

Pilgrim Prayer and Fasting: A Model for Today

Gary P. Bergel

Of the more than one hundred aboard the Pilgrims' ship, the *Mayflower*, the majority were "saints," believers who had come to know and appreciate the life-transforming grace found in and through Jesus Christ. Called "Separatists" because they had drawn apart from the corruption gripping the Church of England and the decadent cultures of their day, they set sail for the New World. "Owning the Covenant" they had formulated in Scrooby, England in 1606, they hoped to construct a "New Testament" congregational way of life, and to worship the Lord in the way they believed the Scriptures taught. Also aboard the *Mayflower* were "strangers," individuals who were not yet spiritually reunited and in relationship with their heavenly Father—men and women who had not yet appropriated the grace to say "yes" to the claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ or who refused to do so.

Halfway across the Atlantic, the *Mayflower* suffered a cracked beam and faced near disaster in a torturous storm. Securing the beam with a great iron screw, they who knew themselves to be pilgrims, committed themselves to the will of God and resolved to proceed. The battered *Mayflower* finally came within sight of Cape Cod on November 19, 1620.

Before landing, the company of Anglo-European "saints and strangers" deliberated how they would maintain law and order among themselves and entered into a "covenant" agreement, The Mayflower Compact. At the heart of this historic compact lay an undisputed conviction that God must be at the center of all law and order. And, they insisted, all law would rest not upon a monarchy or dictatorship, but upon the representation and consent of the governed. The first "civil body politic" in America was constituted. The *Mayflower* Compact, along with the Plymouth Constitution of 1636, made Plymouth Plantation a self-governing colony and helped lay foundations for the entire United States Republic.

The Pilgrims' own historian and future Governor, William Bradford, documented that the band anchored in Plymouth Harbor. Those who first went ashore fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the fast and furious ocean. All safely landed on December 26, 1620. Trees were cut. A common house and a combination fort and congregational meeting house were constructed. Soon, battling the rigors of a harsh New England winter, Bradford recorded that a "Great Sickness" set in and one half of their company perished, leaving but three married couples. Only five of eighteen wives survived. As spring arrived and it pleased God [that] the mortality began to cease, widows and widowers remarried and gathered the orphans into their houses.



Pilgrims on Their Way to Worship and Prayer; Oil Painting by George Henry Boughton

THE DROUGHT AND FAST OF 1623

William Bradford

"A great drought continued from the third week in May, till about the middle of July, without any rain and with great heat for the most part, insomuch as the corn began to wither away though it was set with fish, the moisture whereof helped it much. At length it began to languish sore, and some of the drier grounds were parched like withered hay, part whereof was never recovered. Upon which they set apart a solemn day of humiliation [fasting] to seek the Lord by humble and fervent prayer in this great distress.

And He was pleased to give them a gracious and speedy answer, both to their own and the Indians' admiration that lived amongst them. For all the morning, and greatest part of the day, it was clear weather and very hot, and not a cloud or any sign of rain to be seen; yet toward evening it began to overcast, and shortly after to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God. It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in that abundance as that the earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith. Which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn and other fruits, as was wonderful to see, and made the Indians astonished to behold.

And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient they also set apart a day of thanksgiving."

—William Bradford, "Of Plymouth Plantation"

The 51 survivors of the Pilgrims' first winter in the New World did not meet the first local Native American, Samoset, until March. Samoset, an Abnaki, brought with him Squanto, a local Patuxet. They taught the Pilgrims where to hunt, fish, gather food and how to plant and fertilize corn and beans. Massasoit, Supreme Chief of the Agricultural Wampanoag Indians, arrived for a state visit, became fond of the Pilgrims, and entered into a treaty which was kept for 55 years. The Wampanoag celebrated up to six thanksgiving festivals per year.

Unfortunately, as was also common in other Anglo-European "point of contact" settlements with the indigenous Native People of the Americas, not all who arrived in subsequent sailings carried a Christlike "Pilgrim" spirit. Bradford writes of the "wild" and "lusty young men" who arrived on the ship *Fortune* in 1621. Traders, trappers, sometimes cunning Native guides, and sundry exploiters often played the Anglo and Native communities against each other for personal gain, exploitation, commercial profit, and control of the Native tribal lands and resources.

The indigenous Native People of the region were composed of a variety of tribes with varying religious practices, cultural differences, and intra-

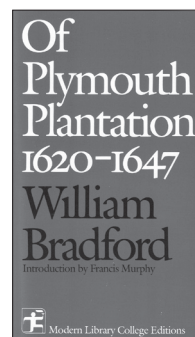
tribal tensions which sometimes erupted into warfare. By 1636, Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" diary would contain the tragic account of the Narragansetts joining with the English forces in defence against the Pequots. Most of the Pequots' chief men were burned alive. Sassacus, the Pequots' chief sachem, was beheaded by the Mohawks. The remaining Pequots were dispersed into various regional tribes.

In just one generation, some 50 years, more Pilgrim letters and diaries began to portray the terrible "disorders" that were beginning to fill the land and were calling for repentance, fasting and prayer to see "revival" enter the Pilgrim communities. The introduction and spread of "bad Christianity" was also causing many in the Native Community to reject the gospel of Jesus Christ and shun "the white man's God."

But the light of Christ was burning far more brightly in the Pilgrim community, and the Anglo-Native relationships were far more benevolent in the autumn of 1621 as the surviving Pilgrim family members gathered in their first harvest—20 acres of corn laid out by Squanto, poorer yields from seven acres of English barley, wheat, peas, pumpkins, wild honey, plums, and red and white wild grapes. The village now had seven completed dwellings and the Pilgrims could look about them with a gathering sense of security. They set apart a time for Christian and community thanksgiving.

Their Indian friends were invited and 90 of them arrived with Massasoit. They brought deer and the Pilgrims furnished seafood, geese, ducks, and wild turkey. Rough tables were spread with the tempting array of the Lord's provisions. Elder William Brewster led in prayer and the festivities, which lasted three days, involved sports and contests, and cemented ties of friendship between the Wampanoags and the fledgling Pilgrim colony.

—The above was compiled and adapted by Gary Bergel from William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647," "The Pilgrim Way" by Robert M. Bartlett © 1971, United Church Press, Philadelphia, PA, and "The Church of the Pilgrimage" history by Gary L. Marks at www.8townsgaure.org.



OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION 1620-1647

William Bradford

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