

A Heritage of Thanksgiving

*“The Christian’s life should be one of thankfulness to God.”
Charles H. Spurgeon*

All people owe gratitude to God. Life is His gift. And every good provision in and for life is from Him, who alone deserves our highest thanksgiving. How much more so for the gift of eternal life? This touches the heart and historical roots of our Thanksgiving holiday.

All people owe gratitude to God, but no one understands this better than those whose sins are forgiven, possessing the living hope of eternal life in and through Christ Jesus our Lord. America’s Thanksgiving Day is a living legacy to the grace of God, especially in the gospel (“good news”) of Christ. There is no greater cause for Thanksgiving Day than the gospel.

The light of history is ever subject to the shades and coverings of present popular interest. People believe what they want to believe about the past—notoriously without authority. In as much as we are able without prejudice and the filters of present popular interest, let us consider the plain evidence of the well documented light of Thanksgiving history.

“Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!”

1 Chronicles 16:8–10

A Reformation Heritage

What does the Protestant Reformation have to do with America's Thanksgiving holiday? In the essence of it, everything. America's Thanksgiving holiday is a direct result of the Reformation. To be sure, many providential factors were involved in its fruition, but behind them all is the singular cause that the Reformation labored so fervently to proclaim and steward.

To trace the steps from the Reformation to the first Thanksgiving Day in America, we will look to William Bradford, the second elected governor of the Pilgrim colony, as our guide. Bradford was born in March 1590 in Austerfield, Yorkshire, England. He was born into a Puritan home, becoming acquainted with the Scriptures and demonstrating a true interest in Christ through the gospel at an early age. He began attending meetings of a Puritan congregation that met in the home of William Brewster in a nearby town. At age sixteen, Bradford became a full member of the church. Then, at age seventeen, owing to persecution, he fled his homeland with his beloved congregation to the Netherlands. Several from this Puritan church would later leave Holland and head to the New World, becoming the first "Pilgrims" to land on American soil. His personal, eye-witness records along with letters and journal entries regarding the events that led to the first Puritan settlement in America were compiled into a book entitled, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. It will be from this record that Bradford guides our steps.¹

THE FIRST CAUSE

William Bradford begins his record with these words:

And first of the occasion and inducements thereunto; the which that I may truly unfold, I must begin at the very root and rise of the same. The which I shall endeavor to manifest in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things, at least as near as my slender judgment can attain the same.

It is well known unto the godly and judicious, how ever since the first breaking out of the light of the gospel in our Honorable Nation of England, (which was the first of nations whom the Lord adorned therewith, after that gross darkness of popery which had covered and overspread the Christian world,) what wars and oppositions ever since, Satan hath raised, maintained, and continued against the Saints, from time to time, in one sort or other. Sometimes by bloody death and cruel torments; other whiles imprisonments, banishments, and other hard usages; as being loath his kingdom should go down, the truth prevail, and the churches of God revert to their ancient purity, and recover their primitive order, liberty, and beauty.²

The "very root and rise of the same," which Bradford says is the "simple truth," concerning the cause that led to the foundation of the New Plymouth Settlement (which gave us our Thanksgiving Day legacy) was the Reformation. He openly appeals to the widespread knowledge of the Reformation as that "breaking out of the light of the gospel," which came "after that gross darkness

¹ Citations will be from William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908). Other references will be noted from Harold Paget's modern English rendering. Bradford's records have also been published under the titles, *History of Plymouth Plantation* (with various spellings of "Plymouth") and *The Mayflower*.

² Bradford, 3.

of popery which had covered and overspread the Christian world.” The force behind the Reformation was that “the truth prevail, and the churches of God revert to their ancient purity, and recover their primitive order, liberty, and beauty.” This summarizes a significant principle of the Reformation and is the very reason why reformers in England were labelled “Puritans.”

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Darkness and corruptions abounded in both the world and the church of sixteenth-century Europe. While there were many attempts at moral reform in the church, it wasn’t until the Greek New Testament was printed for the first time on Guttenberg’s printing press that the Reformation officially began. The event that marks its formal launch is Martin Luther’s posting of his Ninety-five Theses, October 31, 1517. It was a list of arguments against the abuses and errors of the Roman Church in light of the Greek New Testament. It wasn’t a mere moral movement that resulted, but a spiritual revival based on a rediscovery of the gospel in the written Word of God.

REFORMATION IMPACT

The Reformation is stunningly more than just an article of church history—the Reformation changed western civilization, and through it the world. Many of the social blessings that we now take for granted were corrupt or non-existent before the Reformation. “To look upon the Reformation of the sixteenth century as only the substitution of one set of theological doctrines for another, or the cleansing of the Church from notorious abuses and corruptions, or even a return of Christianity to something like primitive purity and simplicity—is to take an inadequate view of its nature and importance.”³

REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

When Bradford refers to the “honorable nation of England” as being “the first of nations adorned with the light of the gospel,” he may be alluding to the forging contributions of John Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards. Wycliffe is regarded as the “Morning Star” of the Protestant Reformation since he was the first to translate the Scriptures into English (from Latin). He also spoke out against the abuses and errors of the Roman Church. Though nearly two-hundred years before Martin Luther, Wycliffe’s teachings were still being used of God to contribute to the Reformation in Bradford’s day. It is also interesting to note that England made the Reformation a matter of national concern, often vacillating between sides and at times asserting her own unique compromises. All of these factors contribute to the legacy that gave America her Thanksgiving holiday.

1516 – GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

The renowned Dutch scholar, Desiderius Erasmus (1466 – 1536), considered to be the “prince of humanists,” lectured in England at Cambridge University from 1511 to 1514.⁴ He published works that issued biting criticism against the abuses in the Roman Church and was widely read. But his

³ B. B. Warfield, *Works*, 9:461 – citing Charles Beard from his Hibbert Lectures.

⁴ B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 221.

truest contribution to the Reformation was his labors to furnish the world with the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament. Though he never formally sided with the Reformation, by making the Greek New Testament widely access in print he was unwittingly bringing light into darkness, shattering the shackles of religious tyranny, and awakening the hearts of men and women to the glorious grace of God in the gospel. The Scriptures were being unleashed in the gripping power of its original language. The Greek New Testament quickly drew attention at Oxford and Cambridge, where William Tyndale, the great Puritan forerunner, was studying.

1518 – LUTHER’S WRITINGS REACH ENGLAND

Only four months after Luther’s posting of his Ninety-five Theses, Erasmus sent copies to his friends, John Colet and Sir Thomas More, in England. Many more publications from Luther would soon follow from various sources. Oxford and Cambridge were soon invaded with Reformation writings and thought. Thomas More, serving as the king’s chancellor, would become one of Luther’s most ardent and articulate opponents.

PERSECUTIONS OF BODY

The story behind the English Puritans leaving their homeland and eventually arriving in the New World (America) was primarily driven by religious persecution. Bradford refers to the trials that those who sided with the Reformation in England suffered when he speaks of “wars and oppositions ... against the Saints, from time to time, in one sort or other. Sometimes by bloody death and cruel torments. At other times by imprisonments, banishments, and other hard treatments.”⁵

Bradford likened “the bloody and barbarous persecutions” that the English reformers suffered to that of the ancient Christians, including:

sundry kinds of torment, often rackings, and dismembering of their joints; confiscating of their goods; some bereaved of their native soil; others departed this life under the hands of the tormentor; and some died in banishment, and never saw their country again.⁶

1519 – SEVEN BURNED FOR TEACHING THE LORD’S PRAYER IN ENGLISH

The truth of the gospel is worth dying for, and many in England bravely did. Soon after the Reformation started placing the Scriptures into the hands of the people on the Continent, the Roman Church in England increased its grip. Many who had even portions of the Scriptures in English, including Lollards who had the works of Wycliffe, were severely punished. The accounts of martyrdom at Coventry, for instance, are notable for their sheer number and repulsive brutality. One account is more than worth citing at length.

And this was not all. There lived at Coventry a little band of serious Christians—four shoemakers, a glover, a hosier, and a widow named Smith—who gave their children a pious education. The Franciscans were annoyed that *laymen*, and even a *woman*, should dare meddle with religious instruction. On Ash Wednesday (1519) Simon Morton, the bishop’s sumner, apprehended them all, men, women, and children. On the following Friday, the parents were taken to the Abbey of Mackstock, about six miles

⁵ Bradford, 3, rendered in modern English.

⁶ Bradford, 5.

from Coventry, and the children to the Grey Friar's convent. "Let us see what heresies you have been taught?" said Friar Stafford to the intimidated little ones. The poor children confessed they had been taught in English the Lord's prayer, the apostles' creed, and the ten commandments. On hearing this, Stafford told them angrily: "I forbid you, (unless you wish to be burnt as your parents will be,) to have any thing to do with the *Pater*, the *credo*, or the ten commandments *in English*."

Five weeks after this, the men were condemned to be burnt alive, but the judges had compassion on the widow, because of her young family (for she was their only support,) and let her go. It was night: Morton offered to see Dame Smith home; she took his arm, and they threaded the dark and narrow streets of Coventry. "Eh, eh!" said the apparitor, on a sudden, "what have we here?" He heard in fact the noise of paper rubbing against something. "What have you got there?" he continued, dropping her arm, and putting his hand up her sleeve, from which he drew out a parchment. Approaching a window whence issued the faint rays of a lamp, he examined the mysterious scroll, and found it to contain the Lord's prayer, the apostles' creed, and the ten commandments *in English*. "Oh, oh! sirrah!" said he; "come along. As good now as another time!" Then seizing the poor widow by the arm, he dragged her before the bishop. Sentence of death was immediately pronounced on her, and on the 4th of April, Dame Smith, Robert Hatchets, Archer, Hawkins, Thomas Bond, Wrigsham, and Landsdale, were burnt alive at Coventry in the Little Park, for the crime of teaching their children the Lord's prayer, the apostles' creed, and the commandments of God.⁷

PERSECUTIONS OF SOUL

The worst of physical persecutions in England were yet to come. But bodily harm was not the only thing that Bradford and the other Puritans fled from. The more important matter to them was truth. The ability to worship and proclaim Christ according to His Word was the greatest motivating force in the whole of their endeavors.

Bradford notes that,

when [Satan] could not prevail by these means [of persecution], against the main truths of the gospel, but that they began to take rooting in many places, being watered with the blood of the martyrs, and blessed from heaven with a gracious increase; he then began to take him to his ancient stratagems, used of old against the first Christians. That when by the bloody and barbarous persecutions of the Heathen Emperors, he could not stop and subvert the course of the gospel, but that it speedily overspread with a wonderful clarity the then best known parts of the world, He then began to sow errors, heresies.⁸

His basic point is that when physical persecutions did not prevail to extinguish the gospel in England, the "ancient stratagems" of Satan were used. In this case, "errors, heresies, and astonishing dissensions" were the more powerful implements of war against the English reformers.

A brief account of the Reformation history that Bradford here refers to follows.

1521 – KING HENRY VIII AWARDED: DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

Henry VIII, King of England, wrote against Martin Luther, opposing the Reformation in England. He was awarded "Defender of the Faith" by the pope.

⁷ J. H. Merle D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Henry Beveridge and H. White, vol. 5, Collin's Select Library (London: William Collins, 1862), 152-153.

⁸ Bradford, 4.

1521 – CARDINAL WOLSEY BURNS LUTHER'S BOOKS

Cardinal Wolsey was the king's favorite church authority in England. He opposed the Reformation in England, ordering all of Luther's writings to be burned.

1523 – TYNDALE SEEKS PERMISSION TO TRANSLATE

William Tyndale, an English scholar of Oxford and Cambridge, sought permission to translate the Bible into English. This was denied, and Tyndale would be outlawed for trying.

1526 – TYNDALE'S NEW TESTAMENT TRANSLATION

Tyndale left England and finished his translation work on the Continent. He published the first English translation of the New Testament from the Greek.

1532 – KING HENRY DEMANDS ANNULMENT

King Henry sought annulment of his first marriage because his wife did not bear him a son. Henry saw an opportunity to leverage the Reformation to his advantage in this situation.

1534 – ACT OF SUPREMACY

King Henry declared himself the head of the Church of England, securing his right to annul his first marriage and set in motion a measure of reform.

1536 – ANNE BOLEYN EXECUTED

King Henry's marriage to his second wife, Anne Boleyn, was at first full of excitement. Almost immediately, Anne conceived and soon bore Henry a girl, Elizabeth. Henry was disappointed that his child was not a son. Afterwards, she conceived a boy, only to miscarry. She soon fell out of Henry's favor. Anne had also demonstrated a fervent interest in the works of William Tyndale. Through various absurdities, Anne was charged with treason and Henry had her beheaded.

1536 – WILLIAM TYNDALE MARTYRED

Tyndale was betrayed and imprisoned at Vilvorde Castle near Brussels. After being confined to a dark and damp dungeon for months, Tyndale was finally condemned a heretic and burned at the stake. Immediately before his demise, he cried out in a loud voice with fervent zeal, "Lord! open the king of England's eyes."

1537 – AUTHORIZATION OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

Tyndale's dying prayer was answered—at least in part—as it was in the very next year, 1537, that the Puritan John Rogers took Tyndale's work, with completions made by Myles Coverdale, and published the *Matthew's Bible* (a code name), which received approval by King Henry.

1538 – ROYAL ORDER TO READ THE BIBLE

What the king deemed worthy of burning at the stake just two years prior, he now not only annulled but set his seal to approve. In 1538, he ordered the churches of England: “ye shall discourage no man from the reading or hearing of the Bible, but shall expressly provoke, stir and exhort every person to read the same as that which is the very lively word of God.”

1543 – BAN OF CERTAIN BIBLE-READING

King Henry banned Tyndale’s translation of the Bible. Additionally, he banned all unauthorized public reading and expositions of Scripture, due to the disorder it was causing in the churches. He also outlawed all private reading of Scripture among the uneducated.

1546 – ALL UNAUTHORIZED TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE OUTLAWED

King Henry outlawed all unauthorized translations of Scripture into English. This prohibition was stronger than before, requiring all such books, including Tyndale’s and Coverdale’s translations, to be delivered up to appointed officials. Such Bibles were burned by proclamation of the crown. The reason so few of these editions remain is owing to King Henry’s diligence to destroy them.

1547 – KING EDWARD VI

King Henry died in 1547. His son Edward, then only nine years old, was next in line for the throne. Edward and his sister Elizabeth had been raised under Catherine Parr, his last wife who happened to be reform-minded. She employed the finest tutors in the land, which also happened to be reform-minded. As a result, both Edward and Elizabeth would be educated and reared under Reformation influence.

1553 – LADY JANE GREY

King Edward died of tuberculosis when he was not yet sixteen years old. In his last prayer, he cried out, “O Lord God, defend this realm from Papistry, and maintain Thy true religion.”⁹ But before the Lord would move on that noble petition, a new course of very dark trials would be felt. “Fearing it coming, and knowing that it would be his arch-Catholic half-sister Mary who would come to the throne and undo all he had achieved, Edward had helped hatch a desperate plan.” This plan enlisted the assistance of John Dudley, a friend and strong advocate of the Reformation. “Dudley would make sure Lady Jane Grey, a resolutely evangelical cousin of Mary’s and next in line to the throne after Henry’s children, was installed as queen before Mary could be. And so, the moment Edward died, Jane was proclaimed Queen in London. All to no avail: Mary swiftly mustered support and entered London, sending Jane to the Tower. The plan had not accounted for the fact that most people cared more for

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Light From Old Times*, 14.

a legitimate monarch than a Protestant one. Even Protestants had supported Mary, blissfully unaware of how severe she would be in dealing with them.”¹⁰

BLOODY MARY

When Bradford speaks of the most “cruel torments ... in the days of Queen Mary,” he is referring to Queen Mary Tudor, otherwise infamously known as “Bloody Mary”—and for good reason. Bradford writes,

Mr. Foxe recordeth how that besides those worthy martyrs and confessors which were burned in queen Mary’s days and otherwise tormented, many (both students and others) fled out of the land, to the number of 800. And became several congregations. At Wesel, Frankfort, Basel, Emden, Markpurge, Strasburg and Geneva, etc.

1553 – QUEEN MARY I

It is said that when Mary Tudor took the throne, she turned the Reformation in England back at least twenty-five years. Under her enforcement, all of the laws that Parliament passed for reform in the Church of England were repealed. Parliament even voted to restore the authority of the pope over the Church of England. As one historian writes, “The work of the Reformation in England was entirely undone.”¹¹ She reinstated the Latin Mass, banned preaching in English, and outlawed the works of the reformers, ordering that they be destroyed. J. C. Ryle reminds us:

Mary was not called “Bloody Mary” without reason, and scores of Protestants were burned in her reign. ... For, unhappily for the credit of human nature, Mary’s advisers were not content with depriving and imprisoning the leading English Reformers. It was resolved to make them abjure their principles, or to put them to death. One by one they were called before special Commissions, examined about their religious opinions, and called upon to recant, on pain of death if they refused. No third course, no alternative was left to them. They were either to give up Protestantism and receive Popery, or else they were to be burned alive. Refusing to recant, they were one by one handed over to the secular power, publicly brought out and chained to stakes, publicly surrounded with faggots, and publicly sent out of the world by that most cruel and painful of deaths, - the death by fire. All these are broad facts which all the apologists of Rome can never gainsay or deny. ... Indeed, the [sticks] never ceased to blaze whilst Mary was alive, and five martyrs were burnt in Canterbury only a week before her death. Out of these 288 sufferers, be it remembered, one was an archbishop, four were bishops, twenty-one were clergymen, fifty-five were women, and four were children. It is a broad fact that these 288 sufferers were not put to death for any offence against property or person. They were not rebels against the Queen’s authority, caught red-handed in arms. They were not thieves, or murderers, or drunkards, or unbelievers, or men and women of immoral lives. On the contrary, they were, with barely an exception, some of the holiest, purest, and best Christians in England, and several of them the most learned men of their day.¹²

It was clear that Mary tried to violently destroy the Reformation, which she could not stop with reason or arguments from truth. Under her tyrannical reign, many leading reformers fled to the continent, mostly to Geneva. Among them was John Knox, a reformer whose influence on the Puritans can scarcely be measured.

¹⁰ Reeves, 136.

¹¹ Kuiper, 226.

¹² Ryle, 13, 15, 16.

The English Puritans

Christianity had long been abused in political hands. Civil government tends to assume lordship over the consciences of its subjects. Religion, then, has served as a prime candidate for asserting political power.¹³ To some in England, the Reformation was little more than a bright new opportunity for political ideals. But this tendency has never represented those who live and die for Christ, whose lives are not their own and whose citizenship is in heaven. The true Christian in this world has always been an alien, a sojourner, a *pilgrim*.

1558 – QUEEN ELIZABETH I

The day that Queen Mary died, her sister Elizabeth announced the words of Psalm 118:23, “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” Elizabeth was next heir to the throne and like her half-brother Edward, she was an Evangelical (a reformer). She wasted no time in reversing the course of her half-sister and reestablishing the Church of England.

Many who had fled to the Continent in order to escape persecution during Mary’s reign returned to their homeland with the hope that Elizabeth, like Edward VI, would champion reform. Elizabeth was no simpleton. She read the Greek New Testament, along with the English Bible, every day, and was quite disciplined in prayer. But while Elizabeth was not Roman Catholic (she couldn’t be since Rome considered her an illegitimate child, thus disqualified from the throne), she had her own ideas about how the Church of England should be run. She approached the situation much more like her father than her half-brother Edward did.

1559 – ACT OF SUPREMACY

Within her first year, Queen Elizabeth ordered a new Act of Supremacy. She was proclaimed “supreme governor” (rather than “head”) of the Church of England. A new prayer book was needed. It ended up being much like Cranmer’s second edition. But like her father, Elizabeth wanted to create her own version of the English Church. Where Henry insisted on a peculiarly English Catholicism, Elizabeth insisted on a peculiarly English Protestantism. She was not interested in the purity of the faith in conformity to the Scripture, rather she was after conformity to her rule and her faith.

This was not enough for those reformers returning from persecution, who would soon be called Puritans. Elizabeth responded to their complaints and unrest within the churches with the Elizabethan Settlement.

1563 – ELIZABETHAN SETTLEMENT

The Queen established a series of changes and laws, including: the Act of Supremacy (1559); the Act of Uniformity (1559); and the Elizabethan Injunctions (1559). These reforms culminated in the

¹³ Today, religion has taken on new sophisticated forms of lordship over the consciences of people, namely social education.

revision of Cranmer's Forty-Two Articles of 1553. The official creed of the Church of England became, as it is to this day, the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563). The adoption of these changes is known as the Elizabethan Settlement.

By 1563, the queen considered the issue of reformation in England to be settled. Elizabeth took more of a middle ground between the Swiss Reformation and her father's Church of England; partly out of fear of war with France and Spain, and partly because she had little tolerance for what she considered to be Reformation idealism.

But many of the reformers in England considered her resolutions as leaving the church only half reformed. "Her demand for strict observance of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* and *Articles of Religion* did little to satisfy their longing for the sort of biblical preaching they had experienced in the great Reformed churches on the continent."¹⁴ Thus, "the Settlement of 1563 did not satisfy them at all. Because they wished to see the Church purified much more thoroughly, these members of the Church of England were called *Puritans*."¹⁵ And "no Puritan could consider the work of reformation complete when the majority of the population still had little or no understanding of justification by faith alone. It was not enough to reform how the church operated; the Reformation was about transforming individual lives, achieving not just an external Protestantism, but an internal, heart-felt evangelicalism."¹⁶

THE BEGINNING OF "PURITANISM"

Elizabeth dismissed the English reformers as an extremists faction within *her* Church. Such was a negative caricature that has persisted to this day in one form or another. The term "Puritan" was first used of those who considered the reforms under Queen Elizabeth incomplete. It was a term of derision; an insult. Since these English reformers were calling for further "purification" of the Church in England, they were disdained with a title that had connection to a group of professing Christians who were declared heretics in medieval times. Those were called "Cathari," which in Latin means "Puritans." In all this name-calling, it should be noted that "these zealous souls had no names either for the movement itself or for themselves as part of it."¹⁷

'Puritan' as a name was, in fact, mud from the start. Coined in the early 1560s, it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its basic implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth's Laodicean and compromising Church of England. Later, the word gained the further, political connotation of being against the Stuart monarchy and for some sort of republicanism; its primary reference, however, was still to what was seen as an odd, furious, and ugly form of Protestant religion.¹⁸

But as soon as we move out of hearsay and secondhand opinions, and read them for ourselves, we will see that the contempt heaped upon them was owing to their earnest faith in Christ more than anything else. One of the Puritans, William Perkins (1558-1602), said that the word "Puritan" was "a vile term" unjustly used against them to describe people with perfectionist tendencies.¹⁹ Leland

¹⁴ Beeke, 3-4.

¹⁵ Kuiper, 250.

¹⁶ Reeves, 155-157.

¹⁷ J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 12.

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 21.

¹⁹ See *The Works of William Perkins*, 1:342, 3:15.

Ryken suggests that “no group of people has been more unjustly maligned in the twentieth century than the Puritans.”²⁰ He goes on to demonstrate through primary source documentation that the Puritans were serious people but not opposed to fun, were not unfashionable in their dress, were not opposed to sports and recreation, were not hostile to the arts, were not dualists who were repelled by the human body and the physical world, were not intolerant of people who disagreed with them, did not repress normal human feelings, were not legalistic moralists, were not judgmental, but instead delighted in marriage, majored in humility, excelled in self-discipline, labored diligently but were not obsessed with earthly gain, and were passionate for education.²¹ Increasing numbers of honest researchers of history “now acknowledge that the typical Puritans were not wild men, fierce and freaky, religious fanatics and social extremists, but sober, conscientious, and cultured citizens, persons of principle, determined and disciplined, excelling in the domestic virtues, and with no obvious shortcomings save a tendency to run to words when saying anything important, whether to God or to man.”²² In 1767, George Whitefield wrote,

Ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross: the spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them. It was this, no doubt, that made the *Puritans* of the last century such burning and shining lights. When cast out by the black *Bartholomew-Act* [the 1662 Act of Uniformity] and driven from their respective charges to preach in barns and fields, in the highways and hedges, they in an especial manner wrote and preached as men having authority. Though dead, by their writings they yet speak: a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour ... Their works still praise them in the gates; and without pretending to a spirit of prophecy, we may venture to affirm, that they will live and flourish, when more modern performances, of a contrary cast, notwithstanding their gaudy and tinsel trappings, will languish and die in the esteem of those, whose understandings are opened to discern what comes nearest to the scripture standard.²³

The formal principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*, was the key issue for the Puritans. Peter Lewis reminds us that “Puritanism as a movement largely began as an endeavour to reform the face of the English Church, and to do so according to the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone. Neither the civil nor ecclesiastical powers, they maintained, had the authority to add to, subtract from, or modify the sufficient, definitive teaching of the New Testament in its pattern of Church government and Church life.”²⁴ But this was not the Queen’s policy.

Queen Elizabeth was insistent on conformity to her brand of Evangelicalism, known by the name Anglican. Conformity to the Anglican Church was her purpose in the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity of 1559. But this meant that the Church was being determined by Elizabeth and not Scripture.

In matters spiritual and ecclesiastical, was the Church to order her own course as distinct from the monarch, and were the Scriptures to order the Church as distinct from ecclesiastical tradition or expedience? In a word, who rules the Church and the spiritual realm of life-God or man? These were fundamental questions. Had they not been on countless lips in the days of Luther and Calvin? The answer of the Puritans was a confident affirmative for the freedom of the Church under the sole sovereignty of the Scriptures. For this they were prepared to suffer with a determination as grim as it was serene. ...

²⁰ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2-7.

²² Packer, x.

²³ George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*, vol. 4 (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 306-307.

²⁴ Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 13.

Ecclesiastically, the Puritans were convinced, as we have seen, that the Reformation in England had, because of political expediency, been stunted before it had properly conformed the Church to the simplicity of the New Testament model.²⁵

NONCONFORMISTS

The Reformation in England was unlike anywhere else. Wittenberg, Zurich, Geneva, and numerous other places witnessed theology leading. But in England, politics would drive the type and degree of reform. Even in its best days, the Reformation in England was a top-down affair. It was this dynamic that deeply concerned the Puritans.

The Puritans could not contend with the queen on a political level. “Having failed to reform the Church from the top down, by parliamentary legislation, the Puritans sought with greater vigour than ever to do so from the bottom up by the persuasion of pulpit, press and personal influence. From here on the real story of Puritanism is the story of its spiritual growth and power, and the history of the progress of Puritanism becomes not the record of councils and convocations, of legislation and counter-legislation, but the history of men whose crusade for a godly Church and a godly State could not be either much hindered or much helped by parliaments and their acts. Puritanism became a grass-roots movement which the legislative scythe could limit but not destroy.”²⁶

While the Puritans all shared concerns for the purity of the Church, some fell under increasing conviction that the Church should be separate from the State. It was becoming more and more evident that true reform in the Church, according to Scripture, could not be realized under the dictates of the State. Successful ventures of independence resulted. These resolves were first demonstrated by individuals; later, by a more formal movement.

New labels were fastened to this group of Puritans. They were called Nonconformists, Separatists, Schismatics, and Dissenters. Like the term Puritans, these too were labels of scorn—and in some ways worse. They were often unjustly accused of seeking to destroy the Church in England, but they openly despised the notion. They loved Christ’s Church and sought only her purity and protection according to the Word of God.

William Bradford plainly speaks with a deep sense of loss over the fact that the Puritans were divided on the matter of conformity to the State. The so-called Separatists disdained factions within the Church, agreeing that the Church should be united and conformed, but united and conformed to Scripture rather than to the dictates of the State.

Bradford considered the order of Satanic assault on Christ’s Church in England as coming in the form of (1) physical persecutions, (2) heresies and superstitions, and (3) “bitter contentions, heartburnings, and schisms.” He said that after errors and heresies, Satan began to sow astonishing

dissentions amongst the professors themselves, (working upon their pride and ambition, with other corrupt passions incident to all mortal men, yea to the saints themselves in some measure) by which woeful effects followed; as not only bitter contentions, and heartburnings, schisms, with other horrible confusions, but Satan took occasion and advantage thereby to foist in a number of vile ceremonies, with many unprofitable cannons and decrees, which have since been as snares to many poor and peaceable souls even to this day.²⁷

²⁵ Lewis, 13-14.

²⁶ Lewis, 14.

²⁷ Bradford, 4.

He later describes the division among the Puritans as a form of persecution against the Church:

[After Satan's] cruel tragedies, which he by his instrualents put in use everywhere in the days of queen Mary and before, he then began another kind of war, and went more closely to work; not only to [oppress], but even to [ruin] and destroy the kingdom of Christ, by more secrete and subtle means, by kindling the flames of contention and sowing the seeds of discord and bitter enmity amongst the professors and seeming reformed themselves. For when he could not prevail by the former means against the principal doctrines of faith, he bent his forte against the holy discipline and outward regiment of the kingdom of Christ, by which those holy doctrines should be conserved, and true piety maintained amongst the saints and people of God.²⁸

Bradford later offers a plain and straightforward statement of the purpose and aim of the Nonconformist Puritans:

The one side [Nonconformist's] labored to have the right worship of God and discipline of Christ established in the church, according to the simplicity of the gospel, without the mixture of man's inventions, and to have and to be ruled by the laws of God's word, dispensed in those offices, and by those officers of Pastors, Teachers, and Elders, etc. according to the Scriptures.²⁹

1570 – THOMAS CARTWRIGHT

Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) was a theological professor at the University of Cambridge and a prominent Puritan leader, considered by some the father of the Puritans. He spoke out against the immorality and incompetency of the clergy tolerated by the English episcopacy under Elizabeth. In time, he "convinced many through his Cambridge lectures in 1570 that the road to reform required the more disciplined Presbyterian model practiced in Geneva."³⁰ As a result, he was formally censured and deprived of his professorship at Cambridge. He devoted his strength to writing, encouraging a more biblical form of church government, and exposing the dangers of the episcopal polity (bishop hierarchy).

Many "therefore separated themselves from the Church of England and became known as Separatists or Dissenters. In the matter of church government they believed not only that each local church or congregation is a complete church in itself, but also that no church should have anything to say about any other church. Because they believed that all local churches should be independent of each other, they were called Congregationalists or Independents."³¹

1576 – END OF PROPHESYING MEETINGS

During this time a practice had grown up among the Puritans of gathering for what they called "prophesyings." Prophesying was a term they used of preaching. In these meetings multiple Puritan pastors would preach in turn and then discuss the sermons they preached. The design was to build up the Church by helping the local pastors to preach God's Word accurately and effectively. People began to flock to these meetings; they were somewhat similar to our modern-day "conferences."

²⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁹ Ibid., 6-7

³⁰ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 4.

³¹ Kuiper, 251.

What was most important about these meetings is that doctrine could be freely and openly discussed. With open Bibles free of ceremonies, the people were being organically disciplined from God's Word. They began to see more clearly how the Scriptures were the authority in all matters of faith. It was somewhat revolutionary for the English Church. Doctrine was here accessible to the people rather than being handed down from on high. Here too a Presbyterian, rather than episcopal, form of church government was being advocated. This resulted in increasing numbers of Puritans aligning with the Nonconformists.

Elizabeth was not pleased. The whole matter appeared too much like a growing anarchism against Elizabeth's Church of England. In 1576, she "decided to put an end to the whole menace of the prophesyings, and ordered her new Archbishop of Canterbury, Edmund Grindal, to suppress them. A thoroughgoing evangelical, Grindal could not countenance muzzling the word of God, especially when so many were benefiting from it, and so he refused. Unsurprisingly, he was put under house arrest at Lambeth Palace, where he remained, deprived of any power to help the Puritans, until his death in 1583."³²

The archbishop appointed to replace Edmund Grindal was John Whitgift, a man who became one of the chief opponents of Puritanism at this time. Whitgift was determined to enforce conformity to the Church of England. This produced two effects: (1) increased oppression and persecution of Puritan Nonconformists and (2) increased writing of Puritan Reformed works. When the pulpit was denied, the pen and printing press were more diligently put into service. We are reminded that "a Cambridge contemporary, William Perkins, a learned godly man with a flair for speed and clarity as a writer, began in the 1580s a long series of practical devotional books to lead ordinary people into living the life of faith in Jesus Christ. These filled a gap; nothing like them had existed before, and they sold widely, thus establishing the Puritan principle that a helpful, desirable and indeed necessary habit for literate believers was to read 'good books,' as they were called."³³

1586 – BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

"By 1586, a *Book of Discipline* began to circulate quietly among concerned ministers; it outlined new patterns for public worship that insured the preaching of the Word and proper administration of the sacraments."³⁴

1593 – ACT AGAINST PURITANS

Archbishop John Whitgift continued to push the Puritans into deeper discouragement and aggravated the differences among them on the issue of conformity. In 1588, a foolish backlash began with the publication of certain tracts against the archbishop, unjustly accusing him of outrageous immoralities. It was all the folly of mudslinging—now happening both ways. Of course, this gave fertile ground for Elizabeth to take action against the Puritans. She accused the Puritans of sedition and disloyalty. "More than ever, Puritanism was now associated with sedition and anarchy. The hunt for the secret press on which the tracts were produced was turned into an excuse to spy out

³² Reeves, 158.

³³ Packer, *Puritan Portraits*, 14.

³⁴ Beeke, 4.

dangerous nonconformity in any Puritan preacher's home. Within a few short years, a legal clampdown on Puritanism was in force, with the 1593 Parliamentary Act Against Puritans, the hanging of separatist leaders, and the placing of many major Puritan figures in dire peril. Now was the time for their enemies to kick them while they were down."³⁵ Elizabeth had successfully ended all organized efforts to reform the church in England. This drove many of the Puritans into home gatherings, like the one that William Bradford attended.

Yet, in the providence of God, a "spiritual brotherhood" remained active in some places. Cambridge was one such place. Students there would flock to hear the preaching of the Word of God from theologians like William Perkins (1558-1602). Perkins, theologian and pastor at Great St. Andrews Church, was considered the "prince of the Puritan preachers." Another influential preacher of the Word was Laurence Chalderton (1538-1640), a man who trained many talented Puritans in his nearly forty years as master of Emmanuel College.

1603 – KING JAMES I

Queen Elizabeth was childless. This meant that upon her death her cousin, King James VI of Scotland, was next on the throne. In one swift move of providence, Scotland and England became united kingdoms under King James.

Reared on a strict diet of haggis and Calvinism, James was the hope of every Puritan. Now at last, they thought, they would have a properly reformed monarch. And what is more, he was highly educated: the author of numerous treatises, from condemnations of tobacco and witchcraft to works of politics and theology, he would surely appreciate the theological issues at stake. So, when Elizabeth died, before James even made it to London, he was presented with a petition from the Puritans, asking for a number of changes to be made to what they still saw as a slightly 'popish' prayer book.³⁶

The Puritans openly denied that they were schismatic and divisive. They submitted their requests to the new king in a petition (*The Millenary Petition*) that they drafted along with signatures from a thousand ministers. "They appealed for changes in the administration of baptism and use of vestments, the need for self-examination before Communion, the replacement of absent bishops with clergy able to preach, and greater restraint by the ecclesiastical courts in excommunicating laypersons and suspending ministers."³⁷

1604 – HAMPTON COURT CONFERENCE

In response to the Puritans' request, King James held a conference at Hampton Court. While the king appeared willing to negotiate with the Puritans, he drew the line at the relationship of the Church to the State. In response to the request for a presbyterian form of church government, "James said (in his thick Scottish burr) 'agreeth as well with the monarch as God and the Devil. ... Then Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meet and at their pleasure censor me.' And that, for James, was the nub of it: reform was all very well, but only so long as it did not involve any chipping-away at his

³⁵ Reeves, 159.

³⁶ Ibid., 160.

³⁷ Beeke, 5.

divinely given authority as king.”³⁸ The king’s ideal was an absolute monarchy. He was a bit envious of the royal order of France, thinking the same should be restored in England. “In Scotland, his Presbyterian subjects had not allowed him to reign with the freedom he wished—and was convinced kings deserved—and therefore in England he sought to strengthen the episcopacy as a means to increase his own power.”³⁹ Beeke explains,

Recognizing that his royal supremacy was tied to the English episcopacy, James openly declared his fears: “No bishop, no king.” Although he agreed to produce a fresh translation of the Bible to assist English preachers (the King James Version), he demanded that all clergy conform to the liturgy and government of the Church of England. To insure this, the king began a new campaign to impose ceremonial conformity through his bishops.⁴⁰

Far too much of God’s Word had taken root in their hearts for them to simply ignore their conscience and convictions. The king was not merely governing the state, he was governing Christ’s Church. Many simply could not conform. King James responded by imposing ceremonial conformity through his bishops. As a result, nearly ninety ministers were suspended from office between 1604 and 1609. Among those suspended was John Robinson (1575-1625), the pastor of the church that William Bradford (1589-1657) attended. Both Robinson and Bradford would migrate to the Netherlands.

Bradford summarizes their position (with modernized English for readability):

When as by the travail and diligence of some godly and zealous preachers, and God’s blessing on their labors, as in other places of the land, so in the North parts, many became enlightened by the Word of God and had their ignorance and sins discovered unto them, and began by His grace to reform their lives and make conscience of their ways, the work of God was no sooner manifest in them but presently they were both scoffed and scorned by the profane multitude; and the ministers urged with the yoke of subscription, or else must be silenced. And the poor people were so vexed with apparitors and pursuants and the commissary courts, as truly their affliction was not small. Which, notwithstanding, they bore sundry years with much patience, till they were occasioned by the continuance and increase of these troubles, and other means which the Lord raised up in those days, to see further into things by the light of the Word of God. How not only these base and beggarly ceremonies were unlawful, but also that the lordly and tyrannous power of the prelates ought not to be submitted unto; which thus, contrary to the freedom of the gospel, would load and burden men’s consciences and by their compulsive power make a profane mixture of persons and things in the worship of God. And that their offices and callings, courts and canons, etc. were unlawful and antichristian: being such as have no warrant in the Word of God, but the same that were used in popery and still retained. Of which a famous author thus writeth in his Dutch commentaries, at the coming of King James into England: *The new king (saith he) found there established the reformed religion according to the reformed religion of King Edward VI, retaining or keeping still the spiritual state of the bishops, etc. after the old manner, much varying and differing from the reformed churches in Scotland, France and the Netherlands, Ernden, Geneva, etc., whose reformation is cut, or shapen much nearer the first Christian churches, as it was used in the Apostles’ time.*⁴¹

So it was that “James I countered his Presbyterian cradle with an episcopalian cross and, seeing that Puritanism meant a serious limiting of his kingly ‘rights’ and powers, swore to the Puritan leaders that he would ‘harrie [harass] them out of the land’. But while James ‘harried’ them out of Old England, God hurried them into the New.” Lewis goes on to explain that “the Puritan mind gave rise

³⁸ Reeves, 160.

³⁹ Gonzalez, 196.

⁴⁰ Beeke, 5.

⁴¹ Bradford, 11-13.

to thoughts on spiritual principles which were to have far-reaching effects in secular as well as religious life—in the State as well as the Church.”⁴²

PILGRIMS

1607 – FLIGHT TO HOLLAND

Bradford reports that after King James persisted in his opposition to further reform the Church by freeing her from the “shackles” of the State, persecutions of the Nonconformists increased. Before resolving to leave their native soil,

they were hunted and persecuted on every side, until their former afflictions were but as fleabittings in comparison. For some were taken and clapped up in prison, others had their houses beset and watched night and day, and hardly escaped their hands; and the most were fain to flee and leave their houses and habitations, and the means of their livelihood.⁴³

These reformers, loving both the Church and their nation, were constrained to leave, in accord with the king’s promise that he would “harrie” [harass] them out of the land. Eventually, some of the local congregations covenanted together to leave their beloved country:

So many, therefore, of these professors as saw the evil of these things in these parts, and whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeal for His truth, they shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage, and as the Lord’s free people joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. And that it cost them something this ensuing history will declare.⁴⁴

These Puritans, now considered “Pilgrims” because of their sojourning as exiles, left with full awareness and anticipation of continued persecution and hardship.

Being thus constrained to leave their native soil and country, their lands and livings, and all their friends and familiar acquaintance, it was much; and thought marvelous by many. But to go into a country they knew not but by hearsay, where they must learn a new language and get their livings they knew not how, it being a dear place and subject to the miseries of war, it was by many thought an adventure almost desperate; a case intolerable and a misery worse than death. Especially seeing they were not acquainted with trades nor traffic (by which that country doth subsist) but had only been used to a plain country life and the innocent trade of husbandry. But 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.⁴⁵

What an indictment against a low view of the Church today. Few today even attend a local church on a regular basis, let alone make their worship of God of such importance that they would move their entire family to a foreign land, suffering a multiplicity of uncertainties and dangers.

They sought to flee to Amsterdam because they heard that there was freedom of religion for all there. They sold most of all they had, left their farms and homes, and paid extraordinary rates to sail from England to Holland. After payment, they were often betrayed and either left without

⁴² Lewis, 16.

⁴³ Bradford, 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ Bradford, 15-16.

transportation or apprehended and brought before the English authorities and imprisoned for a short time. Bradford recounts a couple of instances of these experiences:

A large number of them had decided to take passage from Boston in Lincolnshire, and for that purpose had hired a ship wholly to themselves, and made agreement with the captain to be ready at a convenient place on a certain day to take them and their belongings. After long waiting and great expense — he had not kept day with them — he came at last and took them aboard at night. But when he had secured them and their goods he betrayed them, having arranged beforehand with the searchers and other officers to do so. They then put them in open boats, and there rifled and ransacked them, searching them to their shirts for money, — and even the women, further than be came modesty, — and took them back to the town and made a spectacle of them to the multitude that came flocking on all sides to see them. Being thus rifled and stripped of their money, books, and other property, they were brought before the magistrates, and messengers were sent to inform the Lords of the Council about them. The magistrates treated them courteously, and showed them what favour they could; but dare not free them until order came from the council-table. The result was, however, that after a month's imprisonment, the majority were dismissed, and sent back to the places whence they came; but seven of the leaders were kept in prison, and bound over to the Assizes.⁴⁶

In the second account, Bradford explains that several families negotiated a fare with a Dutchman and arranged to be picked up on the shore of Hull. The women and children were first sent by a small boat while the men traveled by land. But due to low tide, the women and children became stuck in a creek. When the ship arrived, the captain sent for the families to prepare for boarding. He then spied a large number of horses and soldiers approaching on the countryside. Immediately he weighed anchor and hoisted sail. The Puritan men who were at that time loading the ship were in great distress, crying and yelling for their stranded wives and children. The men then encountered a fierce storm that lasted fourteen days—they nearly sank. When one of the sailors cried out, "We sink, we sink," the Puritans cried out, "Yet Lord, Thou canst save; yet Lord, Thou canst save!" The women, children, and remnant of men that remained on the shores of Hull were apprehended by the English authorities and imprisoned. Bradford recounts:

But it was pitiful to see these poor women in their distress. What weeping and crying on every side: some for their husbands carried away in the ship; others not knowing what would become of them and their little ones; others again melted in tears, seeing their poor little ones hanging about them, crying for fear and quaking with cold! Being thus apprehended, they were hurried from one place to another, till in the end the officers knew not what to do with them; for to imprison so many innocent women and children only because they wished to go with their husbands, seemed unreasonable and would cause an outcry; and to send them home again was as difficult, for they alleged, as was the truth, that they had no homes to go to, — for they had sold or otherwise disposed of their houses and livings.⁴⁷

Eventually, in God's good providence, they "met together again with no small rejoicing."⁴⁸

THE CONGREGATION AT LEYDEN

The Puritans were finally free to worship God according to the Scriptures. The following report reflects their testimony while in Holland:

⁴⁶ Modernized English by Harold Paget, *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608-1650* (E.P. Dutton & Company, 1920), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Bradford, 20-21.

⁴⁸ Bradford, 21.

it may be spoken to the honor of God and without prejudice to any, that such was the true piety, the humble zeal and fervent love of this people ... towards God and His ways, and the singleheartedness and sincere affection one towards another, that they came as near the primitive pattern of the first churches as any other church of these later times have done, according to their rank and quality.⁴⁹

In a letter to Sir Edwin Sandys in London, John Robinson and William Brewster explained that the Puritans there were:

Knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord, of the violation whereof we make great conscience, and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves straightly tied to all care of each other's good, and of the whole by every one and so mutually.⁵⁰

One of the magistrates said in a public reproof of another group in the same city, "These English have lived amongst us now these twelve years, and yet we never had any suit or accusation come against any of them; but your strifes and quarrels are continual."⁵¹

But living in Holland was difficult for them. They had to learn a new form of commerce and language. Most of them were farmers and were now not able to provide for their families as before. Several factors were conspiring upon them to consider departing for another land. Bradford explains their reasoning:

After they had lived here for some eleven or twelve years, — the period of the famous truce between the Low Countries and Spain, — several of them having died, and many others being now old, the grave mistress, Experience, having taught them much, their prudent governors began to apprehend present dangers and to scan the future and think of timely remedy. After much thought and discourse on the subject, they began at length to incline to the idea of removal to some other place; not out of any new-fangledness or other such giddy humour, which often influences people to their detriment and danger, but for many important reasons, the chief of which I will here briefly touch upon.⁵²

The first reason given was that they were intent on reaching more Englishmen and concerned about attrition. Their vision was not an "us four and no more" ingrown separatism.

First, they saw by experience that the hardships of the country were such that comparatively few others would join them, and fewer still would bide it out and remain with them. Many who came and many more who desired to come, could not endure the continual labor and hard fare and other inconveniences which they themselves were satisfied with. ... Some even preferred prisons in England to this liberty in Holland, with such hardships. But it was thought that if there could be found a better and easier place of living, it would attract many and remove this discouragement.⁵³

The second reason given showed a discerning eye towards providence and timing.

Secondly, they saw that though the people generally bore these difficulties very cheerfully, and with resolute courage, being in the best strength of their years ; yet old age began to steal on many of them, and their great and continual labors, with other crosses and sorrows, hastened it before their time; so that it was not only probable, but certain, that in a few more years they would be in danger of scattering by the necessities pressing upon them.⁵⁴

The third reason was owing to their love of their families. The practical and serious consequences that the necessity of hard labors was having on their families was threatening. But they

⁴⁹ Bradford, 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁵¹ George B. Cheever, *The Pilgrim Fathers* (London, 1849), 133.

⁵² Paget, 19.

⁵³ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 20.

perceived an even greater danger: the predominating influence of apostasy all around them. They were truly concerned for the spiritual and physical welfare and future vitality of their families.

Thirdly, as necessity was a taskmaster over them, so they themselves were forced to be ... Many of their children, who were of the best disposition and who had learned to bear the yoke in their youth and were willing to bear part of their parents' burden, were their minds were free and willing, their bodies bowed under the weight and became decrepit in early youth, — the vigor of nature being consumed in the very bud, as it were.

But that which was more lamentable, and of all sorrows most heavy to be borne, was that many of [our] children, by these occasions and the great licentiousness of youth in that country, and the manifold temptations of the place, were drawn away by evil examples into extravagant and dangerous courses, getting the reins off their necks and departing from their parents. Some became soldiers, others took upon them far voyages by sea, and others some worse courses tending to dissoluteness and the danger of their souls, to the great grief of their parents and dishonor of God. So that they saw their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted.⁵⁵

The fourth reason given was related to their missionary zeal to advance the gospel.

Last and not least, they cherished a great hope and in ward zeal of laying good foundations, or at least of making some way towards it, for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work.⁵⁶

In voicing their intentions, they were met with much opposition. Many discouraged them from departing, with many warnings of the dangers that would await such an expedition. Other factors that influenced their thinking was the hearing of the new-found land, called Virginia, and the report of encroaching war from the Spaniards.

1617-1620 – DEPARTURE TO THE NEW WORLD

After humble prayers to God for His protection and assistance, and a general conference, they consulted what particular place to pitch upon.⁵⁷

At first, they entertained the possibility of settling in Guiana. But mostly out of fear of harassment from the Spaniards, they decided against it. Then there was the proposal to settle in Virginia, but,

it was objected that if they lived among the English who had settled there, or so near them as to be under their government, they would be in as great danger of persecution for their religion as if they lived in England, — and it might be, worse; while, if they lived too far off, they would have neither help nor defense from them.

Therefore,

At length the conclusion was reached that they should live as a separate body, by themselves, under the general government of Virginia; and that through their friends they should sue his majesty to be pleased to allow them freedom of religion. That this might be granted they were led to hope by some prominent persons of rank and influence, who had become their friends.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

So they sent two members of the congregation to England to seek legal approval from the king. They applied for a patent, but was refused. However, the Virginia Company appeared anxious to have them and were willing to help get their approval, but ultimately their efforts proved unavailing.

The Puritans were still faced with seemingly impenetrable obstacles. Then, despite not having permission or means for the voyage, a patent was at last granted on June 19, 1619 by the London Virginia Company and confirmed under the company's seal. It was a gracious providence of God. King James promised not to molest them if they were peaceable.

According to their own words, written to the king's representative for the Virginia colony, regarding their interests:

We verily believe and trust that the Lord is with us, unto Whom and Whose service we have given ourselves in many trials; ...

We are not like some, whom small things discourage, or small discontents cause to wish themselves at home again. We know what we can expect both in England and in Holland, and that we shall not improve our material well-being by our departure; whereas, should we be forced to return, we could not hope to regain our present position, either here or elsewhere during our lives, which are now drawing towards their periods.⁵⁹

They were not seeking personal gain, wealth, or power; they sought after the grace of God in their "simplicity of heart." The Spanish and French had been in the Americas now for over a hundred years, but their expeditions were not in pursuit of freedom of worship. The Puritan pilgrims were pursuing a new frontier with freedom of conscience and liberty of worship according to the Reformation principle, *sola scriptura*. They were not a group of contracted men seeking to bring back goods, they were families seeking a new life under God's government—they called it New Canaan, not New England.

But they still had no financial means for the voyage. The great problem was profitability. The Virginia Company was penniless and the prospect of these pilgrims was not lucrative. In desperation, the Puritans tried to enter into a contract with some Dutch merchants. But, again, in the providence of God, help came from a certain Thomas Weston, a London merchant, who had visited the congregation in Leyden. He offered them a financial advance and supplied them with shipping in exchange for furs and wood. The Puritans promised to pay them back as soon as they were able.

Finally, after many delays and discouragements, 102 of the Puritans from the Holland settlement traveled to Southampton and set sail September 6, 1620. They embarked on a leaky and worn cargo ship named *Mayflower*. The voyage was quite treacherous, appearing doubtful that they would survive, let alone reach their intended destination.

1620 – ARRIVAL AT CAPE COD

After the death of a crewman and many trials on the voyage, the Pilgrims came upon the land of Cape Cod on November 11, 1620.

William Bradford records their praise upon arrival:

What, then, could now sustain them but the spirit of God, and His grace? Ought not the children of their fathers rightly to say: Our fathers were Englishmen who came over the great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their

⁵⁹ Signed by John Robinson and William Brewster, cited in Paget, 28.

adversity ... Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good, and His mercies endure forever...Let them confess before the Lord His loving kindness, and His wonderful works before the sons of men!⁶⁰

1620 – THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT

These Puritans were responsible for drafting America’s original document of civil government and the first to introduce self-government. On December 11, prior to disembarking the ship, they signed this monumental document. The Mayflower Compact reads:

In ye name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by ye grace of God, of Great Britain, France, & Ireland king, defender of ye faith, etc., having undertaken, for ye glory of God, and advancement of ye Christian faith, and honor of our king & country, a voyage to plant ye first colony in ye Northern parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutually in ye presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of ye ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just & equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet & convenient for ye general good of ye Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codd ye 11, of November, in ye year of ye reign of our sovereign lord, King James, of England, France, & Ireland ye eighteenth, and by Scotland ye fifty fourth. Anno Domini 1620.⁶¹

1620 – PLYMOUTH ROCK LANDING

They disembarked the Mayflower in late December, officially setting foot on what was later called Plymouth Rock. Upon their landing, the Pilgrims conducted a prayer service and then began building shelters. Starvation and sickness afflicted them for the next 3 months, to the point of losing 51 men, women, and children (half of their congregation). With the assistance of some friendly Native Americans, in particular an English-speaking native named Squanto, their 1621 harvest provided more than they needed. Bradford records,

And they found the Lord to be with them in all their ways, and to bless their outgoings and incomings, for which let His holy name have the praise forever, to all posterity.⁶²

1621 – FIRST THANKSGIVING

It was from the 1621 harvest that the Pilgrims celebrated the harvest bounty with the natives in the form of an English-style feast. This is what is commonly referred to as the “First Thanksgiving” (though not initially repeated). Bradford first proclaimed a day of thanksgiving with these words:

Therefore, I, William Bradford (by the Grace of God today, and the franchise of this good people), governor of Plymouth, say—through virtue of vested power—ye shall gather with one accord, and hold in the month of November, thanksgiving unto the Lord.⁶³

⁶⁰ Paget, 66.

⁶¹ Bradford, 110.

⁶² Paget, 89.

⁶³ George Otis, *The Solution to the Crisis in America* (Van Nuys, CA: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), 66.

1622 – SQUANTO’S DEATH

By September of the next year, Squanto died. Bradford’s record of Squanto’s death illustrates the kind relationship that these Puritans had secured with the natives of the land, being quite unlike many of the settlers before them:

Here Squanto fell ill of Indian fever, bleeding much at the nose,—which the Indians take for a symptom of death,—and within a few days he died. He begged the Governor to pray for him, that he might go to the Englishmen’s God in Heaven, and bequeathed several of his things to some of his English friends, as remembrances. His death was a great loss.⁶⁴

1623 – PROCLAMATION OF A DAY OF THANKSGIVING

On November 29, 1623, three years after the Pilgrims’ arrival and two years after the first Thanksgiving Day, Governor William Bradford made an official proclamation for a Day of Thanksgiving:

To all ye Pilgrims:

In as much as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, peas, beans, squashes, and garden vegetable, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as he has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and ye little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November ye 29th, of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

William Bradford, Ye Governor of Ye Colony.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Paget, 110.

⁶⁵ From the Original Manuscript, Library of Congress Rare Book Collection, Washington, D.C.; rendered in Modern English, Harold Paget, 1909; cited by William Federer, *America’s God and Country*.

The Puritan Legacy

Thanksgiving is a Christian legacy. As a custom, it was established in America by the English Puritans. Whatever contemporary revisionism attempts, the Puritans came to this land in search of the freedom to worship God according to Scripture.

A 1918 history textbook plainly states the reason for their coming to America:

It is the special glory of the Pilgrim Fathers that through scenes of gloom and misery they showed the way to those who were willing to brave the dangers of the wilderness in order to win the right to worship God as they pleased.⁶⁶

A small Puritan poem portrays this same sentiment:

*What sought they thus afar?
Bright jewels of the mine?
The wealth of seas, the spoils of war?
They sought a faith's pure shrine!
Ay, call it holy ground,
The soil where first they trod:
They have left unstained what there they found—
Freedom to worship God.⁶⁷*

Peter Lewis, in his excellent book, *The Genius of Puritanism*, helps us to appreciate what is today often eclipsed by the stigma of the name Puritan and the misrepresentation of their legacy:

The definitions of 'Puritan' and 'Puritanism' have been, since their earliest use in England, a matter of crowded debate and widespread confusion. National, political and social elements which were closely allied with the idea of Puritanism at various stages of its progress have largely obscured the vital religious and spiritual meaning of the term. Without attempting an exhaustive definition we may say that essential Puritanism grew out of three great areas: the New Testament pattern of personal piety, sound doctrine and a properly ordered Church-life, and it is the mingling and blending together of all three of these emphases which made English Puritanism the astonishment and the inspiration it was and is still.⁶⁸

Our heritage of Thanksgiving Day traces its immediate roots to the Puritan conscience. Liberty, to them, meant responsibility to freely live to the glory of God. As reformers and children of the Reformation, the English Puritans have given us a legacy worthy of stewarding. Following are just a few highlights.

SCRIPTURE ALONE

The singular most unifying conviction of all Puritans was their commitment to the Word of God as the highest authority in their lives. This meant that the Scriptures should be translated and made

⁶⁶ Smith Burnham, *Our Beginnings in Europe and America: How Civilization Grew in the Old World and Came to the New* (Philadelphia, NJ: John C. Winston Company, 1918), 297-298.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Lewis, 11.

available to everyone. The fruit of these convictions led to various translations such as Tyndale's, the Geneva Bible, and the King James Version. *Sola Scriptura* also meant that governments, ecclesiastical and civil, are not above law. Scripture is above all. The Puritan vision of liberty was not anarchy, but rather order under God's law. This was demonstrated in the civil sphere by their drafting of the Mayflower Compact.

FAITH ALONE

Their highest ambition was explicitly the glory of God in the salvation of people through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was the Puritans who would give us the summary statement: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."⁶⁹ Man exists to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Their passion for freedom within the Church was first concerned with idolatry and second with the salvation of souls. They were opposed to every possible distraction from the simple gospel and despised the apostasy of a works-based religion.

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Because they had such a strong conviction of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone), they pioneered the concept of the rule of conscience in the English world. If salvation is by faith alone, then every man's conscience is of supreme importance. In a works-based religion, salvation could be had by simply conforming to the order of the whole. But through the Reformation, the Puritans saw that salvation was a matter of the heart and not conformity to a religious system and external order. Freedom of thought and liberty of conscience is a trademark of the Puritans, which paved the way for the establishment of religious freedom in the United States of America.

They also knew that because of self-centered propensities, the great principle of liberty of conscience has the seeds of its own destruction within it. The grand ideals that our forefathers sacrificed to grant us were never in the abstract—all was within the framework of a biblical worldview. Why were the Puritans not anarchists? Answer: Scripture. If the authority and practical application of Scripture be removed, then it is not freedom of conscience that we have reached, but chaos. The pioneer reformers that paved the way for religious freedom and liberty of conscience did so looking to the Scriptures as their authority. Today, benefactors of their immeasurable sacrifices insist on maintaining the fruits of their principles without the roots. Most Americans want freedom without authority. That was never the goal.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As a result of cultivating a strong sense of conscience, personal responsibility became a crucial part of their daily life ethic. If every man is free in conscience, then every man must be responsible. With increased freedom comes increased responsibility. This too is a Puritan legacy that proved formative in the foundation of our country.

⁶⁹ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 387.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The undeniable principle championed by the Puritans is that the Church of God is not a Church under any other authority. The Puritans were the first to formally establish this principle through the Reformation. This did not mean that the Church was without any relation to the State. On the contrary, they believed that the Church should influence the State, not that the State should influence the Church. It was the legacy of their views on both Church and State that proved vastly instrumental in the development of our government. But we have failed to understand the meaning of the separation of Church and State if we allow the State to interfere in matters of the Church. Today, this principle of separation is largely misused to impose limitations on the Church rather than as originally intended, to impose limitations on the State.

GRACE ALONE

Finally, the Puritans were a people of unprecedented humility. Humility lies at the heart of genuine thanksgiving. Gratitude truly given acknowledges the grace of the giver, assuming neither entitlement nor desert of what is given. Only pretense is expressed when thanks is given for something taken for granted. For the Puritans this was modeled with regard to both physical and spiritual realities.

The Puritans knew and openly confessed that they were unworthy of the salvation extended to them in Christ. It was not their accomplishments that made them acceptable to God, it was the grace of God alone. This enabled them to suffer much for His sake. They were bold to risk much because their view of God was so refreshingly large. They were freed to pursue the glory of God no matter the cost. It was their perspective that they deserved no good thing in this life that yielded such a profound thankfulness of heart, even amid the trials and travails. It was the Puritans' conviction of grace alone that gave us the legacy of Thanksgiving! Well does Lewis say,

[The Puritans] treasured a high conception of the sovereignty of God in providence and grace, and reflected this in the tranquility with which they were able to carry themselves in the stormiest experiences and the forcefulness with which they were able to show the desperate needs and the unfailing resort of fallen man. If their doctrine of God elevated them, their doctrine of sin humbled them. Recognising their own propensity to sin as well as the potential for evil in fallen human nature at large they did not tire of exposing sin as the plague of plagues and root of all man's ills. In their books and sermons they followed the devious course of sin in all its guises, demolishing self-confidence and pointing men to that salvation which could be of grace alone.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Lewis, 13.

Thanksgiving Scriptures

Commanded

Psalm 50:14; 105:1
Philippians 4:6
Colossians 3:15

With Joy

1 Chronicles 16:8-10

For All Things

2 Corinthians 9:11
Ephesians 5:20

Always

Ephesians 1:16; 5:20;
1 Thessalonians 1:2

By All

1 Timothy 2:1

For the Supply of Bodily Wants

Romans 14:6-7
1 Timothy 4:3-4

Because of God

Psalm 30:4; 97:12; 106:1;
107:1; 136:1-3

To God

Psalm 50:14; 69:30; 92:1;
95:2; 100:4

Because of Christ

Romans 7:23-25
2 Corinthians 9:15
Revelation 11:7

Through Christ

Romans 1:8
Colossians 3:17
Hebrews 13:15
Ephesians 5:20

To Christ

1 Timothy 1:12

A Puritan Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving:

O My God, Thou fairest, greatest, first of all objects, my heart admires, adores, loves thee, for my little vessel is as full as it can be, and I would pour out all that fullness before thee in ceaseless flow.

When I think upon and converse with thee ten thousand delightful thoughts spring up, ten thousand sources of pleasure are unsealed, ten thousand refreshing joys spread over my heart, crowding into every moment of happiness.

I bless thee for the soul thou hast created, for adorning it, sanctifying it, though it is fixed in barrens soil; for the body thou has given me, for preserving its strength and vigour, for providing sense to enjoy delights, for the ease and freedom of my limbs, for hands, eyes, ears that do thy bidding; for thy royal bounty providing my daily support, for a full table and overflowing cup, for appetite, taste, sweetness, for social joys of relatives and friends, for ability to serve others, for a heart that feels sorrows and necessities, for a mind to care for my fellow-men, for opportunities of spreading happiness around, for loved ones in the joys of heaven, for my own expectation of seeing thee clearly.

I love thee above the powers of language to express, for what thou art to thy creatures.

Increase my love, O my God, through time and eternity.

A Puritan Prayer of Consecration and Worship

My God, I feel it is heaven to please Thee, and to be what Thou wouldst have me be. O that I were holy as Thou art holy, pure as Christ is pure, perfect as Thy Spirit is perfect! These, I feel, are the best commands in Thy Book, and shall I break them? must I break them? am I under such a necessity as long as I live here?

Woe, woe is me that I am a sinner, that I grieve this blessed God, who is infinite in goodness and grace! O if He would punish me for my sins, it would not wound my heart so deep to offend Him; But though I sin continually, He continually repeats His kindness to me.

At times I feel I could bear any suffering, but how can I dishonour this glorious God? What shall I do to glorify and worship this best of beings? O that I could consecrate my soul and body to His service, without restraint, for ever! O that I could give myself up to Him, so as never more to attempt to be my own! or have any will or affections that are not perfectly conformed to His will and His love! But, alas, I cannot live and not sin.

O may angels glorify Him incessantly, and, if possible, prostrate themselves lower before the blessed King of heaven! I long to bear a part with them in ceaseless praise; but when I have done all I can to eternity I shall not be able to offer more than a small fraction of the homage that the glorious God deserves. Give me a heart full of divine, heavenly love.

Thanksgiving Activities

“If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you.”

William Law

Some or all of these questions can be used to engage family members either before or after dinner. Simply provide everyone with a piece of paper, ask them to write out their answers, and then after a reasonable allotment of time take turns sharing. You can come up with your questions ahead of time and even make a game out of it.

Reflections on Heritage

How does Thanksgiving relate to the Reformation?

Who were the Puritans?

Name one reason why the Puritans (Pilgrims) left Holland.

Why did the Puritans seek to settle in the New World?

What document did they sign before disembarking the ship?

Name at least three of the legacies given to us by the Puritans.

Learning from the Puritans

Name something for which the Puritans were thankful.

List at least five things you have that the Pilgrims did not.

List at least three hardships the Pilgrims suffered that you have not.

How do your pursuits in life compare to theirs?

Stewarding Thanksgiving Personally

For what do you this day feel most grateful to God?

List three things you are thankful for this year.

List three things for which you need to be more thankful.

List practical ways that you can become more thankful.

Can you lose the things for which you are most thankful?

Who is the most consistently grateful person you know?