

# America's Christian Rulers: John Winthrop

--from "John Winthrop" website

Long before becoming the governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop had a deep understanding of God's divine purposes for the colony. "We shall be a city set on a hill," he said of Boston - where the church was the center of life during those early years of the city's history.

\* Mt.5.14; compare Is.2.2-4

While en route to the New World on board the Arbella, Winthrop wrote a sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Charity," in which he outlined the purposes of God for New England. He described a harmonious Christian community whose laws and government would logically proceed from a godly and purposeful arrangement.

John Winthrop recognized the plans and purposes that Jesus Christ had for our nation. "A New Order of the Ages" was to be set up in which the individual was free to act and choose according to his free will; yet be dedicated to a lawful social order.

But Winthrop also gave a warning: "The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause us to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."

These and many other ideas are contained in "A Model of Christian Charity" a sermon which Winthrop delivered somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on the Arbella. He set out clearly the revealed purposes of God and warned that the success or failure of their endeavors would depend on their dedication to the ideal of selfless community.

History shows us that this ideal was never realized. However, Winthrop himself was a man of unquestionable integrity and deep humanity. He laid the foundation for generations yet to come. God Himself will shortly raise up a new generation of young people who will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

JOHN WINTHROP (1588-1649)

was an English lawyer, laypreacher, & statesman (designer-governor of Mass. Bay Colony ["Boston"]).

For the send-off of his fleet (4 ships, then 7) in 1630, the sermon was preached by John Cotton, dean of Cambridge U.'s most Puritan college, who three years later emigrated to Boston, where he was the founding fathers's leading theologian.

Cotton's grandson, Cotton Mather, followed his father, Increase (pres. of Harvard), in fighting against changes in "The New England Way."

Forced by the Crown, the most significant political change was the shift from church membership to property-owning as the basis of suffrage. The next year became infamous for the Salem witch-trials, which ended when the clergy asked the magistracy to cease & desist (1692).

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Named after John Winthrop, Boston's Winthrop Club is America's oldest regularly-meeting (for mutual education/inspiration/encouragement) clergy association. Addressing it, I used the Scrooby/Mayflower desk lectern-pulpit.

Refused the White House as locus for their readings, some anti-war poets read instead (a few days ago, on PBS) in a VT church, whose pastor began the evening by reading portions of the 1630 "city set on a hill" sermon of Mass.'s first governor. Spelling out his vision of a "novum ordo seclorum" (a "new-order-of-the-ages" commonwealth built on Christian love), he preached (aboard his flagship "Arbela") what was to become the second Founding Document of America (the Mayflower Compact being the first). King Chas.I was glad to be rid of him & the 379 with him (on 11 ships: those Puritans were an irritation to him, & 19 years later Cromwell's Puritians beheaded him....Founding Boston, J.W. was Church of England; but he soon surrendered prelacy/episcopacy & became "Independent," as was Plymouth (each church self-ruled, including local-church ordination). But neither the Plymouth Colony nor the Mass. Bay Colony was "Separatist" (bitter-rejectionist), & the two merged in 1691. In 1635, the "Independents" of Boston exiled Roger Williams, the event beginning the Congregational/Baptist split; & two years later, Anne Hutchinson, for claiming to be Spirit-led & insubordinate to the church/state God-ordered "commonwealth."

*Christian Charitie.  
A Modell Hereof.*

God Almightye in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion.

*The Reason Hereof.*

I. Reas: *First*, to hold conformity with the rest of his workes, being delighted to shewe forth the glory of his wisdom in the variety and difference of the Creatures and the glory of his power, in ordering all these differences for the preservation 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 honoured in dispenccing his guifts to man by man, then if hee did it by his owne immediate hand.

While "A Modell of Christian Charity" is usually printed only in part, the whole is so worth study that here it is,

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2. Reas: *Secondly*, That he might have the more occasion to manifest the worke of his Spirit: first, upon the wicked in moderating and restraining them: soe that the riche and mighty should not eate upp the poore, nor the poore, and dispised rise upp against their superiours, and shake off their yoke; 2ly in the regenerate in exercising his graces in them, as in the greater ones, their love mercy, gentleness, temperance etc., in the poore and inferior sorte, their faith patience, obedience etc:

3. Reas: *Thirdly*, That every man might have need of other, and from hence they might be all knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affection: from hence it appeares plainly that noe man is made more honourable then another or more wealthy etc., out of any perticular and singuler respect to himselfe but for the glory of his Creator and the Common good of the Creature, Man; Therefore God still reserves the property of these gifts to himselfe as Ezek: 16. 17. he there calls wealth his gold and his silver etc. Prov: 3. 9. he claimes their service as his due honour the Lord with thy riches etc. All men being thus (by divine providence) ranked into two sortes, riche and poore; under the first, are comprehended all such as are able to live comfortably by their owne means duely improved; and all others are poore according to the former distribution. There are two rules whereby wee are to walke one towards another: JUSTICE and MERCY. These are allwayes distinguished in their Act and in their object, yet may they both concur in the same Subject in each respect; as sometimes there may be an occasion of shewing mercy to a rich man, in some sudden danger of distresse, and allsoe doing of meere Justice to a poor man in regard of some perticular contract etc. There is likewise a double Lawe by which wee are regulated in our conversation one towards another: in both the former respects, the lawe of nature and the lawe of grace, or the morrall lawe or the lawe of the gospell, to omit the rule of Justice as not properly belonging to this purpose otherwise then it may fall into consideration in some perticular Cases: By the first of these lawes man as he was enabled soe withall [is] commaunded to love his neighbour as himselfe upon this ground stands all the precepts of the morrall lawe, which concernes our dealings with men. To apply this to the works of mercy this lawe requires two things first that every man afford his help to another in every want or distresse Secondly, That hee performe this out of the same affection, which makes him carefull of his owne good according to that of our Saviour Math: [7.12] Whatsoever ye would that men should doe to you. This was practised by Abraham and Lott in entertaineing the Angells and the old man of Gibeon.

The Lawe of Grace or the Gospell hath some difference from the former as in these respectes first the lawe of nature was given to man in the estate of innocency; this of the gospell in the estate of regeneracy: 2ly, the former propounds one man to another, as the same fleshe and Image of god, this as a brother in Christ allsoe, and in the Communion of the same spirit and soe teacheth us to put a difference betweene Christians and

others. Doe good to all especially to the household of faith; upon this ground the Israelites were to putt a difference betweene the brethren of such as were strangers though not of the Canaanites. 3ly. The Lawe of nature could give noe rules for dealing with enemies for all are to be considered as freinds in the estate of innocency, but the Gospell commaunds love to an enemy. proove. If thine Enemy hunger feede him; Love your Enemies doe good to them that hate you Math: 5. 44.

This Lawe of the Gospell propoundes likewise a difference of seasons and occasions there is a time when a christian must sell all and give to the poore as they did in the Apostles times. There is a tyme allsoe when a christian (though they give not all yet) must give beyond their ability, as they of Macedonia. Cor: 2. 6. likewise community of perills calls for extraordinary liberallity and soe doth Community in some speciall service for the Church. Lastly, when there is noe other meanes whereby our Christian brother may be releived in this distresse, wee must help him beyond our ability, rather then tempt God, in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary meanes. . . .

It rests now to make some application of this discourse by the present designe which gave the occasion of writing of it. 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 professing our selves fellow members of Christ, In which respect onely though wee were absent from each other many miles, and had our employments as farre distant, yet wee ought to account our selves knitt together by this bond of love, and live in the exercise of it, if wee would have comforte of our being in Christ, . . .

2ly. for the worke wee have in hand, it is by a mutuall consent through a speciall overruling providence, and a more 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 civill and ecclesiasticall. In such cases as this the care of the publique must oversway all private respects, by which not onely conscience, but meere Civill pollicy doth binde us; for it is a true rule that perticular estates cannot subsist in the ruine of the publique.

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

4ly for the meanes whereby this must bee effected, they are 2fold, a Conformity with the worke and end wee aime 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 Eng-

land, the same must wee doe and more allsoe where wee goe: That which the most in theire Churches maineteine as a trueth in profession onely, wee must bring into familiar and constant practise, as in this duty of love wee must love brotherly without dissimulation, wee must love one another with a pure hearte fervently wee must beare one anothers burthens, wee must not looke onely on our owne things, but allsoe on the things of our brethren, neither must wee think that the lord will beare with such faileings at our hands as hee dothe from those among whome wee have lived, and that for 3 Reasons.

1. In regard of the more neare bond of mariage, betweene him and us, wherein he hath taken us to be his after a most strickt and peculiar manner which will make him the more Jealous of our love and obedience soe he tells the people of Israell, you onely have I knowne of all the families of the Earthe therefore will I punishe you for your Transgressions.

2ly, because the lord will be sanctified in them that come neare him. Wee know that there were many that corrupted the service of the Lord some setting upp Alters before his owne, others offering both strange fire and strange Sacrifices allsoe; yet there came noe fire from heaven, or other sudden Judgement upon them as did upon Nadab and Abihu whoe yet wee may thinke did not sinne presumptuously.

3ly When God gives a speciall Commission he lookes to have it strictly observed in every Article, when hee gave Saule a Commission to destroy Amaleck hee indented with him upon certaine Articles and because hee failed in one of the least, and that upon a faire pretence, it lost him the kingdome, which should have beene his reward, if hee had observed his Commission: Thus stands the cause betweene God and us, wee are entered into Covenant with him for this worke, wee have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to drawe our owne Articles wee have professed to enterprise these Accions upon these and these ends, wee have hereupon besought him of favour and blessing: Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire, then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, [and] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it, but if wee shall neglect the observacion of these Articles which are the ends wee have propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions, seekeing greate things for our selves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us be revenged of such a periured people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant.

Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God, for this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affection, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities,

for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in eache other, make others Condictions our owne reioyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes, soe that we shall see much more of his wisdom power goodnes and trueth then formerly wee have beene acquainted with, wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City 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, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; we shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Cursses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are goeing: And to shutt upp this discourse with that exhortacion of Moses that faithfull servant of the Lord in his last farewell to Israell Deut. 30. Beloved there is now sett before us life, and good, deathe and evill in that wee are Commaunded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplyed, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee goe to possesse it: But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worshipp [*serve cancelled*] other Gods our pleasures, and proffitts, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whether wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it;

Therefore lett us choose life,  
that wee, and our Seede,  
may live; by obeyeing his  
voyce, and cleaveing to him,  
for hee is our life, and  
our prosperity.

SOURCE: John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Winthrop Papers*, 1623-1630, II (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 1931), 282-4, 292-5.

Here, with spelling and punctuation modernized, is the part of the sermon appearing on pp197-198 of Perry Miller and T.H.Johnson of THE PURITANS: A SOURCEBOOK OF THEIR WRITINGS (Harper & Row, 1963):

### *A Modell of Christian Charity, 1630*

*John Winthrop was a lawyer and layman, not a minister. But the Puritans believed all, pastors and people, to be of one spiritual estate. All of those persons elected or chosen by God to be his forever were equally responsible before God, equally called by him to worthy service in the world. So this layman composed a sermon aboard the ship that brought him to Massachusetts, a sermon that set down characteristic features of "the Puritan mind" and "the New England way." The concluding sentiments concerning the covenant made between God and his people are particularly noteworthy.*

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 exercise of it. . . .

2. 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. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which not only conscience, but mere Civil policy doth bind us. For it is a rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.

3. 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.

4. 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 Church) 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; 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. . . .

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. We have professed to enterprise these Actions upon these and these ends [and] we have hereupon besought him of favor and blessing. 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 observance 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 [and] be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a Covenant.

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