

THE EARLY YEARS:1500 & 1600's

There is a sense in which the American shores were born out of the evangelistic interests of the Old World. Christopher Columbus is one such example (1492). He testifies in his journals of his interest in contacting native peoples with the hope that they may be brought into the Holy Faith. On his second journey Columbus brought Catholic friars who he hoped would be instrumental for this cause. Unfortunately, history would not pan out the way he may have hoped. Columbus' reputation today is tainted by the fact that much of the native population would come to be decimated as a result of the wars and plague that ensued over the next 60-100 years.

Columbus was not unique among his contemporaries though. Pope Alexander VI issued a bull for the purpose of assisting Spain and Portugal in their settlement aspirations. The sum of it was that new lands were to be sought out to "bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the Profession of the Catholic faith" to the new lands being discovered. Charles V, king of the Holy Roman Empire, expressed that his chief motive in the exploration of the new world was the conversion of Florida's Indians.

It should be noted that these explorations were not purely for kingdom focused purposes. The economic gain to be had drove much of the early exploration. That Christ would be brought too is expressive of the overall worldview of the men of the time.

Nevertheless, the early exploration and attempts at settlement were mainly Catholics. This is reasonable because the Reformation was still on the horizon or still in its infant stages (it officially commenced in Oct 1517). Even after it began, Catholics had strong dominance over places of power in most places and were the ones who were most able to be financed for the journey across the Atlantic.

17th Century

The influx of Protestants to the shores largely began with the Puritans in the 1630's. The Puritans of New England may be thought of as the bearers of the Reformation or the ones who sought to bring the Reformation to its full flower.

Henry the VIII had initiated the English Reformation, though it was not for the most stellar reasons. His wife was deemed unfit because she would not produce an heir and he sought to divorce her for it. However, the Catholic Church would not countenance a divorce. Henry then cut ties with the Catholic Church and set up himself as the head of the English (Anglican) church. Henry was, for the most part, catholic, but his move made a breach which would allow the English Church to begin moving in a Protestant direction.

Edward VI succeeded Henry at the ripe age of 9 (1547). Despite his youth the Reformation in England was sped along. Edward was trained in Protestant ideas and had a penchant for theology, Latin, Greek, & Hebrew. Unfortunately, Edward, a sickly boy, died at the age of 15 and was succeeded by his ardently Catholic half sister Mary Tudor. Bloody Mary, as she was called, stalled the Reformation by initiating a severe persecution of Protestants. Almost 300 Protestants, including the famed Thomas Cranmer went to the flames for their convictions. Many others escaped to Geneva, Switzerland where they found refuge under John Calvin's (et. al.) reformation, where they became more solidified in their Reformed ideas.

Queen Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558 and restored Protestantism. While Elizabeth was a politique, allowing for some freer expression of religion for Catholics, the Reformation in England was able to progress along again.

Under Elizabeth rose the Puritan movement. The Puritans sought to advance the Reformation's ideas and wipe out the vestiges of RCC worship. After Elizabeth came James I and Charles I, who had Roman Catholic sympathies. Charles and his divine right of rule, was particularly offensive to the Puritans, not to mention making life difficult for them. This led to the first real migration in 1630 with the Massachusetts Bay Colony. 20,000 more settlers would also make the hazardous trip to America. While not all of them are Puritans in the true sense, most of the leaders were.

The following quote shows the intense Puritan influence in the New England: "In contrast to other colonies, there was a meetinghouse in every New England town. In 1750 Boston, a city with a population of 15000, had eighteen churches."¹

Puritan Theology

- Men are wholly dependent upon God for salvation. The Puritans believed in an Augustinian view of man's depravity. Because of their sinful condition they could not come to a state of salvation or choose to be reconciled on their own. Rather, divine grace must first be given so that the heart can be changed and faith created within the believer.
- Puritans believed in the necessity of a conversion experience. This differentiated them from many of their Reformed forbearers. Previously, children would grow up in a Christian home and would continue in their parent's faith. The Reformed forbearers believed in conversion as one would be effectually called and transformed through the operation of the Spirit. However, this "experience" was not emphasized in any kind of drastic way. Puritans began to focus on this application of the Spirit and make being born again something that one must experience, often in a dramatic way. (contrast this even with Rosaria Butterfield's experience).
- The authority of the Bible. Puritans believed that the Scripture regulated life. This meant that one should do only that which the Scriptures explicitly directed (verses doing nothing prohibited by Scripture).
- The Puritans who came to America were mainly "connectional and congregational." They were not elder governed like their English counterparts, so much as they were democratic (perhaps being turned off from hierarchy by the by their experience in the Church of England). Yet they were not independent churches. They were united together in a denominational way with other Puritan churches.
- The Glory of God in all things. Providence governed all of life, Scripture regulated all of life, so all of life must be given over to God's purposes; life, work, church, education, etc.
- Postmillennial – they believed themselves to be God's agents in bringing in the new world order of the millennium. Through them God would bring in the nations as the Indians were converted

¹ <https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/religion-colonial-america-trends-regulations-and-beliefs>

and a new, Christian society was erected. They were the New Israel who would cross the waters and bring in the Promised Land of the millennium.

- The Half-way Covenant – Puritans believed that their children were a part of God’s covenant and would grow up to eventually be converted and profess faith as God’s elect. However, when many of them didn’t, they proposed that the grandchildren be admitted as non-communing members (i.e. be recipients of the right of baptism).
- Covenanting – they believed that God worked through covenants, i.e. he established relationships with families, churches, and societies through a covenant.
- Political authority required church membership. This rose out of their views of the covenant. If God was to rightly lead a country and that country was to remain in covenant faithfulness, the leaders must themselves be Christians. Thus, they must experience conversion and subsequently join a church where they make their profession faith.

A City on a Hill – John Winthrop

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all

professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.