

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 67

Puritans, Separatists and Pilgrims – Part 2

Last week, we discussed the efforts of the British crown and the Anglican Church to chart a middle ground between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. The crown and the Church leadership were insistent that England have only one church with attendance mandatory for all subjects. While the vast majority fulfilled their governmental obligations (if not their Christian responsibilities) by attending the Anglican services, many Catholics would not participate because of the Protestant ingredients to the middle road. Many “pure” (hence the name “Puritans”) Protestants would not participate in Anglican services because of the perceived Catholic ingredients of the compromise church.

In spite of the efforts of the crown to endure obligatory attendance, obedient participation, and uniform practices, the Puritans found ways to secretly worship according to their conscience and convictions. These secret meetings started simply as services for worship and learning that occurred in various homes. Soon, however, the house meetings became actual house churches, with a Presbyterian governing model based on the writings of Calvin and others from Geneva. While many Puritans tried to work within the Anglican faith, a set of Puritans began worshipping only within the confines of these non-Anglican Churches. These Puritans separated themselves out from the rest and have since earned the title of “Separatists.”

We can learn a good bit of what was happening by focusing some time on the separatists from a town named Scrooby¹.

THE SCROOBY MOVEMENT

Our story of the Scrooby Movement starts in a small church in nearby Babworth. The Church dated from 1290, and in 1586, it received Cambridge educated Richard Clyfton as its rector. Clyfton held Puritan beliefs and his sermons stoked flames of purity in its listeners, young and old alike. Among those attending were a teenaged orphan named William Bradford. Young William would walk nine miles each service to hear Clyfton’s sermons. As Clyfton continued to preach his purity message refusing to apply the perceived Catholic requirements dictated by the Anglican hierarchy, the Anglican Church took action. In 1604, the Church ejected Clyfton after 19 years of preaching.

¹ This story actually involves the Separatists from Scrooby and three nearby towns of Gainsborough, Austerfield, and Babworth. These towns are located in the center of England just North of Sherwood Forest and Nottingham.

Clyfton moved with his wife and three sons to Scrooby, where they lived with William and Mary Brewster at the Brewster's Manor House. A Separatist church was secretly meeting in the Manor House and Clyfton became its preacher.

Meanwhile, in nearby Gainsborough, another ordained preacher was ousted from the church for his "strange doctrines." His name was John Smythe. Smythe then began preaching for a Separatist church that met in the Manor House at Gainsborough.² Smythe continued there for five years before moving his church to Amsterdam in an effort to find religious freedom.³

A young orphan boy in nearby Austerfield named William Bradford was deeply moved by these house churches. Bradford had a great love of Scripture from pre-teenage years. To the scoff and derision of his uncles and neighbors, Bradford would trek to the services to hear the preaching of Clyfton, John Robinson (a Cambridge trained theologian who served as the Scrooby "church" teacher), and others. When Bradford turned 18, he moved into the Scrooby Manor House where William Brewster⁴ tutored him in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin.

In 1606, Clyfton and Smythe met with a number of other concerned folks to discuss their future. At this meeting, they agreed to join together in a Covenant to shake "off this yoke of antichristian bondage" and to join themselves into a church that would "walk in all His ways made known...according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them."⁵

The tense situation these folks faced meeting contrary to official English law was heightened when government spies learned of the separatist meetings at Scrooby Manor. Arrests were made and the Christians had to choose between going further underground, facing imprisonment, or ceasing their worship. The decision was made to go into hiding.

² Each Manorial Lord in a district would have his own "Manor House." Hence, the usage of the same name both at Scrooby and Gainsborough.

³ It was in Amsterdam that Smythe and his followers began the practice of believer's baptism, as opposed to infant baptism. Some scholars recognize this as the beginning of the English Baptist church.

⁴ Brewster was not *just* a Manorial Lord. He started getting Puritan and Separatists teaching while studying at Cambridge. Brewster then served in England's diplomatic corps working for the British Ambassador to the Netherlands from 1854 to 1857.

⁵ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (reprinted Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) p. 9.

The best plan seemed to be escaping to Holland where Dutch liberty allowed more freedom to worship. There was no way for Brewster and others to get government permission to immigrate since, for all practical purposes, they were outlaws trying to avoid discovery by the government.

The Scrooby church members took to quietly selling their lands, their furniture, their livestock and all other things that would not make the trip to Holland. In September 1607, they managed to get an agreement from an English boat captain to sail them from the nearby British port of “Boston”⁶ across the English Channel to Holland. The Separatists hid in the bushes and along the waters edge waiting for the captain and his vessel. When it finally showed up in the water, the Scrooby folks paid the Captain’s exorbitant price and began taking small rowboats out to the Ship. Once they were boarded, the 17th century equivalent of police appeared and arrested them! The Captain had sold them out, taking their money in the process.

Over the next month, the authorities finally released all but seven of the captives and sent them back to Scrooby. The seven remaining in custody included Brewster and the teacher Robinson. Because the winter was upon them, the Separatists were not able to contemplate leaving again until spring. Even though they had sold their homes and farms, they figured out how to live through the winter and in the spring of 1608. Again they attempted another flight to Holland.

The idea of fleeing home and going into a foreign land where a different language and different customs awaited was a strong statement of personal faith and conviction of God’s care. As the young William Bradford would write later when an old man, “their desires were set on the ways of God and to enjoy His ordinances; but they rested on His providence, and knew Whom they had believed.”⁷

This time around, the Separatists used a different Captain! The trip was harrowing. The tide kept all the Separatists from getting on board the ship when the English army appeared. The Captain was worried over the legality of what he was doing and lifted anchor early. The ship sailed away taking some men, and most of the wives and children separated many from their husbands and fathers.

The weather worsened immediately and the ship came close to sinking. The short voyage turned into a two-week affair with the ship finally finding port far north in

⁶ This “Boston” took its name from a church started in the 600’s by a missionary named Botolph. The area was called “Botolph’s Stone” which over time was reduced down to “Boston”. Needless to say, America’s Boston got its name from the English town.

⁷ Bradford at 11.

Norway! Those left behind were again brought before the local magistrates who decided the best thing to do was to get rid of them! So Robinson, Brewster, Clyfton, and others left and soon all the Scrooby Separatists were united in Amsterdam.

These Separatists spent the next 12 years, from 1608 to 1620 in Holland. Holland was beginning its great Golden Age. Jacobius Arminius was preaching and teaching (see Lesson 64). Rembrandt and Vermeer were painting, and the Dutch had a hiatus in their constant wars and fighting with the Catholic nation of Spain.

The Scrooby Separatists became the fourth English Church meeting in Amsterdam. We can get a glimpse at their worship services through one of Pastor Richard Clyfton's writings in 1612. They began with a prayer led by the Pastor or teacher. Then several Bible chapters were read with brief explanatory comments. Psalms were sung a cappella. Then, either the pastor or the teacher delivered the sermon. After the sermon, there was more singing of Psalms. On certain Sundays, there would be an informal administering of communion or baptism. The service would end with a collection to support the church and the poor.

Toward the end of their stay in Holland, the Scrooby Separatists decided that God would have them move on. The political and social wrangling over Arminianism was resulting in rioting and violence. While the Separatists were Calvinists, they still saw the writing on the wall, as religious freedom in Holland seemed less certain each day. This uncertainty was further aggravated by the recommencement of hostilities with Catholic Spain (the start of what becomes the "30 year war").

The Separatists were concerned that not only were they in danger of losing their religious freedom, but they felt that Amsterdam was too worldly and made it difficult to rear their children as they wished. The Separatists took to heart Proverb 22:3 which said, "A prudent man seeth the plague, and hideth himself: but the foolish go on still, and are punished."⁸

The Scrooby Separatists sent emissaries back to England to try and negotiate the right to settle some land in the new world. Ultimately, a deal was worked out with the Virginia Company to settle on what we know as the American East Coast, somewhere south of modern New York City.

⁸ During this class, we will be quoting from the Geneva Bible, as that was the Bible used by the Scrooby Separatists.

After much prayer and a sermon on 1 Samuel 23:3-4⁹ by Robinson (who at this point was the Pastor), the Scrooby Separatists decided to leave Holland for America. They decided to go in shifts, the strongest going first. Pastor Robinson stayed behind for a later shift (although he would die before he actually got to go), and William Brewster, as an Elder of the Church, took charge of the first wave leaving.

The church itself had over 300 members. 55 were scheduled to leave in the first wave. On July 30, 1620, the Scrooby Separatists gathered together to leave Holland. They had purchased a ship called the *Speedwell* and were scheduled to head to England first to get aboard another ship and take the two ships to Virginia. The day before their departure, the church that had been through so much together fasted and prayed. Gathering at Pastor Robinson's home that morning, they heard a sermon from Ezra 8:21 ("And there at the River, by Ahava, I proclaimed a fast, that we might humble ourselves before our God, and seek of him a right way for us, and for our children, and for all our substance."). With tears and nervousness, the Separatists then had a last meal together. Early the next morning boarding the *Speedwell* at the Dutch coastal town of Leiden, the Separatists left. Some left as families. Others, recognizing they were headed into a stark wilderness, decided to leave children or wives behind for a later wave.

As Bradford would later record, at this point he determined an appropriate Biblical label for him and his other Scrooby Separatists could be found in Hebrews 11:13-14. In their Geneva Bible, this passage read, "All these died in faith, and received not the promises, but saw them afar off, and believed them, and received them thankfully, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly, that they seek a country."¹⁰ This was the Scrooby Separatists! They were pilgrims seeking a country. As verse 16 would add, "But now they desire a better, that is a heavenly, wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city." We still call them Pilgrims today.

The Pilgrims sailed back to England where they had arranged to rent a ship called the *Mayflower*. It was waiting at the southern port of Southampton.¹¹ More

⁹ "And David's men said unto him, See, we be afraid here in Judah, how much more if we come to Keilah against the host of ye Philistines? Then David asked counsel of the Lord again. And the Lord answered him, and said, Arise, go down to Keilah: for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand."

¹⁰ Bradford at 47.

¹¹ 324 years later this same port would launch part of the D-Day invasion fleet to liberate Europe in World War II.

Separatists joined the Pilgrims in England by bringing the total with crew to slightly over 100.

Before leaving England, the Pilgrims read a letter sent by their Pastor in Holland which closed with the prayer, “And the Lord in whom you trust and whom you serve...guide you with His hand, protect you with His wing, and show you and us His salvation in the end, and bring us in the meanwhile together in this place desired, if such be His good will, for Christ’s sake. Amen.”¹²

The ships made two efforts to sail the Atlantic but each time, several days into the journey, they turned back because of problems with the *Speedwell*. After spending too much money (that was never too plentiful) on repairs, the decision was finally made to sell the *Speedwell* and make the dangerous journey as just one ship. This was a major decision because most transatlantic journeys always had at least two ships, lest one encounter problems.

About 20 withdrew from the journey at this time and opted against going. The dangers of the journey were even greater because fall and winter were now coming. Typically, these voyages were done in spring or summer because storming in the North Atlantic increases significantly in the winter. A further concern, of course, was the fact that winter would make the initial surviving more difficult. Farming and harvesting would not be available for some time with a winter landing.

Eventually, the *Mayflower* made the trip. The crossing of the Atlantic took 66 days. They traveled 3,500 miles averaging 2 miles an hour!

The ship did not, after all, land in Virginia as expected. The weather pushed the voyage much farther north and the landing was at Cape Cod. The road over the last two decades had many bumps and struggles, but the difficulties paled compared to the life dangers once the Pilgrims landed. Almost half of those that came on the *Mayflower* had died within five months of landing. Disease, cold, and accidents were daily problems.

The Pilgrims landed and settled in what we know as Plymouth and Cape Cod Massachusetts. They set themselves to prayer and devotion and tried to build a society that was godly from the ground up. The rules and laws passed were attempts to set out God’s wishes for the community standards and behaviors.

While some of the local Native Americans were hostile, there was also a group that sought out a peaceful co-existence. In fact, two Native Americans actually

¹² Bradford at 367

spoke English! One, a fellow named Squanto, had been kidnapped 20 years earlier by other British folks who took him to England. Eventually, he was able to escape and return to America. Squanto's presence, which came as a huge shock to the Pilgrims, was a Godsend. Through him, the Pilgrims learned the right ways to farm and trap in America. He taught the Pilgrims how to get food to survive.

Squanto and Chief Samosett (the other Native American who spoke some English he had learned from trappers) along with their tribes became allies of the Pilgrims. They all celebrated the thanksgiving feast that forms the basis of so many elementary pictures during November!

The Pilgrims did not celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November.¹³ It was never on a set annual day. Rather, they would set aside days to celebrate Thanksgiving as they saw fit. The first Thanksgiving seems to have been in October 1621. It was a three-day feast with the Native Americans bringing all sorts of food including turkey!¹⁴

So, what happened to the Pilgrims? There were a few more waves that brought over those that never made the first trip. But, a great number stayed behind in Holland and within a generation quit their separatists' ways and became basic Presbyterians or other groups of believers. In America, within a generation, many became Presbyterian as well. Many others became Congregationalists. It would not take long before these Congregationalists would become Unitarians who are not today typically recognized as a standard orthodox Christian church. There is much within the Pilgrim tradition that was strong, though, and influenced a number of others in their religious walk. The writings they left behind are inspiring and their courageous faith is infectious.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Follow God; wherever he leads is where you want to be! Some days that means quiet and still waters. Other days it means the dark valley of death. But with God as our shepherd, we have no fear, regardless. His rod and staff comfort us. He is in control. We will live with him and serve in his house forever. (Getting the 23d Psalm here? If not, read it! -- "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides

¹³ Presidents Lincoln, Grant, and F. Roosevelt set the late November date. Until 1939, however, even with the decrees of those presidents, the dates would still dance around a bit.

¹⁴ David Beale, *The Mayflower Pilgrims* sets out this information along with much of what is included in this paper. The book, published in 2000, is well worth reading for any who wish more detail of this incredible story.

me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”)

2. God does not leave us to fend for ourselves in our lives. He is our supplier. We need to trust him accordingly. He will take care of us. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6).
3. We are only a generation from unbelief. Let’s take care to train our children and rear them in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4).