

Calvinism in the New World

Sometime ago I was talking about George Herbert, the British poet. In one of his poems, in the series of poems called “The Church Militant,” George Herbert wrote, “Religion stands on tiptoe in our land, ready to pass to the American strand.” One hundred years later, when the English evangelist George Whitfield was preaching in America, he wrote in his journal on December 1, 1739, “Surely the divine Herbert’s prophecy is now being fulfilled.” As we come to this lesson today, we will move from the Old World to the New World and see some of the events that took place in America in the settlement of this country.

To begin I would like to turn to one of the poems of Anne Bradstreet for our prayer. Anne Bradstreet was one of America’s first significant poets. Some of her poetry includes “As Spring the Winter Doth Succeed.” It is a very beautiful and lovely poem. It is important to see the Puritans as writers of poetry. People do not always appreciate the artistic and aesthetic sensitivities of the Puritans. With Anne Bradstreet and some others, we have examples of beautiful language and writing from these early American Puritans. The prayer from Anne Bradstreet that I will use today is a very brief one. Let us join together as we pray these few but meaningful words.

“All praise to Him who now hath turned my fears to joys, my sighs to song, my tears to smiles, my sad to glad.” Amen.

Before the Calvinists came to America, some other people came. I am not going to try to tell you about all the religious traditions that were represented in the settlement of the Americas. We will focus on Calvinism in the New World. I should mention as we start to put this in context that long before many Calvinists arrived in the New World Spanish Catholics came in large numbers. They came particularly to South America, Central America, and the New Mexico territories in the southwestern part of what later became the United States. These Spanish Catholics came in order to evangelize, conquer the native peoples, and settle in those vast regions of the New World. That means that before Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement, which came into being in 1607, thousands of Indians in the southwest of this country were already evangelized and at least nominal believers in the New Mexico territories. The Spanish were first. About the time large numbers of Protestants came to settle the Atlantic seaboard of the new country, French Catholics were also arriving. The colony of Quebec was begun in 1608, which was one year after Jamestown in Virginia. The French Catholics reached out in the Canadas, down the Ohio River Valley and the Mississippi River Valley, into Saint Louis and even further south. They missionized the Indians and attempted to set up trading posts throughout Canada and the Midwest.

The motives for these various groups of people coming to the New World were, of course, complex. Generally it is said that they came for two reasons: gold and God. It was not always in that order, but sometimes it was in that order. Certainly all of these religious traditions had as one motive the freedom to worship or to establish their own form of religion in new territories of the world. All of them spoke about missions to the native peoples. Whether they always lived up to that goal or not is another matter. Often the first goal dominated—the seeking of earthly gold, possessions, and riches. The second was always there as well, the spread of various forms of Christianity to the New World, to the settlers from the Old World as well as to the Native American peoples.

We will focus in this lesson on Calvinism in the New World. There were a number of groups of Calvinists who came. The first Calvinists in the New World were not from the British Isles as we usually think. They were from France. There were 14 settlers, including two Geneva-trained ministers

who went to a Huguenot settlement in Brazil in 1555. They attempted to reach out to the Indians in Brazil with the Gospel. Unfortunately that Protestant Huguenot colony was soon abandoned because of various problems that developed in trying to establish it, so there was not a continuing Huguenot and Protestant community in the land of Brazil. Not too long after the failed mission to Brazil, Huguenots came to South Carolina in 1562 and to Florida in 1565. The Florida colony was exterminated by the Spanish who were moving up from the south. They soon overran the Huguenot colony in northern Florida. Not too much came of those early French attempts to settle in the New World. Larger numbers of French Protestants immigrated to America after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 when Huguenots in France were once again persecuted. Many of them left their homeland to come to the New World at that time. Most of the Huguenots who settled in America joined other churches. They became Anglicans or Presbyterians. There were a few continuing churches, and there is a Huguenot church that exists today in Charleston, South Carolina with regular services.

Let us talk next about the Anglicans. They settled largely in Virginia and some of the other southern colonies. The first settlement of Anglicans was in the colony of Virginia. Of the early settlers who came to Virginia, some of them were Puritans. They were all members of the Church of England, and we know by now in our study that there were two very distinct parts of the Church of England: the Anglican party and the Puritan party. Those two groups did not always get along very well, and they eventually took opposite sides during the time of the civil war and the commonwealth. The settlement of Virginia, which was by Anglicans, contained a number of Puritans. The first charter for the colony of Virginia, which was drawn up in 1606, spoke of the project—the expedition to Virginia—for the glory of the Divine Majesty. We know that some of those early Virginia Anglicans were Puritan in sympathy. This included John Rolfe, who came in 1610 and was an ardent student of Calvin's *Institutes*. He is a man who is famous in history because he married the legendary Pocahontas. Alexander Whitaker came in 1611. He was a Puritan Presbyterian and was sometimes called the Presbyterian apostle of Virginia. Puritanism did not flourish in the colony of Virginia because of enforced Anglican conformity, at least from 1642, by the Stuarts, although much of this was in effect before 1642. The religious situation in Virginia was comparable to the religious situation in England. The bishops and the king were firmly in control and Puritan or Presbyterian dissenters were persecuted or at least not given freedom to worship in the way that they chose. Many Virginia Puritans moved to other colonies, including Maryland, which was the only American colony to have a significant number of Roman Catholics. Perhaps for that reason it was more open to settlements of different religious traditions. Other Puritans moved to Pennsylvania, which, under the Quaker William Penn, became the most tolerant place for religious freedom in the world at that time. The Huguenots were in the south and later in different parts of America. The Anglicans were in Virginia. And the Puritans were in New England.

The Puritans were the most significant settlement of Calvinists in America, so we will take a little longer to talk about the Puritan settlement in New England. James I tried to ignore the Puritan movement, which began during his reign. Charles I was more concerned to suppress it, but soon Charles had his hands full with the parliament and the civil war in England. The Stuart policies led to two events of major significance. One was the Great Migration of the 1630s and the other was the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s. The Great Migration of the 1630s was an attempt to form a new England in America. Sooner or later some of the English Puritans began to become discouraged and disillusioned with the prospects of old England ever changing. During the 1630s, thousands of English Puritans migrated to America in order to establish in a new country a new England. This new England would not only be a light to the world but also a witness to the old England. It would show what a real Christian commonwealth would look like.

Let me outline a few of the major events in the 1630s. We will go beyond that decade in talking about the Great Migration. These are facts of history that I am sure you have studied in other places. It is important for us to see them here in brief outline. First the Pilgrims came, led by English separatists. The most outstanding of the English separatists was Robert Brown. The separatists were sometimes called the Brownists. They were Puritans in England who felt that there was no use waiting for the church to reform. There was no use trying to establish a national church. The most important thing they could do was to separate from the national church and create completely independent churches. That was quite in contrast to the non-separating Congregationalists who were so prominent during the Westminster Assembly. Small groups of these English separatists began to meet in England. One group moved from Scrooby in Nottinghamshire to Holland. A few years later they moved from Holland to Plymouth in America in 1620. Those are the so-called Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers who made that long voyage to America.

Every year the day before Thanksgiving the *Wall Street Journal* includes in its editorial page the same essay coming from one of the Pilgrim Fathers. It is the beginning of a chronicle written by Nathaniel Morton, the keeper of the records of Plymouth Colony. It is based on the account of William Bradford, who was one of the early governors of Plymouth. It begins by saying, "So they left that goodly and pleasant city of Leiden [in the Netherlands, where they had lived], which had been their resting place for above 11 years, but they knew they were pilgrims and strangers here below and looked not much on these things but lifted up their eyes to heaven, their dearest country. For God hath prepared for them a city (Hebrews 11:16) and therein quieted their spirits." It goes on in that way to express the hopes and dreams of these pilgrims who came to America. It seems to me rather significant that the *Wall Street Journal* continues to print that section of Morton's journal after all these years. The Mayflower Compact was created on board the ship as these pilgrims made their way to the New World. The Reformation Wall in Geneva records the prayer and depicts the group in the ship bowing in prayer before the signing of the Mayflower Compact in 1620. So with the beginning of the settlement in New England with the Pilgrims, there is soon a second group coming directly from England this time. They did not come by way of the Netherlands. Particularly as Archbishop William Laud began to put increasing pressure on the Puritans in England, there was desire to create a model community and Christian commonwealth in the New World to be an example to England and to all the world. John Winthrop, one of the early governors of Massachusetts Bay, wrote these words: "We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." All together perhaps 30,000 or more people came in the Great Migration in England. Most of them were from East Anglia.

These Puritans settled in two colonies and later in several others around what became Boston, Massachusetts. It was not long before tensions developed among the different Puritans who came. Most of the people who settled were God-fearing people; they were the saints. There were some strangers, as they were called. These were people who were not professing Christians or devout Christians. Almost all of the early Puritans were zealous Christians. The colonies, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, were not colonies that were founded on the premises of religious liberty. This was not going to be a place where people of all different religions could come and worship freely—not yet. The purpose in the establishment of these colonies was not religious freedom but freedom to worship God in the Puritan manner. These people felt they did not enjoy that freedom in England. One writer has said, "Those who differed from the Puritan majority were encouraged to exercise their liberty to live elsewhere." That is exactly what happened after a while as tensions developed in the Puritan community in Massachusetts, beginning with Roger Williams. Williams was a Calvinist and a man of strong convictions. He eventually began to express his beliefs in the Baptist conviction concerning baptism, and he became unwelcome in the Congregational colony of Massachusetts Bay. After some difficulty among the leadership of the colony, Roger Williams left Massachusetts Bay and went not too far away to

Providence Plantation. There he started his own colony, later known as the state of Rhode Island. It was in March 1639 that the first Baptist church in America was founded in Providence, Rhode Island. Roger Williams has a place of honor on the Reformation Wall as well in Geneva. He is dressed with his Puritan hat and garment, and the words “*Sol liberti*” are engraved on the book in his hands.

Soon there was another problem in Massachusetts Bay with Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson, a zealous and devout member of the church and the colony, began to feel that the Massachusetts Bay clergy were in error in their preaching, and she told them so. She felt they were preaching a covenant of works. Probably what she was responding to was undue emphasis on works as a sign of regeneration or election. At any rate, there was a dispute between this woman and the clergy. She was then charged with antinomianism. When she began to claim that she was receiving direct revelations from God she was excommunicated from Massachusetts Bay. It is not surprising that that happened. What is surprising is that a woman would have such influence and standing within the colony that she could raise her objections to the theology that was being preached at that time. Fortunately for Anne Hutchinson there was a place to go. She went to Rhode Island. One writer has said, “Men and women like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson could not live with the Puritans of Massachusetts and, in learning to live with each other, advanced the cause of religious freedom in the Western world.” That is exactly what happened in Rhode Island. People of different religious convictions did not particularly like each other, but they learned to put up with each other. We have, in that American colony, the first place in the world where there was an experiment of religious pluralism. It was not complete pluralism; the Quakers were not particularly welcome, although gradually they were put up with as well. They at least expanded some of the former narrowness of their attitude toward having only one established church and not letting anybody else exist in that area, which had been the practice of the Protestants and the Catholics from the very beginning.

The mainstream of New England Puritanism united around the Cambridge Platform and the Synod of 1646, although the document was not published until 1649. The Cambridge Platform was basically the Westminster Confession of Faith adopted as the Savoy Declaration in England had been adopted by English Congregationalists. The Cambridge Platform accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith as very holy, orthodox, and judicious in all matters of faith but different on church government. There was substantial independence of each local church in New England. There were synods of ministers that met, but those synods had no authority over the local church. The authority existed in the local church, not in a presbytery, not in a synod, and certainly not in bishops. The New England Way, as it was called, was established with local churches of visible saints in independent churches without control beyond the local church. These “visible saints” were people who not only had been baptized as infants but who could give evidence of their regeneration as true Christian believers.

In Puritan New England there were some very significant developments that influenced all of America. In some sense they continue to influence America down to the present, although not nearly in the way that this was true for several hundred years in the beginning of the history of the United States. The Puritan town was a Christian community. It was not theocratic in the sense that the clergy ruled the towns; the clergy did not govern the towns. Elected officials who were strong Christians did the governing. They saw to it that the basis for the life of the Puritan towns in New England was Christian. The clergy did not control the towns of New England any more than John Calvin controlled Geneva. The Puritan family was very important. It was like a little commonwealth or a little church. Much concern went into understanding how the family worked. This included how husband and wife related to one another properly, how they cared for and trained their children, and how children respected their parents and were taught by them. The New England and Puritan family was the first in a series of

educational institutions that culminated in the founding of Harvard College in 1638. It is a school that was first brought into existence for the training of clergy.

The Puritan church of visible saints became a distinctive part of the New England landscape. Particularly as the colonies and the Puritans were able to construct separate church buildings, the Puritan church began to dominate the New England landscape. We know what those churches looked like: white, wooden churches, graceful and beautiful, Protestant and Puritan in their construction. There was an absence of statuary, stained glass, and all distracting ornamentation, although as the Puritans became wealthier, they could construct beautiful churches. They were still simple but with appropriate ornamentation as they saw it. One of the distinctive things about the Puritan New England church was the clear windows. The reason for the clear windows was not that they did not like pictures or stained glass; they simply wanted clear windows so people could open their Bibles and see them. If the windows were dark they would have to have some sort of artificial light in order to read the Bible. The Bible was so important to these Puritans that individuals would have their Bibles, and they would be able to read and follow as the minister preached. Therefore it was important to have clear glass windows. Our chapel at Covenant Seminary is not in every aspect Puritan, but in the clear windows we do follow a Puritan tradition. The central pulpit was important for the elevation of preaching with the communion table below as the place where the elements would be served in the commemoration of the Lord's Supper.

The Great Migration took place in the 1630s, but during the 1640s not as many people came from England to New England. You can see why. We have already looked at the 1640s as the time of the Puritan Commonwealth in England. The long parliament was meeting, the civil war took place, and Puritan hopes for the reform of old England once again began to rise. As people thought that now at last England could become the kind of church and country that God had planned for it, not as many migrated to the New World. John Cotton of Boston, Thomas Hooker of Hartford, and John Davenport of New Haven were New England ministers who were invited to return to England and attend the Westminster Assembly. They did not do so, but it is interesting to see the English Puritans including some of the New England Puritans in their list of delegates to the Assembly. The former governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, Sir Henry Vane, Jr., did go back to England, and he played a major role in the Westminster Assembly and in the parliament.

There are four Puritan histories that are books of importance for the study of American religious history, particularly in New England. One was by a carpenter, two were by governors of colonies, and the fourth and most important was by a minister named Cotton Mather. His *Magnalia Christi Americana* is still widely read and used in the study of early New England Puritanism. Cotton Mather is noted as one of the clergy involved in the Salem witch trials that took place in the early 1690s and has created a blot on the history of Puritanism. For most people who know anything about it, it shows that the Puritans were a rigid and narrow-minded sect. Witches were commonly accepted; it was believed that there were witches in countries of Europe and in America. Almost everybody held that this was something that really existed. It was not simply imaginary. As the witch trials proceeded in Salem, 20 people were executed as a result of those witch trials. There is not much that I can say to explain that; I certainly do not want to excuse it. To put the clergy in the right place and perspective, it is important to remember that it was not the clergy who instigated the panic that took place in Salem. It was the clergy, including Cotton Mather, who began to see that they had to use their influence to bring this hysteria to an end. If the Puritan clergy cannot be exonerated, they certainly should not have all the blame placed upon them for what happened in Salem in the 1690s. As John T. McNeil says in his book, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, "From John Cotton to Jonathan Edwards, New England Puritanism passed through an epic of greatness and produced a type of human being that no just and informed mind can

think of without admiration.” Not everybody would agree with that statement, but John T. McNeil is a good and competent historian, and I think he has expressed it well.

Let us move on to another group that came to the New World. The Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed settled in the middle colonies. The Anglicans were in the south, the Puritans were in the north in New England, and in between the two, in the middle colonies, were the Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed. There were people who were Presbyterians by conviction, both in Congregational New England among the Puritans and in Anglican Virginia. In those two areas it was almost impossible for a Presbyterian church to emerge when the other two churches were strongly established. The first Presbyterian congregation that we know anything about was organized in 1640 on Long Island. As Scottish settlers began to come and settle along the Atlantic seaboard followed by Scotch Irish who settled the frontier, there were many Presbyterians who came to this country. It was not long before Presbyterian churches began to spring up in many places, particularly in the middle colonies. Francis McKinney was a Scotch Irish missionary to America. It was through his influence and hard work that the first presbytery was organized in 1706. This led to the establishment of the first synod, the Synod of Philadelphia, in 1717. Other groups of Presbyterians came from Scotland as well. Secedor or Associate Presbyterians and Reformed or Covenanter Presbyterians, as well as Independent Presbyterian churches and presbyteries, were established in America.

The Presbyterians were in the middle colonies, and the Dutch Reformed were in the middle colonies as well. The Dutch Reformed Church was organized in New Amsterdam in 1628. That later became New York when the British took control of it. The first Calvinistic Presbyterian church, or Reformed church, on American soil was established by the Dutch in New Amsterdam in 1628. It was part of the classis of Amsterdam until 1792. There were Dutch settlements around New York, particularly in New Jersey, along the Hudson River in New York, and on Long Island. That part of the middle colonies became the center for the Dutch church. It was later known as the Dutch Reformed Church in America, and it is now called the Reformed Church in America.

Not only did Dutch Reformed Christians come, but German Reformed Christians also came. They came from the Palatinate with their beloved Heidelberg Catechism. They mostly settled in Pennsylvania and formed the German Reformed Church. They were later called the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and they are now called the United Church of Christ because that church eventually merged with most of the New England Congregationalists. That is a very brief overview of the coming of Calvinists to America, the settling of the different colonies with people of Reformed convictions, and something of their significance.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Some have asked how the Cambridge Platform of the New England Congregationalists so quickly embraced Westminster. The Scots did it about the same time, and I would think that the two groups in the world that were the most amenable to Westminster doctrine would be the Scottish Presbyterians and the New England Congregationalists. The Cambridge Platform was not published until 1649. The synod first met to begin to deliberate in 1646. What they actually adopted was set forth in 1649.

The Congregationalists had synods, and their synods acted very much like Presbyterian presbytery except without authority. They could not adopt a platform and then impose it on all the churches. They

recommended it and urged it, but they were always very careful in New England not to become too much like the Presbyterians.

Some have wondered whether or not Anne Hutchinson was right in her dispute with the Massachusetts Bay clergy. Though I have not studied it enough to be an authority on it, I have an impression that her initial criticism may have been something they should have listened to. The Puritans could go to an extreme in attempting to base assurance on good works. There was the necessary correction that our assurance first of all comes through the Gospel and our belief in Jesus Christ, not on the evidence that we see in our lives. That is not an improper way of looking at it, but in Calvin's view that was always to be secondary, not first. My assurance comes because I trust Christ as my Savior. Second, it comes because I see some evidence of that. If you put the evidence first, there is always the possibility that you will be discouraged because you will not see enough evidence. Because that was a Puritan tendency to move in that direction, Anne Hutchinson's criticism probably had some merit. In disputes of theological types or of any kind, people tend to move to extremes. Undoubtedly Anne Hutchinson, in trying to counter what she saw as an error in the preaching of the covenant of works, did fall into antinomianism. Then she really lost any chance for further influence when she began to claim direct revelations as the basis for her theology. The Puritans were not going to put up with that, so she had to go to Rhode Island!

The central pulpit did not begin with the Puritans. We can find examples of this in Dutch church architecture in the Reformation era. When the Protestants first took over churches, they took over Catholic churches. Generally they tried to rearrange the church to make it look more Protestant. But it was not always easy to have a central pulpit because it was not always easy to tell where the center was in some of those churches. There were various schemes that were used. The pulpit was raised or seats were placed in a certain part of the church so that they would face what was then considered the center of the church. I would say from the time of the Reformation there was a concern to elevate the preaching of the Word by a central pulpit. When people began to build new churches they could do it without any of the constraints of having inherited a building that was not just right. Of course, all the churches in New England were new. So now they used the central pulpit and windows that were clear. There was an attempt to express the regulative principle of worship in architecture. It is interesting to read some of the records of these early Puritan churches. One thing that they often debated was how to design the pillow on the pulpit on which the Bible would rest. You do not get in the Bible any sort of direction as to whether you should have a pillow on the pulpit for the Bible to rest on. So you might say the regulative principle did not operate there. Those pillows were beautifully designed with color and the best material. It was something that concerned the New England Puritans to do it well. If they were going to do anything like this, it is very proper that they debate and work hard at whatever they were going to put the Bible on. The Bible was very central in their thinking, worship, and preaching.

The term "independent Presbyterian" is a strange one. There were independent Presbyterian churches and presbyteries that did not actually go into the American Presbyterian Church in 1706 when it was formed. There are a number of different kinds of Presbyterians. The American Presbyterian Church is made up of all sorts of Presbyterians from Scotland, Wales, New England, and old England. There are the secedor churches, the covenanting churches, and the independent churches. Most of those independent churches eventually became real Presbyterian churches by joining presbyteries. One that did not become a member of a presbytery and still is not a member of a presbytery is the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, Georgia. It is a very historic and wonderful church and building. It will be 250 years old in several years. I am particularly interested in that church because I have been asked to write the history of it, which I will start this summer. It has outside engraved in the stone in the front of the church "A part of the Church of Scotland." That is not true; it has never been a part of the

Church of Scotland. Those Presbyterians in Georgia, for some reason, wanted to think of themselves as part of Scotland and not part of South Carolina or wherever the presbytery was going to be.