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Our Pilgrim Heritage : How Religion Shaped History

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Our Pilgrim Heritage



The First Thanksgiving by Jennie Brownscombe. Courtesy of The Pilgrim Society, Plymouth, Massachusetts

How Religion Shaped History

by Ed Hindson

From the time the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in November 1620, American religion was shaped by English Puritan and Separatist beliefs. Having separated from the established Church of England, the first Pilgrims left their homeland for Holland as early as 1593 in search of liberty. These fugitives from religious persecution eventually settled in two communities in Amsterdam. The London group was pastored by Francis Johnson and the Gainsborough group was pastored by John Smyth.

In 1597 Johnson and three others actually joined an expedition to Canada to establish a colony for the exiles on the Island of Ranae. However, they met with rough weather, went aground on the rocks off the coast of Newfound-

land and were pillaged by French pirates. Defeated and beleaguered, they were forced to return to Europe, but their dream of freedom never died.

The Amsterdam church eventually grew to 300 under Johnson. He was

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assisted by Henry Ainsworth, four ruling elders, three deacons, and a widow who served as deaconess. In the meantime Smyth's church, which was more Congregational in government, was growing as well. In 1608, still another group came from Scrooby, England, led by Richard Clyfton and John Robinson. They eventually settled at Leyden, Holland, in 1609. There Robinson became their pastor and was able to purchase a house, which served as a meeting place for the Pilgrims, who valued "peace and spiritual comfort above any other riches."

The principle of self-governing autonomy was deeply entrenched in the Pilgrim mind. Robinson was strongly convinced that the true Christian Church should be composed of Christian men, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and capable—under His illumination—of self-government. He believed that no other power, civil or ecclesiastical, had the right to supersede that divine calling.

As the Thirty Years' War began to break out in Europe, the Pilgrims made the historic decision to sell all their possessions and set sail for America. Bringing little more than the clothes on their backs, and clutching their beloved Geneva Bibles, they set sail for England. After some delay they eventually embarked from Plymouth on the Mayflower on September 6, 1620, with a cargo of 102 passengers, 200 books, and Elder William Brewster's printing press.

Halfway across the Atlantic the huge crossbeam supporting the main mast cracked during a violent storm. At the point of desperation, the Pilgrims remembered the great iron screw of Brewster's printing press and used it to raise the beam back to its proper position. Spared by the providence of God, the grateful Pilgrims continued their two-month journey across the



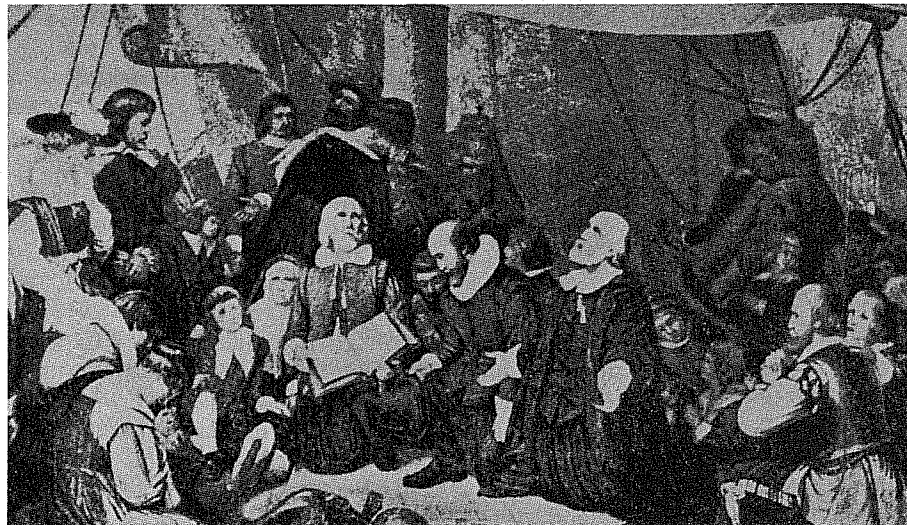
Engravings from *The Mayflower Pilgrims* by Edmund Janes Carpenter

ocean and sighted the shores of Cape Cod in the early morning of November 9, 1620.

Following their Scrooby Church Covenant, the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact while still aboard ship. It was a revolutionary document for its day, acknowledging no nobility and giving each member of the community equal status. Thus, the beginnings of modern democracy were laid by those who covenanted together "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith." Their settlement, originally known as New Ply-

mouth, would become the seedbed of the American democratic spirit.

The Pilgrims' arrival in the New World was not without problems. William Bradford's wife, Dorothy, fell overboard and drowned while the *Mayflower* was anchored some 25 miles from its ultimate destination. At the time of the tragedy Bradford was exploring the shore to select the spot for their settlement. When he returned to the ship he discovered that his wife had been dead several days. Before the first winter passed, 47 people had died, including 28 of their 48 male adults.



With their nearest European neighbors 500 miles to the south in Virginia, remaining members of the little Pilgrim band literally clung to the frozen wilderness for their very survival.

During that first year, their governor, John Carver, and his wife, Katherine, both died and were laid to rest side by side in a grave overlooking the sea. The custom of the day was for another governor to be appointed by the king. But the Colonists, giving birth to the American spirit of free elections, chose their own governor—William Bradford.

In the spring, to their surprise, an Indian named Samoset walked into their settlement speaking broken English. He told them that he had learned their language from English fishermen he had met along the coast. He informed them that the Indian name for the place was Patuxet ("little bay") and that the previous inhabitants had died four years earlier from a mysterious plague. He also explained that their nearest neighbors were the Wampanoags some 50 miles to the west and ruled over by Chief Massasoit.

Samoset eventually arranged a meeting between Massasoit and the Pilgrims. A peace treaty and friendly relations ensued. In October 1621 Governor Bradford declared a day of public thanksgiving, modeled after the Feast of Tabernacles, and invited Massasoit to attend. He arrived with 90 Indians bearing deer and wild turkeys to add to the Pilgrims' garden-grown vegetables. A joyous meal and games followed Elder Brewster's humble prayer of thanks. An American tradition—Thanksgiving Day—was begun.

With their settlement at New Plymouth the Pilgrims laid the foundation of a new society in what was truly a new world. Like Abraham of old, they had journeyed to a land of promise seeking a city whose builder and maker is God. On these shores they established the principles that would make America great for years to come. Yet today, some three and a half centuries later, we, like they, are still pilgrims passing through a temporal land, looking by faith for our eternal and heavenly home. En route, we have much for which to be thankful, not the least of which are our Pilgrim Fathers.

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