

John Winthrop on Founding New England, 1630¹

Although this document was not signed or dated, historians assume that Puritan leader John Winthrop wrote it during his 1630 voyage to New England on the Arabella or perhaps just before leaving England. Because he was on his way to serve as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he was particularly concerned about his colony's purpose. Most of the European accounts you have read so far have been from Catholics. Like John Eliot, Winthrop was a Protestant who believed in the importance of individual access to the Bible.

Christian Charity. A Model Hereof.

We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ. . . . For the work we have in hand, it is by a mutual consent through a special overruling providence, and a more than ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. . . .

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.

For the means whereby this must be effected, . . . 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 a 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,² 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 doth from those among whom we have lived, and that for 3 reasons:

1. In regard of the more near bond of marriage, between him and us, wherein he hath taken us to be his after a most strict and peculiar manner which will make him the more jealous of our love and obedience so he tells the people of Israel, you only have I known of all the families of the Earth therefore will I punish you for your transgressions.³

2. Because the lord will be sanctified in them that come near him. We know that there were many that corrupted the service of the Lord, some setting up altars before his own, others offering both strange fire and strange sacrifices also; yet there came no fire from heaven, or other sudden judgment upon them as did upon Nadab and Abihu who yet we may think did not sin presumptuously.⁴

3. When God gives a special commission he looks to have it strictly observed in every article. When he gave Saul a commission to destroy Amaleck he indented with him upon certain articles, and because he failed in one of the least, and that upon a fair pretence, it lost him the kingdom, which should have been his reward, if he had observed his commission.⁵ 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. . . . 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, 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,⁶ 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, our community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,⁷ 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,⁸ 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,⁹ 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 where we are going. . . . Beloved there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinance, and his laws, and the articles of our covenant with him that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship other Gods, our pleasures, and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good Land whither we pass over this vast Sea to possess it.¹⁰

Discussion Questions:

According to Winthrop, what were the reasons for founding New England?

How do these reasons compare to those from other accounts you have read?

Winthrop saw New Englanders as God's chosen people—what are the advantages and disadvantages of being a chosen people?

Do you think that believing they were God's chosen people helped or hurt the Puritans in their new home?

1 John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," from *Winthrop Papers* (Boston, 1931), 2: 282-95.

2 These phrases come from the Christian Bible: Romans 12:10, I Peter 1:22, and Galatians 6:2.

3 Amos 3:2.

4 Leviticus 10:1-2. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offered unholy fire.

5 I Samuel 15:1-29. God had commanded Saul to destroy Amalek and spare none of its men, women, children, or animals. Saul killed all but the king and a few animals, but God punished him for not following his command exactly.

6 Micah 6:8.

7 Ephesians 4:3.

8 Matthew 5:14.

9 Deuteronomy 28:37. Here, Winthrop seems to be adopting the role of Moses in Deuteronomy, leading the chosen people.

10 Deuteronomy 30:15-18.