

# Pilgrims' Progress: From Puritanism to...Unitarianism?

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**Reading** (Emmy Lou Schenk)

From [\*Seven Sermons\*](#) by Jonathan Mayhew (1720-1766)

Let us take pains to find out the truth, and after we are settled in our judgment concerning any religious tenet or practice, adhere to it with constancy of mind, till convinced of our error in a rational way. Let us despise the frowns and censures of those vain conceited men who set themselves up for the oracles of truth and the standards of orthodoxy; and then call their neighbors hard names—We have not only a right to think for ourselves in matters of religion, but to act for ourselves also...

Did I say we have a right to judge and act for ourselves? I now add—it is our indispensable duty to do it...God and nature and the gospel of Christ enjoin it upon us to maintain the right of private judgment, and to worship God according to our consciences, as much as they enjoin us to give alms to the poor, to love God and our neighbor, and practice universal righteousness...

And to conclude, while we are asserting our own liberty and Christian rights, let us be consistent and uniform; and not attempt to encroach upon the rights of others. They have the same right to judge for themselves and to choose their own religion, with ourselves. And nothing is more incongruous than for an advocate of liberty, to tyrannize over his neighbors. We have all liberty to think and act for ourselves in things of a religious concern; and we ought to be content with that, without desiring a liberty to oppress and grieve others...Let us, as much as in us lies, live peaceably with all...

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Let me begin by doing my best to answer a question that I was asked earlier this week: What is the [difference between Pilgrims and Puritans](#)? You will notice that they both show up in my title, suggesting that they are interchangeable, but they are not...not quite.

First of all, *pilgrim* (with a lower-case “p”) refers to “one who embarks on a quest for something conceived of as sacred.” In this sense, both the Pilgrims *and* the Puritans were pilgrims...see what I mean? But when we use *Pilgrim* (with a capital “p”) we are referring to a specific group

of Puritans who, fleeing religious persecution in England, came to America via Holland and founded the colony of Plymouth in 1620. (They also founded the Plymouth church which Polly Packard from this congregation attended for a time. It is the oldest, continuous church in New England, and it became a Unitarian church in 1800).

Now the Puritans were a group of English Protestants who sought to “purify” the Church of England of its Catholic-style ritual and hierarchy and return to a simpler style of worship and community based on their understanding of Scripture. But there were different types of Puritans: Some Puritans believed that the Church of England could be reformed, so they were working from the inside. Others, like the *Pilgrims*, came to the conclusion that reform was not forthcoming *within* the Church, so they proposed setting up a new church that would be governed by the principles in which they believed. They became *Separatists*, as they found the only solution was in *separating* themselves from the Church of England.

Ten years after the Pilgrims came to America, there was another (much larger) group of Puritans (*not* Separatists) who made the journey from England and settled in Massachusetts Bay. Among this group was John Winthrop who, upon their departure, spoke in a sermon about the new community they would establish as “a city on a hill,” that would serve as a model for the world. So, in summation, Capital-P Pilgrims are Puritans of a particular variety known as Separatists who settled in Plymouth in 1620. Puritans, however, are not necessarily Capital-P Pilgrims, and the Puritans who followed the Pilgrims ten years later and settled in Massachusetts Bay were not Separatists.

If this is not quite clear yet, don't feel bad. Ronald Reagan once referred to Puritan John Winthrop as “that old Pilgrim.”

George Herbert Walker Bush, who purportedly is a descendant of *Mayflower* passenger John Howland and thus could be expected to know better, gave a speech around this time of year in 1992 in which he said, “This Thanksgiving...let us renew the solemn commitment that John Winthrop and his fellow Pilgrims made more than 100 years ago.” Again, John Winthrop is not a Pilgrim, and furthermore he lived quite a bit longer than 100 years ago...by about 200 years! (I know, I know...technically speaking, he was correct; it was *more* than 100 years ago).

But enough cheap shots taken at ex-presidents...I am simply pointing out that this whole Pilgrim/Puritan thing can be confusing. (Are there any questions at this point?)

Well, fasten your seat belts, as this whole Puritan/Unitarian thing can be pretty confusing, too, especially when we throw in the Arminians.

Whether the Puritan settlers to America initially considered themselves still part of the Church of England or not, the fact was that the Church was now so distant that it was left to the settlers to come up with their own congregational structure, their own membership requirements, and their

own procedures for sacraments. The Pilgrims led the way in developing a Congregational form of church polity, or church structure, that bound the members together in covenant with God and to each other, and that placed the power to choose and ordain ministers, to choose officers, and to monitor membership in the hands of the congregation itself. This provided the roots (and name) of the Congregationalist churches, and eventually resulted in the form of polity that we Unitarian Universalists practice today. You can thank a Pilgrim for that...*and* a Puritan, come to think of it. Both communities practiced congregational polity.

Membership for the Puritans came to mean “a communion of saints,” made up of those who had been convicted of their sins and could testify to having experienced, at a definite time, the spirit of God working in their lives to manifest grace. This was not an absolutely certain sign of salvation, as only God could know who was among the elect, but it was enough of a sign to earn church membership. Members shared not only in the exclusive privileges of Communion and Baptism within the church, but also in political rights within the community, which were contingent upon church membership.

You see, though we often hear that the early European settlers to America came in search of freedom of religion, the freedom really only stretched as far as *their* religion, and certainly did not include any concept of freedom *from* religion. It reminds me of Garrison Keillor saying, "My people were Puritans who came to America in the late Seventeenth Century...in hopes of discovering greater restrictions than were permissible under English law."

The Puritans were, in some ways, fundamentalists in that they sought a separation from the world and the purification of Christianity in accordance with strict Biblical teachings. Still, life sometimes gets in the way of our most deeply-held principles and forces us to alter something that we thought was written in stone...this is what occurred for the Puritans.

It was a tricky thing to base membership on a personal experience of the spirit of God working a conversion in one's life. It worked well for the first generation, composed of people who had been forced to defend and nurture their faith under the various adversities of oppression and discrimination by the Church of England, had weathered a harrowing voyage to a new land, and had borne the struggles of building a new community. The very adversity they faced may have challenged them in such a way as to make them more receptive to feeling the full power of their faith in singular, intense moments.

The second generation, however—those born on American soil—were strangers to these types of struggles and found themselves being raised in a pretty stable and peaceful community. This

more placid environment, it appears, did not lend itself to the same type of religious fervor experienced by their parents, and though the children grew to live righteous lives, study the Bible, and give their full support to the church, they could not attest to *a particular* experience of the grace of God through Christ working its wonders in their lives. Unitarian historian, Conrad Wright, writes, “The Puritan experiment, which had thrived on adversity, was [now] threatened by political and economic success.” (pg. 12)

What to do now? These were children who had been baptized in the church, in anticipation of their full membership being recognized when they attested to a conversion experience. Now, not only was the membership of these adult children threatened, but what about the baptism of the children’s children? (Only members, remember, could have their children baptized in the church...)

Well, common sense swayed church leaders to find a way to keep these people in the church, while their idealism convinced them to hold on to their principle of full membership being a “communion of saints.” So they came up with what they called, appropriately enough, the “Halfway Covenant.” Parents could bring their children for baptism even though they were not *regenerate* (the term used for those who had experienced conversion). They had only to “own the covenant,” which meant that they affirmed their support of the church and the church order. This way, the church leaders felt that they could keep these “half-way-ers” within the influence of the church, increasing the likelihood of a recognizable conversion experience *sometime* within their lives.

This, however, is not quite how things worked out. It seems that many were quite satisfied with “half-way” membership, and did not worry themselves over the fact that they had not fully joined the rank of *regenerate* members who were allowed communion. One minister, Solomon Stoddard, challenged the exclusivity of even this last-remaining privilege of full membership, and invited the “half-way” members to come to the Lord’s Table also, hoping that the sacrament of Communion itself would inspire the personal experience of God’s grace which they lacked thus far.

Needless to say, this upheaval in the definition of a church member also had ramifications on the theological understanding of who was saved and how one could tell.

This was really not a new question: it simply exposed a tension that had always existed in the Calvinist theology that the Puritans professed to embrace. You see, in strict Calvinism, God has already chosen all of those who will be saved; it is in His hands; it is a foregone conclusion;

there's nothing that you or I can do about it (and, indeed, our reason and perceptions are so warped by the fact that we were born in sin, that we could not distinguish between good and evil and our corrupted will could not choose the good even if we wanted to). However, the seeming futility of this worldview hardly does much to inspire one to clean and virtuous living, right? How did the Puritans become so extremely disciplined and rigorous about their behavior with a theology that said all of their striving was in vain? I mean, what's the point?

Well, the Puritans skirted around this futility in an interesting way. Sure, they said, it is up to God who will be in Paradise. We can't know for sure who that will be. But it stands to reason that one of the signs of the elect would be that they live virtuous lives on Earth. They don't thereby *earn* their way to heaven, but they are doubtless displaying what God has already decided regarding their future salvation.

This way, they were able to retain their Calvinist theology, and yet give people impetus to live disciplined and holy lives. I may not know if I am saved, but if I live a sinful life, I know that I'm not. And as the Halfway Covenant was instituted, and conversion experiences became more history than present-day reality, the way that people lived became more important as a sign of salvation, practically speaking if not yet theologically.

There arose (as there was bound to arise) a backlash against the eased requirements of the Halfway Covenant and the perceived lukewarm intellectualism of the clergy in a movement called The Great Awakening that began in 1735. The Great Awakening was the movement of revival preachers, the ones who said that the way to salvation *was* through an identifiable experience of conversion, what might be termed "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," in which the new believers were grasped in the power of God, led to an intensity of emotion in the moment, swept up, transformed, saved. This *was* the mark of the elect and the ministers who suggested differently were slipping away from the truth.

It is at this time that the ministers we claim in our heritage, known sometimes as *Arminians*, ministers like Jonathan Mayhew who you heard in the reading, were challenged to speak out for what they believed. And it is interesting that these ministers, far from perceiving themselves as radical, were actually protecting and preserving the established tradition. They were the ministers of the churches of the Standing Order (that's what it was called, the Standing Order), meaning that these Congregationalist churches often held, if not exclusive, at least primary influence in their communities and were supported by taxes. So a good share of their problem with these preachers of the Great Awakening, outside of theology, was political, in that these were traveling preachers who were not shy about challenging the authority and doctrine of the

settled minister in any given community.

These early liberal ministers whom we claim in our heritage, these Arminians (a name taken from Jacob Arminius, who taught that humans *could* choose the good), these precursors to those whom we know as Unitarians, often blended free-thinking notions with seemingly reactionary sentiments. They disagreed with strict Calvinists and with the revivalist preachers of the Great Awakening, but they also argued against the heresies of the Deists who sought to explain all religion through natural means. They abhorred the sort of church/state occlusion that occurred in England, yet had no trouble with the public support of ministers through taxes in Massachusetts. They championed the use of reason in matters of religion, yet upheld the revelation of the Bible as an indispensable companion to human reason, and thus became tagged with the rather paradoxical title “supernatural rationalists.” They rejected the Trinity, yet curiously believed that Jesus held a unique place that was something more than just human.

And contrary to what we may prefer, they just might agree with some of the television evangelists who suggest that God causes natural disasters (as Charles Chauncey attributed the earthquake of 1755 that was felt from Philadelphia to Nova Scotia to the wrath of God) and they may side with the proponents of intelligent design in the current debate: (Jonathan Mayhew often pointed to the wonder and order of the natural world as proof of the existence of a loving Creator).

And yet, and this is why I find these ancestors of ours so fascinating and so inspiring, though they may seem extremely conservative now in some of their particular ideas, they courageously opened up amazing possibilities for us. People like Charles Chauncey and Jonathan Mayhew dared to assert against the fearful certainty of Calvinism that people are born with the capacity for both evil *and* good, and revived the Biblical teaching from the letter of James that faith without works is dead. They insisted, in the face of vehement opposition during the Great Awakening, that conversion, or the experience of the saving presence of God, may take many differing forms in the experiences of different people. It may be sudden, or gradual, or so subtle that it is recognized only in retrospect; and furthermore, when it happens, it is not made evident only through someone flailing about in the grip of emotion, but that it takes shape in the actions of people, the generosity, the hearts that have been opened to empathize with the pleasure and pain of others, and the minds that fashion ways to be of service in the world. They affirmed, against those in their midst who distrusted education and insisted that “Christians should be required to think alike upon religious subjects,” (pg. 234) that free inquiry is not a threat to God or religion or the church, but that it is vital to healthy spiritual lives and no less than God would expect. Recognizing that free inquiry would lead to inevitable differences of opinion, they also recognized the importance of welcoming and nurturing that diversity. In disagreement with

Calvinist Nathaneal Emmons, who insisted that there is no “prospect of success, in attempting to unite the professed friends of Christ in brotherly love, without first uniting them in the belief of the same essential doctrines of the gospel,” (pg. 235) David Barnes countered, “Let [people] be perfectly united in opinion, and, paradoxical as it may seem, in a short time they would have no religion at all.” (pg. 239)

So when we celebrate the words of Frances David of Transylvania in our hymnal, where he says, “We need not think alike to love alike,” we can also thank these Arminian ministers, like Charles Chauncey and Jonathan Mayhew, who held to their truth in the sometimes-rocky transformation of Puritanism to Congregationalism, and through Arminianism to an unseen Unitarianism; we can thank them for giving us a language from our own heritage that may be able to address and engage some of the debates raging within Christianity, that may allow us to legitimately challenge those who would claim Jesus as their sole property, and that may provide us with the words of solidarity with those voices who speak from the heart of Jesus’ teaching rather than the hell of his death or the histrionics of an imagined apocalypse; we can thank these Arminian ministers for though they could not, as we cannot, see into the future, they did their best to keep alive the hope and promise of greater light forthcoming; and they passed along, not only their own personal understandings, but the faith that profound understandings are developed within each individual that can be more valuable than all of the creeds of the ages.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we can cast a glance back in time, back into a portion of our history that is all-too-often overlooked, and say, simply, Thank you.

*\* An invaluable reference for this sermon was **The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America** by Conrad Wright, published by Starr King Press in 1955, Distributed by the Beacon Press. (All page numbers refer to this text).*