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Pilgrim Hope: Seedbed of Liberty

"Thus out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and, as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shown unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise. "

- Pilgrim Governor William Bradford

Nearly 20 years before the landing of the Mayflower, a small church plant met under the threat of imprisonment in Scrooby, England. The motto of their church congregation was "Reform ourselves without tarrying for any." The members believed that the church should be separate from government control and under Christ's lordship only, a belief that gave rise to their name: Separatists. They simply wanted to live in peace, obeying the teachings of the Scriptures. But the new king, James I, would not tolerate religious liberty. Some Separatists were maimed or burned at the stake. In 1607, the men of the Scrooby congregation were imprisoned for eight months.

They were not pale plaster saints, hollow and bloodless. They were men – and women, too – of courage and convition strong and positive in their attitudes, prepared to sacrifice much for their principles, even their very lives.

- Saints and Strangers, George F. Wilson

The Pilgrims, as they came to be called, escaped from England and much persecution in 1608. For twelve years they lived in relative peace in Holland within the walled city of Leiden, where thirty-four years earlier the Dutch had taken their heroic stand against the Spanish invaders.

But as time passed, John Robinson, the Pilgrims' faithful minister since the early years in Scrooby, and his congregation, began to realize the need to emigrate. As foreigners, they could hardly find work in Holland, although they wanted to be successful so that others would join them and place their faith in Christ's redemption. Their children were being corrupted by the increasing moral laxity of Dutch life. And, the Spanish were planning a new offensive to wipe out all religious dissent. There also was a fourth reason, as William Bradford recorded, for wanting to emigrate.

First Worship Service in Plymouth
George Johann Schwarze

America, the world's most successful model of nation building, was not birthed by marauding armies. Armies and brute force have been the weapons of choice for the building of empires in history. In sharp contrast, America was birthed largely by twenty pilgrim families as they settled Plymouth in the 17th century. Their weapon of choice was the "Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God."

- Dr. Marshall Foster 1945-2022

CHERISHING A GREAT HOPE

DR. MARSHALL FOSTER

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THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT, 1620

Jean Leon Gerome Ferris

Bradford wrote:
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...

In 1620, the Pilgrims were able to obtain a charter to the "northern parts of Virginia." This charter was granted by James I, who had despised and hounded them for seventeen years. Yet, as providence would have it, he unwittimgly set the stage of liberty for God's unsung heroes.

Most of the congregation, including the pastor, John Robinson, had to remain behind. The king feared the potential effect of Robinson's influence in distant America and would not permit him to go. However, the congregation sent thirty-eight of their number, including their most trusted leaders - William Brewster, William Bradford, and John Carver - to pioneer the desolate wilderness of North America. Departing from Plymouth, England, in August 1620, with 102 passengers aboard the Mayflower, they endured a terrifying sixty-six day voyage across the Atlantic. They arrived in America in November, far north of their intended charter. Fearing mutiny since they were out of the territory of the king's charter, all of the men gathered in the captain's cabin on November 11, 1620 and signed a covenant with each other to form the new government to glorify God and to advance the Christian faith.

The Mayflower Compact is America's first great constitutional document, and it is a fine example of the covenantal, or compact, theory of government, which is echoed in all of America's colonial charters and founding documents:

In ye name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne lord, King James, by ye grace of God, of Great Britaine, France & Ireland King, defender of ye faith, &c., haveing undertaken, for ye glorie of God, and advancemente of ye Christian faith, and honour of our king & countrie, a voyage to plant ye first colonie in ye Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solumnly & mutually in ye presence of God, and of one another, covenant & combine our selves togeather into a civill body politick, for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of ye ends

aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to anacte, constitute, and frame such just & equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitution & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for ye generall good of ye Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codd ye 11. Of November in ye year of ye raigne of our soveraigne lord, King James, of England, France, & Irlenad ye eighteenth, and by Scotland ye fiftiefourth.
Ano:Dom. 1620

It should be mentioned that the Jamestown colony had already led the way in stating similar goals in its charter for the Virginia colony in 1606, declaring that they had come to America to propagate the "Christian Religion." The desire to reach the lost world with the Gospel and to fulfill the Lord's great commission (Matthew 28:18-20) was an impelling force behind the settling of America from Christopher Columbus to the blazing of the Oregon Trail by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman.

If the men of Jamestown had not been successful in maintaining their colony, the Pilgrims probably would have never followed them to America. These Jamestown settlers, after twelve years of trial and turmoil, met in July 1619 in the first church built in the colonies to start America's first representative assembly, called the House of Burgesses. These Virginians would hone their governing skills for 150 years, until the 1770s, when the founding generation of Virginia patriots would turn the world upside-down.

The landing of the Pilgrims at Cape Cod was an important providential event, for they were bound for Virginia. But the Mayflower was blown hundreds of miles off course and ended up at Cape Cod instead. Because their patent did not include their territory, they consulted with the captain of the Mayflower and "resolved to stand for the southward...to find some place about Hudson's River for their habitation." But God did not allow them to do so. They soon encountered "dangerous shoals and roaring breakers" and were forced to return to Cape Cod. From there they began their scouting expeditions to find a place to settle, finally discovering what is now Plymouth. Had they arrived a few years earlier they would have been greeted by the fiercest tribe in the region, the Pawtuxet; but in 1617, the tribe had been wiped out by a plague. It was perhaps the only place where they would have survived.

This leads to another major providential event in the lives of the Pilgrims. There was one survivor of the Pawtuxet tribe, and how he survived shows the Hand of God in history. This survivor, Squanto, was kidnapped in 1605 by Captain George Weymouth and taken to England. He learned English and, in 1614, returned to New England with Captain John Smith. Though Smith wanted to return him to his people, this was not God's timing. Shortly after Smith left for England, Squanto was again kidnapped, this time by Captain Thomas Hunt, who lured Squanto and twenty-four other natives on board his ship.

According to William Bradford, Hunt intended to sell his victims into slavery in Spain. "But he [Squanto] got away for England and was entertained by a merchant in London, and employed to Newfoundland and other parts, and lastly brought hither into these parts by Captain Dermer."

Tisquantum. or Squanto, the guide and interpreter
Charles de Wolf Brownell

THE TRAGEDY OF THE FIRST WINTER

Thomas Dermer was on a voyage of discovery to the New England coast in 1618 and probably intended to use Squanto as an interpreter with the native tribes, but Squanto apparently jumped ship and headed home - only to find that all of his tribe had been wiped out by the plague. After searching in vain for survivors, he attached himself to the neighboring Wampanoag tribe. Fluent in English, he offered his friendship and help to the Pilgrims when he learned of their presence at Plymouth. He joined with them thereafter and was converted to Christianity. Bradford said that Squanto "was a special instrument of God for their good beyond expectation." Without Squanto's help, they might not have survived, for he showed them how to plant corn, fertilizing it with fish. He also acted as their aid and, most importantly, was their interpreter in their dealings with the Wampanoag chief, Massasoit, in the crucial early days when it was vitally important to the Pilgrims to establish friendly relations with their native neighbors. With Squanto's aid as interpreter, a peace treaty was agreed upon, which treated both native tribes and Pilgrims justly under the law. Through the hand of God, unlike many other English colonies, in the New World the Pilgrims experienced nearly 50 years of peace.

The Pilgrims lost 47 of the 102 settlers in the first four months in the New World due to disease and cold. Many of the women did not survive because they gave their covering and food to their children.

After two years of near starvation under the rule of the merchant adventurers who had helped to finance their venture, Governor William Bradford led them to abandon the socialist contracts that mandated communal farming and labor, and move to a free enterprise system that multiplied their productivity.

Bradford's testimony concerning this economic shift in the colony is especially revealing in light of the current trend towards socialism. In his writings, he details the importance of private property and individual responsibility.

The failure of this experiment of communal service, which was tried for several years, and by good and honest men proves the emptiness of the theory of Plato and other ancients, applauded by some of latter times, - that the taking away of private property, and the possession of it in community, by a commonwealth, would make a state happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For in this instance, community of property (so far as it went) was found to breed much confusion and discontent, and retard much employment which would have been to the general benefit and comfort.

- The History of the Plymouth Settlement, William Bradford

During the summer of 1623, a severe drought destroyed their crops. Furthermore, they had no water reserves. The Pilgrims declared a day of fasting and prayer to confess their sins and pray for rain. On that very day, Bradford recorded that:

For all the morning, and greatest part of the day, it was clear weather and very hot, and no cloud or any sign of rain to be seen; yet toward evening it began to overcast, and shortly after to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God. It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in that abundance as that the earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith. Which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn and other fruits, as was wonderful to see, and made the Indians astonished to behold...For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving.

- Of Plymouth Plantation, William Bradford

This was the real foundation for America's Thanksgiving tradition, which has survived almost four hundred years.

- Dr. Marshall Foster (1945-2022)

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