
John Winthrop Calls Massachusetts Bay Colony “a City upon a Hill”

Excerpted from “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630

John Winthrop (1588–1649), lawyer and leader of the 1630 migration of English Puritans to Massachusetts Bay Colony, delivered this famous lay sermon aboard the Arbella to settlers traveling to New England. Although it is possible to exaggerate the significance of this particular sermon, which remained unpublished for two centuries after Winthrop delivered it, it nonetheless provides a clear statement of the sense of special purpose that helped motivate the settlement of New England. The excerpt below comes from the end of the sermon, whose main theme was Christian charity. Winthrop began the sermon by noting the fact that: “GOD ALMIGHTY in his most holy and wise providence, has so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in submission.” The sermon thus began with an acceptance of social hierarchies. Non-standard spelling and punctuation have been modernized. —D. Voelker

It rests now to make some application of this discourse

1. For *the persons*. We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ, in which respect only though we were absent from each other many miles, and had our employments as far distant, yet we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of love, and live in the exercise of it, if we would have comfort of our being in Christ. . . .

2nly for the *work* we have in hand. It [our task] is by a mutual consent, through a special overvaluing providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the Churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation . . . under a due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, does bind us. For it is a true rule that particular Estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.

3ly The *end* is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord; the comfort and increase of the body of Christ, whereof we are members; that ourselves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world, to serve the Lord and work out our Salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.

4thly for the *means* whereby this must be effected. They are twofold, a conformity with the work and end we aim at. These we see are extraordinary, therefore we must not content ourselves with usual ordinary means. Whatsoever we did, or ought to have done, when we lived in England, the same must we do, and more also, where we go. That which the most in their churches maintain as truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice; as in this duty of love, we must love brotherly without dissimulation, we must love one another with a pure heart fervently. We must bear one another’s burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren. Neither must we think that the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as he does from those among whom we have lived. . . . When God gives a special commission he looks to have it strictly observed in every article. . .

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 has given us leave to draw our own articles. . . . If the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then has 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; be revenged of such a perjured 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 other's necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make other's 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. . . . 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, "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

Discussion Questions:

1. What goals did Winthrop state for the Massachusetts settlement in the first few paragraphs above?
2. What kind of relationship did Winthrop want Massachusetts to have with God, and how were his listeners to honor that relationship?
3. What did Winthrop mean when he said that New England would be "as a city upon a hill"?
4. What implications might Winthrop's vision have for liberty in Massachusetts society?

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