

THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF THE *MAYFLOWER* COLONISTS

Introduction

The modern western beliefs in progress, in the rights of man and in civil and religious freedom, spring in large part from the moral ideals of the *Mayflower* colonists. Their settlement was the first settlement on this continent dominated by great civic and religious ideals. It was the first example on American soil of the principles of civil and religious liberty. It was the first community in the world actually to incorporate the principle of separation of church and state. But somewhere along the way, we've almost forgotten those contributions. And so I'd like to spend a little time today discussing the political views of the *Mayflower* colonists and the contributions they made to democratic thought.

Before we continue, I need to define three concepts so we'll be thinking in the same direction.

First, I said political views of the *Mayflower* colonists but in actuality they had no political views. Had you asked them what were their political views, I doubt they would have understood the question. Instead they held religious views that affected all aspects of their lives, including how they viewed the workings of society.

Second, as we look at those religious views, keep in mind that I mean religion in the broadest possible sense to refer to their views on spiritual, scriptural and organizational issues.

Third, when I refer to things that the *Mayflower* colonists thought or did before anyone else, I am not unaware that there were political writers and theorists putting forward many of the same concepts and in some cases long before the *Mayflower* colonists. However, keep in mind that for the most part the *Mayflower* colonists had little education and little wealth. They didn't attend university and they didn't have the leisure to sit around and read or discuss political theory. That John Locke coined the phrase social contract and that the *Mayflower* colonists most likely had never heard of it does not change the fact that they actually created a social contract.

THE CONTEXT

So ... let's begin by going back in time a little. Without some understanding of what was going on in England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the nature of what the *Mayflower* colonists did makes no sense.

During this time, governments through out the known world ascribed to the doctrine of the divine right of rulers. The king was immortal, perfect, infallible and omnipresent. He held his position because God ordained it. The implication of challenging or questioning the authority of a divinely sanctioned monarch meant the questioner was actually challenging God. With the Church as just another extension of the divinely sanctioned monarch and of the government, anything other than conformity was both heretical and treasonous.

Until the end of the 16th century, the Bible was available only in Latin. After the Reformation, the Bible was printed and available in English translation. Before English versions, the common man was unable to read or understand the Scriptures. Church officials were often the interpreters of Latin. As English translations became more readily available people read the Scriptures and controversies arose concerning the interpretation of many passages in the Bible.

It was out of this oppression that the Pilgrim ideas grew.

As those who became Pilgrims looked around them, they saw a church and society fallen far from Biblical principle. There was a growing sentiment that church hierarchy was a human invention found nowhere in Christian scriptures. Because the church hierarchy was not scriptural, allegiance and obedience to it was not required in the view of those attempting to purify the church and return it to its Biblical state. But how to bring that about was a source of disagreement.

The Pilgrims were part of a grassroots movement that wanted to reassert the ancient law of the Christian church, the idea that "within the sacred kingdom of religious worship the greatest prince had no more authority than the humblest of mankind." As in any movement bent on major social change, disagreements rose about how much change was necessary and what it would take to bring about that change. They were all radicals, of course ... that's the nature of any movement that seeks change. But some were more radical than others.

The least radical were committed to purifying their church from within with as little upheaval as possible. We normally call this group Puritans. They were content with the idea of a state church and very aware that to challenge that church could be an act of treason. Rather than leave or attempt to destroy the Church of England, they tried to make the changes they most wanted from within the church - the Bible as the ultimate authority, membership by choice and therefore limited to those who had at least some degree of religious motivation and an active clergy who actually taught the scriptures to its members.

Another group wished to keep the Church identity but reform its organization - to give each local congregation control over its own affairs. These people were a small minority in the Church in England and known as Congregationalists.

The group considered most radical was the Separatists. Most simply stated, these were people who had given up on any possibility of real reform within the Church of England and sought to separate from it and start their own churches ... but there were differing points of view even among the Separatists.

They are often lumped together under the name Brownists because the first vocal Separatist was a minister named Robert Browne. But Browne was extremely radical and not all Separatists agreed with him either theologically or on church organization. Most of the Separatists who stayed in England favored a structured form of church organization that was already strong in Scotland. The *Mayflower* Pilgrims were Separatists and favored the congregational approach to church governance but they rejected Browne's extremism.

Regardless of their differences, these groups were the first to emphasize the direct leadership of Christ over the church without the intervention and meddling of clerics and civil magistrates. They wanted to strip the church hierarchy of its authority to impose religious practices and creeds on the masses. If we are all equal before God, then no one - bishop, priest, king or magistrate - can command any person to worship in a way that

violates the conscience of the believer. This was the radical idea that threatened the absolute power of both the monarchy and the church hierarchy.

Although there were many issues represented by these groups, there are three issues that are important to us.

1. Members needed to remove themselves from the corruption in the parishes and form their own congregations. This is the beginning of the idea of separating the church and the state. These congregations were the basic units of the church and emphasized the power of the individual congregation. They elected their own officers and disciplined their own members. This would be impossible under a doctrine of divine right.
2. Each person remains responsible to and for every other person. All are equally important. The minister, by way of his education and calling, would be the first among equals. Even so, he does not necessarily have the final word - he remains responsible to the congregation and to its covenant. He is always subject to the scrutiny of the lay people who have been encouraged to read and study the scriptures for themselves and who have the power to reject false teachers. This is the beginning of the idea that all men are created equal.
3. The concerns about authority, community and responsibility were formally addressed by the creation of covenants. These voluntary agreements had the essential function of making churches out of collections of individuals, of establishing a community. Covenants provide order and continuity in society. There are a number of elements contained within a covenant which are important.
 - a. A covenant recognizes the rule of law.
 - b. It recognizes that meaningful, collective existence involves a consensus and a commitment with regard to what is right.
 - c. It comes from an attitude of trust and affection and is maintained because of that, not because of laws.
 - d. Covenants are not spiritual statements, though ... they describe how groups function, not what groups believe. This is an important distinction because a covenant is a promise to be together and work together as a community. It is not a statement of faith. The Pilgrims were very careful to not compose a statement of faith because of their belief in the supremacy of the individual conscience.
 - e. This is the beginning of the idea of government as a social contract.

THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT

At the beginning of the 17th century, a group of Separatists gathered in Scrooby, England. They objected to church beliefs as dictated by English rulers and believed the Church of

England had not completed the work of the Reformation and demanded full separation from the Church. Since they were not likely to get that in England, the group immigrated to Holland to escape religious persecution. Here the group enjoyed full religious freedom. However, Dutch influence on their families and increasing economic difficulties resulted in their immigration to America.

For the most part, these people were yeomen - working people. There were some among them successful enough to use the title Master, but none who had risen higher. There was not even an ordained minister in the group. William Bradford, the governor whose leadership would shape the Plymouth colony, had been a cloth worker. They were sober men of middle age, to whom the spirit of adventure was entirely foreign.

Most of them were poorly educated and without social or political standing. In order to afford passage to America, they approached the London Virginia Company. The company awarded a patent to the group and financed their trip in exchange for the group's seven years of indenture. On September 6, 1620, the *Mayflower* departed from Plymouth, England with 102 passengers.

The 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* were in two groups. Less than half of them were from the Separatist group. The rest of the passengers, called strangers by the others, included merchants, craftsmen, skilled workers, indentured servants and several young orphans. All were common people. About one-third of them were children. The strangers were included to increase the chances of success for the enterprise.

The 3,000-mile voyage across the Atlantic lasted more than two months. When they finally sighted land the captain knew they were at Cape Cod, far north of their destination. He headed the *Mayflower* south, but dangerous sand bars and heavy seas forced him to turn back. The *Mayflower* finally dropped anchor in a harbor at the tip of Cape Cod. Rather than chancing more days at sea, the *Mayflower* colonists decided to land.

Almost immediately, an argument broke out. According to William Bradford several strangers made "discontented and mutinous speeches." They apparently argued that, since the Cape Cod area was outside the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, its rules and regulations no longer applied. The troublemakers threatened to do as they pleased "for none had power to command them," wrote Bradford. Three thousand miles from home, a real crisis faced the colonists even before they stepped ashore. Keep in mind that the *Mayflower* passengers were not a homogenous group. They were from different walks of life. They didn't all share the same religious affiliation. Differences of opinion would certainly occur and dissension was bound to happen.

Consider: here you have over 100 people, cut off from any government, with a rebellion brewing, running dangerously short of food, and if they don't work as a group they may all die in the wilderness. The leaders realized they needed a temporary authority. Back home, such authority came from the king. Isolated as they were in the new world, it could only come from the people themselves. To establish their own authority and to avoid a possible mutiny, the leaders drew up the *Mayflower Compact* - probably written by William Brewster, who had a university education. As soon as the document was completed, the entire company was called together to hear it read aloud. By necessity, the Pilgrims and strangers agreed to it. What is fascinating about the Compact is that even working men and servants signed it. Imagine that occurring anywhere else during the 17th century.

Once the Compact was adopted, those who signed became legal voters and proceeded to elect a governor. Their choice was John Carver. This may have been America's first democratic election of a leader.

The Compact was the only formal constitution Plymouth Colony had in the whole of its existence. It was modeled after a Separatist church covenant and established a local governing body. It said in part:

In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread [awe, reverence] Sovereign Lord, King James, by the Grace of God, of England, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, e&. Having undertaken for the Glory of God, the Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid; And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

The *Mayflower* Compact is short and really only says four things.

1. We have a deep faith and belief in God and His divine guidance.
2. We remain loyal to England and to the King regardless of the past.
3. We have a mutual regard for one another as equals in the sight of God.
4. We intend to establish just and equal laws on which we can build a government for the good of the colony.

Out of those four short statements, however, come a number of ideas. According to the *Mayflower* Compact, a self-governing body rules for the greater good. The signers of the Compact clearly indicated the importance of the greater good by the written statement, "solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and of one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforementioned." Too, the signers clearly see governing law as something for and by the people. This concept is at the heart of democracy. Finally – and well in advance of the Declaration of Independence – the signers see the Compact as a social contract. A social contract exists between the ruled and their rulers and defines the rights and responsibilities of each.

Remember the words of the Declaration of Independence.

[major premise] When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. --That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. —Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain [George III] is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

[minor premise] A long list of deliberate acts committed by the king is offered as proof of the destruction of government's legitimate ends.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

[conclusion] We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

We all know those words. Yet 150 years before the Declaration of Independence, the *Mayflower* Compact expressed the idea of self-government for the first time in the New World.

THE PLYMOUTH COLONY

The Pilgrim contribution to American political thought did not end with the *Mayflower* Compact. The Pilgrims actually practiced what they preached as was shown in the way they governed their new home. Again, their political practices were extensions of their spiritual beliefs.

The Pilgrim Church was composed of free people who ordered their own affairs. Each member had an equal vote in important matters affecting the church. This meant, of course, that democratic principles determined the governance of the church. Keep in mind that the Pilgrims did not come to the new world in order to establish a democratic society. Their primary motivation was to find a place where they were free to worship God according to their vision of church governance. They wanted to be independent of any church hierarchy and free of any requirements on how they worshiped.

The Pilgrims' contribution to political democracy came solely from the manner by which they governed their church. It was natural, however, for them to use democratic principles as the need for civil government arose. Thus, democracy was to evolve from church to state.

The Pilgrims clearly took seriously their commitments to each other as expressed in the *Mayflower* Compact at the time of its signing. More impressive is that they continued that commitment even after they instituted a local government with elected leaders. The colony viewed the Compact as a covenant. The covenant bound those elected to office as much as it bound other members of the community. They were in that sense equals. Philosophically, therefore, Plymouth's government came close to being a true democracy; its elected officials derived their powers by the consent of the governed within the terms of their shared covenant.

At Plymouth, church and state were unquestioningly separate. Remember that one of the issues with the Church of England was that the Bible - as opposed to church leaders - should be the final authority. In Plymouth, the colonists interpreted that to include the idea that what Scripture does not specifically claim as a religious function remains a civil function. The best-known result of this thinking was the belief in Plymouth that marriage was a civil rite, not a religious one. Governor Bradford wrote that marriage is "a civil thing, upon which many questions about inheritances depend ... and no where found in the gospel to be laid on the ministers as a part of their office." To the Pilgrims, there were only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The other sacraments of the Church of England were inventions of man, had no scriptural basis and were therefore superstitions, to the point of being heretical.

To carry out daily life with justice and equality, the colonists elected a governor and magistrates each year. Those with voting rights were the adult men as well as all independent women. Independent women were those who as widows had become heads of households or who had reached the age of majority but were as yet unmarried and had rights to land from the future land divisions. In Plymouth gender was not significant in determining voting rights.

During the first seven years of Plymouth Colony, everyone lived together in the village of Plymouth. The colony as a whole — land and products — belonged to the investors who had lent money to the Pilgrims. These investors had demanded that the colonists own and farm the land in common, put the fruits of their labors each day in a common storehouse, each taking out the same amount, no matter how much — or little — they put in. The colonists

objected on the grounds that it was a mistaken socialist, collectivist arrangement and against God's principles of private property and economic justice, based on "as ye sow, so shall you reap." The investors insisted on the grounds that it would provide a convenient arrangement for the dividing of the expected profits.

The first year under communal agriculture, the Pilgrims planted just 26 acres and nearly starved to death. They shared what they could with the Indians and the Indians shared the deer they had slain for the occasion with the Pilgrims, but it was no huge Thanksgiving feast and they soon were close to starvation. The second year, knowing they had to do better but still under the obligation to practice communal agriculture, they doubled their first year's production and planted 60 acres. But that was not nearly enough and they were still near starvation.

So the third year they switched to private agriculture, assigned each family specific property and made each responsible for itself. They planted 184 acres, tripled their best previous effort and never went hungry again. With the wisdom of hindsight it seems almost obvious that as religious freedom had led to political freedom, so political freedom led to economic freedom.

As I said earlier, the colonists elected leaders once a year. Four times a year they came together to hold courts. The magistrates and a jury elected from and by the freemen, under the chairmanship of the governor, decided criminal and civil cases. Also at these meetings, all freemen voted on proposed laws. Without the voted approval of the majority of the freemen, no law could take effect. This is the origin of the town meeting, which is so characteristic of New England even today and is almost a pure democracy as has been found only previously in Athens.

Writings from this period demonstrate with frequency that the Pilgrims were committed to equal justice and equal treatment. Something apparent in the relationships they had with the local native peoples, relationships reportedly much better than other colonists'. In fact, to a remarkable degree, they had won the friendship and trust of the native peoples. One excellent example involved a wild young Englishman in the village who murdered an Indian. The court gave him a fair trial, found him guilty and hanged him. A crime was a crime and justice treated everyone equally.

By 1627 the debt of the colony was paid. The governor and magistrates then had the right to distribute the land of the colony for private ownership. For the territory surrounding the village of Plymouth each freeman who was already present in 1627 (together with their heirs and assigns) had an equal right to the future land divisions. And everyone could vote on an equal basis in the decisions about land distribution. This differs from the Dutch system in which land possession determined the value of the vote, so that a major land owner had more to say in all decisions. In Plymouth, the court elected from among the citizens had the right to reward someone with extra land for his services to society but the person granted that favor did not gain an increased weight in the voting.

The change in the colony in 1627 enabled people to begin founding new settlements through grants of land outside the village boundaries of Plymouth. As the population of these new villages increased, people complained about the inconvenience of the requirement that each freeman had to travel to Plymouth four times a year to elect leaders and vote on proposed laws. A system of delegates elected by the freemen arose.

These delegates represented the citizens at court. The delegates, together with the elected governor and magistrates, formed the legal body that determined policy, taxation and

proposals of law. Nevertheless, the decisions about proposed laws taken by these representatives had to be confirmed afterwards by general voting in the local town meetings before the new laws took effect.

The *Mayflower* Compact was an inspired document but not a specific constitution that defined the form of government, its functions and basic laws. Thus in 1636, drawing on fifteen years of experience in self-government in the new world, the Pilgrims held a kind of mini-constitutional convention, which framed *The Laws of Plymouth*, a basic constitution that was revised from time to time but never abandoned. It's interesting to note that the capital offences were treason, murder, diabolical conversation, arson, rape and unnatural crimes. The Plymouth colony had only six sorts of capital crime, against thirty-one in England at the time of James 1, and of these six it actually punished only two. Unlike other colonies, the Plymouth courts imposed fines and forfeitures without regard to the station or quality of the offenders. Too, they never punished or even committed any person as a witch.

There isn't enough time to look at a complete history of Plymouth but it is important that we understand why so little is known today of the truly important achievements of the *Mayflower* colonists. When Charles II became king in 1660, a shift took place toward a hierarchical system of power in the colonies. The Crown voided the charters of all the colonies in New England and appointed a Commissioner of the King to exercise the Crown's power. The Commissioner in turn appointed his own people to local offices. In Plymouth, elected representatives no longer represented the town meetings to the court. Instead, the court considered the delegates to be representatives of the political power of the central government towards the separate village populations. The court confirmed (if it chose to do so) the nominations of the elected representatives and the court concluded from that, that the representatives derived their legitimacy from the court and not from the electorate. As the Crown and its representatives in the new world gained more and more power, so those living in the new world lost more and more liberty. By the time of the colonies' declaration, the world had nearly forgotten the *Mayflower* colonists.

THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF THE *MAYFLOWER* COLONISTS

The *Mayflower* colonists were the first people to not merely talk about but to actually put into place over a span of decades, in their own lives as individuals and as a whole community, the unique American identity as a free people, governed by the people and for the people. At least six of our most basic principles came from the *Mayflower* Compact and the Plymouth colony.

1. All men are created equal. The Pilgrims believed in God and believing in God, they believed in the equality of all men before God.
2. All men are treated equally under the law. Because the *Mayflower* colonists believed in the equality of all men before God, they made all men equal under the law.
3. Governments should be created for the people and by the people. If all men are equal before God, no government should be instituted that requires some men to exist for the benefit of others.
4. A social contract exists, even if only implicitly, between the governed and the governing. Government exists for the benefit of the people, specifically

to safeguard the rights of the people. People have the right to overthrow any government that is destructive of legitimate rights.

5. Because God creates all men as equals, power must reside in the people.
 - a. A majority vote of the citizens should determine who holds political power and judicial power.
 - b. All laws should be approved by a majority vote of the citizens.
 - c. Freedom must be based on the principle of "one man, one vote" so that in no case does any group have more say in government than any other group or any individual more than any other individual.
6. The people can elect representatives who will guard the interests and preferences of the larger group. As the Plymouth colony became more complex, the political system evolved from pure democracy to a representative democracy.

Conclusion

Centuries ago, the *Mayflower* colonists established the foundation for a more democratic process of self governance. They had come to the conviction that religion should be a matter of individual conscience and belief. What was more logical than moving from the search for religious freedom to the discovery also of political freedom and even economic freedom? As William Bradford said,

"As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone to many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation."

We will never know the extent of the *Mayflower* colonists' influence on subsequent political ideas. But I find it difficult to believe that ideas so unique for that time and yet so successfully implemented came and went without any influence at all.