

John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity"

New England's Puritans dissented not only from the Church of England, but from England's social and political order as well. Seeking alternatives to established institutions, they turned on the one hand to Scripture and on the other to their common experience for precedents. Of this extraordinarily learned and articulate group (the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century boasted more college graduates per capita than England itself), few gave more careful thought to the purposes of the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness" or to the proper foundations for the colony's institutions than, John Winthrop (1588-1649).

Winthrop was a representative of the new gentry that flourished under the Tudor regime. His grandfather, Adam Winthrop, was a country boy who went to London, made a fortune as a clothier, and then purchased a manor (one of the many properties seized by Henry VIII from the church). His son, also named Adam, trained as a lawyer, but spent his life farming and governing his estate in Suffolk. The habit of governing others came naturally to John Winthrop. After attending Trinity College, Cambridge for two years, he returned home, where he was appointed Justice of the Peace and, a few years later, steward -- in which capacity he acted as his father's chief financial and administrative officer.

Despite his privileged position, John Winthrop, like many other educated Englishmen of the period, became increasingly disenchanted with corrupt and oppressive Stuart monarchy. When Charles I decided in the spring of 1629 to rule without parliamentary consent, imprisoned Puritan parliamentary leaders, and banned Puritans from the practice of law, Winthrop decided to emigrate.

While en route to New England in 1630, on board the *Arabella*, Winthrop wrote an essay on charity (which he presumably preached as a sermon) which sought to apply scriptural virtues to the peculiar circumstances and challenges the colonists would face in creating their new social and political order. A number of themes which become central to American philanthropic traditions are first articulated here: 1) efforts to reconcile the problem of spiritual and political equality with economic inequality; 2) concerns about the relations between the good of individuals and the good of the community; 3) the conception of community as a voluntary -- contractual -- bond between individuals; 4) a focus on the particular obligations of the rich towards the poor; 4) the conception of mission as the basis for formulating specific institutional goals and objectives.

It is important to note that Winthrop does not mention private institutions: he, like many Puritans, rejected the idea of endowed institutions because of their association with Stuart corruption. For him, charity retains an interpersonal rather than an institutional emphasis. Further, he assumes that the work of society will be done by public institutions of church and State. Notably, Winthrop did not suggest that charity should extend beyond the covenanted group of believers. The notion of universal benevolence would have to wait until a more enlightened age.

A Modell of Christian Charity

Written

On board the Arrabella,

On the Atlantic Ocean.

By the Honorable JOHN WINTHROP Esquire.

In his passage, (with a great Company of Religious People, of which Christian Tribes he was the Brave Leader and famous Governor;) from the Island of Great Brittain, to New England in North America. Anno 1630.

God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the Condition of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjection.

THE REASON HEREOF.

1. Reas: *First*, to hold conformity with the rest of his works, being delighted to shewe forth the glory of his wisdome in the variety and difference of the Creatures and the glory of his power, in ordering all these differences for the preservacion and good of the whole, and the glory of his greatnes that as it is the glory of princes to have many officers, soe this great King will have many Stewards counting himselfe more honored in dispenceing his gifts to man by man, than if he did it by his owne immediate hand.
2. Reas: *Secondly*, That he might have the more occasion to manifest the work of his Spirit: first, upon the wicked in moderateing and restraineing them; so that the

riche and mighty should not eate upp the poore, mor the poore, and dispised rise up against their superiours, and shake off their yoake; 2ly in the regenerate in exerciseing his graces in them, as in the greate ones, their love mercy, gentlenes, temperance etc., in the poore and inferior sorte, their faithe patience, obedience, etc.

3. Reas: *Thirdly*, That every man might have need of other, and from thence they might all be knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion. . . .

The deffinition which the Scripture gives us of love is this Love is the bond of perfection. First, it is a bond, or ligament. 2ly, it makes the worke perfect. There is no body but consistes of partes and that which knitts these partes together gives the body its perfeccion, because it makes eache parte soe continguous to other as thereby doe mutually participate with eache other, both in strengthe and infirmity in pleasure and paine, to instance in the most perfect of all bodies, Christ and his church make one body: the severall partes of this body considered aparte before they were united were as disproportionate and as much disordering as so many contrary quallities or elements but when christ comes and by his spirit and love knitts all these partes to himselfe and each to other, it is become the most perfect and best proportioned body in the world. . . .

Herein are 4 things to be propounded: first the persons, 2ly, the worke, 3ly, the end, 4ly, the meanes.

1. For the persons, wee are a Company professiong our selves fellow members of Christ. In which respect onely though wee were absent from eache other many miles, and had our employmentes as farre distant, yet wee ought to account ourselves knitt toether by this bond of love, and live in the

exercise of it, if wee would have the comferte of our being in Christ. . . .

2ly. for the worke wee have in hand, it is by mutuall consent through a speciall overruleing providence, and amore then an ordinary approbation of the Churches of Christ to seeke out a place of Cohabitation and Consorteshipp under a due forme of Government both civall and ecclesiasticall. In such cases as this the care of the publique must oversway all private respects, by which not onely conscience, but meare Civil pollicy doth binde us; for it is a true rule that perticuler estates cannott subsist in the ruine of the publique.

3ly. The end is to improve our lives to doe more service to the Lord the comferte and encrease of the body of christe whereof wee are members that our selves and posterity may be the better preserved from the Common corrupcions of this evill world to serve the Lord and worke out our Salvacion under the power and purity of his holy Ordinances.

4ly. for the meanes whereby this must be effected, they are 2fold, a Conformity with the worke and end we aim at, these wee see are extraordinary, therefore wee must not content our selves with usuall ordinary meanes whatsoever wee did or ought to have done when wee lived in England, the same must we doe and more allsoe where we goe. . . .

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. . . wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, we must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluties, for the supply of others necessities, we must uphold a familiar

Commerce together in meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our owne rejoyce together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke. . . . for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, we shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whether we are going. . . .

Source: Edmund S. Morgan, ed., The Founding of Massachusetts: Historians and the Sources (Indianapolis, 1964).

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