**Summary of Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity"**

John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* - delivered on board the *Arbella* as members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony sailed toward the New World - describes the struggle of Puritans and their "errand into the wilderness." Their struggle? How can a group of outcasts who have a habit of quarreling with authority construct a strong society without fighting amongst themselves?

Winthrop's sermon makes for difficult read. Winthrop's address is an integral part of our national legacy, and the city it envisions is symbolic.

The reading contains three contradictions in order to sustain Puritan life:

(1) a society must maintain difference among its members to ensure community,

(2) the acquisition of money can serve spiritual ends, and

(3) stable public life depends upon some exterior threat to its existence.

**Background**

John Winthrop (1588-1649) was governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony - a group of entrepreneurs who left Europe in search of trade opportunities in the New World. Like most members of the Colony, Winthrop was a **Puritan**. This group claimed that the Church of England was corrupted by selfish leaders and petty squabbles. In contrast, Puritans envisioned an idealized community in which all citizens would focus their lives on the word of God. Ironically, the Puritans' almost single-minded pursuit of a perfected society based on biblical teachings resulted in impressive success in secular affairs. This success is often explained by the so-called "Work Ethic" - the ability to sacrifice personal ambitions for larger goals. Puritans also believed that they could be a blessed people - chosen by God to set an example for others. They preached that God's wrath would fall swiftly upon a people who strayed from His divine path. In this case, Puritan society must be unified - public life must act as a single individual seeking God.

**1. Differences within people in society**

Winthrop's sermon begins with a question: why are some people rich while others are poor? Many readers assume that the Puritans were simply another group of rich white men trying to form a powerful central government. However, they believed that in public life faith, not social ranking, could unify an entire people. Winthrop states that difference among people (like wealth) is ordained by God for three reasons.

* Diversity among people allows for a variety of ways in which God may be honored.
* Acts of kindness by the rich toward the poor - and a spirit of obedience by the poor toward the rich – creates the spirit of ideal public life.
* Common need among individuals with different qualities is necessary to society.

According to Winthrop, all people should view their life's circumstances as the product of God's will. No one should take excessive pride or distress in their identity; it is part of a larger plan than could possibly be designed by human hands:

*"noe man is made more honourable than another or more wealthy &c., out of any particular and singular respect to himselfe, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man"*

**2. Wealth in a spiritual society**

The role of the individual in relation to the state continues to guide Winthrop's sermon as he anticipates another problem: what is the extent of our duty to others, both within and beyond our community? Do we have a spiritual obligation to serve the poor - even if that results in our *becoming* poor? Winthrop concludes that excessive wealth leads our hearts away from God and toward the sin of pride and a disregard for social needs.

Is wealth, therefore, a bad thing? Certainly not, according to Winthrop. He has already established that some wealth can reflect the glory of God and that it should be maintained to help one's family.

Winthrop concludes, that one must share one's wealth with others - even if they cannot repay their debts to you. Members of the Puritan society must love one another, turn to each other, and be willing to give freely of their gathered riches. One must show love toward community through works and sacrifice. Members of this society united by love (which to Winthrop is the ever-present God) must be willing to sacrifice for each other - even if that sacrifice must include their wealth or their lives.

Winthrop illustrates this notion by describing the love of a mother for her child. The infant, a separate individual, is recognized as being of the same flesh as the mother. So are all people the same spirit in Puritan public life. The rewards of this love far outweigh any economic price that must be paid to maintain this community.

**3. Risk and the stable society**

The bulk of Winthrop's sermon concerns a community in almost perpetual danger - natural and human threats from outside and an admittedly sinful and fractious group within.

Winthrop attempts to relate his teachings to those practical concerns: a group of people brought together for various reasons hopes to profit from the New World and seeks to escape religious persecution in Europe. They must cling together in a time of troubles. To foster the unifying love necessary for this public life, a government that addresses both the secular and spiritual sides to this community must be formed.

This government must have certain powers over its citizens, since

"care of the publique must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but meare civill pollicy, dothe binde us".

Such public life cannot be shown by symbolic acts such as weekly church attendance; it must be witnessed in everyday life. Like a contract, this social covenant cannot be broken without risking the wrath of God. Failure to build this ideal community would be a shipwreck.

"wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill"

This holy city, this New Jerusalem, restates Christ's statement in Matthew 5, verse 14:

"Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid."

While Winthrop's sermon is more than 370 years old, its role in the American narrative cannot be underestimated. In the 1980s, the city upon a hill was employed by diverse speakers such as Ronald Reagan and Mario Cuomo. In a more general way, one finds traces of John Winthrop's ideal for public life every time the American experiment is defined as being distinct from human history.