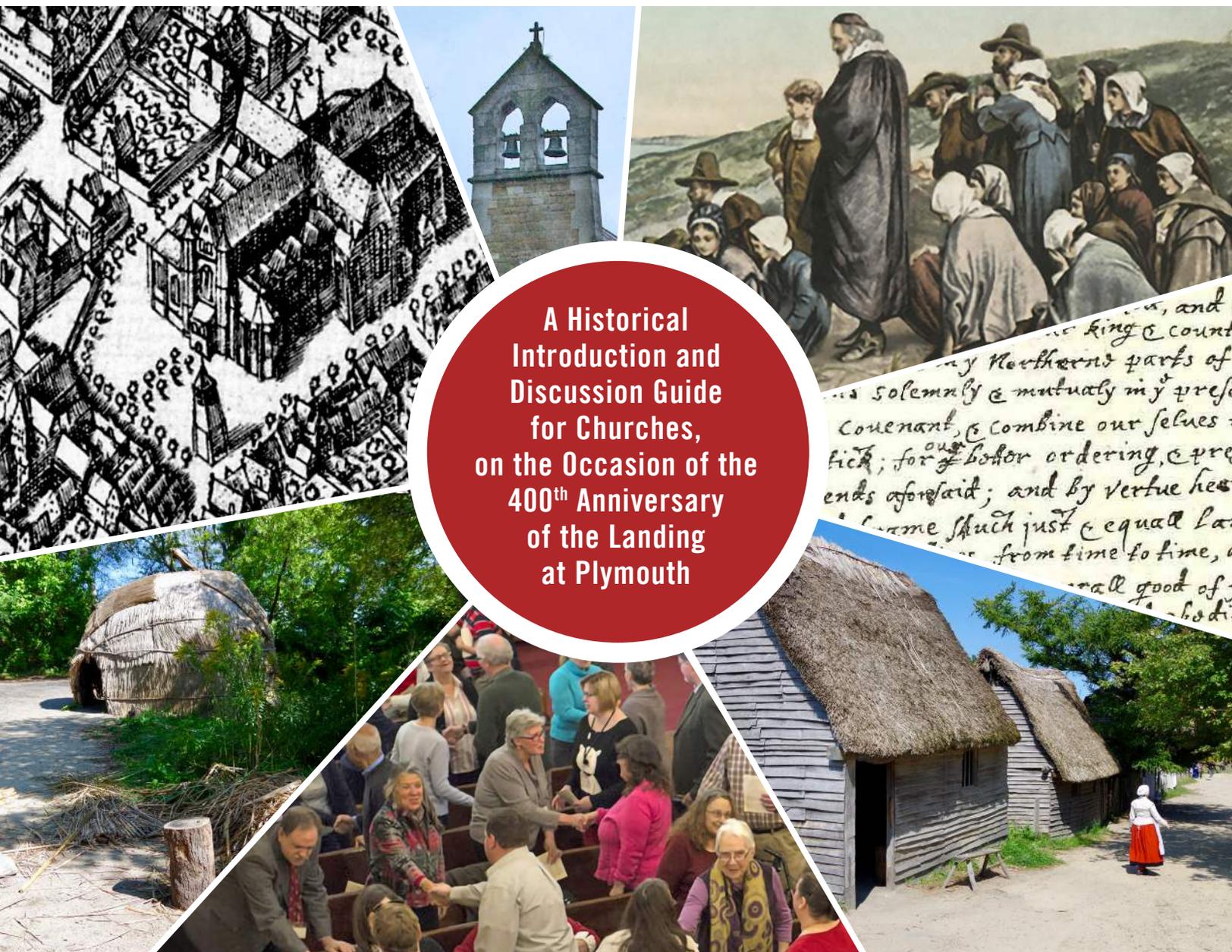


# PLYMOUTH'S PILGRIMS

## Their Church, Their World, and Ours



A Historical  
Introduction and  
Discussion Guide  
for Churches,  
on the Occasion of the  
400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Landing  
at Plymouth

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Congregational  
Library & Archives  
*History Matters*

Written by **Linda Smith Rhoads**

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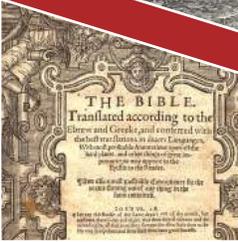
They Were One Body in Christ



SECTION

2

They Were People of the Book



SECTION

3

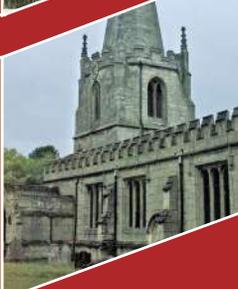
They Were Colonists;  
They Were Colonizers



SECTION

4

They Were Congregationalists



# Foreword

Since its formation in 1853, the **Congregational Library & Archives** has served a single mission, to preserve the records of the past and make them accessible and relevant to people in the present. We believe that history matters, that it informs us, widens our understanding of the world, and continually challenges us with important and difficult questions.

As we approach the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival in Plymouth, we are inviting the churches of the Congregational Way to take up their historical challenge and to create fresh conversations about an old story, one that is deeply embedded in American lore and, for many Native American communities, thick with painful memories. The 2020 anniversary provides us a unique opportunity—and an obligation, in fact—to engage with those storied Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers as full human beings, as morally and spiritually complex as anyone alive today.

We are offering this study and discussion guide as a place to start, providing some stories, questions, and a variety of resources to open what we hope are many more thoughtful explorations of the Congregational tradition. The Library offers much more, of course, from digital collections of colonial-era church records to expert help with managing the electronic and paper trail of modern-day church life. We are delighted to serve researchers of all kinds, from professional historians to church members curious about their roots—anyone wanting to know more about one of the oldest and most influential American religious traditions, now marking its 400<sup>th</sup> year.

Dr. Margaret Bendroth

*Executive Director, Congregational Library and Archives*



Congregational  
Library & Archives  
*History Matters*

# Introduction

## WHAT WERE THEY ABOUT?

In December 1620, one-hundred and two men, women, and children disembarked the English ship *Mayflower*, anchored in Cape Cod Bay. The brave remnant of a congregation that had most recently been worshiping in Leiden (Netherlands), augmented by men chosen for their practical skills, they had committed to a punishing sea voyage and an uncertain future to live in godly communion with one another.

They would have preferred to return home. England, though, was growing unpredictable and dangerous. Nearly a century before, in 1534, Henry VIII (r. 1509–47) had broken with the Roman Catholic Church in pursuit of a new wife and a male heir. In Catholicism's stead, he established the Church of England, of which, he pronounced, he was head. He seized papal properties and privileges, freely dispensing them to consolidate his royal authority and garner support for his new religious establishment. But Henry had little concern for doctrinal matters. And so the competing Protestant views that had proliferated on the Continent—thanks to Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, among others—began to infiltrate the island nation. For the next decade, England seesawed between extremes, until Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), Henry's youngest daughter, ascended the throne. She cleverly balanced competing factions, permitting (but not sanctioning) a reform movement to take hold in the land. That movement was disparagingly referred to as puritanism.

Puritans disdained the ecclesiastical ruling class that had come to dominate England's established church. With their elaborate prayer books and fancy robes, these clerics were no better than Catholic priests, puritans claimed. A hotbed of puritan thought, Cambridge University had been sending its reform-minded young graduates into the countryside to serve in parish churches, which, under Elizabeth, had enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy. But when James I (r. 1603–25), a Presbyterian Scot, succeeded Elizabeth, he chose to enforce religious conformity. In private gatherings (called conventicles)

the most ardent puritans defied those constraints, asserted their independence, and, like the religious body that would send its most courageous pioneers to the New World, organized themselves into a separate congregation.

The men you will meet in the pages that follow were instrumental in founding the “pilgrim church” and planting it in the New World. At Scrooby Manor, the home of William Brewster, a small group of puritan radicals, men and women, first declared themselves free from the authority of the Church of England. John Robinson, whose unorthodox views had cost him his parish post, attached himself to the group, helped shepherd it across the channel to the Netherlands, and eventually became the ever-expanding congregation's pastor in Leiden. William Bradford, a young proselyte who had gravitated toward the community of faithful at Brewster's estate, would go on to be Plymouth's longtime governor, managing the settlement's relationship with the merchant elite who had financed the pilgrim venture in expectation that its farming, fishing, and trading would yield handsome profits. Edward Winslow, who joined the congregation in Leiden and assisted Brewster in publishing insurgent tracts, was a tactful negotiator with English and Native Americans alike.

Although a biographical approach helps humanize the pilgrims' extraordinary undertaking, it also does them a disservice. Convinced that each individual had his or her unique gifts to offer the larger community, they tended to soften distinctions among themselves. Resurrecting the contributions of women beyond their barely noted roles as wives and mothers raises another difficulty. Would that it were otherwise, but history yields only what its contemporaries chose to record. It is not that women were not valued—they were loved, respected, esteemed for their care of the succeeding generation, and mourned—but in that era, they were not permitted to hold official positions in church, government, or military, the only institutions considered worthy of historical mention.

## WHAT ARE WE ABOUT?

History documents the series of decisions individuals make, generally in moments of stress and danger. Decisions that have a lasting impact or alter the preceding course of events are those that attract most attention. Few decisions in American history are more monumental than that which led to the landing at and settlement of Plymouth. We are fortunate that the pilgrims were people of the book. Not only did they revere the Bible and attempt to follow its teachings; they routinely recorded their own views and aspirations in private memoirs and published tracts.

In what follows, we will examine the decisions the New World's first migrating puritans faced and, insofar as they are knowable, the beliefs these men and women held. We will do so, first, to commemorate their accomplishment, but we will also question their actions within their historical moment and our own. Committed to the truth as they were, our puritan forebears would expect no less of us. The puritans got a good deal right; they also, we will likely agree, got a good deal wrong. Let's open our investigation with that understanding. And then let's move from it into a larger discussion concerning the current state of our own church, our nation, our world, and ourselves.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPLORATION

We have arranged our study and discussion guide into four units, each headed by a brief historical essay and followed by suggested questions for discussion. Although the four sections are interrelated, they need not be addressed in sequence. In addition, although you may choose to cover each section in a one-hour session (one per week for four weeks), we encourage you to engage the material that follows as your fellow congregants and as the Holy Spirit direct.

You may want to begin your discussion by inviting participants to share their preconceptions about the pilgrims, returning to that topic after you have completed the study and discussion series to understand how your views have or have not changed. To aid your conversation the Congregational Library & Archives will offer online supplemental aids: a bibliography of primary and secondary sources; a collection of useful documents; and an "Ask the Experts" feature, where you can get answers to your historical and theological questions. A version of the history/discussion series for youth is also available.

Pilgrims questioned authority. While they did not dispute rank and privilege in social contexts, they did not abide such distinctions—except in recognizing the communally assigned

roles of preacher, teacher, elder, and deacon—in religious contexts. But because the first migrants to the New World were not markedly different in social status and because they were more or less free to create an English governmental order where none had existed, they had a unique occasion to overlay their religious principles on their legal order, as is evident in the Mayflower Compact (see section 4). The Congregational Way, in other words, became the American Way. Scholars have argued, and will continue to argue, about the degree to which such a statement is accurate, but there is no doubt that the pilgrims have had a powerful hold, for good or ill, on the American imagination. On this 400th anniversary of the pilgrims' landing at Plymouth, we are presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to examine our legacy and consider our future.

The questions appended to each unit are merely suggestive. We encourage you to develop questions of your own. Moreover, we invite you to spin off further discussion series as inspired by the present one. For example:

- How might the concept of covenant, of promise to one another and to God, secure our future as a congregation, as a denomination, and as people of faith?
- How might a study of the New Testament Epistles further my congregation's renewal efforts?
- How might an exploration of the concept of hospitality and its biblical and historical precedents inform my congregation's approach to our present-day clash between religious and cultural cohesion and efforts toward inclusivity?
- How is spirituality different from and equivalent to religion? What are your sources of spirituality? How do your spiritual beliefs affect your daily conduct?

Another potential series could be rooted in a more thorough investigation of the key elements of pilgrim worship and conduct: Bible study; prayer; psalm singing; sharing spiritual insights; and mutual care.

The Congregational Library and Archives is committed to assisting congregations in their pursuit of historical and religious understanding and enlightenment. We invite you to communicate with us: to explore our resources; to ask questions; and to suggest ways in which we may continue to serve the congregations that are at the heart of our mission. Engaging with history is no less complex than engaging with our present day. Both require, as the pilgrims remind us, biblical study, a communion of the likeminded, respectful discussion, and the presence of God in our midst.

## SECTION

# 1

# They Were One Body in Christ

*We are 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 straitly tied to all care of each other's good and of the whole, by every one and so mutually.*

— JOHN ROBINSON AND WILLIAM BREWSTER  
TO EDWYN SANDYS, 17 DECEMBER 1617,  
IN WILLIAM BRADFORD, *OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION*

In 1620, 102 bodies (men, women, and children) crowded into the hull of the *Mayflower*. It was September and it was fair, but they faced an ominous passage across the Atlantic. For two months they would share their approximately 1,500 square feet with animals, all their earthly possessions, and a stash of weaponry. As temperatures dropped and the stench rose, many fell ill. By the time they disembarked, two had been born, but five had died. It was hard to keep up hope.

William Brewster drew his wife, Mary, near and looked over at his sons Love and Wrestling. He too struggled to fend off despair, but his duty to his God and to his fellow passengers strengthened his resolve. He had known most of those on the *Mayflower* for over a decade. They, like him, believed that the Church of England was drifting back into popery, religious practices designed by men, not God. Although each individual was responsible for bringing God's light into the world, the mutual support and tender correction a community might offer drew the religious dissenters together. They had begun meeting at Brewster's home, Scrooby Manor, in Nottinghamshire. There they prayed, sang psalms, studied the Bible, and shared spiritual insights. There they felt they were truly one body in Christ.

In 1606 or 1607, those worshipping at Scrooby turned away, or separated, from the Church of England. They "joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate"—that is, a congregation—a congregation thereby sanctioned not by men nor any of man's institutions but, they trusted, by God alone. Such an act was a crime against the state (which had authority over the church). Some of the devoted were dragged from their homes and imprisoned. For the good of all, the Scrooby faithful decided together, as one body, to depart England.

Brewster, a former diplomat, had some familiarity with the Continent. In Amsterdam, he advised, was a congregation that would welcome the emigrants. In 1608, following Brewster's lead, the Scrooby faithful left for Holland. But the separatists at Amsterdam were bickering. Because, the pilgrims believed, spiritual enlightenment



was not fixed but—through study, prayer, and discussion with fellow congregants—would progressively evolve with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the integrity of their congregation was sacrosanct. To ensure its purity and harmony, the small band of English separatists moved on to Leiden. In that city, they worshiped as they chose, under the care of their beloved pastor, John Robinson. For that they were grateful, but the rest was hardship: they were country folk living in cramped urban dwellings; the only jobs they could find were unfamiliar, exhausting, and low paying; they did not speak the language of their host country; and that country’s political future was in doubt. Most important, though, their children were becoming less English and less pious by the day.

And so, Brewster reflected, God had called them away once again. Their pastor remained in Holland, ministering to those who could not make the journey. Now he, Brewster (the congregation’s elder), was responsible for all the brave souls who had risked the treacherous Atlantic to embark on a lifelong journey in the Lord’s service. But he was not alone; Brewster drew strength from his good wife and his robust sons. God willing, Love and Wrestling would bring to the tasks that lay ahead those qualities of compassion and perseverance for which they had been named. In an unfamiliar land whose only virtues were its declared Englishness and lack of religious oppressors,

his sons would turn their youthful energies toward building a godly society.

A decade later, another group of puritans would sail toward the New World. Their leader, John Winthrop, echoed William Brewster’s advice to his spiritual compatriots. To establish their own godly community, their “city upon a hill,” Winthrop instructed, they must “be knit together . . . as one man.” They must “rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together—always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.”

In the years to come, as congregations multiplied and spread across New England, the ideal of mutual care and support became ever more difficult to sustain. As differences arose and could not be resolved, those in power began to wield the very tools that had been used against them in England. To stifle dissenters, they enforced conformity and threatened imprisonment and exile. Robinson and Brewster had urged patience. If the faithful approached one another with humility and remained open to the unfolding of God’s plan, he would bless them. But by 1635 or so, patience was fraying. The compact the pilgrims had so lovingly fashioned—arguably English America’s first, and most quixotic, utopian experiment—was at risk.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The pilgrims considered their faith community “one body in Christ.”** Explore the biblical passages that discuss that concept (e.g., Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 10:16–17, 12:12–27; Col. 3:12–17) and consider the degree to which you embrace it. What characteristics, in your opinion, unify your congregation? Where are its fault lines? How do you ensure that everyone’s needs are met? How do you go about discovering what those needs might be?
- Christians (indeed, humans in general) are constantly balancing idealistic objectives against worldly realities.** How do you judge the pilgrims’ venture: heroic, foolhardy, doomed, visionary, lucky?  
**Think about instances in your church life in which practical considerations were weighed against dearly held aspirations.**  
Which won out? Was God, in your opinion, present in those decisions?
- The pilgrims believed that spiritual enlightenment would be most effectively achieved within the context of their congregation.** In our current cultural context, spiritual enlightenment is often considered to be a private, even secular (think meditation, yoga, even journaling), pursuit. How do you seek spiritual enlightenment—privately and communally? What strategies does your congregation use to promote spirituality among its members? What strategies do you feel are lacking? How would you bring them into play?
- In separating themselves from the Church of England and establishing themselves as an independent congregation, the pilgrims carefully defined the boundaries of their faith community.** As a faith community grows and moves through time, however, it often faces the challenge of either adapting to new views or shrinking into its core beliefs. How does a religious community retain its spiritual identity while continuing to evolve and attract new adherents?

# They Were People of the Book

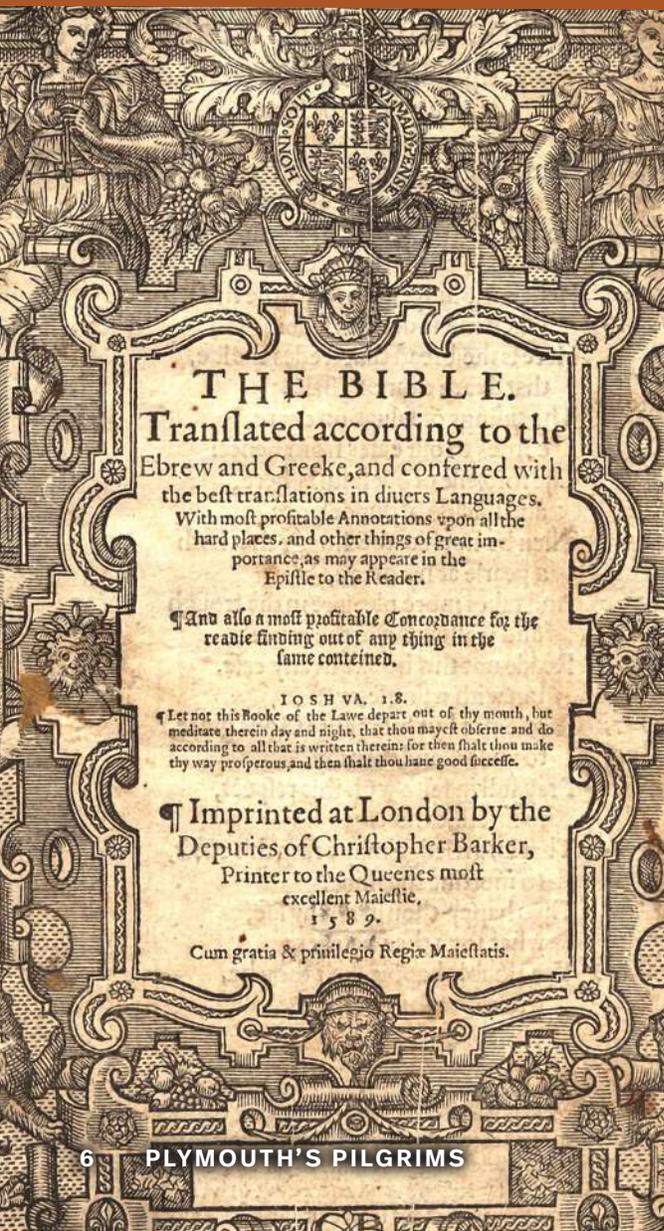
*The [puritan reformers] laboured to have the right worship of God and discipline of Christ established in the church, according to the simplicity of the gospel, without the mixture of men's inventions; and to have and to be ruled by the laws of God's Word, dispensed in those offices, and by those officers of Pastors, Teachers and Elders etc. according to the Scriptures.*

— WILLIAM BRADFORD, OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

Of the puritan faithful aboard the *Mayflower*, none, arguably, was more fervent than William Bradford. A sickly child, he had sought comfort in his Bible and also, in his early teens, in a community of likeminded individuals. Finding that community at Brewster's Scrooby estate, he had joined himself to the congregation there and, with them, fled to Amsterdam and then on to Leiden. He had returned to Amsterdam in 1613 to marry his sixteen-year-old bride, Dorothy May, and draw her into the orbit of his righteous devotion. When Bradford died in Plymouth at the age of 68, his faith had clearly withstood some of the worst God has ever visited upon his children. Like an Old Testament prophet, Bradford had also left his own book of those trials (*Of Plymouth Plantation*), a chronicle of the pilgrims' journey intended to inspire a future generation of puritan migrants with the nobility of their ancestors' mission and the abundance of God's mercies toward each and every man, woman, and child.

The pilgrims' avid attention to their Bible defined them as the most ardent of protestants. As Luther and Calvin had claimed, each individual is entitled to a direct, personal relation to the Word of God. Catholicism, the reformers had insisted, had usurped that right, walling the people off from their Book with a universal but incomprehensible religious language, Latin, as well as with rites invented by men, not ordained by God. With fifteenth-century innovations in print technology, the Catholic Church's dominion over God's truth gradually came to an end. The people now had direct access to God's Word in their own language. The first mass-produced Bible to be made widely available in England was the Geneva Bible (English edition, 1575). Translated in part by reformists who had fled England for Geneva during the reign of Queen Mary I, the text was supplemented with biblical aids and study guides. A competitor to officially authorized translations like the King James version (1611), the Geneva Bible (1599 edition) was the puritans' preferred text, source of inspiration and model for the right worship of God.

As Bradford would state in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the reformists' goal was for "the churches of God [to] revert to their



ancient purity and recover their primitive order, liberty and beauty.” To regain that Pauline simplicity, the pilgrims immersed themselves in the New Testament Epistles. There they found authority for only two sacraments—communion and baptism—as opposed to the Catholic Church’s seven. (Dorothy and William were married in a civil, not a religious, ceremony.) There they found authority for three church offices: elders for teaching and preaching, ruling elders, and deacons. There they found *no* authority for clerical vestments, Communion rails, signing the cross, altars. There they *did* find evidence for psalm singing, praying, Bible study, and spiritual sharing. Just like those who had proclaimed themselves a congregation at Scrooby, the early churches were voluntary associations of true believers who gathered together for no other reason than to worship their God, attempt to follow their Sovereign’s precepts, and support one another in their journey. In all of these activities, the congregation would wend its way together toward a more thorough understanding of God’s plan for them, a plan that would unfold according to God’s own time and purpose.

The singularity of the puritans’ mission may have felt inhumanly abstract to some. Aboard the *Mayflower*, William read to Dorothy the farewell letter John Robinson had addressed to those bound for the New World. Their beloved pastor, obliged to remain in Leiden, urged the migrants not to give or take offense, one to another. And, more important, they should not take “offense at God Himself, which yet we certainly

do so oft as we murmur at His providence in our crosses, or bear impatiently such afflictions as wherewith He pleaseth to visit us.”

The *Mayflower* made landfall on November 11, 1620, at Provincetown on Cape Cod. Not until December 23, however, after a laborious search for a site suitable for settlement, was a work party dispatched at Plymouth to begin the task of building shelters. The endless waiting, the gathering cold, and the diminishing supplies of food bred worry and discontent. Despite herself, Dorothy May Bradford could not help but murmur at God’s providence. To keep their three-year-old child out of harm’s way, she and William had left him behind in Holland. She cleaved to her husband, as she desired and as God commanded, but neither husband nor God could atone for the sheer unrelenting emptiness she felt since parting from her cherished son. William, she believed, did not share her anguish. Having been orphaned at the age of seven, he had poured all his love into a steadfast obedience of his heavenly father.

In early December, as her husband participated in yet another inland expedition to locate a site suitable for settlement, Dorothy Bradford’s afflictions came to an end when she fell overboard and drowned in Cape Cod Bay. We will never know whether her death was intentional or whether she had made peace with her God. We will never know what William Bradford suspected or whether and which biblical passages brought him comfort. Such are the mysteries of faith, of the human heart, and of history.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Discuss your relationship with the Bible.**  
Do you read it: daily, weekly, monthly, not at all?  
Do you view it as an inspirational text or a historical one?  
Do you seek guidance or comfort from it in your daily life?  
Do you want to alter your approach to the Bible—  
as an individual; as a congregation?
- 2. The pilgrims believed that each individual’s spiritual journey was in God’s hands and would—in part, over time, and according to God’s own plan alone—be revealed to him or her; nonetheless, they also believed that a communion of fellow believers could help enrich the individual’s understanding as well as correct his or her behavior, the earthly expression of faith.**  
How have your fellow congregants affected your life’s journey?  
How have you affected theirs? How would you characterize that effect: spiritual? social? political? What do your answers reveal about the nature of your personal commitment to your religious community? your faith? What do they reveal about your congregation and its commitments to you?  
To the larger community?
- 3. The pilgrims turned to the New Testament Epistles to learn how to organize themselves as a congregation.**  
What do you know about the Epistles? Do you see them as the proper model for today’s church, or do you believe that they are irrelevant because churches necessarily evolve to better suit the current age? Consider exploring the Epistles together as an exercise in congregational reflection and renewal.
- 4. The pilgrims, and puritans in general, had a vehement disdain for Catholicism, what they disparagingly referred to as “popery” or “papism.” Although, like all Christian churches, protestant congregations traced their origins and authority to the communities that began to gather in the years following Christ’s Ascension, protestants believed that the Catholic Church’s institutional bureaucracy had erected barriers that separated believers from a direct experience of their God. Consider the role of “enemies” or “outsiders” in how we construct our views of our Christian identity.**  
How do we articulate what we are for without assailing those we are against?

## SECTION

# 3

# They Were Colonists; They Were Colonizers



*What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not.*

—WILLIAM BRADFORD, OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

*And the appearance of it [Cape Cod] much comforted us, especially seeing so goodly a land.*

—EDWARD WINSLOW, MOURT'S RELATION

In the summer of 1621, ten men set out from Plymouth in search of a boy who had become lost. Along the way, they encountered an aboriginal woman they judged to be at least one hundred years old. As they approached, she began to weep uncontrollably. Why is she so distraught? the men asked. With the help of their Native American interpreters, the colonists learned that some years earlier, her three sons had boarded a nearby ship to engage in trade. But its English captain, Thomas Hunt, had instead captured them, transported them east, and sold them into slavery in Spain. The account was, as Edward Winslow pronounced it, “grievous.”

Edward Winslow and William Bradford, both future governors of Plymouth Colony, saw New England through different eyes. Bradford's were dimmed by a fearful gloom; Winslow opened his wide to new challenges and exploits. For Bradford, as he reports, the air is frigid, the landscape devoid of sheltering buildings, food scarce, the bodily after-effects of the voyage unrelenting, the sounds of unfamiliar animals and unfamiliar men terrifying. Winslow, on the other hand, excitedly names the trees overhead, the herbs beneath his feet, the fish in the streams he crosses. He playfully recounts how Bradford got trussed up by a Native American deer snare, an incident Bradford neglects to record. Wilderness was, for each man, a matter of personal preference, and wilderness clearly appealed to Edward Winslow.

Winslow's unrestrained embrace of the New World was, in part, strategy. *Mourt's Relation*, which he largely authored, is a promotional tract, full of puff and exaggeration, designed to entice newcomers to New Plymouth. Still, his youthful exuberance (Winslow was twenty-six years of age), evident in every detail, is clearly genuine. As is his sincere respect for the other-looking people (they remind him of gypsies) who are struggling, like the pilgrims, to accommodate themselves to new realities.

The encounter with the old woman reminds us that European-First Nation contact was not new. The two groups had been sizing each other up for the better part of a century. Native populations had had the worst of the bargain. European disease ravaged their

communities, and the English had the advantage of guns. Still, Europeans offered desirable goods in exchange for beaver pelts as well as stabilizing alliances that shielded local Native Americans from competing tribes.

For several months, outlying residents kept their distance from the pilgrims. But in mid-March 1621, a Native American walked boldly into the Plymouth settlement. A few days later, a second arrived. He, like the old woman's sons, had been captured by Hunt and sold into slavery (in England), but he had escaped. Squanto had returned home to Patuxet, where the English had planted themselves, only to discover that a plague had obliterated his entire village, most inhabitants having died and the few remaining having scattered.

By an irony of fate (or God's providence?), Hunt's perfidy became the pilgrims' salvation, for during his captivity Squanto had learned to speak English. Nearby was a Wampanoag village of some sixty men, and with Squanto's assistance, the English brokered a treaty with Massasoit, the chief sachem, pledging peace and mutual aid against any hostile adversaries. The peace was steady, promising, based on mutual fear and respect as well as a culture of hospitality. Plymouth began, modestly, to prosper. By fall 1621, the community had grown to seven dwellings and four common buildings. Native Americans came and went in Plymouth, just as the English did in the indigenous villages.

That fall, twenty acres of indigenous corn and barley yielded their fruit, and, as Winslow reported, English and Native Americans hunted, feasted, and entertained one another for three days. That glorious occasion we celebrate as our beloved national holiday, Thanksgiving.

Mutual fear, respect, and hospitality, though, tend to flourish in an environment of mutual need and scarcity as well as of parity. Both under stress from outside forces, the Wampanoags and the pilgrims were stronger together than they were individually. As Bradford's words reveal, however, even the most godly among God's servants could woefully disregard the humanity of people who seemed different ("savage," "uncivil" "wild," "brutish") from themselves. Although "savage" is also in Winslow's lexicon, context suggests the synonym "state of nature." He characterizes the indigenous people he encounters as "very trusty, quick of apprehension, ripe-witted, just."

As the New World beckoned new puritan migrants, the balance of power between settlers and natives began to shift. Not all who crossed the Atlantic were as large-hearted and open-minded as Winslow; men like Hunt were also among them, and their cannon would not be as idle as Plymouth's had been that year. Appeasing the Native Americans, let alone befriending them, would become much less important for the English than, in the name of God and king, spiritual and territorial domination.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In Winslow's telling, the pilgrims and Native Americans engaged in an easy, mutual hospitality, sharing food and lodging no matter how little of each was available. His account of what we call the First Thanksgiving is particularly inspiring, although it is interesting to note that Bradford makes no mention of it.**

How do you practice hospitality, especially toward those less fortunate? How does your church do so? Research what the Bible has to say on the matter (e.g., Luke 10:30-37; Heb. 13:1-3).
- In Holland, the pilgrims considered themselves to be exiles, but when they landed in the New World, they were colonists. Bradford describes New England as "unpeopled," "devoid of all civil inhabitants," a rationale, the pilgrims were convinced, that gave them and other English people who followed license to appropriate Native American lands. Consider distinctions among the terms "immigrant," "emigrant," "exile," "colonist," "colonizer." What rights does each term confer or deny? Discuss related terms used today—such as "alien," "illegal," "refugee," "asylum seeker"—**

in this context. How have terms such as "native" and its attendant rights been expropriated. Why does our use of particular words matter?
- In the late sixteenth century, European countries (Spain, France, England) began dividing up the North American continent into distinct protectorates, essentially creating boundaries or borders between them. Even though Native Americans had a loose notion of territorial sovereignty, the concept of boundaries or borders was foreign to them.**

Consider the concept of borders within the larger question, Who owns a land, a country? How do we approach such questions as Christians?
- The pilgrims hoped to christianize Native Americans for their eternal salvation.** How might that intention have complicated their effort to establish an English outpost in the New World? How might it have intersected with that goal? Is it possible to evangelize a people without dominating them, without disrupting their culture? What is the role of Christian missionaries in today's world? Discuss.

# They Were Congregationalists



*As the Lord's free people [they] 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 endeavors.*

— WILLIAM BRADFORD, OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

*Whereas you are become a body politic, . . . let your wisdom and godliness appear not only in choosing such persons as do entirely love and will promote the common good, but also in yielding unto them all due honour and obedience in their lawful administrations, not beholding in them the ordinariness of the person, but God's ordinance for your good.*

— JOHN ROBINSON, FAREWELL LETTER, IN BRADFORD, OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

In seventeenth-century England, choice was a commodity in short supply. All power flowed from the sovereign, as everyone knew. Still, not entirely content, James I pronounced that he occupied his throne not by royal succession alone but by divine right. The Church that had crowned him by God's decree, he would in turn protect. Puritans, especially those who had separated themselves from their local parishes, played no role in that equation. They were ingrates, apostates, pariahs. Their conventicles were nothing less than treasonous cabals.

Pen poised above paper, John Robinson squinted and blinked as he tried to peer into the future. Having chosen him as their pastor, those who had fled Scrooby for Leiden had become his life's labor, care, and joy. What, he wondered, might he say to those few brave "pilgrims" who would soon depart England on a journey that they and he hoped would bring them closer to their God—and, strangely, into better standing with their king.

The Scrooby faithful, Robinson insisted, were not traitors. They had never publicly disputed their king's authority, civil or ecclesiastical; they had, quite simply and in all humility, quietly set about organizing themselves separately as "the Lord's free people." Their "constitution," if you will, was a covenant, a sacred vow that, because it derived from God's biblical promises to humanity, took precedence over all other forms of allegiance. But now, in removing themselves to the New World, they would be in a position to serve not only their Lord but their king as they planted his flag on a distant shore.

As he attempted to compose his farewell letter to John Carver, Plymouth's first governor, Robinson drew assurance from his congregation's respectful admiration. Robinson was, as William Bradford would later declare, a father to his flock, loving and beloved, intent on promoting the well-being of all. Knowing that the migrants would take heart from his careful attention to their plight loosed Robinson's pen, freeing words of comfort and compassionate instruction. His ability to "foresee dangers and inconveniences" in mundane affairs was also a mark of his talent for leadership. And so, returning to first principles, Robinson addressed secular as well as spiritual matters. The tenets they had applied to their religious life, Robinson advised, must also guide the pilgrims in their civic conduct.

Robinson's letter, which pilgrims had, variously, read and reread countless times on their journey west, was perhaps more refresher than primer. And so, when certain travelers, probably those outside the congregation, began to grumble and incite, Robinson's ability to spot trouble and offer useful, preemptive guidance pointed the way toward a solution more than likely already divined. Asserting its will, the majority drew up a document while still anchored in Cape Cod Bay that gave political form to the faithful's religious principles. After pronouncing themselves "loyal subjects" of their king, they declared that they would, in the presence of God, "Covenant and Combine" themselves into a "Civil Body Politic." On the basis of that authority, they would enact laws and elect officers for the proper ordering of their life together, just as they had elected a pastor and an elder to shepherd their congregation. To this agreement (the Mayflower Compact) they promised "all due submission and obedience."

Bradford's and Edward Winslow's writings tell us more about the Plymouth settlers' civil life and their everyday trials

and tribulations than about their religious routines. We do get a glimpse of those practices, however, in a 1618 letter Robinson and elder William Brewster sent to one of the wealthy merchants they hoped would support their enterprise. First, they described their church leaders, all of whom were elected for life: pastors for teaching, elders for ruling, and deacons for soliciting and distributing the church's offering to the poor. They recognized only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Admonitions and excommunications were delivered publicly, in the presence of the congregation, as were professions of faith. Robinson later clarified (1623) to Brewster that the teaching pastor alone had authority to administer the sacraments. The congregation, it seems, centered its life not in religious forms or rites so much as in its capacity to grow in the Spirit through Bible reading, preaching (generally by Brewster, but others as well), praying (including, as Robinson instructed, a confession of sins), discussion, and correction, offered humbly and respectfully. Together, in the political as well as the spiritual realms, the Plymouth congregation sought to promote individual virtue and faith through careful attention to the common good.

John Robinson never set foot in Plymouth, as he had promised and as he deeply desired. Despite Edward Winslow's best efforts, few among Robinson's flock (other than direct family members) followed their brave, utopian fellow congregants to New England; eventually the Leiden congregation was absorbed into the Dutch Reformed Church. But until Robinson's death in 1625 and Bradford's in 1657, the two men remained true to the Plymouth model: a laity empowered by faith and love, standing together as one body against life's adversities and in hope of God's heavenly promise, the overarching goal of the separatists' New World pilgrimage.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What does it mean to you to be a Congregationalist?**  
Were you born to the denomination or did you choose it. If the latter, why? What, in your view, are the denomination's core features?
- 2. John Robinson believed that the conduct of the pilgrims' religious and political lives should be mutually reinforcing. The prevailing interpretation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, however, maintains that religion and government must be kept separate.**  
Is that possible? Desirable? Discuss the implications of the two points of view.
- 3. Does your church have a covenant?**  
If yes, should your covenant be updated? If not, might you want to create one? In any case, consider exploring the concept of covenant in the Old Testament and New (see, e.g. [among many possibilities], Gen. 6:5–22; Ps. 89; Ps. 106:44–45; Jer. 31:31–34; Luke 1:68–80; Luke 22:19–20; Heb. 8:7–13).
- 4. In what ways has it been useful to you to examine the historical roots of your denomination?**  
What has been your primary takeaway from the pilgrims' experience? How might you apply what you have learned to your ongoing religious experience, both in your own life and in that of your congregation?



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*Photographs courtesy of Francis Bremer, Congregational Library & Archives, and Plymouth Congregational Church, Syracuse, New York*

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