



## **PILGRIM AND PURITAN: A DELICATE DISTINCTION**

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Near the end of his term as president of the United States, Ronald Reagan delivered an address in which he sought to call the American people back to the values of - in his words - "that old Pilgrim, John Winthrop." Reagan's successor in office, George Bush - who, according to some, ought to have known better because he is a descendant of *Mayflower* passenger John Howland - compounded the historical error in his 1992 Thanksgiving proclamation by saying, "This Thanksgiving... let us renew the solemn commitment that John Winthrop and his fellow Pilgrims made more than 100 years ago." Mr. Bush not only had the Pilgrims and Puritans confused; he missed their dates by more than two centuries! And a bit more recently, the November 1994 issue of the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* suggested that we include in our Thanksgiving that year "the Puritans in Plymouth, Massachusetts from whom most of our traditions come." The same article later described the "first Thanksgiving" as "the 1621 feast to celebrate the first long winter the Puritans survived in the New World."

These illustrations of the apparent ignorance of many Americans concerning at least some parts of our own history have produced among some of us Mayflower descendants an emotional reaction. We become highly incensed if someone refers to the Plymouth settlers as "Puritans," and we become downright angry at the thought that Winthrop might be called a "Pilgrim." The purpose of my presentation today is to examine with as little prejudice as possible the shared history, similarities, and differences between the two groups we commonly call Pilgrims and Puritans.

Let's start with some basic definitions. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines a *Puritan* as "A member of a group of English Protestants who in the 16th and 17th centuries advocated strict religious discipline along with simplification of the ceremonies and creeds of the Church of England." The *Puritans*, in short, were people who wanted to reform or purify their church. A *pilgrim* (spelled with a lower-case "p"), is defined in that same dictionary as "A religious devotee who journeys to a shrine or sacred place, or one who embarks on a quest for something conceived of as sacred." A pilgrim is one who makes a journey for a religious purpose.

In America, we've added specific references to those two terms. We apply the name *Pilgrim* (with a capital "P") to the small band of English people who came here in 1620 on a vessel called the *Mayflower* and settled in Plymouth. We use the name *Puritan* to refer to a much larger group of English immigrants, led by John Winthrop, who came here ten years later and started Massachusetts Bay Colony. Both groups were motivated by their religious convictions. Both groups wished to purify their church by applying the principles of the Protestant Reformation.

In other words, the *Pilgrims* who settled Plymouth were *puritans* seeking to reform their church, and the *Puritans* who settled Massachusetts Bay were *pilgrims* (with that lower-case "p") who moved to a

whole new land because of their religious convictions. Now you know why I call it a "delicate distinction!"

What the two groups have most in common is Puritanism, so it seems appropriate that we take a few minutes to consider that movement: the issues which called it into being, its beliefs, and a bit of its history. In a biography of William Bradford entitled *Bradford of Plymouth*, Bradford Smith offered a concise description of the movement called Puritanism. He wrote:

Puritanism in England was essentially a movement within the established church for the purifying of that church - for ministers godly and able to teach, for a simplifying of ritual, for a return to the virtues of primitive Christianity. There was nothing revolutionary about the main body of its doctrine. . Its innovating principle was in the idea that the Bible, rather than any established religious hierarchy, was the final authority. Therefore every man, every individual, had direct access to the word of God. It was the Puritan's aim to reconstruct and purify not only the church, but individual conduct and all the institutions men live by.

The Protestant Reformation that had taken place in the sixteenth century in Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere on the European continent had not really touched England nearly a century later. By the Act of Supremacy in 1534, King Henry VIII had taken control of the Church in his country away from the Pope, but little else had changed. The Church of England was the official and only church in England. Everybody belonged to it, whether they wanted to or not. Every resident of a given community was automatically a member of the parish in that community. Worship services were read from a Prayer Book. There was little or no teaching or preaching that went on in worship; therefore, there was little need for a trained clergy or for the clergy to make any effort at preparation for worship.

Because it was an extension of the government, the English church was as subject to political abuse and favoritism as any other governmental agency. One result was that the office of the parish priest became a sinecure given as an expression of the favor of the hierarchy; many of the clergy were assigned to parishes but never went near them! The church members had nothing to say about all of this; they were expected to quietly accept whatever the hierarchy of the church thrust upon them. In his biography of John Robinson entitled *The Pilgrim Way*, Robert Merrill Bartlett summarized the problems which led to the rise of Puritanism in England as being "the tyranny of the hierarchy, the indolence of the clergy, and the lethargy of the laity."

The initial impetus for the Puritan movement came from a highly enlightened area of England, and the movement was noted from the beginning for its intellectual substance. Dr. Bartlett wrote of the Puritans:

They were part of the intellectual and cultural ferment of the Elizabethan period. They were close to the amenities of Lincoln, Boston, York, and within the arc of influence that emanated from Cambridge [University]. . They were substantial thinkers, and their contribution was not only religious and intellectual but of literary significance as well. . These Puritans marshaled a mighty brain trust. Their movement was one of the intellectually best equipped in history; and they prevailed in their reformation through the force of their logic expressed in dynamic Elizabethan English.

As in any movement bent on major social change, Puritans differed among themselves about the degree of change that was necessary and what it would take to effect that change. They were all radical, of course; that's the nature of any movement that seeks change. But some were more radical than others.

The least radical of the Puritans were committed to purifying their church from within, with as little

upheaval as possible. They were content with the idea of a state church and very aware that to challenge that church could be construed as an act of treason. They therefore sought to bring about within the structure of the Church of England the changes they most wanted: the Bible, not the church hierarchy, to be the ultimate authority; membership by choice and therefore limited to those who had at least some degree of religious motivation; and an active clergy who carried out some teaching as well as purely liturgical functions.

Then there was a group who wished to retain the Anglican Church identity but reform its polity - its form of organization - to give each local congregation control over its own affairs. These people were a small minority in the Church in England and were known as congregationalists.

A major dividing line comes between the two groups that I've just described and the next: the Separatists. Most simply stated, these were people who had given up on any possibility of real reform within the Anglican Church and sought to separate from it and start their own churches. Again, there were differing points of view among the Separatists. They are often lumped together under the name Brownist because the first vocal Separatist was a minister named Robert Browne. But Browne was extremely radical, and not all Separatists agreed with him either theologically or on church polity. Most of the Separatists who stayed in England favored a structured form of church organization called presbyterianism, which was already strong in Scotland. Those Separatists who came to New England favored the congregational approach to church polity but rejected Browne's extremism. And that brings us to these shores. The Pilgrims at Plymouth were Separatists; the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay were not. As a matter of fact, one of the deepest concerns for Governor Winthrop was the fear that, in New England, his followers would be drawn to the Separatism that was already here because of the presence of Plymouth Colony. And that, in effect, is what ultimately happened.

Both Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth perceived themselves as purely English colonies, subject to English law and loyal to the English monarch. But with England an ocean away, the colonists in New England - just as much at Massachusetts as at Plymouth - had to make decisions and devise the systems by which their society and its institutions would operate. Even though the Church of England continued to be the official church in Massachusetts Bay Colony, there were no bishops or other hierarchy present to sustain its bureaucracy. The act of moving from old to New England had brought about a kind of *de facto* separatism, and in time the Congregational form of church polity became the accepted way throughout the colony.

That system had undergone much development by the Plymouth group during their exile in Holland and under the leadership of their beloved pastor, John Robinson. Of Robinson's thoughts on the matter, Bartlett wrote:

Robinson drew a distinction between the faith and order of the Church of England. He could accept its faith, but not its order. . Robinson believed that church polity was an essential part of church doctrine. The order of the church was of basic importance. Its principles had been instituted by Jesus and his early followers, and there was no place in this system for an ecclesiastical hierarchy. The English parish system, which included people without regard to character, was also alien to a communion of saints. . The church should be composed of those who had separated themselves from the world, that is, those who were dedicated Christians. They were "gathered" into organized companies for communion and mutual service. They were bound through a covenant with God and as a consequence the power which Jesus gave to the church was lodged in them. The congregation had the power to choose and ordain its own minister, to choose its own officers, to receive and dismiss members.

Those hallmarks of the Congregational way came, in time, to be accepted in both colonies and were to undergo further development as New England matured. Despite their differences concerning

separation from the Anglican Church, Puritanism was a shared commitment that did more to draw the two New England colonies together than to force them apart. They did, however, have differences. Some were subtle; most were significant.

An obvious difference between the two groups is their size. When the *Mayflower* arrived at Plymouth in December of 1620, it brought 102 passengers, half of whom were to die in that first terrible winter. Ten years later, no fewer than 17 ships, headed by the *Arbella*, made port at Salem, bringing with them a thousand settlers for Massachusetts Bay. After another decade had gone by, the population of Plymouth Colony was a mere 2,500, while that of Massachusetts Bay had risen to 20,000.

Another less-than-subtle difference between the two groups is the economic and social status of their people. The Pilgrims at Plymouth were, for the most part, yeomen - working people. There were some among them successful enough to merit the title "Master," but none who appended to his name the title "Gent." There was not even an ordained minister in the group. The colonists of Massachusetts Bay, by contrast, were better educated, more economically and socially successful, and brought with them educated clergy to give leadership to both the church and the community. William Bradford, the governor whose leadership shaped the Plymouth colony, had been a fustian worker (fustian is a corduroy-like cloth); his counterpart in Massachusetts, John Winthrop, was a trained lawyer who had worked in the English government service.

These differences in size and the social class of the members of the two colonies may be the reason that many have confused the two groups and underestimated the importance of the smaller of them. Indeed, the English historian Arthur Percival Newton wrote:

The Massachusetts migration was an event entirely without precedent in the modern world; Virginia, Newfoundland, and Guiana had attracted merely the adventurers and the needy; the Mayflower pilgrims, though later ages have glorified them, were too few in number, too humble in station, and too far removed from the main currents of English life to be of importance; but now sober, well-to-do men of middle age, to whom the spirit of adventure was entirely foreign, were contemplating a transfer of themselves, their families, and their goods to new homes across the seas, there to found not a colony, but a commonwealth.

The more subtle differences between our two groups of colonists were largely the product of the years that the Pilgrims had spent in Holland. There, they had been influenced by Dutch ways of doing things and by the deep and generous spirituality of their pastor, John Robinson. Under these influences, the Pilgrims had further developed the Puritan concept of covenant, the voluntary but sacred agreements by which they understood themselves bound together in church and community. This highly developed idea of covenant tends to separate the Pilgrims of Plymouth from the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay in at least three ways.

The first is in the colony's government. The members of both colonies had a voice in selecting their leaders, but once that choice was made there was a subtle but significant difference in attitude about those leaders.

Plymouth's Mayflower Compact was viewed by the members of that colony as a covenant. Those who were elected to office were bound by the terms of the covenant just as were all members of the community; they were in that sense equals. Philosophically, therefore, Plymouth's government came close to being a true democracy; its elected officers derived their powers by the consent of the governed within the terms of their shared covenant.

In Massachusetts Bay, a more English philosophy prevailed. The Governor, Deputy Governor, Assistants, and other officers were chosen by the people. Once chosen, however, they understood themselves to be ruling with divine authority. Edmund Morgan, in his book *The Puritan Dilemma; The Story of John Winthrop*, put it this way: "Rulers, however selected, received their authority from God, not from the people, and were accountable to God, not to the people."

Although it is not really an accurate use of the word, Massachusetts Bay has been described as a theocracy, and that for two reasons. The colony was founded on motivations that were primarily religious, so for the governing officials to be under divine authority meant they were also answerable to God. In keeping with that point of view, the clergy - the most educated men in the community - were often consulted and played a significant, though unofficial, role in the making of government decisions.

The relationship of church and state is the second area in which the colonies differed significantly, if subtly. Morgan describes the situation in Massachusetts Bay:

The relationship between church and state was one of the things that the Puritans knew they must get right. They were certain that God had prescribed the terms of it, and they had thought much about it before leaving England, where church and state were confounded at every level from parish to Crown. In Massachusetts the Puritans drew a firmer dividing line between the two than existed anywhere in Europe. The state was still responsible for supporting and protecting the church: as guardian of the divine commission the state must punish heresy like any other sin. And it did so, inflicting loss of civil and political rights as well as other penalties. But in prosecuting heresy it did not operate as the agent of the churches. It formed its own judgments with the aid of a jury or in the General Court, where the representatives of the people sat in judgment with the magistrates. The church had no authority in the government and the government was particularly careful not to allow the actions of any church to affect civil and political rights. In England excommunication carried heavy civil disabilities, in Massachusetts none. The right to vote and hold office was not revoked by loss of church membership.

Though the clergy had no political authority of any kind, they did enjoy a very powerful indirect influence. They were highly respected by their congregations, and when unpopular measures had to be adopted, the magistrates counted on their assistance in reconciling people to the necessity of obedience. When a difficult decision had to be made, the magistrates frequently consulted the ministers, who were learned men and wise in the laws of God. In this way, though they were barred from the exercise of authority, a back door was left open through which they could influence state policy.

At Plymouth, church and state were even more markedly separated. Like all Puritans, both groups held that the Bible - as opposed to church leaders or their pronouncements - is the final authority. In Plymouth, they interpreted that to include the idea that what Scripture does not specifically claim as a religious function remains a civil one. The best-known result of this thinking was the belief in Plymouth that marriage was a civil rite, not a religious one. Governor Bradford himself explained that marriage is "a civill thing, upon which many questions aboute inheritances doe depende, with other things most proper to their cognizans... and no wher found in the gospell to be layed on the ministers as a part of their office." Bradford's biographer summarized the Pilgrim attitude this way:

Whatever the elders had planned at Leyden, it is clear that Bradford and the younger generation wanted to create, under God and His guidance, a Christian commonwealth in which Scripture should be the guide but with civil and religious functions clearly separated.

The third area in which I perceive a significant difference between the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay has to do with attitude. There was about the members of the Bay colony an arrogance which they brought with them from England. Using a kinder vocabulary, Edmund Morgan described it as "that unabashed assumption of superiority which was to carry English rule around the world." It's expressed in the belief that, even though they may have been chosen by the

people, the autocratic leaders in Massachusetts ruled by divine right. And it's seen in the way that these colonists related to others, including members of other English colonies as well as the Native Americans.

This difference in attitude is illustrated in an incident described by Robert Bartlett:

In 1635 members of Pastor John Warham's church in Dorchester decided to move to the Connecticut River. They visited the Plimoth trading post at Windsor that was in charge of Jonathan Brewster. He extended them hospitality and helped them secure canoes and guides to explore the area. He was shocked when they announced that they were taking over Plimoth's land and building on it. Brewster pointed out that the Pilgrims had bought the land from the Indians in order to establish their fur trade, and that thousands of acres were available for their Dorchester colony. But the newcomers stuck to their purpose, assured that providence had so willed it. During these confrontations two shallops of Dorchester settlers set out from Boston for the Connecticut post. Their boats were wrecked on Brown's Island in Plimoth Bay. Plimothians rushed to the scene and gathered in the victims and their possessions. A third boat that was carrying cargo to the Windsor site for the migrants was blown ashore off Sandwich. Once again the people of Plimoth salvaged the goods and turned them over to the owners. Obviously the Dorchester colonists must have been somewhat chagrined by these demonstrations of brotherliness. In due time, as they reflected upon their haste and avarice, they decided to forego their claim on the Pilgrims' land and to move on into the wilderness.

There are differences between the two groups of English immigrants who settled the area in which we now meet. Undoubtedly, the exile, the terrifying journey on the *Mayflower*, and the suffering in the first winter at Plymouth had much to do with the gentler attitude of the Pilgrims. So also had their years of living in Holland's more tolerant society and the influence on them of one deeply spiritual man, John Robinson.

But our Pilgrims and Puritans also had many similarities. They had a shared history and experience of old England. They shared a commitment to God and the Biblical revelation so strong that, because of it, both groups were willing to cross an ocean and set up new homes on an unknown continent. As time went on, the two colonies came to depend more and more upon one another until finally both the boundary between their lands and the delicate distinction between their cultures faded into obscurity. 370-plus years later, we give thanks to God for both groups.

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