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Spiritual Characteristics of the First Christian Society in America

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When the *Mayflower* began her nine weeks' voyage across the Atlantic in September, 1620, the intention of her passengers was 'to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia' — under which description they had in view land around Manhattan Island at the mouth of the Hudson river. In the event, however, the land which was at last sighted on November 9, 1620, was Cape Cod, and because it was too late in the year to make a further voyage southwards they chose to ignore the patent from the Virginia Company, which had authorised their voyage, and to become the first white settlers in what was to be 'New England'. The decision had far-reaching consequences. Englishmen of various kinds had been settled in Virginia since 1607, and the Dutch had been on the Hudson since 1609. If the men of the *Mayflower* had landed in either of those places it is doubtful whether they could have formed a new society of any geographical extent. They would have been in close proximity to men of a very different outlook from their own. The wilderness of New England, on the other hand, presented the opportunity for a distinct and separate society.

Probably no one besides the Pilgrim Fathers considered Plymouth rock on Massachusetts Bay to be a desirable site for a colony in 1620. The tobacco of Virginia and the fur-trade of the Hudson river would not be found there. The Plymouth plantation started with many disadvantages. Virginia in 1620 had the support of wealth and of more than a thousand colonists. In contrast the Pilgrims of Plymouth, in December 1620, had a mere fifty-three adult males. Yet the remarkable fact is that within fifteen years New England had taken over as the leading colony in North America. Her population had unparalleled growth, some 10,000 had settled there by 1634 and 18,000 by 1643. In the building of towns, the erection of churches [at least 35 in twenty years], the establishment of free schools in every township of fifty householders, the opening of Harvard College [1638],

the setting-up of the first printing press in the English Colonies [1639], the men of New England overtook and far outstripped all the other North American colonists. In their sense of priorities they were far different from the profit-seeking individualists who went elsewhere. Their concern was to build a common culture and a united society. As Joel Hawes writes: ‘The sanctuary, the college, the school house, the hall of legislation, and the court of justice, rose nearly at the same time with their own humble dwellings; and wherever a new settlement was commenced, it began and arose under the continued influence of all these causes.’

From her small beginnings and comparative isolation New England thus grew to pre-eminence. In 1702 Cotton Mather could claim, without dispute, that she was ‘the most flourishing plantation in all the American dominions’, and the eighteenth century was to be well-advanced before she began to lose her predominance. In the 140 years from the mid 1630’s to the War of Independence no part of North America contributed so much to the emergence of the nation, and it is an accurate reflection of the facts of history that today in the United States, it is not the Jamestown landing of 1607 that is commemorated but the altogether more important landing at Plymouth. Without New England the history of the United States would have followed a very different pattern.

This being so, we may well enquire what gave New England so distinctive and influential a part in the development of the American nation, and beyond all doubt the answer is — the Christian Faith! In the history of most lands the number of true Christians has generally been a mere fraction of the total population; in New England it was not so. 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. The reinforcements to the Plymouth plantation came largely from the same source. Then in 1628 there began from England itself one of the largest transplantation of Christians from one land to another which has ever occurred. Over a period of twelve years, in about 198 ships, men and their families arrived in Massachusetts Bay. They included gentlemen, merchants, farmers, craftsmen and ministers of the gospel. The one thing which the vast majority possessed in common was a fervent commitment to the Word of God and to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In one sense it may be said that they came for their own advantage for they came to escape persecution. Yet they could have escaped that persecution with far greater ease by remaining at home and ceasing their support of the Puritan cause for which they suffered. That they could not do. They had so experienced the life and power of the gospel that they preferred temporal hardships with the

continuance of spiritual privileges to ease of body and dearth of soul. As Cotton Mather writes:

‘The God of heaven served as it were a *summons* upon the spirits of his people in the English nation; stirring up the spirits of thousands which never saw the faces of each other, with a unanimous inclination to leave all the pleasant accommodations of their native country, and go over a terrible ocean, into a more terrible desert, for the pure enjoyment of all his ordinances . . . the design of those refugees was that they might maintain the *power of godliness* and practise the evangelical worship of our Lord Jesus Christ, in all parts of it.’

Many other testimonies to the character of the first settlers are extant. Thomas Prince says:

‘There never was, perhaps, before seen such a body of pious people together on the face of the earth. For those who came over first, came for the sake of religion, and for that pure religion which was entirely hated by the loose and profane world. Their civil and ecclesiastical leaders were exemplary patterns of piety. They encouraged only the virtuous to come with, and follow them.’

Personal spiritual benefit was by no means, however, the only end in view. Indeed they believed that the more a Christian grows in grace the more he will be taken up with ‘the public interest of Christ’. New England was planted with the hope and prayer that through it the gospel might reach many others. And it was also the conviction of the settlers that they had to build for posterity a society and a culture which would be distinctively Christian. Certainly there were Christians in America before 1620 but only in New England did a unified Christian society emerge. And this was because it was only there that a common spiritual life existed, strong enough to secure the achievements in community life which we have already mentioned. In the 1640’s a minister from New England, who had returned to England, was called to preach before Parliament in London. In the course of his sermon he told his hearers: ‘I have lived in a country where in seven years I never saw a beggar, nor heard an oath, nor looked upon a drunkard.’ This was America’s first Christian society.

I turn now to some of the chief characteristics of the first Christians of New England.

I

They were men deeply acquainted with the power of the gospel and with the experimental work of the Holy Spirit. The best way to illustrate this is to

summarise briefly what was happening in England before and at the time New England was planted. In England the Reformation of the 16th Century had taken two forms. There was first a spiritual movement which brought into being a strong nucleus of Christians, and there was, secondly, an official separation from Rome carried out by the civil government which led to the population at large being declared members of a Protestant national church under Queen Elizabeth in 1559. Consequently true Christians were to be found inter-mingled with a multitude of nominal, worldly Christians, and true ministers of the Word of God often had colleagues who were destitute of spiritual light and zeal. During Elizabeth's reign those Christian ministers who were not content to accept this state of affairs were faced with the following dilemma. They could either separate from the national church and gather congregations of those whom they had reason to think were true believers, or they could stay in the national church and work for the introduction of spiritual discipline. Those who went out were the 'Separatists', and of their leaders, John Robinson, who led his persecuted congregation to Holland as already mentioned, was one of the most eminent. A much larger number made the second choice and with this group the name 'Puritan' is usually identified. Puritanism made steady progress but at the beginning of the seventeenth century the prospects darkened. The focal point of the Puritan movement was the University of Cambridge and in 1602 William Perkins, the leading Puritan preacher in Cambridge, died at the early age of forty-four. The next year James I came to the throne and instead of listening sympathetically to the appeals made by the Puritans for reform in the Church, he declared that he would 'make them conform or herry them out of the land'. This declaration he endeavoured to carry out through his loyal bishops. Perkins had left two eminent followers — William Ames and Paul Baynes — in the University of Cambridge. In the course of a few years both these preachers were silenced, but not before they had been the means of awakening others. Richard Sibbes was converted under Baynes and, in turn, John Cotton was struck with conviction of sin under the preaching of Sibbes.

In the case of John Cotton [1584-1652] we must pause for a moment, for to him belongs a foremost place among the band of men who were to cross the Atlantic. Cotton was a student at Cambridge before Perkins' death. He heard the Puritan leader but resisted his message. Such, in fact, was his secret dislike of that preaching that 'when he heard the bell toll for the funeral of Mr Perkins, his mind secretly rejoiced in his deliverance from that powerful ministry by which his conscience had been so oft beleagured.' Cotton's subsequent awakening under Sibbes resulted in deep conviction of sin: 'Mr Cotton', writes Mather, 'became now very sensible of his own miserable condition before God and the arrows of these convictions did strike so fast upon him that after no less than three years'

disconsolate apprehensions under them, the grace of God made him a thoroughly renewed Christian, and filled him with a sacred joy, which accompanied him unto the fulness of joy for ever.’

Under John Cotton another future Puritan leader was awakened. This was John Preston. Preston, it seems, was convinced the first time he heard the truth. Until that time no branches of learning had satisfied him. Having tried the study and practice of medicine he had turned to astrology and fortune telling, ‘But’, writes Thomas Ball in his *Life of Doctor Preston*, ‘he saw not what his Maker had determined concerning him; for, as he was in the celestial contemplations, it fell out that Mr Cotton, then fellow of Emmanuel College, preached in St Marys, where Mr Preston, hearing him, was set about another exercise and constrained from his contemplations in astrology to look unto himself and consider what might possibly befall him.’

John Cotton left Cambridge in 1612. As Ball has already reminded us, Cotton had been a fellow of Emmanuel College — the chief nursery of Puritans for old and New England. He left behind him at Emmanuel another fellow of the College who had also been converted since entering the University. This was Thomas Hooker. Hooker had left Cambridge before another figure who was also to be eminent in American history, Thomas Shepard, arrived at Emmanuel in 1619. For two years Shepard studied hard and maintained a form of religion. In his third year, he tells us, he began to be ‘foolish and proud’. One Saturday night he became drunk with dissolute companions and was filled with a sense of shame but still he did not know himself. True self-knowledge came when he heard John Preston (who became master of Emmanuel College in 1622) preach from the words, ‘Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ Describing his experience under that sermon Shepard writes, ‘The Lord so bored my ears as that I understood what he spake; the secrets of my soul were laid open before me, and the hypocrisy of all the good things I thought I had in me, as if one had told him all that ever I did — of all the turnings and deceits of my heart.’ There followed some eight months in the slough of despond before Shepard began to experience the manifestation of God’s love. He left Cambridge in 1625.

It is quite clear that, despite the suspension and silencing of preachers, there was a flood-tide of spiritual life in Cambridge in the first quarter of the 17th Century. No sooner did the authorities remove one Christian leader than the Spirit of God raised up several more. Between 1630 and 1639 between sixty and seventy University men went to New England and the majority of them had been converted in Cambridge in that first quarter of the century. What is more, in the years before they were finally ‘harried out of the land’, these same men were used

in the conversion of hundreds and probably of thousands. John Cotton was for twenty years minister in Boston, Lincolnshire, before he crossed the Atlantic in 1633. Of this ministry Cotton Mather writes:

‘The good Spirit of God so plentifully and powerfully accompanied the ministry of this excellent man that a great reformation was thereby wrought in the town of Boston. Profaneness was extinguished, superstition was abandoned, religion was embraced and practised among the body of the people; yea, the mayor, with most of the magistrates, were now called Puritans.’

John Wilson, another Cambridge and New England man, described Cotton’s preaching in these words: ‘Mr Cotton preaches with such authority, demonstration, and life, that methinks, when he preaches out of any prophet or apostle, I hear not him; I hear that very prophet and apostle; yea, I hear the Lord Jesus Christ himself speaking to my heart.’

Even more remarkably blessed was the preaching of Thomas Hooker, whose last work in England was as a lecturer at Chelmsford, in the county of Essex, between 1626 and 1629. Continually threatened by the Church authorities Hooker preached with undiminished boldness, the unction of the Spirit so attending his preaching that ‘the light of his ministry shone through the whole country of Essex’. It was said of Hooker by Giles Firmin that he was ‘a man so awed with the majesty and dread of God that he would put a King in his pocket’. One Essex man who followed Hooker to New England was converted in the following way. On a day of the week when Hooker gave his weekly ‘lecture’ in Chelmsford this man was drinking with his companions in a local tavern. They were all in merry spirits and to add to their amusement the man in question proposed to his friends that they should go and hear ‘what that bawling Hooker will say to us’: ‘And thereupon’, reports Mather, ‘with an intention to make sport, unto Chelmsford Lecture they came. The man had not been long in the church before the quick and powerful Word of God pierced the soul of him; he came out with an awakened and a distressed soul. and by a further blessing of God upon Mr Hooker’s ministry, he arrived unto a true conversion; for which cause he would not afterwards leave that blessed ministry.’

This man was probably typical of a multitude of young converts who went to New England. Others were older Christians who were prepared to cross the Atlantic rather than lose the benefit of the preaching under which they had so profited in England. The story is told how, before John Cotton decided to leave his native land, he consulted John Dod, one of the father figures of the Puritan movement, who lived to the ripe age of ninety. Dod advised him to go, ‘I am old

Peter, and therefore must stand still and bear the brunt; but you, being young Peter, may go whither you will, and ought, being persecuted in one city, to flee unto another.’ But, objected Cotton, what would happen to their people if Puritan pastors thus departed? To which Dod at once replied, ‘That the removing of a minister was like the draining of a fish pond: the good fish will follow the water, but eels, and other baggage fish, will stick in the mud.’

Dod’s prediction was right. And is there any greater proof of the power of the gospel in the ministry of the men who led the exodus to New England than the fact that, offering nothing but spiritual benefits, they were followed by such a multitude? It was the rich measure of the presence of God which made New England such a privileged place in the 1630’s. When some who stayed behind hesitated to cross the Atlantic this was the argument which reached them from those who had already gone: ‘It is not gold and prosperity which makes God to be our God. Though there are very many places where men may receive and expect more earthly commodities, yet I do believe there is no place this day upon the face of the earth where a gracious heart and a judicious head may receive more spiritual good to himself, and do more temporal and spiritual good to others’ [Thomas Hooker].

II

A second characteristic of the first Christians of New England to which I would call your attention *was the extent to which brotherly love governed their living*. This was the grace which John Robinson especially urged upon the part of his congregation who sailed first in 1620. In the first place they were to preserve their peace with God by faith in his promises and repentance often renewed, and next to that they were to attend to their peace with one another ‘for his sake who is, though three, one; and for Christ’s sake, who is one, and as you are called by one Spirit to one hope’.

For eight years the Pilgrim Separatists of New England lived in harmony with each other but with the arrival of the Puritans direct from England after 1628 there came a great test of their charity. For years in England there had been controversy between the Separatists and the Puritans. Separatists had charged Puritans with compromising and Puritan authors had replied with warmth that the Separatists were schismatics. With the arrival of Puritans in such close proximity to the Pilgrims on Massachusetts Bay there could well have been further controversy. It is a memorable testimony to the strength of brotherly love that the Separatists, far from resenting the new arrivals, who were in far greater numbers

than themselves, were soon united with them in spiritual fellowship. Governor Bradford, speaking for the Pilgrims, declared that their great hope in coming to 'these remote parts of the world' had been to advance the Kingdom of Christ and they were happy in this 'though they should be but as stepping-stones unto others for performing of so great a work'.

Of the many ways in which the brotherly-love of the New England Puritans showed itself I mention but two.

First, it was richly seen in their church life. For example, in each New England congregation there were usually at least two preaching elders — often denominated 'pastor' and 'teacher' — and this arrangement, far from being a source of disharmony, exemplified the brotherly-love and esteem which ought to exist between all Christians.

Secondly, this same spirit showed itself in the closeness which these Christians felt to the dead in Christ. They considered love to the saints in glory to be something which ought to be in our hearts upon earth. They took seriously the apostolic command to remember them 'who have spoken unto you the word of God', and not infrequently we read how, when these New England Christians departed this life it was their joy to anticipate their coming fellowship with those who had gone before. On John Cotton's dying, Mather writes, 'Although the chief ground of his readiness to be gone was from the unutterably sweet and rich entertainments which he did by foretaste as well as by promise know that the Lord had reserved in the heavenly regions for him, yet he said it contributed unto this readiness in him, when he considered the saints, whose company and communion he was going unto; particularly Perkins, Ames, Preston, Hildersarn, Dod and others, which had been peculiarly dear unto himself; besides the rest, in that general assembly.'

Perhaps the most common criticism of the New England Christians — most notably in secular authors — is that their spirit was the very opposite of loving. Having been persecuted themselves, it is said, they in turn became persecutors of others. The grounds of this charge as it affects religious issues are, first, that they allowed no toleration for the few clergy who came to New England and wanted to use the Prayer Book and all its ceremonies as in the Church of England, and, second, that they opposed all other nonconforming Christians apart from themselves. In reply to the first of these statements it is undoubtedly true that some few clergy were sent back from New England. But these men were in sympathy with the repressive government in England and had they been allowed to build up support in New England, it is quite possible that repression of the

Puritans would have occurred there, as it did in Virginia. John Brown in his *The Pilgrim Fathers of New England and their Puritan Successors*, writes of the New England leaders: 'The question as it presented itself to them at that particular time was not whether they were to tolerate others, but whether they were to give to others the opportunity of being intolerant to themselves. The cases, therefore, are not parallel between a strong government harrying out of the land a little community of conscientious men, far too weak to be dangerous, and that little community fighting as for dear life to guard the liberty which has cost them so much, and which might easily be taken from them again. [This view is also taken by Professor S. R. Gardiner, an authority in 17th Century history.]

The charge that the New Englanders persecuted other nonconforming Christians is more complex. It is usually said that they tolerated no Baptists and as proof the expulsion of Roger Williams from New England in 1636 is cited. But the denial of infant baptism was not the cause of Williams' expulsion. At least one congregation 'questioned and omitted the use of infant baptism' in Massachusetts prior to 1636, as Cotton Mather tells us, 'nevertheless', he adds, 'there being many good men among those that have been of this persuasion, I do not know that they have been persecuted with any harder means than those of kind conferences to reclaim them.' Williams was expelled chiefly because he denied that the magistrate has any religious duty; he was opposed to any laws on such things as blasphemy and the public abuse of the Lord's Day, and he held that pagan, Jewish, or Turkish worship should all be allowable. For the men who had settled New England to advance the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ that was unthinkable.

It has to be admitted that the views of the New England Puritans on liberty of conscience were imperfectly formed, and that some of their principles were erroneous, but to attribute to them an attitude of hostility to all nonconformists except themselves is entirely unwarranted. They did not make full agreement on church principles a term of Christian communion. Their primary concern was for a union of all the godly. Edward Winslow, one of the first governors of the Plymouth Colony, in speaking of their practice on this matter, said, 'We ever placed a large difference between those that grounded their practice on the Word of God, though differing from us in the exposition and understanding of it, and those that hated such reformers and reformation, and went in anti-Christian opposition to it, and persecution of it.' Mather quotes similarly from another New England leader, Jonathan Mitchel, 'who was one fully satisfied and established in the Congregational way of church government, and yet had a spirit of communion for all godly men in other forms, and was far from confining godliness unto his

own. It was a frequent speech with him, “the spirit of Christ is a spirit of communion!” This attitude explains why New England Puritans could treat godly Baptists who sought to follow the rule of Scripture with respect, and why also they were so opposed to the Quakers who by setting aside the rule of Scripture were overturning the foundations of historic Christianity.

III

I pass now to a third characteristic of the first generation of New England Christians. It is *their contentment in God, and their trust in him, in the face of almost overwhelming difficulties and discouragements*. The sufferings of the early settlers in New England has been a theme often repeated and yet it remains an amazing story. Within three months of the landing in December 1620 only about fifty of the original hundred survived. The graves of the others had to be unmarked and grassed over to prevent the Indians discovering how weak the survivors were numerically. Most died from illness, others went more tragically. William Bradford was with the first party who used the *Mayflower's* small boat — a shallop — to land at Plymouth Rock. When they returned later to the mother-ship Bradford was to learn that his wife had fallen overboard and been drowned. Together through several years this little band faced danger, toil and famine. ‘I have seen men stagger’, says Winslow, ‘by reason of faintness for want of food’. And yet in the midst of it all there was no spirit of murmuring and discontent.

When the Puritans began to arrive, from 1628 onwards, they faced similar conditions. Of the large party who came over in 1630 under the leadership of Governor John Winthrop some two hundred died within eighteen months. Yet we find Winthrop writing home to England in these words:

‘The Lord is pleased still to humble us; yet He mixes so many mercies with His corrections as we are persuaded He will not cast us off, but in His due time will do us good . . . We may not look at great things here. It is enough that we shall have heaven though we should pass through hell to it. We here enjoy God and Jesus Christ. Is not this enough? I do not repent of my coming; and if I were to come again, I would not have altered my course, though I had foreseen all these afflictions.’

Another of the early settlers gave this testimony:

‘I take notice of it as a great favour of God, not only to preserve my life, but to give me contentedness in all our straits; insomuch that I do not remember that ever I did wish in my heart that I had never come into this country, or wished

myself back again to my father's house. The Lord Jesus Christ was so plainly held out in the preaching of the gospel, and God's Holy Spirit was pleased to accompany the word with such efficacy to many, that our hearts were taken off from Old England, and set upon heaven. The discourse not only of the aged, but of the youth also, was not, how shall we go to England, but how shall we go to heaven.'

Many of the Christians who left England found it a very difficult decision to take and some were terrified at the prospect of what the journey might involve. Among the latter was the wife of John Wilson who could in no way be persuaded to go with her husband 'till upon prayer with fasting before the Almighty turner of hearts' her attitude was changed. Among those who encouraged Mrs Wilson was John Cotton's advisor, old John Dod. Dod's encouragement took an unusual form. He sent a present of three different coins to Mrs Wilson but told the person who carried them they should not all be given her together; she was to be given only one and then, if her response was the right one, the others. The first coin was nothing more than a common and almost valueless brass counter; the second was a silver crown of much more value, and the third was the solid gold 'Jacobus' named after James I. These were all separately wrapped, the bearer being instructed 'that he should first of all deliver only the counter, and if she received it with any shew of discontent, he should take no further notice of her; but if she gratefully received that small thing for the sake of the hand it came from, he should then go on to deliver the silver, and so the gold: but withal assure her, "That such would be the dispensations of God unto her, and the other people of New England: if they would be content and thankful with such little things as God at first bestowed upon them, they should in time have silver and gold enough"' Mather, who reports this story, also tells us the result: 'Mrs Wilson accordingly, by her cheerful entertainment of the least remembrance from good old Mr Dod, gave the gentleman occasion to go through with his whole present and the annexed advice; which hath in a good measure been accomplished.'

One cannot read these records without being led to consider how these men and women were able to manifest such a large measure of contentment and thankfulness under such adverse conditions. Two things, chiefly, appear to constitute the explanation.

First, many of these Christians, by the study of the Scriptures and by personal acquaintance with God had come to a settled persuasion about the sureness and goodness of his providential government. They believed that God reigns and that he works all things together for good — even affliction, suffering and death — to them that love him and who are the called according to his

purpose. They believed, further, that divine providence enters into the smallest details of life and that it is therefore a sin not to 'trust in him at all times'. Hundreds of examples of these beliefs could be found in their lives. When Thomas Hooker was about to leave England he was being pursued to the coast by agents of the government. A friend accompanied him as they rode on horseback to the waiting ship and, conscious of the nearness of their pursuers, he said anxiously to Hooker, 'Sir, what if the wind should not be fair when you come to the vessel?'; to which Hooker instantly replied, 'Brother, let us leave that with Him who keeps the wind in the hollow of his hand.' Again, once, in New England, John Wilson was with a group of soldiers when they saw an Indian carrying off a young English woman in a canoe. The canoe was within gunshot range but it was moving so swiftly through the water that they were afraid to shoot in case they hit the woman. Do not fear, Wilson exhorted them, 'God will direct the bullet!' And so it proved.

In the second place, it must be said that the contentment of these Christians under affliction was due to the rich spiritual consolations which they received in Christ. 'In this world', wrote Robert Cushman, 'We are all, in all places strangers and pilgrims, travellers and sojourners. most properly, having no dwelling but in this earthly tabernacle.' Yet this did not mean that they considered heaven as something entirely future: many of them enjoyed the first-fruits of heaven here, for the love of God was shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost. Among them the full assurance of salvation was not the rarity that it is with us. Not a few were like William Bradford, who, as already mentioned, lost his wife so tragically in 1620. Before he ended his pilgrimage we read that 'he was filled with ineffable consolations, the good Spirit of God giving him a pledge of the first-fruits of his eternal glory.'

I conclude this point with an extract from the diary of Thomas Shepard. It takes us right to the heart of the school of Christian living we have been considering:

'Oct. 6, 1641. I was very sad to behold outward wants of the country, and what would become of me and mine, if we should want clothes, and go naked, and give away all to pay our debts. Hereupon the Lord set me upon prizing his love, and the Lord made my heart content with it: (1) His love, though he denied me all blessings. (2) Hence I desired to know it. (3) To constrain my heart by it. (4) That I might not abuse, but honour it. And there I left myself, and begged this portion for myself, and for my child, and for the church; and so left them in the Lord's bowels. Now, such was the goodness of Christ, that when I came to hear my father [Thomas Hooker, his father-in-law] preach at Boston, the day after, my soul was

settled on the same way again, when he preached about contentedness; and so I was confirmed in the faith.’

IV

The last characteristic of those first American Christians which we have time to mention was their *concern for the building of a society in which God and his Word were honoured*. They were not prepared to live a cloistered Christian life, simply cultivating personal godliness. Their view of their duty was much larger; they considered others and not least the generations which would follow them. Their foundational principle here was that not only is the church to be ruled by the Word of God, but that same authority must also rule in the life of the family, in the education of youth, and in the government of the state. I find their outlook on this matter stated very well by J. C. Ryle in an address which he gave in the seaport of Liverpool in 1881. Ryle was concerned to assert that the lasting prosperity of any people depends ultimately on their attitude to the cause of Christ:

‘In the long run of years, the moral standard of a city or a nation is the grand secret of its prosperity. Gold mines, and manufactures, and scientific discoveries, and docks, and roads, and eloquent speeches, and commercial activity, and democratic institutions are not enough to make or to keep nations great. Tyre, and Sidon, and Carthage, and Athens and Rome, and Venice, and Spain, and Portugal had plenty of such possessions as these, and yet fell into decay. The sinews of a nation’s strength are truthfulness, honesty, sobriety, purity, temperance, economy, diligence, brotherly kindness, charity among its inhabitants, and, consequently, good credit among mankind. Let those deny this who dare. And will any man say that there is any surer way of producing these characteristics in a people than by encouraging, and fostering, and spreading, and teaching pure Scriptural Christianity?’

There is perhaps nothing upon which the New England Puritans have been more fiercely criticised than upon their views concerning the proper ordering of society. Authors, novelists, playwrights, even forgers, have united to depict the society of 17th-Century New England as ‘a dreary waste overhung by a wintry sky’, and as ‘a theologico-glacial age’. We are solemnly asked to believe that 17th-Century New-England law treated a kiss in public on a Sunday as a crime, and that a minister was known to refuse to baptise infants ‘so irreverent as to be born on the Sabbath’!

Certainly no person in his senses will claim that the Puritan endeavour to build a Christian State in America was a faultless procedure. Sometimes the judgment of the pioneers was wrong. They erred in supposing that voting rights could be restricted to church members. But in their conviction that civil rulers must acknowledge the Word of God, and the Kingdom of Christ, they ought to need no apologia. They knew that governments can only stand firm if they are based upon morality, and that morality in turn must find its sure basis in God and in submission to His Word. Accordingly they held that magistrates have a religious obligation: their power is of God and they must use it lawfully for God to whom they will be answerable. Among the many priceless letters preserved in Mather's *Magnalia* is one from Ezekiel Rogers written to a brother minister a few years before his death in 1660 and dealing with our present subject:

'We grow worldly everywhere; methinks I see little godliness, but all are in a hurry about the world; everyone for himself, little care for public or common good. It hath been God's way, not to send sweeping judgments when the chief magistrates are godly and grow more so. I beseech all the Bay-ministers to call earnestly upon the magistrates, tell them that their godliness will be our protection: if they fail, I shall fear some sweeping judgment shortly. The clouds seem to be gathering. I am hastening home, and grow very asthmatical and short-breathed. Oh! that I might see some signs of good to the generations following to send me away rejoicing!'

This is the voice of the genuine New Englander: other-worldly yet believing that in this world godliness with contentment is the best gain to be wished for his contemporaries and his posterity.

It needs to be remembered that the views on society which our modern age so commonly supports were also represented in North America in the 17th Century. Virginia was in some ways the 'official secular state'. When a Scots minister pleaded in 1696 that more care should be shown for souls in that colony the reply he got from the Attorney-General was 'Souls, damn your souls! Make tobacco!' The result of this policy was that Virginia in the 17th Century was in no position to give leadership to the American colonies. In moral qualities, in education, in personal initiative, the average Virginian was far behind his contemporaries in New England. [As late as 1671 Governor Berkeley of Virginia could report: 'I thank God we have no free schools, nor printing, and I hope we shall not have, these hundred years. For learning has brought disobedience and heresy into the world; and printing divulged them and libels against the government. God keep us from both.']

Much the same can be said of Roger Williams' colony established on Rhode Island. As already mentioned, Williams rejected the New England Society for what he believed was a better way. In 'God's free air' on Rhode Island there would be a religious oasis for all who cared to settle there, and many did so, including Antinomians, Familists and mystics. In Rhode Island there was full freedom, no rule of Scripture, and there were few restrictions. Had this philosophy been correct, Williams' colony should have thrived and challenged the moral and spiritual leadership of New England. This it entirely failed to do. A. L. Drummond, by no means an enthusiast for the Puritans, commenting on the composition and ideas of the Rhode Island Community, writes:

'These conditions did not make for progress or prosperity. Toleration was a blessing, but it did not have the "drive" adequate to build churches, schools and public works. Rhode Island remained "the least of the tribes of Israel". Shifting, unstable coteries were incapable of producing the homogeneous communities characteristic of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Sixty years after the foundation of Providence there was no adequate house of worship in the town; and at the end of Rhode Island's first century there were less than a dozen churches of any denomination, "and these mostly in a very feeble state".' [Story of American Protestantism, 1949, 74.]

In conclusion there is one more note to be struck. The New England Puritans did not believe that their colonies advanced because they were stronger, wiser or more righteous than others. With the recognition of their imperfection and sin, and with faith and much prayer, they sought to acknowledge God and his Kingdom. The blessing which followed was all of his doing. Their testimony in life and death was, 'The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it.' Looking back, Governor William Bradford of Plymouth could declare:

'Of small beginnings great things have been produced by His hand . . . and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone to many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation. Let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise!'

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