

Resources for Further Study: Historical Documents

Section 1: *They Were One Body in Christ*

When individuals, generally women as well as men, joined together and signed a covenant setting forth their religious goals, they thereby declared themselves one body in Christ, that is, a formally constituted Congregational church. As Christ is quoted in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” All prospective future members of that particular church were required to subscribe to its covenant.

There is no extant copy of the Scrooby congregation’s founding covenant; indeed, there is no evidence that it was committed to writing at the time. In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford describes that momentous event as follows: “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.”

More insight is to be found in Pastor John Robinson’s 1620 advice to his congregation’s departing members. He reminded them of their “Church-Covenant (at least that part of it) whereby we promise and covenant with God and one with another to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word” (Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, pp. 97–98).

John Murton, Robinson’s contemporary, later reflected, “Do we not know the beginnings” of the Scrooby church?” “There was first one stood up and made a covenant, and then another, and these two joined together, and then a third, and these became a church, say

they, etc.” (quoted in Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*, pp. 84–85).

Section 2: *They Were People of the Book*

Like other Protestant reformers, the pilgrims understood the Scriptures to be the word of God. But they also thought that biblical truth was not always clear; believers approached the Scriptures, as St. Paul observed, looking through a glass darkly. One of the striking religious characteristics of the pilgrims was their openness to further light, well expressed by their pastor, John Robinson, as recorded by Edward Winslow:

He [Robinson] was very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word. He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who were come to a period in Religion, and would go no further than the Instruments of their Reformation: As for example the *Lutherans* they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw, for whatever part of God’s will he had further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the *Calvinists*, they stick where he left them: A misery much to be lamented; For though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had revealed his whole will to them; And were they now living, saith he, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Here also he put us in mind of our Church-Covenant (at least that part of it) whereby we promise and covenant with God and one with another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word: but withal exhorted us to take heed what we received for truth, and well to examine and compare, and weigh it with other Scriptures

of truth, before we received it; For, saith he, *It is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick Antichristian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.* (Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, pp. 97–99)

Robinson and his followers believed that the Scriptures should be available in the language of the people (the vernacular as opposed to Latin) and that all men and women should be taught to read so that they could engage with the text and, by the grace of the Spirit, better understand its meaning. Still, humans were imperfect interpreters, and so everyone (as Robinson instructed), laity and clergy alike, should be prepared to share their insights and remain open to the views of others. They referred to this process of sharing as “prophesying,” an application of the term that is distinct from its Old Testament use as foretelling future events. While some reformers maintained that only the clergy were capable of receiving and transmitting the Spirit’s enlightenment, others insisted that the Spirit could empower any believer. Robinson defined “prophesying” as “a kind of preaching” not to be limited to the ministry; “but that others having received a gift thereunto, may and ought to stir up the same, and to use it in the Church for edification, exhortation, and comfort” (John Robinson, *A Justification of Separation* [1610], p. 236).

Section 3. *They Were Colonists; They Were Colonizers*

Crucial to the early history of the colony was the relationship between the pilgrims and the indigenous people they met. The sources reveal significant differences among the English in how they viewed and dealt with the Wampanoag Natives. In the following document extracts, colonist Edward Winslow exhibits more honesty toward and interest in engaging with the Natives than does William Bradford.

First Encounters

[William Bradford:] [They found] a good quantity of clear ground, where the Indians had formerly set corn, and some of their graves; and proceeding further they saw new stubble where corn had been set the same year, also they found where lately a house had been where some planks and a great kettle was remaining, and heaps of sand newly paddled with their hands, which they digging up, they found in them diverse fair Indian baskets filled with corn, and some in ears, fair and good of diverse colors, which seemed to them a very goodly sight (having never seen any such before).

[Edward Winslow:] We found a little path to certain heaps of sand, one whereof was covered with old Matts, and had a wooden thing like a mortar whelmed [overturned] on the top of it, and an earthen pot laid in a little hole at the end thereof; we musing what it might be, digged & found a Bow, and, as we thought, Arrows, but they were rotten. We supposed, there were many other things, but because we deemed them graves, we put in the Bow again and made it up as it was, and left the rest untouched, because we thought it would be odious unto them to ransack their Sepulchers. [Going on further, they found another site] where an house had been, and four or five old Planks laid together; also we found a great Kettle, which had been some Ships kettle and brought out of *Europe*; there was also an heap of sand, made like the former, but as it was newly done, we might see how they paddled it with their hands which we digged up, and in it we found a little old Basket full of faire *Indian* Corn, and digged further & found a fine great new Basket full of very fair corn of this year, with some 36. goodly ears of corn, some yellow, and some

red, and others mixt with blue, which was a very goodly sight: the Basket was round, and narrow at the top, it held about three or four Bushels, which was as much as two of us could lift up from the ground, and was very handsomely and cunningly made. . . . We were in suspense, what to doe with it, and the Kettle, and at length after much consultation, we concluded to take the Kettle, and as much of the Corn as we could carry away with us; and when our Shallop came, if we could find any of the people, and come to parley with them, we would give them the Kettle again, and satisfy them for their Corn. (*Mourt's Relation*, pp. 6–7)

The “First” Thanksgiving

[Bradford:] They began now to gather in the small harvest they had; and to fit up their houses and dwellings, against winter, being all well recovered in health & strength; and had all things in good plenty, for as some were thus Employed in affairs abroad; others were exercised in fishing, about cod, & bass, & other fish of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion; all the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees), and besides water fowl, there was great store of wild Turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, &c. Besides they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion.

[Winslow:] Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our

labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the *Indians* coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King *Massasoit*, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain, and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty. (*Mourt's Relation*, p. 61)

Treaty with Massasoit

[Bradford:] 1. That neither he nor any of his, should Injure or do hurt, to any of their people [i.e., the pilgrims]. 2. That if any of his, did any hurt to any of theirs, he should send the offender, that they might punish him. 3. That if anything were taken away from any of theirs, he should cause it to be restored; and they should do the like to his. 4. If any did unjustly war against him, they would aid him; if any did war against them, he should aid them. 5. He should send to his neighbours confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong them, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of peace. 6. That when their men came to them, they should leave their bows & arrows behind them. {citation?}

[Winslow:] 1. That neither he nor any of his should injure or do hurt to any of our people. 2. And if any of his did hurt to any of ours, he should send the offender, that we might punish him. 3. That if any of our Tools were taken away when our people were at work,

he should cause them to be restored, and if ours did any harm to any of his, we would do the like to them. 4. If any did unjustly war against him, we would aid him; if any did war against us, he should aid us. 5. He should send to his neighbour Confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong us, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of Peace. 6. That when their men came to us, they should leave their Bows and Arrows behind them, as we should do our Pieces when we came to them. (*Mourt's Relation*, pp. 56–57)

Robert Cushman's Account of Early Relations with the Indigenous People

They [Natives] are very much wasted of late, by reason of a great mortality that fell amongst them three years since, which together with their own civil dissensions and bloody wars, hath so wasted them, as I think the twentieth person is scarce left alive, and those that are left, have their courage much abated, and their countenance is dejected, and they seem as a people affrighted. And though when we came first into the country, we were few, and many of us were sick, and many died by reason of the cold and wet, it being the depth of winter, and we having no houses nor shelter, yet when there was not six able persons amongst us, and that they came daily to us by hundreds, with their sachems, or kings, and might in one hour have made a dispatch of us, yet such a fear was upon them, as that they never offered us the least injury in word or deed. And by reason of one Tisquanto, that lives amongst us that can speak English, we have daily commerce with their Kings & can know what is done or intended towards us amongst the savages. Also, we can acquaint them with our courses and purposes, both humane and religious. And the greatest Commander of the country called Massasoit cometh often to visit us,

though he live fifty miles from us, and often sends us presents, he having with many of their governors promised, yea, subscribed obedience to our sovereign Lord King James, and for his cause to spend both strength and life. And we for our parts, through God's grace, have with that equity, justice, and compassion carried ourselves towards them, as that they have received much favour, help, and aid from us, but never the least injury or wrong by us. We found the place where we live empty, the people being all dead & gone away, and none living nearby 8 or 10 miles; and though in the time of some hardship we found (travelling abroad) some 8 bushels of corn hid up in a cave, and knew no owners of it, we gave them (in their estimation) double the value of it. . . . We find in many of them [Natives], especially of the younger sort, such a tractable disposition, both to Religion and humanity, as that if we had means to apparel them, & wholly to retain them with us (as their desire is) they would doubtless in time prove serviceable to God and man, and if ever God send us means we will bring up hundreds of their children, both to labor and learning. (Robert Cushman, *Epistle Dedicatory, A Sermon Preached at Plimoth in New-England, December 9, 1621* [London, 1622])

Section 4. *They Were Congregationalists*

From the outset, New World Congregationalists' religious beliefs shaped their political institutions and their social outlook and actions.

The Mayflower Compact

Having decided to settle along Cape Cod and fearful that doing so outside the geographic boundaries of their patent might cause disruptions, the adult male passengers signed a document

on November 11 known to us as the Mayflower Compact. Quoted here from William Bradford's account in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, it reads in its entirety as follows:

In the name of God Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, & Ireland King, defender of the faith, &c.

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith and honour of our king & country, a voyage to plant the first Colony in the northern parts of Virginia. Do by these presents solemnly & mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, Covenant, & Combine ourselves together into a Civil body politic; for our better ordering, & preservation & furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by vertue 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 the general good of the Colony: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have here undersubscribed our names at Cape Cod the 11[th] of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James of England, France, & Ireland the eighteen[th], and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domine 1620.

The names of those who signed are provided in Nathaniel Morton's *New-Englands Memoriall*: John Alden, John Allerton, John Billington, William Bradford, William Brewster, Richard Britteridge, Peter Brown, John Carver, James Chilton, Richard Clark, Francis Cook, John Crackstone, Edward Doten, Francis Eaton, Thomas English, Moses Fletcher, Edward Fuller, Samuel Fuller, Richard Gardiner, John Goodman, Stephen Hopkins, John Howland,

Edward Leister, Edmond Margesson, Christopher Martin, William Mullins, Digory Priest, John Ridgedale, Thomas Rogers, George Soule, Miles Standish, Edward Tilley, John Tilley, Thomas Tinker, John Turner, Richard Warren, William White, Thomas Williams, Edward Winslow, and Gilbert Winslow (pp. 15–16).

Robert Cushman's Sermon on Brotherly Love

The Congregationalists' social outlook is set forth in Robert Cushman's lay sermon on "the danger of self-love and the sweetness of true friendship," delivered at Plymouth in December 1621. It may profitably be compared with John Winthrop's more famous lay sermon on "Christian Charity," preached to puritans embarking for Massachusetts in 1630. Cushman's sermon was published in London in 1622 and is extracted below.

I charge you, let this self-seeking be left off, and turn the stream another way, namely, seek the good of your brethren, please them, honor them, reverence them, for otherwise it will never go well amongst you. (p. 3)

There is a generation which think to have more in this world than Adam's felicity and innocence, being born (as they think) to take their pleasures and their ease. . . . Such idle drones are intolerable in a settled commonwealth, much more in a commonwealth which is but as it were in the bud. Of what earth, I pray thee, art thou made, of any better than other of the sons of Adam? And canst thou see others of thy brethren toil their hearts out, and thou sit idle at home, or takest thy pleasure abroad? Remember the example of Uriah, who would not take his ease, nor his pleasure, though the King required him, and why? Because his brethren, his associates, better men than

himself (as he esteemed them) were under hard labors and conditions, lay in the fields in tents, etc. (p. 6)

It is reported that there are many men gone to that other plantation in Virginia, which, whilst they lived in England, seemed very religious, zealous, and conscionable, and have now lost even the sap of grace and edge to all goodness, and are become mere worldlings. This testimony I believe to be partly true, and amongst the many causes of it this self-love is not the least. It is indeed a matter of some commendations for a man to remove himself out of a thronged place into a wide wilderness; to take in hand so long and dangerous a journey, to be an instrument to carry the Gospel and humanity among the brutish heathen. But there may be many goodly shows and glosses and yet a pad in the straw. Men may make a great appearance of respect unto God and yet but dissemble with him, having their own lusts carrying them. And, out of doubt, men that have taken in hand hither to come, out of discontentment in regard to their estates in England, and aiming at great matters here, affecting to be gentlemen, landed men, or hoping for office, place, dignity, or fleshly liberty. Let the show be what it will, the substance is nought, and that bird of self-love which was hatched at home, if it be not looked to, will eat out the life of all grace and goodness. And though men have escaped the danger of the sea, and that cruel mortality which swept away so many of our loving friends and brethren, yet, except they purge out this self-love, a worse mischief is prepared for them. And who knoweth whether God in mercy have delivered those men which here departed from the evils to come, and from unreasonable men in whom there neither was, nor is, any comfort but grief, sorrow, affliction, and misery, till they cast out this spawn of self-love. (pp. 11–12)

Let no man seek his own wealth, but every man seek another's wealth. And the word here translated [as] *wealth*, is the same with that in Rom. 13. 4 and may not be taken only for riches, as Englishmen commonly understand it, but for all kinds of benefits, favors, comforts, either for soul or body. (p. 12)

Now brethren, I pray you remember yourselves, and know that you are not in a retired Monarchical course, but have given your names and promises one to another, and covenanted here to cleave together in service of God and the King. What then must you do? . . . We ventured our lives together here, and had a hard brunt of it, and we are in league together. Is his [my brother's] labor harder than mine? Surely I will ease him. Has he no bed to lie on? Why, I have two. I'll lend him one. Hath he no apparel? Why, I have two suits. I'll give him one of them. Why, surely we will part stakes. He is as good a man as I, and we are bound each to other, so that his wants must be my wants, his sorrows my sorrows, his sickness my sickness, and his welfare my welfare. For I am as he is, and such a sweet sympathy were excellent, comfortable, yea heavenly, and is the only maker and conserver of Churches and commonwealths, and where this is wanting, ruin comes on quickly, as it did here in Corinth. (p. 13)

The present necessity requireth it [that all share the burden], as it did in the days of the Jews returning from captivity, and as it was here in Corinth. The country is yet raw, the land untilled, the cities not builded, the cattle not settled. We are compassed about with a helpless and idle people, the natives of the country, which cannot in any comely or comfortable manner help themselves, much less us. We also have been very chargeable to many of our loving friends which helped us hither, and now again supplied us, so that before we think of gathering riches we must even in conscience think of

requiting their charge, love, and labor, and cursed be that profit and gain which aims not at this. Besides, how many of our dear friends did here die at our first entrance, many of them no doubt for want of good lodging, shelter, and comfortable things, and many more may go after them quickly if care be not taken. Is this then a time for men to begin to seek themselves? (pp. 14–15)

Never measure thy course by the most, but by the best, yea, and principally by God's word. Look not what others do to thee, but consider what thou art to do to them. Seek to please God, not thyself. (p. 15)

And as you are a body together, so hang not together by skins and gymocks, but labor to be joined together and knit by flesh and sinews. Away with envy at the good of others, and rejoice in his good, and sorrow for his evil. Let his joy be your joy, and his sorrow thy sorrow. Let his sickness be thy sickness, his hunger thy hunger, his poverty thy poverty. And if you profess friendship, be friends in adversities; for then a friend is known and tried, and not before. (p. 18)

Avoid all factions, forwardness, singularity, and withdrawals, and cleave fast to the Lord and one to another continually. So shall you be a notable precedent to these poor Heathens, whose eyes are upon you, and who very brutishly and cruelly do daily eat and consume one another through their emulations, wars, and contentions. Be you therefore ashamed of it, and win them to peace both with yourselves and one another by your peaceable examples, which will preach louder to them than if you could cry in their barbarous language. So also shall you be an encouragement to many of your Christian friends in your native country to come to you when they hear of your peace, love, and kindness that is amongst you. But above all, it shall go well with your souls when that

God of peace and unity shall come to visit you with death, . . . [and you] may be translated from this wandering wilderness unto that joyful and heavenly Canaan. (pp. 18–19)