**PILGRIM AND PURITAN: A DELICATE DISTINCTION**

**by Richard Howland Maxwell**

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.

BASIC DEFINITIONS

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!"

**UNDERSTANDING “PURITANISM”**

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.

**WHAT DOES PURITANISM MEAN?**

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.

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 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 political gift as an expression of the favoritism of the King. The church members had nothing to say about all of this; they were expected to quietly accept whatever the leaders of the church thrust upon them.

**WHERE DID IT START?**

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 growth in the Elizabethan period. They were close to the towns of Lincoln, Boston, York, and heavily influenced by discussions in Cambridge [University]. They were great thinkers and writers, and their contribution was not only religious and intellectual but of literary significance as well.*

**WHO WERE THE FIRST PURITANS?**

These Puritans were very smart. Their movement was one of the intellectually best equipped in history; and they prevailed in their reformation through the force of their logic. Puritans differed among themselves about the degree of change that was necessary for the church. Most 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 thought of 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 administrators, to be the ultimate authority;
* membership by choice and therefore limited to only those who had at least some degree of religious motivation; and
* an active clergy who carried out some teaching as well as other functions.

**WHAT IS CONGREGATIONALISM?**

There was another group of Puritans who wished to retain the Anglican Church identity but completely change most of its policies and leadership and 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.

**WHO WERE SEPARATISTS?**

There were those who saw little hope of making reforms. They were referred to as 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.

**HOW DID SEPARATISTS DIFFER?**

Within the ranks of those who wanted to separate from the Church of England, there were 2 different points of view:

Separatists who stayed in England favored a structured form of church organization called Presbyterianism, which was already strong in Scotland.

Separatists who came to New England favored the congregational approach to church policies.

And that brings us to North America.

**THE PILGRIMS VERSUS THE PURITANS OF NORTH AMERICA**

**HOW DID CONREGATIONALISM TAKE OVER IN NORTH AMERICA?**

The Pilgrims at Plymouth were Separatists ant the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay were not.

One of the deepest concerns for Puritan Governor Winthrop was the fear that, in New England, his followers would be drawn to Separatism because of the presence of Plymouth Colony just a few miles away. 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 Massachusetts and 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 leaders from England’s government present to sustain its bureaucracy. The act of moving from old to New England had brought about separatism, and in time the Congregational form of church became the accepted way throughout the colony.

Where did this idea start? The Plymouth group, during their exile in Holland, was under the leadership of their beloved pastor, John Robinson.

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 there was no place in this system for any bishops, archbishops, cardinals, etc….

He also felt the English parish system, which included people without regard to character, was also not tolerable. The church should be composed of those who were dedicated Christians. He believed Christians were "gathered" into organized companies (congregations) for communion and mutual service. Congregations were bound through a promise to God and had the power to choose and ordain their own minister, to choose their own officers, to receive and dismiss members.

Those hallmarks of Congregationalism way came, in time, to be accepted in New England.

**HOW DID THE PILGRIMS AND THE PURITANS DIFFER?**

An obvious difference between the two groups is their **size.**

* When the *Mayflower* arrived in December of 1620, it brought 102 passengers, half of whom were to die in that first terrible winter. Ten years later, Puritans brought 17 ships, headed by the *Arbella*, 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 difference between the two groups is the economic and social status of their people.

* The Pilgrims at Plymouth were, for the most part, working people. There were some among them successful enough to merit the title "Master," but none had 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 cloth worker; his Puritan counterpart in Massachusetts, John Winthrop, was a trained lawyer who had worked in the English government service.

The smaller differences between the two groups of colonists were largely the product of the years that the Pilgrims had spent in Holland. Pilgrims 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.

**HOW DID THE PURITANS AND PILGRMS DIFFER IN ATTITUDES ABOUT THEIR LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNMENT?**

The members of both colonies had a voice in selecting their leaders, but once that choice was made there was a 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. Rulers, however selected, received their authority from God, not from the people, and were accountable to God, not to the people.

Massachusetts Bay has been described as a theocracy. 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 role in the making of government decisions.

**HOW DID THE PURITANS AND PILGRMS DIFFER IN THOUGHT ABOUT THE RELTIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE STATE?**

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. In Massachusetts the Puritans drew a firm dividing line between the church and the state government.

The state was 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.

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 clergy had no political authority, they did enjoy a very powerful indirect influence. They were highly respected and when unpopular measures had to be adopted, the government magistrates counted on them to convince people to obey. When a difficult decision had to be made, the magistrates frequently consulted the ministers. In this way, though they were barred from authority, a back door was left open through which they could influence state policy.

At Plymouth, church and state were even more markedly separated.

In Plymouth, Pilgrims felt the Bible included the idea that what Scripture does not specifically claim as a religious function remains a civil one. As example is 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 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.

**HOW DID THE PURITANS AND PILGRMS DIFFER IN THEIR ATTITUDES?**

There was a significant difference between the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay in their attitude.

There members of the Bay colony held 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.

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 had their years of living in Holland's more tolerant society.

**MIXING THE TWO**

Pilgrims and Puritans 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.

**Pilgrim and Puritan: A Delicate Distinction**

1. What is the difference in the definitions of the words "Puritan" and "pilgrim?"

2. Briefly define the term "Puritanism."

3. The Protestant Reformation did not start in England. What ware some countries where it happened first?

4. When Henry pulled England away from the catholic church, what changes were made in the new Church of England?

5. How did the government "control" religion in the Church of England?

6. What were some of the changes that the Puritans wanted to make in the Church of England?

7. What does Congregationalism mean? How did this differ from the COE?

8. How did the Separatists" differ in their approach to the Church of England?

9. There were two different types of Separatists. Describe them.

10. Explain how Congregationalism took over religious organization in North America.

11. How did the Pilgrims and Puritans compare in size

12. How did the Pilgrims and Puritans compare in terms of their socio-economic status?

13. How did the Pilgrims and Puritans differ in their attitudes about leadership and government?

14. Contrast the attitudes of the Pilgrims and the Puritans.