THE AMERICAN PURITANS

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This book is dedicated to
all the families who fled persecution
and braved the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean
to seek the freedom to worship the Lord Jesus Christ
with a clear conscience.

Contents

Foreword

Iain H. Murray has observed that "without New England the history of the United States would have followed a very different pattern." What made New England different from the other British colonies formed in North America was the desire of its settlers to have a distinctive Christian character. Murray reckoned that of "the 102 passengers on the Mayflower it is probable that ninety-eight belonged to the congregation of John Robinson which had been in exile in Holland since 1608." And the majority of the settlers who came to New England in successive waves between 1620 and 1640 were also ardent Christians. The ultimate failure to achieve a "city upon a hill," as John Winthrop once described Puritan New England via his use of Matthew 5:14, should not blind us to these believers' passion, their remarkable achievements, and the way that their lives and thought have shaped the American psyche.

Yet even those who love the Puritans today and have benefited from the current revival of interest in "Puritania" seem to have forgotten many of those who figured large in colonial New England—men such as Thomas Shepard (whom Jonathan Edwards often cited) and John Eliot (not to be confused with the martyr Jim Elliot!). Of course, Baptists remember and love that "subversive" Puritan, Roger Williams, as Mostyn Roberts has recently called him in his marvelous biography, but we who love church history should know many more of these figures. I am therefore deeply grateful to

Dustin Benge and Nate Pickowicz for this prosopographical primer of New England Puritanism, and I hope it gets an extensive reading.

—Michael A. G. Haykin
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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
September 3, 2019

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Time Line

1534	King Henry VIII officially breaks with the Roman Catholic Church and appoints himself as the official head of the newly established Church of England, thus establishing the foundation of the Reformation in England.
1547	Henry VIII dies, and his son Edward VI becomes king, furthering the English Reformation under the advisement of Thomas Cranmer.
1553	Edward VI dies; Mary I ascends the throne and attempts to reestablish Roman Catholicism in England, thus persecuting Protestants. This leads to the arrest and execution of leaders such as John Hooper, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and Thomas Cranmer; many flee England and seek asylum in places like Geneva.
1558	Mary I dies; Queen Elizabeth ascends the throne and restores Protestantism to England. She later establishes the Acts of Uniformity, followed by the adoption of the Thirty-Nine Articles.
1590	Thomas Cartwright is arrested for his activities in seeking to further reform the Church of England beyond the Elizabethan Settlement.

1603	Queen Elizabeth dies; King James I ascends the throne; although sympathetic to the cause of the English Reformation, James opposes all Separatist activities.
1609	The congregation in Scrooby flees England for Holland.
1620	The Scrooby congregation, now residing in Leyden, Holland, joins with Thomas Weston and the Merchant Adventurers to sail to the New World aboard the *Mayflower*.
1625	King James I dies; Charles I ascends the English throne.
1629	The New England Company receives a royal charter for a new settlement in America; the Massachusetts Bay Colony is officially formed.
1630	The Great Migration begins with the sailing of a small fleet, led by the *Arbella*, from England to America. John Winthrop travels with them.
1633	William Laud is appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury and begins arresting nonconformists. John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Samuel Stone flee England and arrive in Massachusetts.
1636	Harvard College is founded; the Pequot War begins; the Antinomian Controversy commences; Roger Williams, having been convicted of sedition by the General Court in October 1635, sets out for Rhode Island. The following year, along with Ezekiel Holliman, Williams establishes the first Baptist church in America at Providence.
1637–1638	Anne Hutchinson and John Wheelwright are banished from Massachusetts.

1640	Charles I is forced to call the "Long Parliament"; petitions for reforms are introduced; Archbishop Laud is imprisoned; with turmoil in England increasing, the Great Migration effectively comes to an end.
1642	With tensions mounting between Charles and the English Parliament, the English Civil War begins.
1643	The Westminster Assembly of Divines is established in order to make recommendations for religious reforms; Thomas Hooker, John Davenport, and John Cotton decline an invitation to appear at the assembly.
1648	Having surrendered two years earlier, Charles I regroups and launches an unsuccessful attack against the New Model Army. He is tried and executed the following year.
1658	The Congregational ministers in England gather for the Savoy Conference, adopting the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order. Oliver Cromwell dies in England.
1662	Parliament passes the Act of Uniformity. More than two thousand English ministers refuse to sign and are banished from their pulpits. In America the Synod of 1662 adopts the Half-Way Covenant.
1675	The Indian chief Metacom (King Philip) attacks the English residents in New England. King Philip's War ensues and lasts for nearly three years.
1679	The New England Reforming Synod adopts the Savoy Declaration.
1684	The Massachusetts charter is revoked by King Charles II, who later dies in 1685.

1686	Sir Edmund Andros arrives in Massachusetts, appointed as the royal governor of New England. A rebellion begins to mount, led by the Mathers.
1689	New England citizens stage a revolt against Andros; he is arrested and deposed. Andros is eventually deported back to England. William and Mary are crowned as England's monarchs.
1690	John Eliot, "the apostle to the Indians," dies.
1692	Witch Trials begin in Salem; Increase Mather returns from England with a revised charter.
1702	Cotton Mather publishes *Magnalia Christi Americana*, the most important work of early American church history.
1703	Jonathan Edwards is born in East Windsor, Connecticut.
1723	Increase Mather dies at age eighty-four.
1728	Cotton Mather dies in Boston.

INTRODUCTION

WHO ARE THE AMERICAN PURITANS?

"There is no such thing as an *American Puritan*" is a sentiment we have often heard. By all rights, Puritanism as we know it was "a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival" that took place in England from around 1560 to 1660.[1] However, over the course of the seventeenth century, it is estimated that nearly a hundred Puritan ministers migrated to America, along with tens of thousands of English believers, all to pursue lives of faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.[2] The earliest settlers in New England were cut from the same cloth as many of the Puritans in England. But to understand who they were and why they came, we first need to go back a hundred years to the birth of the English Reformation.

The English Reformation

When most people think of the Protestant Reformation, their minds often latch on to the image of Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the castle at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. However, the movement that began in Germany quickly spread like wildfire throughout all of Europe. It arrived in England by way of

1. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 28.

2. John Brown, *The English Puritans: The Rise and Fall of the Puritan Movement* (1910; repr., Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1998), 126–27.

an unlikely champion, King Henry VIII (1491–1547). When Pope Clement VII failed to grant Henry a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, he responded by severing ties with the Roman Catholic Church and attached himself to the fast-growing Reformation movement. In 1534, he influenced Parliament to pass the Act of Supremacy, effectively decreeing the English monarch as the head of the Church of England. Thus, the English Reformation was born.

With the advent of the Church of England came a wave of ecclesiastical reforms. Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) to the highest ministerial office—the archbishop of Canterbury. As the first Protestant to hold the coveted position, Cranmer ushered in sweeping changes, removing icons and images from the church buildings and replacing the Roman Catholic Missal (service book) with the Book of Common Prayer.[3] Upon King Henry's death in 1547, his young son, Edward VI (1537–1553), ascended the throne with Cranmer by his side to guide him in the ways of Reformation.

In 1549 Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity, which effectively institutionalized Protestantism into the Church of England. All vestiges of Roman Catholic imagery were officially removed from the churches, the clergy were no longer required to be celibate, and the Book of Common Prayer was required to be used in worship services. Whatever progress was made toward Reformation under King Edward VI came to an abrupt halt upon his death on July 6, 1553, at age fifteen. His replacement would not be a sympathetic Protestant but an embittered Roman Catholic monarch named Mary.

After her father, Henry VIII, divorced her mother, Catherine, Mary I (1516–1558) vowed to remain faithful to Roman Catholicism and oppose her father's apostasy. When her stepbrother, Edward, had attempted to bypass Mary from the line of succession by appointing his cousin, Lady Jane Grey (1537–1554), to the

3. S. M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), 113.

throne following his imminent death, Mary promptly deposed her and had her beheaded only nine days into her reign. For the next three years, "Bloody Mary" systematically reversed every Protestant element from England, lashing out vehemently. When she had 283 Christians martyred in 1555, many Protestants went into hiding. Several hundred leading Protestant leaders fled to Geneva, Switzerland, where they were warmly received by the Reformed pastor and theologian John Calvin (1509–1564). This short stint in Calvin's Geneva would set the course in England for the next hundred years.

The Emergence of Puritanism

By November 1558, Mary I was dead and Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) had ascended the throne. This change of power signaled the safe return of many Protestant exiles from hiding. However, Elizabeth had a difficult challenge on her hands. Sympathetic to their causes, she worked to provide toleration for the dissenting Protestants. At this time, she established the Elizabethan Settlement, which would draw together "Reformed or Calvinistic *doctrine*, the continuation of a liturgical and…Catholic *form of worship*, and an episcopal *church government*."[4] Essentially, this move was designed to keep all parties happy by incorporating key elements from each major group, but many of the English Reformers would have nothing of it. Having spent time in Geneva, many of the Protestants had seen an example of a fully Reformed city and purposed to bring about its fruits in their homeland.

While the term *Puritan* was initially used as a derogatory term in the 1560s, it came to refer to a large contingent of Protestants who were seeking to purify and further reform the Church of England. However, not all Protestants who bore the name of Puritan believed and practiced the same way. According to Everett Emerson

4. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 7, emphasis original.

in his book *Puritanism in America*, four groups emerged within the Church of England in response to the Elizabethan Settlement.[5]

The first group sought only mild reforms (the elimination of vestments, more emphasis on preaching, etc.) within the church and largely conformed to Elizabethan standards. Adherents to this position included John Foxe, Edmund Spenser, and Edmund Grindal.

The second group sought to reform the episcopal structure and diminish the hierarchy of church power; their efforts were focused on parliamentary changes, which proved unsuccessful. This movement included strong leaders such as Thomas Cartwright and John Field.

The third group also opposed the Church of England's hierarchy but sought more passive, grassroots reform that they would practice in their local churches. Further, they were committed to nonconformity—dissension and opposition to the Elizabethan standards spelled out in the Act of Uniformity (1559). A large group of Puritans rejected many of the practices listed in the Book of Common Prayer (owing to their similarity to Roman Catholic dogma) and adhered to their convictions, citing the offense of their own consciences. Key leaders in this movement were men such as Laurence Chaderton, Richard Greenham, and William Perkins, along with the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The fourth group grew frustrated with the lack of reformation within the Church of England and withdrew from it completely. They sought to form their own congregations and were maligned as "Separatists" and persecuted vigorously by church officials. Key leaders in this movement included men such as Richard Clyfton, John Smyth, William Brewster, and William Bradford.

Of the four main groups, the latter two practiced various degrees of nonconformity, and many of their adherents fled persecution to America.

5. Everett Emerson, *Puritanism in America, 1620–1750* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), 18–19.

Nonconformity

When the "Marian exiles" returned to England, they had hoped they would be able to pick up where Edward VI had left off and further reform the Church of England. However, Queen Elizabeth was quite content to demand strict observance to the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles of Religion, which many Puritans believe left the church only "half reformed." Believing many of the Elizabethan standards to be eerily similar to Roman Catholicism, many Puritans vowed not to conform.

Furthermore, having experienced the feast of biblical preaching and sound doctrine in Geneva, the Puritans were appalled at the quality of ministry that was being streamlined. Some English preachers were so unskilled and ignorant, and others so puffed up and pretentious, that they could barely lead the congregation in any sort of way of godliness. Historian Edmund S. Morgan notes, "In England, they said, too many ministers substituted an affected eloquence for sound knowledge and indulged themselves 'in [fond] fables to make their hearers [laugh], or in ostentation of learning of their Latin, their [Greek], their [Hebrew] tongue, and of their great reading of antiquities.' Worse than these dilettante preachers were the ignorant and evil ministers, incapable of preaching at all."[6]

Not only were the ministers awful but corruption in the church was prevalent. Church membership was not reserved for those who maintained a credible profession of faith but was freely granted to many unregenerate persons. And since all disciplinary power was maintained solely by the bishops, there was no way for a church to rid itself of sinning members, making the task of purification nearly impossible.

The reigns of James I (1566–1625) and Charles I (1600–1649) brought increased opposition against nonconformity. While King James focused much of his energy on weeding out the Separatists, King Charles very quickly took to uprooting the nonconformist

6. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of the Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 7.

movement. In 1633, Charles appointed William Laud (1573–1645) as the archbishop of Canterbury and tasked him with enforcing the standards of the Church of England. For the next decade, Laud systematically investigated, pursued, arrested, and prosecuted every nonconformist minister he could lay his hands on. While many Puritans were imprisoned, others fled to Holland and America.

Separatism

The most radical of all the English Puritans were the Separatists. They believed that the Church of England had become apostate and that their only course of action was to remove themselves and begin their own independent churches. When King James I came to power in 1603, he set out to uproot all opposition to his rule as head of the Church of England. No group angered King James more than the Separatists. He famously vowed to "make them conform or harry them out of the land!"[7] He not only drove out the Separatists but threw them into prisons whenever he could. In 1609, a group of Puritan Separatists in Scrooby, England, decided to flee to Holland. Very quickly they realized that life was not much better there, and their children were still being exposed to the same revelry they found in England. Finally, they decided to set sail for the New World.

The New England Way

Strictly speaking, the first arrivals to New England were not regarded as Puritans but as Separatists. However, their devotion to Scripture, sound preaching, Reformed doctrine, and visible piety places them within the sanctified realm of Puritanism. The Separatists in Plymouth fled from England "in order to establish churches of their own in which the membership would more closely approximate that of the invisible church."[8] The Church of England, they

7. B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 327.
8. Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 33.

believed, though technically Protestant in designation, still did not value faithfulness, righteousness, and individual soul liberty. Much of English religion was politicized. They observed that the fires of English Reformation had simmered down to lukewarm coals. All told, while many migrated to America in the early 1600s for various reasons, many residents writing back to England argued that "the only valid reason for migrating to Massachusetts was religion."[9] In short, the Puritans' primary focus was to establish "pure" churches.

When the Massachusetts Bay Colony became populated with ten thousand people in the 1630s, the leaders sought to perfect what had begun in England. Unlike the Plymouth Separatists, they still regarded the Church of England as their "dear sister" but desired to purify what remained in America.

The New England Puritans believed they were in covenant with God and needed to honor the terms of that covenant through their faithfulness. "It is evident," declared John Cotton, "by the light of nature that all civil relations are founded on covenant."[10] Further, they recognized that there needed to be a way to govern themselves civilly as well as religiously. With the help of leaders such as John Cotton, they established "The New England Way." At its core, the "Way" was an expression of Congregationalism that sought to impact all areas of public life. American church historian Mark Noll writes, "New England was, thus, no theocracy, where ministers exercised direct control of public life. It was, however, a place where magistrates frequently called upon the reverend fathers for advice, including how best they might promote the religious life of the colonies. The churches were also nonseparating. Local congregations had responsibilities for the good of the whole, not just for themselves."[11]

While steering themselves away from the Presbyterian form of government found in the Church of England, the American

9. Emerson, *Puritanism in America*, 32.

10. Cited in Emerson, *Puritanism in America*, 49.

11. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 42.

Puritans sought to implement the best of what they knew of Calvin's Geneva as well as the Protestantism of their beloved homeland. For a short season, the New England Puritans attained what they were striving for. While they failed to create "New Jerusalem" on the New England shores, they succeeded in embedding Christianity into the fabric of American society.

Introducing the American Puritans

While the English Puritans were not the only peoples to migrate to America, they were some of the most influential in establishing American society. Furthermore, there are countless magistrates, ministers, artisans, and influencers who deserve to be memorialized, such as William Brewster, Edward Winslow, John Endecott, John Wilson, John Norton, Samuel Stone, John Davenport, Peter Bulkeley, Richard Mather, Increase Mather, Samuel Sewall, Simon Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, Michael Wigglesworth, and Theophilus Eaton. However, for the purposes of this book, we have chosen to tell the story of the first hundred years of Puritanism in America through the lives of nine key figures.

It is our conviction that the American Puritans have a great deal to offer the church of today. And while every Christian in history is clay-footed and inherently sinful, God works through their lives to advance the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Our aim is threefold. First, we hope to clarify and correct many of the myths and half-truths associated with the American Puritans. Second, we hope to showcase their story—without hiding their faults—in order to inspire and edify this generation of Christian believers. Lastly, we hope to encourage further study into their lives, beliefs, struggles, and accomplishments so that we might have a fair and accurate view of our spiritual fathers.

May the Lord be glorified!

1

WILLIAM BRADFORD

Tears streamed down Pastor John Robinson's cheeks as he preached his farewell sermon. Heading for the New World via Southampton, Dartmouth, and Plymouth, England, the people later known as Pilgrims would part ways with most of their church family at a town called Delftshaven, Holland. Although they were hopeful the rest of their congregation that remained in Leyden would follow them shortly, for some it would be their final farewell this side of heaven. The scene was filled with such heartache, a large number of Dutch strangers gathered around them, unable to hold back their own tears. Finally aboard, these brave men and women hoisted sail into "a prosperous wind" that would carry them down to Southampton. While history doesn't record all that was said during this historic departure, one thing we know is that William Bradford left half his heart that day on the dock at Delftshaven.

Early Life in Austerfield

Halfway between London, England, and the Scottish border, just off the Great North Road, sits the rural town of Austerfield, the home of the Bradford family. While there is no official record of his birth, William Bradford was baptized as an infant on March 29, 1590.[1] When he was sixteen months old, his father, William Sr.,

1. In 1752, the American colonies changed from the Julian to the Gregorian

died, leaving young William in the care of his mother, Alice. When he was four, William's mother remarried and sent him to live with his grandfather, who died a mere two years later. Alice died shortly after her son was returned to her, and, now orphaned, he went to live with his two uncles.

Having no siblings, William spent his childhood alone. At first, his uncles determined to instruct him in the family trade of husbandry,[2] but "a soon and long sickness" prevented William from doing much in his uncles' fields. However, Bradford seized the opportunity of convalescence to immerse himself in his books. Since no school existed in Austerfield, William likely received his education from a local minister.[3] No doubt he would have been immersed in the popular books of the day such as Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511) and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563). It was not long before William became absorbed with the Bible.

Eight miles from his home in Austerfield, a Separatist preacher named Richard Clyfton (d. 1616) was ministering in Babworth at All Saints' Church, which Bradford began attending when he was twelve years old. At this time, Bradford became acquainted with a Scrooby postmaster named William Brewster (1566–1644). Later on, Bradford remembered Brewster as "wise and discreet and well spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, of a very cheerful spirit, very sociable and pleasant amongst his friends, of an humble and modest mind, of a peaceable disposition, undervaluing himself and his own abilities and sometime overvaluing others. Inoffensive and innocent in his life and conversation, which gained him the love of those without as well as those within."[4] The two developed a

calendar (New Style). At that time, the change effectively shifted the start of the year from March 1 to January 1. According to the Old Style, his baptism date is March 19, 1589.

2. Farming, agriculture.

3. Gary Schmidt, *William Bradford: Plymouth's Faithful Pilgrim* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 7.

4. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Modern Library, 1952), 327.

lasting friendship, and Brewster became a lifelong father figure and mentor to Bradford.

At Babworth, Richard Clyfton believed that the Church of England retained too many Roman Catholic practices and had wandered away from the biblical model of the church as described in the New Testament. In an effort to purge their own congregation of the vestiges of Rome, the Babworth congregation effectively separated from the Church of England. Babworth was not the first church to proclaim separation from the officially sanctioned church; another pastored by Mr. John Smyth (1570–1612) in Gainsborough seceded from the Church of England in 1605. When King James I (1566–1625) ascended the throne in 1603, he immediately saw Separatism as a threat to his authority as the self-proclaimed "head of the church." Therefore, he launched a vehement opposition against the Separatists, famously vowing to "make them conform, or harry them out of the land!" Under the weight of the king's threats, the Babworth church decided to split, with forty or fifty of them meeting in William Brewster's home in Scrooby.

When Bradford's uncles received word that he was aligning with the Separatist movement, they were furious and forbade him from attending any of their gatherings. Regardless, Bradford was resolute in his determination to attend church services. In his biographical account of Bradford, Cotton Mather notes, "Some lamented him, some derided him, *all* dissuaded him: nevertheless, the more they did it, the more fixed he was in his purpose to seek the ordinances of the gospel."[5] Bradford was convinced that Clyfton was faithful in his teaching, and at Scrooby he found what he had longed for—a family.

For the first time in his life, he did not feel alone.

5. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 1:110.

Seeking a Better Life in Holland

When the king dispatched officers of the Church of England to force the Separatists into conformity, the Scrooby church "would not submit to their ceremonies and become slaves to them and their popish trash," Bradford wrote, "which have no ground in the Word of God, but are relics of that man of sin."[6] In the face of growing opposition, the Scrooby church decided to escape England for Holland in the fall of 1607. The thought of leaving everything behind was daunting, but, Bradford wrote, "these things did not dismay them, though they did sometimes trouble them; for their desires were set on the ways of God and to enjoy His ordinances; but they rested on His providence, and knew Whom they had believed."[7] They secretly hired a ship to sneak them into Holland, but after all their goods were aboard, they were ambushed by the king's officers. They knew immediately that the ship's captain had betrayed them, and several of the men were jailed for a month, including Clyfton, Brewster, and seventeen-year-old Bradford.

Their brief stay in a Boston, Lincolnshire, prison did nothing to quell their ardent desire to flee the country so they might freely worship. After selling nearly everything else they owned, and forsaking family and countrymen, they made a second attempt at escape. This time they hired a Dutch captain to ferry them across. With their wives and children still ashore, half of the men were aboard the ship, preparing for departure. Suddenly, a large group of armed pursuivants[8] arrived to arrest the group. Fearing capture, the captain weighed anchor and set sail. "The poor men which were got aboard were in great distress for their wives and children which they saw to be taken," wrote Bradford. "It drew tears from their eyes, and anything they had they would have given to have been ashore again."[9] Of the men left behind, both Bradford and Brewster assisted the families in their trouble, seeing "these poor women in this distress…

6. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 7.
7. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 11.
8. Officers of the Church of England.
9. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 13.

their poor little ones hanging about them, crying for fear and quaking with cold."[10] When news of the heart-wrenching ordeal became public, the magistrates were unsure of how to proceed. After several examinations, the families were finally released to return to their homes. They took on a new strategy, escaping in smaller numbers, all finally arriving in Amsterdam in August of 1608.

They had chosen exile in Holland because of its religious toleration, which came at a high cost. Added to the cultural shock of living in Amsterdam, the Scrooby congregation was forced to take unskilled jobs to survive.[11] After struggling for nine months, the group decided to move twenty-two miles away, to the city of Leyden. According to Bradford, Leyden was "a fair and beautiful city,"[12] and despite the uncomfortable cultural differences, the Separatists were able to make a home for themselves. When Richard Clyfton stepped down from his pastorate in 1608, his assistant, John Robinson (1575–1625), was called to fill his shoes as the pastor of the Scrooby assembly. Cambridge-trained and fully competent, Robinson remained the church's pastor until his death. The church loved Robinson and sat joyfully under his teaching. Bradford wrote, "His love was great towards them, and his care was always bent for their best good, both for soul and body."[13] Historian Williston Walker notes, "No nobler figure stands forth in the story of early Congregationalism than that of this moderate, earnest, patient, learned, kindly man, who was for the next sixteen years to be Bradford's friend and guide."[14]

The whole congregation lived in close proximity to one another, many of them on the same parcel of land. When Bradford reached

10. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 14.

11. Many of them worked "hard and continual labour," with textiles, metal, and leather, the lowest-paying jobs.

12. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 17.

13. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 18.

14. Williston Walker, *Ten New England Leaders* (New York: Silver, Burdett, and Co., 1901), 17.

the legal age of twenty-one, he received "a comfortable inheritance"[15] from his family's estate, which he sold, using a large portion of it to help purchase a building for the church. Despite his youth, Bradford quickly established himself as a vital member of both the congregation and the local community. In 1612, he became a citizen of Leyden and established himself up as silk weaver. On November 30, 1613, he married Dorothy May, who would later give birth to their only son.

After living ten years in Holland, the assembly at Leyden once again began considering options for departure. While many of them made enough money to sustain their families, others struggled to survive and were even forced to send their children to work. Additionally, they noticed an increased temptation to be "drawn away by evil examples into extravagant and dangerous courses, getting the reins off their necks and departing from their parents."[16] Beyond this, their religious freedom was being threatened by the end of the Spanish truce, due to expire in 1621.[17] Further exciting their desire to leave was the fact that William Brewster was a fugitive from King James, and after Dutch agents raided his home, Brewster was destined to remain on the run for as long as he stayed in Holland. After entertaining several options, the Leyden church decided on departing for America.

Journey to the New World

Among the numerous reasons for leaving Leyden, Bradford noted yet another purpose for traveling to the New World. He wrote that they had "a great hope and inward zeal…for the propagating and advancing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world."[18] As children of the Protestant Reformation, their

15. Mather, *Magnalia*, 1:109.

16. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 25.

17. In 1609, Holland and Spain signed a truce that was set to last twelve years. If war resumed in 1621, and Spain were to be victorious, the Roman Catholic Church would become the state church. The Inquisition would oppress and persecute all non-Catholics, and the Separatists would no doubt be persecuted the greatest.

18. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 25.

earnest desire was to see the gospel of Jesus Christ advance to the far reaches of the known world. Before leaving, however, the group had to secure a patent—that is, permission from the king to settle in the new land. After two years of lobbying and pleading with the king, they eventually changed their approach, signing instead with Thomas Weston, a London businessman who had assembled a team of seventy investors called the "Merchant Adventurers."[19] These investors would fund the excursion in exchange for the first fruits of the settlers' labors. America was rumored to be bountiful with natural resources, and this was the Adventurers' chance to capitalize on the untapped land. For the Leyden congregation, it seemed an acceptable arrangement in exchange for the freedom to worship God in the way He desired.

The church members sold whatever they still had in Holland and prepared for their new life in America. However, at the last minute, Weston began demanding more money and a larger share of their claim. After a series of bitter disputes, the group sold off a large amount of supplies to satisfy Weston's requests, and they were soon on their way. They had purchased a sixty-ton ship called the *Speedwell* that would also serve as a fishing and scouting vessel in the New World. In addition, they would also charter a larger vessel called the *Mayflower*, which they would rendezvous with in London before their departure across the Atlantic.

At the Dutch port of Delftshaven, the Leyden congregation gathered for departure on July 21, 1620. Of the nearly three hundred congregants, only 120 would depart aboard the *Speedwell*; the rest were scheduled to follow in the coming few years. Along

19. The Merchant Adventurers were essentially an investment group assembled by Thomas Weston. In exchange for financing the voyage and their supplies, the Pilgrims would pay the Adventurers back over seven years. However, at the last minute, Weston attempted to change the arrangement, insisting the Pilgrims spend seven days a week working to pay their debts. The Pilgrims countered, offering to work five days a week; Weston reluctantly accepted. Strained from the beginning, the relationship between the Pilgrims and the Adventurers would end up being a miserable arrangement until, in 1627, the Pilgrims were in a position to buy out their entire interest, thus freeing themselves from their financial obligation.

with several key leaders, their pastor, John Robinson, chose to stay behind and guide the church until the rest could make the transatlantic journey. On the deck of the *Speedwell*, Robinson preached an impassioned sermon from Ezra 8:21, "And there at the river, by Ahava, I proclaimed a fast, that we might humble ourselves before our God, and seek of him a right way for us, and for our children, and for all our substance."[20] He fell to his knees "with watery cheeks" and "commended them with most fervent prayers to the Lord."[21] However, the sobs of William and Dorothy Bradford must have carried in the breeze as they said goodbye to their three-year-old son, John, whom they were leaving behind.

This small, faithful band fixed their hope on the Lord, entrusting their lives to His providential hand. Remembering this departure, Bradford wrote, "So they left that goodly and pleasant city which had been their resting place for near twelve years; but *they knew they were pilgrims*, and looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits."[22]

Trouble started immediately as the *Speedwell* began taking on water.[23] After two attempts to keep her seaworthy, the ship was abandoned due to "general weakness,"[24] and half the Pilgrims hesitantly returned to Holland. Weston insisted on equipping the remaining ship with his own complement of men, which the Pilgrims pejoratively referred to as Strangers. With the loss of the *Speedwell*, compounded by the presence of an unseemly crew, only half of the 102 passengers aboard were from the Leyden church.

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20. Quoted in the 1599 Geneva Bible.

21. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 48.

22. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 47, emphasis added. This is the first reference of the group being referred to as pilgrims, a title given to them here by Bradford himself.

23. It is believed that when the *Speedwell* was refit for the voyage, it was overmasted, meaning that the crew installed a mast too big for the ship. Once at sea, the added stress forced open the seams in the hull, causing leaks to spring. According to Bradford, this was done intentionally and deceptively by the ship's captain to sabotage the voyage, thus freeing themselves from their obligation to stay in New England for the next year.

24. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 53.

After months of delays, they set sail for the New World. After sixty-five tumultuous days at sea, the *Mayflower* finally arrived at Provincetown Harbor on November 11, 1620. However, they spent nearly a month searching for a suitable location to settle. A small contingent of men loaded up the shallop[25] and undertook shorter trips to land in hopes of reporting back with a spot to build their settlement. After braving rough surfs that "froze so hard as the spray of the sea lighting on their coats, they were as if they had been glazed,"[26] they returned to the *Mayflower* with a report that Plymouth Harbor would be as fit a place as any, and they weighed anchor there on December 15. Upon his return from an expedition, Bradford was given the dreadful news that his wife, Dorothy, had fallen overboard and drowned only a few days prior on December 7. The specific details surrounding her death are still a mystery. One historian notes, "If Dorothy took her own life, she would not be the last of those facing the desolation of the frontier to do so."[27] With Dorothy gone, and his young son an ocean away, Bradford was once again alone.

The Mayflower Compact

The Pilgrims' initial plan was to establish a society where they could order all religious and civil life and practice according to the Bible. However, they were not the only travelers aboard the *Mayflower*. The Merchant Adventurers, or Strangers, occupied half of their number, many of whom were irreligious, uncouth, and uncommitted to the Separatist religious ideal. The two-month voyage did nothing but exacerbate their differences.

Having drifted from their original course in arriving at Cape Cod, the patent secured by Weston for Virginia would be rendered null and void. They were therefore settling illegally, in a governmental no-man's-land. According to Bradford, the Strangers were "discontented

25. A small sailboat.

26. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 68.

27. George D. Langdon Jr., *Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth, 1620–1691* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), 12.

and mutinous," vowing that they would "use their own liberty" once they came ashore.[28] Knowing that such hostility and division would jeopardize everything they had worked so hard for, the two groups agreed together and drafted the Mayflower Compact.

Prior to their departure, Pastor John Robinson had sent his farewell letter, urging his congregation abroad to "become a body politic" of "civil government" that elected their own leaders who would "promote the common good."[29] Both groups knew that it was a radical idea, untested and untried by anyone before in England. Yet with the king three thousand miles away, they covenanted together aboard the ship, drafting the following:

> Having undertaken, for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.[30]

Representative of all the people, forty-one men from both groups signed the compact and jointly confirmed John Carver (1576–1621) as their governor for the first year.

The significance of the Mayflower Compact cannot be overstated. In 1802, John Quincy Adams noted that it was "the first example in modern times of a social compact or system of government instituted by voluntary agreement, conformably to the laws of nature, by men of equal rights, and about to establish their

28. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 75.
29. Cited in Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 370.
30. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 76.

community in a new country."[31] While it was designed to protect the interest of all residents present and future, in the end it was a "creation of a political union by common consent, and a settlement devoted to God's glory."[32]

The Early Years of the Colony

The first New England winter was severe and killed nearly half of the early settlement. Those who survived were "infected with scurvy and other diseases" to the point that only six or seven people were healthy enough at a time to work on building their homes.[33] On March 16, a tall, scantily clad Indian man named Samoset (c. 1590–c. 1653) walked out of the woods and into the settlement. In broken English, he told them of the land's native inhabitants and their recent dealings with other European settlers. While in Holland, the Pilgrims heard stories of "savage people, who are cruel, barbarous and most treacherous." Not merely content to kill, the Indians were rumored to torture and cannibalize their victims "in the most bloody manner."[34] Soon after his arrival, Samoset brought with him a man named Squanto,[35] who befriended the settlers and helped them learn to survive for the next few years.

For months the Pilgrims had seen only traces of the Indians, with a few brief encounters, but soon after meeting Samoset and Squanto, sixty armed warriors accompanied their chief, Massasoit (c. 1581–1661), to Plymouth colony. A young Edward Winslow (1595–1655)

31. Cited in Bradford Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1951), 133.

32. Thomas S. Kidd, *American Colonial History: Clashing Cultures and Faiths* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), 85–86.

33. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 77.

34. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 26.

35. Squanto (c. 1585–1622) was the last surviving member of the Patuxet tribe, which previously lived on the land the Pilgrims were seeking refuge. Squanto himself had been abducted by a merchant named Thomas Hunt, who sold him into slavery in Spain. With the help of English explorer Thomas Dermer (c. 1590–1620), he was able to escape and return to America, only to find his entire tribe wiped out by a plague. With none of his own people left, Squanto made a home with the Wampanoag.

functioned as their diplomat, ushering the chief to the home of Governor John Carver. After an exchange of pleasantries and gifts, the two leaders spoke of peace; both men were seeking allies in one another. They established a treaty founded on the principles of trust, friendship, and justice. Both parties promised not to "injure or do hurt to any of their people." They agreed that if any trespass occurred, the offender would be tried and punished by the laws of the other party. Further, both parties were agreed to come to the aid of the other in war, and when they came together, "they should leave their bows and arrows [i.e., all weapons] behind them."[36] The Pilgrims found nothing but friendship with Massasoit and the Wampanoag tribe. For years it was not uncommon to find several Indians living in Plymouth—Squanto himself became a constant companion of William Bradford. While history records the joyful details of their first thanksgiving celebration, in truth they often feasted together. As more ships arrived from Holland and England, the colony slowly began to expand, and the lives of both peoples became increasingly intertwined.

In April 1621, Governor Carver, having returned from working in the fields, complained of a severe headache and was dead within a few days. In seeking to appoint a new governor, the colony unanimously chose William Bradford. At age thirty-two, Bradford stepped in to bear the responsibility not only of leading the struggling colony but also of maintaining peace with the Indians. In the end, Bradford and Massasoit remained friends for the rest of their lives, and the peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag lasted more than forty years.

In the winter of 1623, word traveled to Plymouth that Massasoit was gravely ill and on the verge of death. A concerned Bradford sent Edward Winslow to provide what aid he could. Upon his arrival, he saw the chief surrounded by several women "who chafed his arms, legs, and thighs, to keep heat in him,"[37] but they were

36. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 80–81.

37. Edward Winslow, *Good News from New England*, ed. Kelly Wisecup (1624; repr., Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 81.

not hopeful of his condition. Seeing that Massasoit was likely suffering from typhus, Winslow wasted no time in prying the chief's jaws open with the point of his knife to feed him some medicine. Winslow refused to leave his side during the several days he nursed the sachem back to health. Upon his recovery, Massasoit declared, "Now I see the English are my friends and love me, and whilst I live I will never forget this kindness they have shewed me."[38] It was then that he recounted a conspiracy plot against the English by a number of hostile Indians, led by a chief named Wituwamat. When the report came back to Bradford, he had a difficult decision to make.

While Bradford had no desire to lead his people into war, Massasoit had already proven himself to be a trustworthy friend, even helping defend them from earlier threats. He knew he would do well to heed the sachem's warning. Wituwamat was determined to "kill all the English people in one day."[39] Their only option was to launch a preemptive attack. Bradford dispatched his military officer, Captain Myles Standish (c. 1584–1656), along with eight men, to stop the threat. When it was all done, several Indians were dead, including their leader, Wituwamat. While Standish's actions effectively spared Plymouth from certain demise, Bradford did not receive the news with joy. Even more stinging than his own conscience was a letter he received from Pastor John Robinson, lamenting the attack:

> Concerning the killing of those poor Indians, of which we heard at first by report, and since by more certain relation. Oh, how happy a thing had it been, if you had converted some before you had killed any!… It is also a thing more glorious, in men's eyes, than pleasing in God's or convenient for Christians, to be a terrour to poor barbarous people. And indeed I am afraid lest, by these occasions, others should be drawn to affect a kind of ruffling course in the world.[40]

38. Winslow, *"Good News from New England,"* 84.

39. From the account given by Phineas Pratt, cited in Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking, 2006), 147.

40. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 374–75.

Despite later confirmation that an Indian attack had, in fact, been imminent, Bradford shouldered the moral responsibility in sanctioning the action. After suffering loss and sacrificing all, the Pilgrims had come too far to be wiped out. With his hope in God, Bradford continued to lead the settlers in their fight for survival.

Challenges in Leadership

Bradford's leadership was put to the test in the colony's early years, and such challenges would be incessant during his three decades as governor. When exposure and starvation nearly wiped out the colony the first winter, the Pilgrims set all their attention on building homes and planting gardens, with the help of the Indians. For the first three years, everyone in the colony worked together for the common interest. However, the increased number of travelers heavily taxed the already struggling colony, and many of the new arrivals were not as eager to contribute to the community effort. In 1623, Bradford oversaw the allotment of private property to each family and found that private ownership incentivized the Pilgrims to work harder. According to Bradford, "This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content."[41] The notion of communal living was romantic, but the human condition would surely hinder its success. Writing about the difficulty of their trials and the folly of communal living, Bradford noted, "The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of private property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God."[42] Bradford believed that hard work and personal

41. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 120.
42. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 120–21.

responsibility were pleasing to the Lord. His actions had saved the colony, ushering in a long pattern of flourishing for years to come.

Despite the temporary success, Bradford soon had to face the threat of rival colonies. From the very beginning, Thomas Weston had proved to be a nuisance, as he was prone to change agreements and burden the colony. When word arrived in Plymouth that Weston had established a rival colony forty miles north called Wessagusset, the Pilgrims were both shocked and relieved, hoping it to be the end of their engagement with Weston and his troublesome men. However, Wessagusset soon became nothing but a regional liability. Those at the new outpost not only struggled to feed themselves but lacked the wherewithal to maintain peace with the surrounding Indians. Bradford knew that their antagonism of the Indians would surely plunge the region into war, so he decided to act. He sent Myles Standish to persuade the new colony to dissolve, which it quickly did. Many of the men either returned to Plymouth or traveled back to England.

Not every new settler was committed to the separatist ideals of the Pilgrims, but the majority of arrivals were Christians who were eager to submit to the colony's statutes. One colony's beginning was particularly problematic. A man named Captain Richard Wollaston (d. 1626) led a small team of men to establish an illegal trading post just north of Plymouth. In 1626, he quarreled over the site with one of his leaders, Thomas Morton (c. 1579–c. 1647). Wollaston lost out and Morton seized control, renaming it Merrymount. Immediately trouble began to ensue. Morton's actions posed a twofold threat.

First, Morton himself was godless and atheistic, becoming, as Bradford notes, "Lord of Misrule." Committed to debauchery, Morton and his followers engaged in drunken orgies and feasts to pagan gods. Whereas the Pilgrims had established Plymouth for the glory of God, they feared that the idolatry emanating from Merrymount would elicit God's judgment.

Second, Morton was selling firearms and alcohol to the Indians indiscriminately. Along with other allied Indian tribes, Bradford's concern was that the weapons would end up falling into the hands

of certain tribes who would use them to attack the English.[43] In this way, Morton was a traitor, and Bradford knew he had to be stopped. Standish was dispatched to Merrymount to force them to shut down. Upon his arrival, Morton's men scurried to attack the small army but were too drunk to aim their weapons. Morton was so intoxicated that Standish was able to walk up and grab his gun out of his hand. So ended the Merrymount trading post.

In March 1624, John Lyford (c. 1580–1634), an ordained Anglican minister, arrived in Plymouth. His mere presence was a cause for alarm, as the Pilgrims were committed to utter separation from the Church of England. They had hoped their pastor, John Robinson, would be sent to them, but the Merchant Adventurers sent Lyford instead. However, he immediately disavowed his allegiance to the Church of England. While his arrival seemed promising at first, none in Plymouth wanted to call Lyford as their pastor, since they were still waiting for John Robinson.[44] Embittered by this, Lyford led a quiet rebellion against the colony's leadership. Sensing the growing disenfranchisement, Bradford intercepted a batch of letters written by Lyford headed for England. Although the letters were filled with slanderous accusations, Bradford chose not to play his hand until a short time later, when he summoned Lyford and his co-conspirators to court and questioned them about their efforts to stir up turmoil in the colony. When Lyford's associate, John Oldham, flew into a rage at the charges, Bradford produced the letters and read them aloud. The townspeople were appalled, and as a result Lyford and Oldham were banished. Bradford's stealthy actions were further vindicated when it came to light that Lyford had previously deceived his own wife, fathering a child out of wedlock, and had also been banished from Ireland for "satisf[ying] his lust on" a young woman engaged to one of his parishioners.[45] With Lyford's character in ruins, the threat was neutralized. The Lyford ordeal affirmed Bradford's belief that the

43. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 205–8.

44. John Robison never made the journey; he died in Holland in 1625.

45. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 208.

Merchant Adventurers would continue to meddle in their religious affairs. Something had to be done.

By 1627, Plymouth Colony was positioned to establish itself as its own entity. A year earlier they had severed ties with the Merchant Adventurers, effectively buying out their interest for £1,800, which was payable over nine yearly installments. Along with eleven other men, Bradford assumed financial responsibility for making the payments, even signing the new patent in his own name. However, questions began to arise about the land interest of the original settlers. Prior to 1639, Bradford and seven assistants had exercised control over all land distribution and business transactions. Now being free from their obligation to the Adventurers, the members of the colony sought to retain a measure of control over the assets. By March the tensions were mounting as residents began making demands of Bradford and his associates. In an unexpected move, Bradford graciously handed over the patent, signifying the surrender of the colony into their hands, "whereupon the freemen promptly handed the patent back to him for safekeeping."[46] While this event functioned as the end of his dominant interest, Bradford continued to be retained as governor more than thirty times until the year before his death in 1657.

The Church and the State

The founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629 was both a blessing and a curse. While not a Separatist colony, Massachusetts Bay soon became sympathetic to the Plymouth ideal. When Governor Bradford got word that John Endecott (c. 1588–1665), governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and his associates were sick with disease, he quickly dispatched physician Samuel Fuller (1580–1633) to tend to their needs. During his stay, Fuller spent time speaking to Endecott about Separatism, and the two became well-acquainted. No doubt influenced by their time with Fuller, the Puritans in Massachusetts were soon conducting their church services similarly to

46. Langdon, *Pilgrim Colony*, 41.

the Pilgrims, even electing their own ministers—an unthinkable act within the Church of England.[47] While Separatism had been despised in England, those in Massachusetts came to see that they had much more in common with their Plymouth neighbors than they had originally thought. In a letter written to Bradford, John Endecott professed,

> God's people are all marked with one and the same marke, and sealed with one and the same seale, and have for the mayne one & the same hart, guided by one & the same spirite of truth; and where this is, there can be no discorde; nay, here must needs be sweete harmonie. I acknowledge myself much bound to you for your kind love and care in sending Mr. Fuller among us, and rejoyce much that I am by him satisfied touching your judgements of the outward forme of God's worshipe.[48]

By 1630, the last members of the Leyden congregation arrived from Holland. In the same year, thirteen ships brought more than one thousand colonists to Massachusetts Bay. In June, John Winthrop (1588–1649) arrived on the *Arbella*, along with four other ships. Having taken office as governor, he was eager to meet the already famous governor of Plymouth colony. When Winthrop finally met Bradford in 1632, he described him as "a very discreet and grave man."[49] The two felt an instant connection and remained in frequent contact through correspondence for the rest of their lives. However, their relationship would suffer duress as both colonies jockeyed for financial advancement. In the end, Massachusetts Bay would outpace Plymouth at every turn, even drawing many of their own people away to settle in the Bay Area. More than thirty thousand colonists would brave the Atlantic over the next ten years,

47. Schmidt, *William Bradford*, 165–66.

48. Cited in Schmidt, *William Bradford*, 165.

49. John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal, "History of New England," 1630–1649*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 1:93.

and nearly all of them would settle near Massachusetts Bay, with Plymouth growing at a noticeably slower pace.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of having the burgeoning new Bay colony nearby was the solidarity and support in the face of opposition. In 1648 the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts, along with Connecticut and New Haven, joined together to form the New England Confederation. The colonies had previously banded together when the Pequot Indians attacked in 1637, defeating them with the help of the Narragansetts. But now they would be unified in protecting their common interests, both economic and spiritual.

Unlike Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth was not attempting to be a theocracy. Yet as one historian has noted, "The Pilgrims had come to Plymouth resolved to build a society structured and governed according to the will of God: to achieve this goal and to sustain their society they knew that their civil government must support and nourish religion."[50] With no strong ministerial influence, Bradford instituted and enforced laws to restrain evil and encourage flourishing. In 1636, Plymouth enacted a new legal code designed to be "a brief, sensible, understandable rendering of the law by which it governed itself."[51] The code regulated land deeds, civil litigation, and criminal offenses. Taking cues from the Bible, capital punishment was decreed for treason, murder, witchcraft, sodomy, rape, and buggery.[52] To Bradford's dismay, the occurrences of rank debauchery and wickedness seemed to escalate within the colony. In his journal, Bradford records some of the instances, lamenting that "even sodomy and buggery (things fearful to name) have broke forth in this land oftener than once."[53] He attributed the rampant sinfulness to several factors, including satanic attacks against New England, the exacerbating effects of moral law, and the increased visibility due to the small size of the colony. One thing soon became abundantly

50. Langdon, *Pilgrim Colony*, 58.
51. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 224.
52. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 222.
53. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 316.

clear: the colony was changing, and there was nothing William Bradford could do about it.

Fading Hope

As the original Pilgrim Fathers began to die, so did the founding vision for Plymouth. For Bradford, the most difficult loss came in 1644 with the death of his friend and mentor, William Brewster. Devoting several pages to Brewster in his journal, Bradford memorialized "a man that had done and suffered much for the Lord Jesus and the gospel's sake, and had borne his part in weal and woe with this poor persecuted church above 36 years in England, Holland and in this wilderness, and done the Lord and them faithful service in his place and calling."[54] By 1656 Edward Winslow and Myles Standish were also gone, and Bradford was "growne aged." He had become increasingly frustrated with the moral laxity and greediness of Plymouth residents. It was clear that hope was all but gone, and "the community of Saints he had hoped to create in New England had never come to be."[55] After a long winter of sickness, William Bradford died on May 9, 1657.

Bradford's successor as governor was a stern and tactless man named Thomas Prence (1600–1673). Exploiting the full measure of Plymouth's law code, Prence tirelessly pursued and persecuted dissenters and religious zealots with a heavy hand. Under the guise of subduing heresy, Prence mercilessly attacked the Quakers,[56] earning

54. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 324.

55. Philbrick, *Mayflower*, 189.

56. Quakerism was founded by George Fox in the mid-1650s in England. The basic premise was that a relationship with Jesus Christ came through religious experiences divorced from Scripture, even through sexual encounters. The Quakers tended to deemphasize the Scriptures, leaning more on their own subjective "inner light" to guide them. In response to their lewd and defiant behavior, the government of the New England colonies began to arrest Quakers in 1656. When fines and banishment failed to deter their extremism, many Quakers were imprisoned and executed. Over time, the Quakers modified their practices, becoming less radical and more restrained in their behavior. For a helpful overview, see Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New*

himself the title "a Terrour to evill doers."[57] Beyond the tensions with fellow Englishmen, hostility toward the Indians began to mount as well. When Massasoit died in 1661, the forty-year truce forged on that spring day in 1621 died with him. Within fifteen years his own son, Metacom, would wage war on New England. To be sure, the latter days of Plymouth were darker than its earlier ones. Finally, after years of failing to obtain its own patent, Plymouth was swallowed up into the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691.

Bradford's Legacy

The greatest Christians are seldom aware of their own greatness. They simply rise to meet their unique challenges and endure by the grace of God. Called "the first American" by one of his biographers,[58] William Bradford typified the American spirit: courageous, adventurous, tireless, and free. While the eighteenth-century Founding Fathers have their rightful place of honor, Bradford stands preeminent: "To Bradford belongs the singular honor of being the first ruler to demonstrate, with his associates, true Christian democracy, not exaggerated into communism, as a successful principle of government."[59] While he was certainly a Christian first and a governor second, Bradford labored tirelessly for a society that was ordered around the freedom to worship God.

As for Bradford's role as governor of Plymouth, Cotton Mather writes, "The leader of a people in a wilderness had need be a Moses; and if a Moses had not led the people of Plymouth Colony, when this worthy person was their governour, the people had never with so much unanimity and importunity still called him to lead them."[60] Despite numerous challenges, the colonists insisted on Bradford's

England Society from Bradford to Edwards, rev. ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), 154–58.

57. Langdon, *Pilgrim Colony*, 72.

58. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 12.

59. Albert Hale Plumb, *William Bradford of Plymouth* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1920), 106.

60. Mather, *Magnalia*, 1:113.

hand at the helm. He would have governed every year of his life had he not requested five intermittent years of rest. On the nature of his governance, it has been written, "His administration exhibited a happy blending of his constitutional mildness and moderation, combined with a firmness that could not be shaken, a patience that would not wear out, and an optimistic hope that was based upon his Christian faith."[61] Further, "It was not power or wealth he wanted, but a way of life—a community of dedicated men and women, bound together as close and warm as a family is bound, by covenants sacred and inviolable."[62] When he died, all of New England mourned the great loss.

In his later years, with the colony's survival a distant thought, Bradford began to occupy himself with reading, studying, and writing. With the founding generation passing on, he quickly saw the need to instruct the next generation on the nature and necessity of Separatism. Framed in a question-and-answer format, the didactic piece came to be known as the "Dialogue" and showcased Bradford's own apt theological acumen. A few years later, in 1652, Bradford took up his pen again and retold the fateful beginnings of Plymouth Colony from 1620 to 1647. What was first referred to as his journal, or history, was published two hundred years later as *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Historian Williston Walker notes, "His writings are marked throughout by courage and cheer. They give us the best picture of the man himself; the modest, kindly, grateful, generous, honorable leader in a great enterprise. Shrewd and sober of judgment, profoundly religious with a religion that masters his actions rather than seeks expression in words, self-forgetful, without cant, and with far less superstition than many of his associates, it is a sweet, strong, noble character that has unconsciously written itself in the pages of his *History*."[63] One is hard pressed to find its equal in early American literature.

61. Plumb, *William Bradford of Plymouth*, 42.
62. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 282.
63. Walker, *Ten New England Leaders*, 41.

While many have sought to psychoanalyze Bradford as a political figure, it must be noted that "we cannot understand William Bradford without attempting to enter into his feeling of a close walk with God."[64] Orphaned by the world, he was adopted by God at age twelve. Even when he perceived himself to be the only Christian in Austerfield, William held fast to his faith in Jesus Christ. After losing his wife to the sea, Bradford remarried the widow Alice Southworth, "a woman of devout mind and great force of character."[65] Bradford saw to it that they would not only care for their own blended family but also take many orphaned children into their home, thus extending the godly kindness of adoption. All his life, Bradford never stopped seeking the Lord. Even in his old age, he taught himself Hebrew so he would see with his own eyes "the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty."[66] And when he grew weak, teetering on the brink of eternity, he at last said, "The good Spirit of God has given me a pledge of my happiness in another world, and the first-fruits of eternal glory."[67] In his passing, William Bradford joined his heavenly Father, the One in whom he had hoped all his life.

64. Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 135–36.
65. Plumb, *William Bradford of Plymouth*, 59.
66. Mather, *Magnalia*, 1:113.
67. Plumb, *William Bradford of Plymouth*, 106.