added, 'Let us try to do good with as much application of mind as wicked men employ in doing evil'" (Olasky).⁴¹ "Most leaders in both the North and South, did not assume that men (and women) naturally want to work. They believed that many persons, given a choice between working and not working, would choose to sit. They viewed the poor not as standing on the bottom rung of the social ladder, with the only choices stagnation or upward movement, but as resting in the middle, capable of moving either upward to economic independence or downward to 'pauperism,' characterized by a defeated and dependent state of mind, as well as a lack of income" (Olasky).⁴²

³⁴ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 154-155

³⁵ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 7

³⁶ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 9

³⁷ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 10

³⁸ Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America*, 165-157

³⁹ John Cotton, *An Exposition of First John*, 382

⁴⁰ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 3

⁴¹ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 3

⁴² Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 5-6