

CHURCH HISTORY

The Church in America: 17th Century

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The Modern Church, part 8

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. A new land had been discovered in North America. The then civilized western world, which was in great religious, economic and political turmoil, was ready for the adventure of pioneering and settling a new land.
- B. The desire to propagate the gospel in freedom without persecution was one of the prime motives for most who came to America in those beginning years.

II. THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

- A. The Episcopal Church was the first Protestant church to be introduced into America. At Jamestown in 1607 the English established their first successful colony. This was primarily an economic venture but the Anglican Church was established there to meet the spiritual needs of the colonists.
- B. The Episcopal Church was from the beginning the established or state church of Virginia, and remained so throughout the colonial period. It also became the established church in all the English colonies south of Virginia, as well as of New York.
- C. Throughout the seventeenth century the Episcopal Church was very weak and made little progress. There was a lack of trained, able clergy because good men could get better positions in England, and with no bishop or college there were no means to provide clergy from the area. In 1693, the College of William and Mary was chartered in Williamsburg, with the purpose of training men for the Episcopal ministry. In 1701, there was founded in England the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. This society became the great missionary organization of the Church of England, and was responsible for sending trained missionaries to America.

III. THE PILGRIMS

- A. A distinction must be made between the Pilgrims and the Puritans. The Pilgrims were originally called Scroobyites because they were a group of separatists who lived at Scrooby in Nottinghamshire, England. Because of persecution from the Anglican Church, they fled to Holland. They were able to make arrangements with the London Company to settle in Virginia. They set sail from Plymouth, England, in the Mayflower and landed on the bleak, rocky coast of Cape Cod on November 11, 1620. They named the place Plymouth and introduced Congregationalism to the New World. These Pilgrims left the old country to have freedom of religion and to keep their children from the evil world. It was said of their children:

“drawne away by evill examples into extravagante & dangerous courses, getting ye raines off their neks, & departing from their parents . . . so that they saw their posterietie would be in danger to degenerate & be corrupted.”

- B. When these separatists left England, they said, “Farewell Babylon.” Slightly more than 100 persons sailed on the Mayflower under the spiritual leadership of William Brewster and the later political leader William Bradford. To provide state government when they landed, the Pilgrims drew up the Mayflower Compact, which was really a church covenant applied to a political situation. This was their only legal basis for government until 1691, when Plymouth merged with Massachusetts.
- C. As a whole, the little group of believers did not grow into great numbers. They, for the most part, were poor and humble folk, and they were looked upon as radicals because of their separatist views. In fact, the Separatists were despised by all their fellow countrymen. The colony at Plymouth always remained small; however, by 1630 the colony numbered 300.
- D. Doctrinally, these Pilgrims were strong on the congregational form of government, and leaned strongly towards separation of church and state. They were deeply rooted in Calvinistic theology. Boettner says,

“Calvinism came to America in the Mayflower, and Bancroft, the greatest of American historians, pronounces the Pilgrim Fathers ‘Calvinists in their faith according to the straightest system.’ John Endicott, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; John Winthrop, the second governor of that

Colony . . . were all Calvinists” (Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 382.).

IV. THE PURITANS

A. *Review of Puritanism:* The Puritans stayed within the established Church of England. They wanted the Anglican Church to reform, and were opposed to separation. They wanted reform in the liturgy of the church (less ritual, and greater adherence to biblical design), reform in the lives of people, and reform in the training of ministers (men of outstanding character who were scholars).

B. *Puritan Migration*

1. The first small band of Puritans (about sixty people) migrated to Salem in America in 1628 under John Endicott. King Charles I, who had no love for Puritans, granted a charter to Puritans who wanted to go to the New Land. Desiring religious freedom and a better economic existence, John Winthrop led about 1,000 Puritans to settle in Boston and other towns. Between 1629 and 1639, when Charles ruled without a Parliament, about 20,000 Puritans came to New England. Included were 147 of England’s greatest preachers. Most of the people were of the upperclass, well-educated levels of English society. They were some of the finest citizens of England.

2. The Puritans, while they abhorred the low spiritual condition of the Church of England, had no desire to depart from it. One of the first Puritan ministers to come to Massachusetts Bay was Francis Higginson. When from the deck of the ship he saw the shore of England fade away, he said,

“We will not say as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving England, ‘Farewell Babylon! Farewell Rome!’ But we will say, ‘Farewell, dear England; farewell, the Church of God in England; and all the Christian friends there!’ We do not go to New England as Separatists from the Church of England, though we cannot but separate from the corruption in it.

C. *Church and State*

1. The Puritans did not come to establish religious liberty. They came to establish a theocracy. They did not believe in democracy. It was their desire to establish a colony where Christ ruled through the Bible. The government was of God, headed up by an aristocratic elect group.
2. The Puritan Colony was a state-church system. The first General Court in 1631 linked the franchise with church membership by limiting it to regenerate church members, thus creating a practical union of church and state. The church was also supported by public taxes. By 1636 the General Court gave power over the church to the magistrates and, later, control as to who preached what and where. The General Court, made up of the governor and freemen, had full legal authority.
3. The irony of the Puritans is that, while they never believed in democracy, they became the forerunners of the democratic principles of America. From the Puritans came the seeds of democracy. While they originally opposed the Separatists, they became separatists themselves and set up churches which were Calvinistic and congregational. They disagreed with Calvin over the type of church government a local church should have. By 1629, Puritans were electing their own pastors. Churches were based on complete local autonomy. Because of the Puritan concept of electing church officers, the democratic principle came into being.

D. *Philosophy of Education*

1. The Puritans stressed the necessity of education for ministers. Preachers should be well trained in the Bible as well as in the classics. In 1636, the foundation was laid for a Christian college at Cambridge in Massachusetts. It was named Harvard. Harvard was established first, even before grammar schools, for the new colony needed trained men for the ministry. Harvard was patterned much after Cambridge in England because many of the ministers had gone there. This school was geared for the one purpose of preparing men to exegete and preach the Word of God. The average student entered the college at 15 years of age. The curriculum was difficult, consisting of grammar, literature, Aristotelian philosophy, languages, metaphysics, algebra, etc. To enter the school one had to have a good working knowledge of classical Latin, and had to decline perfectly all the Creek verbs of the Greek New Testament. The first entrance requirement was to have a personal

knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who is the center of all learning.

Many of the greatest biblical and theological Christian works were done by Puritan ministers. The Puritans probably had the greatest Christian society in the history of the world.

2. The Puritans had elementary education where every child was taught to read and write. There was no illiteracy. The text books were the Bible, and other books that were related to the Bible and to Christian philosophy of life. The daily catechism was taken from a book entitled *Milk For Babes Drawn Out Of The Breasts Of Both Testaments*. There was a preparatory school for college which they called grammar school. Every town was required to have and support a grammar school and elementary school. A high percentage of children graduated from elementary school (common school), but the casualties came in the grammar school. Why? Latin killed many off, and many had to go to work.
3. The Puritan attitude was not “Let’s change the curriculum to accommodate the weaklings.” They felt they were doing young students a favor by failing them if they could not make it. If a man dropped out, they did not stigmatize him as being a failure. God had given each person a certain capacity, and each was to find his niche in life.
4. Rigid as the Puritans were, their standards largely influenced things been done in America subsequently. Puritans tenaciously held to a view that it was not just what was “crammed” down the brains of children in the classes that mattered. It was the facts that brains were honed and sharpened by mental discipline, and that mental energies were channeled. The Puritans were trained to think through issues clearly. Their minds were of high caliber in insight, and were stabilized by much “mental sweat” in early years.

- E. *Doctrinal Beliefs*: The Puritans were Calvinistic, congregational and believed in infant baptism:

“Basing all his theology on the Bible, the Puritan asserted the sovereignty of God and the total depravity of man through Adam, the federal head of the race, who broke the covenant between God and himself. Because this covenant of works with Adam failed, God graciously set up the new covenant of grace in Christ, by which the elect were chosen and irresistibly brought to salvation by the Holy Spirit, who applied the work of the atonement, limited to the elect, to their hearts. They believed that the elect ones were also united by a covenant to God and to one another in a church of regenerate believers, who alone could elect magistrates and church leaders. This system of thought led to a rigid code of ethics. The covenant concept was carried over into political life” (Cairns, *Christianity In The United States*, p. 31).

- F. *Missions*: The Puritans had a view of missions that was certainly not as biblical as it could have been. There was little desire to go into all the world with the gospel, and very few ever went to the American Indian with the message of Christ. Of course, there were exceptions like the great David Brainard, John Eliott and the Mayhew family. The Bible was translated into the language of a few of the tribes, but as a whole there was not much evangelistic thrust or missionary vision among the Puritans. This, probably more than anything else, led to the decline of Puritanism.

- G. The Half-Way Covenant (1662)

1. The decline of Puritanism began with the Half-Way Covenant. Included in the church covenant of the New England Puritan’s theology was the provision of infant baptism. This was extended only to the children of believing parents. It was a sign that the parents would bring the child up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and within the church community. It was trusted that the baptized child would later be converted and personally conform to the covenant.
2. However, many of the children grew up and were never converted. Yet, they still attended the church services. They wished to have their children baptized, but could not since only the children of converted parents could be baptized. This situation was so common that in 1662

it was decided that the children of baptized but unconverted parents could also be baptized. This provision is known as the Half-Way Covenant. Their need to alter their practices in this way indicated the sterility and deadness of New England Puritanism in its second generation. The Puritans were in a mess, and only God could rescue them; God did just this in the Great Awakening which came late in the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

V. THE BAPTIST

- A. The Baptists had their early beginnings with Roger Williams, who came to Massachusetts in 1631. The Congregational Church was the established state church, and Williams believed in the separation of church and state. He immediately came into conflict with the church authorities in Boston.
- B. He became the minister of the Pilgrim Church at Plymouth, and learned the language of the Narragansett Indians in order to teach them the gospel. In 1634, he was called to minister to a Congregational church in Salem. He served there for two years, and won a number of the members to his view about the separation of church and state.
- C. Williams was forced to leave Massachusetts for his beliefs, and went to Rhode Island to establish a new colony where Baptist principles would be practiced, and where there would be freedom of religion. In 1638, the first Baptist church in America had come into being.
- D. America is indebted to Roger Williams for the principles of: 1) separation of church and state; 2) church membership not a requirement for voting; and 3) complete liberty of religion. Many Puritans in Massachusetts were persuaded by the teachings of Roger Williams, including Henry Dunster, the second president of Harvard College.
- E. Williams was essentially Calvinistic in his beliefs about salvation, but many of his followers were not of this persuasion.

VI. ROMAN CATHOLICS

- A. About the time Massachusetts settlers were spilling over into Connecticut, Lord Baltimore was planting a colony in Maryland (1632). This colony was to be a haven for persecuted Catholics, who were in the minority. However, not many Catholics came to Maryland, which was very bad for the economic growth of the colony. For economic purposes, toleration was granted to all religious groups except those that denied the Trinity (Jews and Unitarians).
- B. It is very interesting that the first English colony in America in which religious toleration was established by law was founded by a Catholic. With Lord Baltimore, freedom of religion was not a principle, as it was with Roger Williams, but a matter of policy. In order to make his colony profitable, Lord Baltimore needed settlers to whom he could sell the land.
- C. In 1692, the Baltimore family lost its possessions in America. Maryland was made a royal colony, and the Church of England was set up as the established or state church.

VII. DUTCH REFORMED

- A. The Dutch were not to be outdone by the English, so they set up two colonies in the New Land (New Netherlands): New Amsterdam and New Jersey. While the Dutch did not profess any religious motivation for colonization, they naturally favored the Dutch Reformed Church, the first one appearing in 1628. The efforts of Dutch governors to enforce the Dutch Reformed Church were not successful, for almost from the beginning New Amsterdam became a cosmopolitan center. In 1664, the New Netherlands was captured by the English, and New Amsterdam was renamed New York. The Dutch Reformed Church was allowed to carry on its work unhindered, but it did not prosper. Thirty years later there was a great variety of religious faiths in the colony. There were almost as many English Separatists as Dutch Reformed. Besides these, there was a sprinkling of French Huguenots, Lutherans, Anglicans and Jews.
- B. In 1693, the Church of England was made the state church of New York. The Anglican ministers were to be supported by the state. The absence of any colonial bishop prior to the American Revolution prevented the effective on-the-spot leadership necessary for the growth of the Anglican Church anywhere in the New World.

VIII. QUAKERS

- A. The Quakers had a strong missionary spirit. By the end of the seventeenth century, they could be found in every colony in the New World. The Quakers, because of strong divergent views such as separation of church and state, pacifism, inner light, etc., were persecuted socially.
- B. In 1681 Pennsylvania was granted to William Penn, and the next year Delaware was added to be a haven for persecuted Quakers. Later Delaware became a separate colony.
- C. Penn made a success of his colony by granting complete religious freedom and advertising his colony in Europe. Thus thousands of Europeans came to Pennsylvania. In 1685, only half of the colony was English. By 1760 it is estimated there were thirty thousand Quakers. But as numbers increased, their spiritual life declined.