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John Eliot: A Successful Application of Missiological Methodology

Abstract

For many seventeenth-century explorers and settlers arriving in the "New World," new and exciting opportunities arose not only for building new lives for themselves, but also to spread their Christian faith. John Eliot, a Puritan missionary from Widford, Hertfordshire, England, engaged in conversion efforts among the Amerindians of New England, employing "missiological methodology," or proselytizing the natives while simultaneously subjugating them to European cultural norms. His work, while mixed in its effects, anticipated many aspects of modern missionary movements.

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF HISTORY

John Eliot:

A Successful Application of Missiological Methodology

Submitted to Dr. Smith,

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American Colonial History

by

Brent Kyle Meyers

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Introduction

Colonization and Christian missions were inseparably linked during the early British colonial era of North America. For many early explorers and settlers, this “New World” was a new and exciting opportunity for their economic growth, but also an opportunity to spread their Christian faith. So intertwined were these two concepts that many of the early colonial charters included an almost standard clause which expressed their desire to convert the Native Americans. The Massachusetts Bay Charter of 1629 is a prime example of this, which states that

[The Colonists] maie wynn and incite the Natives of Country, to the Knowledg and Obedience of the onlie true God and Savior of Mankinde, and the Christian Fayth, which in our Royall Intention, and the Adventurers free Profession, is the principall Ende of this Plantation.¹

However, while these charters were explicit in their desire to “save” the Indians, the act of doing so had very little success. Missions work was so unsuccessful that as historian Timothy J. Sehr explains it, “Englishmen quickly learned that to drive unwanted Indian guests away they had only to begin to speak about religion.”²

Yet, in the midst of this failure, the desire to see the natives come to salvation was undeterred. It was not until 1643, thirty-six years after the founding of Jamestown, that a Puritan missionary from Widford, Hertfordshire, England, named John Eliot, successfully linked these two actions. While his methodology has a very negative connotation or stigma today, he was successful in the application of a commonly accepted practice of proselytizing the natives while simultaneously subjugating them to European cultural norms. As Cotton Mather would later

¹ Francis Newton Thorpe, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the State, Territories, and Colonies Now or Hertofores Forming the United States of America*, vol. 3, *Kentucky - Massachusetts* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 1857.

² Timothy J. Sehr, “John Eliot, Millennialist and Missionary,” *The Historian* 46, no. 2 (February 1984): 192.

write about John Eliot, that “he was to make men of them ere he could hope to see them saints; they must be civilized ere they could be Christianized.”³ Eliot’s persistence and flexibility allowed him to succeed in the application of the contemporary missiological methodology when others failed.

Missiological Methodology

The term missiological or missiology is defined as the science or study of missions. This means that it “includes the formal study of the theology of mission, the history of missions, the concomitant philosophies of mission and their strategic implementation in given cultural settings.”⁴ It is the strategic application and implementation in a given cultural setting of an individual’s or organization’s philosophy of missions. This philosophy stems from a biblical theology⁵ of mission and one’s personal or a location’s history of missions. Therefore, a missiological methodology is the system of methods a missionary uses to strategically apply and implement their philosophy of missions.

As for John Eliot, he explained his missiological methodology as follows: “[the Indians] should first be Civilized, by being brought from their scattered and wild course of Life, unto civill Co-habitation and Government, before they could... be betrusted with the sacred

³ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana, Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New-England: From Its First Planting in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord, 1698, in Seven Books* (Hartford, CT: S. Andrus, 1853), 560.

⁴ Justice Anderson, “Overview of Missiology,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, 2nd ed., ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 9.

⁵ The running definition of Biblical theology in this paper is “[biblical] synthetic assertions about the nature, will, and plan of God in creation and redemption, including therefore also the nature, purpose, and ‘story’ of humanity.” D.A. Carson, “Systematic and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 181.

Ordinances of Jesus Christ.”⁶ In agreement with orthodox, Puritan theology, he believed that an individual had to go through a series of antecedent steps prior to possibly receiving God’s gracious salvation. These steps include regular church attendance, frequent prayer, contrition for sin, godly conduct, intellectual agreement with orthodox doctrine, and the observance of the sabbath.⁷ The natives and their culture, to Eliot and his fellow Puritan colonists, were the ultimate representation of human degradation, and they needed to be civilized out of it.⁸ Submission to their “rules of civility” would allow the Native Americans the possibility of experiencing the irresistible grace of God.

This begs the question then as to why Eliot and his fellow colonists would try and reach these “savages” if they saw them as being in a degraded human state. Their reasoning for this outreach can be found in the reformed, Puritan, eschatological theology – a belief that they were living in the end times and that they needed to generate the necessary conditions to bring about the second advent of Christ.⁹ Before their anticipated sequence of the glorious climax of history could happen, God needed them to help Him draw the nations and the Jews to Himself. It was not until members from every tribe and nation on earth were converted that God’s Kingdom

⁶ Michael P. Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 303.

⁷ Richard W. Cogley, “John Eliot and the Origins of the American Indians,” *Early American Literature* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1986/1987): 213.

⁸ *Ibid*, 213.

⁹ Eliot wrote: “Now this glorious work of bringing in and setting up the glorious kingdome of Christ, hath the Lord of his free grace and mercy put into the hands of this renowned Parliament and Army; Lord put it into all their hearts to make this designe of Christ their main first and chiefeft endeavour, according to the Word... And when the Lord Jesus is about to set up his blessed Kingdome among these poore Indians also, how well doth it become the spirit of such instruments in the hand of Christ to promote that work also.” Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts*, 186.

could come. The conversion of the Native Americans, therefore, was proof that the end times had begun.¹⁰

Developing Civility

In an effort to bring about God's eternal kingdom here on earth, John Eliot began to civilize and preach the gospel to the Native Americans in their own tongue¹¹. While typical in the application of his missiological methodology of using the native tongue, Eliot was persistent even when "they gave no heed unto it, but were weary, and rather despised what I said."¹² Yet Eliot regarded them as God's children, believing that the gospel was both for the red and white man.¹³ Eventually, his perseverance brought forth positive results. As he put it, "A while after God stirred up in some of them a desire to come into the English fashions, and live after their manner, but knew not how to."¹⁴

His first convert was a man by the name of Waban in 1646, who lived near the town of Concord. As Waban explains:

Before I heard of God, and before the English came into this Country, many evil things my heart did work, many thoughts I had in my heart; I wished for riches, I wished to be a witch, I wished to be a Sachem; and many such other evils were in my heart: Then when the English came, still my heart did the same things; when the English taught me of God (I coming to their Houses) I would go out of their doors, and many years I knew nothing; when the English taught me I was angry with them: But a little while agoe after the great

¹⁰ Sehr, "John Eliot," 190; Constance Post, "Old World Order in the New: John Eliot and 'Praying Indians' in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*," *The New England Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 1993): 420.

¹¹ He was able to do this because had intentionally spent three years learning the Massachusetts and Wampanoag languages from a bilingual and indentured native named Cockenoe. Steffi Dippold, "The Wampanoag Word: John Eliot's 'Indian Grammar,' the Vernacular Rebellion, and the Elegancies of Native Speech," *Early American Literature* 48, no. 3 (2013): 545.

¹² Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts*, 124.

¹³ Steve Curtis, "In Prayer and Pains, through Faith in Christ: The Life and Ministry of John Eliot," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 2 (2015): 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 124.

sickness, I considered what the English do, and I had some desire to do as they do; and after that I began to work as they work; and then wonder how the English come to be so strong in labor; then I thought I shall quickly die, and I feared lest I should die before I prayed to God¹⁵

His conversion story, while containing traditional elements like overcoming personal sin and hearing the gospel, seems to suggest an almost non-salvific reasoning behind his decision.

Waban's story is an appeal to the Great Physician or Shaman who could provide a far stronger and better medicine than any of his witchdoctors (Powwows) could supply. His story, and many others like it, has led many historians¹⁶ to doubt the religious validity of Eliot's Christian Indians. Conversion, for these natives could easily be interpreted as an act of personal survival rather than a profound spiritual experience. However, Eliot was not one to rush the salvation process or merely accept their consent of the gospel, but instead he "questioned the Indians frequently and extensively about their new beliefs."¹⁷

After Waban's conversion, Eliot's diligent perseverance began to bear fruit when Sachems (tribal leaders) from the Concord area, about twenty-two miles north west of Roxbury, agreed to twenty-nine points of Puritan civility.¹⁸ Their agreement laid the foundation for one of Eliot's later crowning achievements: the Praying Towns. As part of their agreement, Eliot reorganized these Massachusetts and Algonquin tribal governments into a new one that mirrored a

¹⁵ John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew, *Tears of Repentance Setting Forth, Not Only Their Present State and Condition, but Sundry Confessions of Sin by Diverse of the Said India: Or, a Further Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel Amongst the Indians in New-England* (London: Peter Cole, 1653), 7.

¹⁶ Some of these historians are Kathryn N. Gray in 'How May Wee Come to Serve God?': Spaces of Religious Utterance in John Eliot's Indian Tracts; J. Patrick Cesarini in "John Eliot's 'A Breif History of the Mashepog Indians,' 1666; James L. Axtell in *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*; and Constance Post in *Old World Order in the New: John Eliot and 'Praying Indians' in Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana*.

¹⁷ Constance Post, "Old World Order in the New: John Eliot and 'Praying Indians' in Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana," *The New England Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 1993): 416-33.

¹⁸ Kathryn N. Gray, "'How May Wee Come to Serve God?': Spaces of Religious Utterance in John Eliot's Indian Tracts," *The Seventeenth Century* 24, no. 1 (April 2009): 75.

biblical one found in Exodus 18:21. This reorganization set up a system of tens, fifties, and hundreds, in which he allowed the natives to democratically pick their own collective leaders as well their personal ones.¹⁹ This biblical form of government came directly from his belief that man should commit to obeying God's Word, as it was the literal guide for man's every act.

Building upon this biblical, government structure, Eliot petitioned the general court of Boston and received a legal framework from which to establish a judicial structure. This provided the Native Americans a rule of law, but it also afforded them a civilized English court which would preside over all their cases, both civil and criminal.²⁰ This judicial structure was designed to further civility through the use of fines:

[A]ll fines to bee imposed upon any Indian in any of the said Courts, shall goe and bee bestowed towards the building of some meeting houses, for education of their poorer children in learning, or other publick use, by the advice of the said Magistrates and of Master Eliot, or of such other Elder, as shall ordinarily instruct them in the true Religion.²¹

Eliot used this money to further his ministry toward the natives, which would result in his development of Praying Towns.

These Praying Towns developed out of the growing success in Concord. But as Eliot's work there exponentially multiplied so did conflict with the European colonists. Eliot realized

¹⁹ Norman Earl Tanis, "Education in John Eliot's Indian Utopias, 1646-1675," *History of Education Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 314.

²⁰ Some of these laws were: "1. That if any man be idle weeke, at most fortnight, hee shall pay five shillings. 2. If any unmarried man shall lie with young woman unmarried, he shall pay twenty shillings. 3. If any man shall beat his wife, his hands shall bee tied behind him and carried to the place of justice to bee severely punished. 4. Every young man not anothers servant, and if unmarried, hee shall be compelled to set up Wigwam and plant for himselfe, and not live shifting up and downe to other Wigwams. 5. If any woman shall not have her haire tied up but hang loose or be cut as mens haire, she shall pay five shillings. 6. If any woman shall goe with naked breasts they shall pay two shillings sixpence. 7. All those men that weare long locks shall pay five shillings. 8. If any shall kill their lice betweene their teeth, they shall pay five shillings." John Eliot and Thomas Shepherd, *The Day-Breaking, If Not the Sun Rising of the Gospel: With the Indians in New England* (London: Richard Coates, 1647), 28.

²¹ John Eliot and Thomas Shepard, *The Clear Sunshine of the Gospel Breaking Forth Upon the Indians in New-England* (New York: J. Sabin, 1865), 23.

that for his mission to succeed the natives would need to be separate from the colonists.²² So, he established the first Praying Town in Natick, Massachusetts about 20 miles west of Boston. The name Natick means the place of our searching, and Eliot's ministry exponentially grew as a result of this location. He hoped to gather the Native Americans together at this one place in order to consistently teach them the Word of God, and so that they could be trained in the ways of civility. However, it soon became clear that due to tribal divisions and strife, multiple Praying Towns would be needed.²³ So, from 1651-1674 the number of Praying Towns increased to fourteen and eventually housed over 1,100 natives.

These Praying Towns provided Native Americans with legally demarcated land²⁴ and a familial allotment of land for a home and farming in accordance with English settlement standards.²⁵ At each of the fourteen Praying Towns, Eliot had a meeting hall and a school erected, in agreement with his missiological methodology. Soon Eliot, and other British colonists, were teaching the natives reading and writing, politics and law, liberal arts and logic, trade skills (such as carpentry and husbandry), and personal hygiene coupled with the gospel and Christian theology.²⁶ At these schools, male students were taught to read and write in their native languages while female students were only taught to read. This deliberate decision to teach both genders to read stems from an orthodox, Protestant belief that spiritual rebirth required

²² Convers Francis, *Life of John Eliot: The Apostle to the Indians* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840), 160.

²³ Curtis, "In Prayer and Pains," 143.

²⁴ Hostility from other native tribes and British colonists, was another practical impetus to the formation of praying towns and the ability to legally own their land. Travis L. Myers, "John Eliot's Pastoral Theology of Poverty and an "Obscure Low Condition"—Including That of Being "a Worm"—in His Harmony of the Gospels (1678) Published Two Years After Metacom's War," *Missiology: An International Review* (March 2020): 4.

²⁵ Tanis, "Education," 313.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 308; Curtis, "In Prayer and Pains," 139

alphabetic literacy so that an individual could personally encounter the gospel of salvation.²⁷

Based on this belief, Eliot would go on to translate the Bible into Algonquin, as well as a large collection of religious pamphlets and books.

Eliot feared that the “bountiful field” of possible converts might be lost due to the lack of laborers, so he constantly wrote and petitioned for more laborers. However, in the midst of these petitions, he wrote this:

I find it hopeless to expect English Officers in our Indian Churches; the work is full of hardship, hard labor, and chargeable also, and the Indians not yet capable to give considerable support and maintenance; and Men have bodies, and must live of the Gospel: And what comes from England is liable to hazard and uncertainties.²⁸

Eliot understood that help in accomplishing his missiological methodology was not coming, and, if any did come, it was liable to all sorts of issues. But he needed help, so he began to training nationals to be pastors and teachers in his Praying Towns. “And seeing they must have teachers amongst themselves, they must also be taught to be Teachers; for which cause, I have begun to teach them the Art of Teaching.”²⁹ So John Eliot taught the Wampanoag and Massachusetts Indians to be teachers, carefully instructing them on how to communicate earthly and heavenly knowledge methodically and skillfully. He took his time to ensure that they were properly trained and able to lead their people correctly.³⁰ By 1675, nearly all the pastors and teachers in the Praying Towns were Native Americans.³¹

²⁷ Tanis, “Education,” 310.

²⁸ Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts*, 401.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 402.

³⁰ After being Educated, “God put it into the hearts of the [Natick] Church to desire to send some their brethren to sundry parts of the Country to call in their Countrymen to pray unto God,” and they were not without success. John W. Ford, ed., *Some Correspondence between the Governors and Treasurers of the New England Company in London and the Commissioners of the United Colonies in America: The Missionaries of the Company and Others, between the Years 1657 and 1712* (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1869), 44; Sehr, “John Eliot,” 199.

³¹ Curtis, “In Prayer and Pains,” 134.

In the midst of all this acculturation, Eliot refused to allow the natives to incorporate their cultural customs into Puritan beliefs and lifestyles so that Christianity would prove more palatable. As Cotton Mather put it, “He brought his Indians to a pure, plain Scripture worship. He would not gratify them with a Samaritan sort of blended, mixed worship.”³² While he did allow and encourage them to question the civilized and religious practices to which they were subjugated, he never let them supplement them. This unwavering stance led to a new, hybrid synthesis of these two cultures, in which the Native Americans were now Puritans, leading them to be called “red puritans” or “Coper-colored puritans.”³³

Developing Native Saints

Whenever Eliot began to preach, he always had four elements to his service: a children’s catechism, biblical teaching, confession and admonition of sins, and an opportunity for questions and answers.³⁴ He would start with the children because he understood the necessity of planting seeds of faith in the next generation, which could germinate into future Christian souls. The catechism that he taught to the children was one that he personally developed so that it was easy for native Americans to remember. It contained a highly repetitive group of stock phrases that were easy to learn and interject at the appropriate times. Some of these phrases were: “I believe,” “Jesus Christ,” and “by this we declare.”³⁵ He also promised a gift or a reward to the children who came and participated in the catechism.³⁶ While this hardly confirms unequivocal

³² Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 571.

³³ Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts*, 19.

³⁴ Eliot, *The Clear Sunshine*, 30-34.

³⁵ John Eliot, *Christiane Oonoowae Sampoowaonk* (Cambridge, MA: Broadside, 1660), 1-30.

³⁶ Gray, “How May Wee,” 82; Eliot, *The Day Breaking*, 9-10.

conversion, it does illuminate Eliot's desire and actions towards allowing Native Americans the possibility of experiencing God's irresistible grace.

Secondly, Eliot would preach to them out of a chosen text of scripture. Often this passage was a gospel-oriented passage with the idea of pointing them towards their need for the Savior. Eliot writes in his book: *The Clear Sunshine of the Gospel Breaking Forth Upon the Indians in New-England*, about one of these sermons: "The Sermon was spent in shewing them their miserable conditions without Christ, out of Ephesians 2:1. That they were dead in trespasses and sinnes, and in pointing unto them the Lord Jesus, who onely could quicken them."³⁷ Eliot often used native, cultural phenomenon for examples to help distill abstract, theological points and arguments into concrete illustrations. In teaching about God's limitlessness and His creation of the world, Eliot used an Indian basket as an example:

Therefore wee bid them looke upon that Indian Basket that was before them, there was black and white strawes, and many other things they made of, now though others did not know what those things were who made not the Basket, yet hee that made this must needs tell all the things in (wee said) was here.³⁸

Eliot used the indigenous concepts of a hand-woven basket to relay abstract, Christian, theological constructs within a distinct, native context.³⁹ Through a combination of both of these elements, Eliot would use native illustrations to facilitate his Indian listeners' comprehension and practice of Gospel truths.

The third aspect of Eliot's preaching was to allow for a time of confession and admonition of sin. He would only do this if a reason was warranted due to a response to a sermon or if one of the members of the Praying Town had publicly broken a rule. Eliot would allow

³⁷ Eliot, *The Clear Sunshine*, 16.

³⁸ Eliot, *The Day Breaking*, 5.

³⁹ Dippold, "The Wampanoag Word," 548.

them the opportunity to “[s]ubmit themselves reverently, and obediently, and some of them penitently confessing their sins with much plainnesse, and without shiftings, and excuses.”⁴⁰ This aspect of his preaching was a very common Puritan practice which arose from their theological belief that the church required purity.

The final aspect of Eliot’s preaching was an opportunity for questions and answers. He allowed the natives to verbalize their questions and concerns, after which he would respond and answer them to the best of his ability. Some of these questions were: “*What Countrey man Christ was, and where he was borne?* Another was, *How Farre off that place was from us here?* Another was, *Where Christ now was?* And another, *How they might Lay hold on him, and where, being now absent from them?*”⁴¹ Eliot used these questions to further explain his sermon but also as a means of guiding the Massachusetts Indians towards the possibility of experiencing God’s irresistible grace. This also helps to demonstrate that the Native Americans were not unconsciously accepting Eliot’s messages but consciously participating in them.⁴²

Eliot’s enduring impact on missions work in North American is the Algonquian Bible. His creation of this Bible originated out of his missiological methodology – a desire to have civilized people come to faith in Christ. The Algonquin Bible or the *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God* was finished in 1663, seventeen years after his first convert. It is the earliest complete Bible from a non-European language family, and it was the first Bible printed in America. Also, it was the only Bible written in an indigenous New World tongue until 1862 (almost 200 years later).⁴³ As Eliot tirelessly worked on this translation, he

⁴⁰ Eliot, *The Clear Sunshine*, 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴² Gray, “How May Wee,” 79.

⁴³ Dippold, “The Wampanoag Word,” 546.

would read it and preach it to his Indian congregation and check to see whether or not “they did understand what I read, perfectly, in respect of their language.”⁴⁴ After his translation was finished, he sent it before a colonial, Puritan commission who personally evaluated the work and later approved it. This achievement displays the monumental undertaking, dedication, and skill of Eliot, which demonstrates his zeal for the souls of the indigenous people. Even today, Algonquin Indians are revisiting Eliot’s translation in an effort to recapture aspects of their history and the language of their forefathers.⁴⁵

Eliot’s Missiological Methodology in Response to Specific Issues

An early issue that Eliot faced in his application of his missiological methodology was the concept of prayer. After one of his many sermons, a native posed to him the question “whether Jesus Christ did understand, or God did understand Indian prayers”⁴⁶ As a preface to this question he explained:

[A] little while since praying in his Wigwaniy unto God and Jesus Christ, that God would give him a good heart, and that while hee was praying, one of his fellow Indians interrupted him, and told him, that hee prayed in vaine, because Jesus Christ understood not what Indians speake in prayer, he had bin used to heare Englisli man pray and so could well enough understand them, but Indian language in prayer hee thought hee was not acquainted with but was stranger to and therefore could not understand them.⁴⁷

Essentially, there was a conflict over the civility aspect of the native tongue. Or to rephrase the question Eliot was asked, “Is my language good enough to reach and be answered by God?”

⁴⁴ Clark, ed., *The Eliot Tracts*, 330.

⁴⁵ Strong Woman and Moondancer, “Bringing Back Our Lost Language,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (1998): 217.

⁴⁶ Eliot, *The Day Breaking*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

Eliot who had been preaching and teaching Puritan civility and Christian faith had inadvertently caused confusion as to the value of the Native American tongue. To one native, God could only hear and understand the English tongue while the other believed that God could hear him in his own indigenous tongue. Eliot, after some careful consideration, responded, attempting to clear up this misconception:

Jesus Christ and God him made all things, and makes all men, not onely English but Indian men, and hee made them both (which wee know the light of nature would readily teach as they had been also instructed us) then hee knew all that was within man and came from man, all his desires, and all his thoughts, and all his speeches, and all his prayers and hee made Indian men, then hee knowes all Indian prayers also.⁴⁸

Eliot argued that since God made everything, both English and Indian, He knew everything. As a result of knowing everything, He knew the Indian language and their prayers by extension.

An additional issue arose from another inquisitive Indian; this time the question was whether or not “Englisli men were ever at any time so ignorant of God and Jesus Christ as themselves?”⁴⁹ Or another way to phrase this question in modern vernacular is, what makes you Englishmen so special compared to us? What do you have that we lack? Demonstrating a desire to understand their needed to become civilized, Eliot in an application of his missiological methodology responded:

there are two sorts of Englisli men, some are bad and naught, and live wickedly and loosely, (describing them) and these kind of Englislimen wee told them were in a manner as ignorant of Jesus Christ as the Indians now are ; but there are a second sort of Englisli men, who though for a time they lived wickedly also like other prophane and ignorant Englisli, yet repenting of their sinnes, and seeking after God and Jesus Christ, they are good men now, and now know Christ, and love Christ, and pray to Christ, and are thankfull for all they have to Christ, and shall at last when they dye, goe up to heaven to Christ; and we told them all these also were once as ignorant of God and Jesus Christ as the Indians are, but by seeking to know him by reading his booke, and hearing his word, and praying to him, &c. they now know

⁴⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 6.

Jesus Christ and just so shall the Indians know him if they so seeke him also, although at the present they bee extremely ignorant of him.⁵⁰

Eliot tailored his answer to the deeper issue of the native's question. Everyone at some point is ignorant of God, he argued, but true knowledge of God comes through repentance and obedience to God. Eliot sidestepped the civility-barbed question and in turn pointed the question back towards obedience to God. It is not that the English are "better" than you, Eliot essentially said, it is that the English follow God and His rules as we hope you will too⁵¹.

The issue of illness was another point of great contention for Eliot and his missiological methodology. Epidemic diseases were common among the Native American population, and they were extremely devastating. They "tore at the native social fabric, leaving gaps in the web of kinship, political succession, technological expertise, and corporate memory."⁵² Compounded upon this destruction was the existing tribal belief that spiritual and physical welfare were synonymous.⁵³ So when some of Eliot's converts got sick, a crisis of faith occurred for many of the natives. Eliot framed their sickness and suffering as something "sanctified" like the holy and sinless sufferings of Christ. Suffering in the Christian life, he argued, was medicine for the soul – a "physick"⁵⁴ (sickness) was part of their sanctification.⁵⁵ It was through these sicknesses and sufferings that the Native Americans

⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁵¹ By following God, Eliot means following His rules.

⁵² James L. Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981), 83.

⁵³ Gray, "How May Wee," 86.

⁵⁴ Eliot, *The Clear Sunshine*, 37.

⁵⁵ Myers, "John Eliot's Pastoral Theology," 5.

proved their faith, rather than turning back to their shamans for relief and away from God. Eliot saw them draw nearer to the Lord by crying for His mercy, grace, and pardon.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In 1675 King Philip's War erupted in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, pitting indigenous people against their colonial neighbors. In the midst of all of this Eliot's "Praying Indians" were caught somewhere in the middle – both sides distrusted and attacked them. By the end of the war in 1678, half of Eliot's converts were dead or had returned to their previously beliefs. Only four of his Praying Towns remained: Pawtucket, Chabanakogngkomun, Natick, Hassanamesitt. However, Eliot continued to persevere in the face of all the devastation which he witnessed as regards to his fellow native Christians and their Praying Towns. He continued preaching and teaching to the natives, and even broadened his gaze to the small enslaved African population.⁵⁷ He continued working amongst the people he loved so dearly, until his death on May 20, 1690 at the age of eighty-six.

Though John Eliot erred in believing that he must civilize the natives before he could lead them to Christ, his application of his missiological methodology was effective. He spent most of his life engaging in a concerted effort to train and preach the gospel to a hostile and native people. In many ways, his ministry was a precursor to the work of William Carey and the modern, missions movement.⁵⁸ Cotton Mather would describe Eliot as "one who *lived in heaven* while he *was on earth*; and there is no more than pure justice in our endeavours that he should

⁵⁶ Wilberforce Eames, ed., *John Eliot and the Indians, 1652-1657: Being Letters Addressed to Rev. Jonathan Hanmer of Barnstable, England, Reproduced from the Original Manuscripts in the Possession of Theodore N. Vail* (New York: The Adams & Grace Press, 1915), 26.

⁵⁷ Curtis, "In Prayer and Pains," 145.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 138.

live on earth after he is in heaven.”⁵⁹ Even if none of the Native Americans were every truly converted from the labors of John Eliot, still those labors were an outworking of his theological beliefs. As historian Francis P. Harper remarks concerning Eliot’s ministries, “they stand as the imperishable record of good attempted by man for man.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 584.

⁶⁰ Francis P. Harper, *John Eliot's First Indian Teacher and Interpreter: Cockenoe-De-Long Island and the Story of His Career from the Early Records* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), 1.

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