

The Pilgrims' Religion: Congregationalism and Its Impact on America

[Note: This 5- to 10-minute speech is suitable for delivering verbatim. However, you are encouraged to read it before delivering it; make any edits or modifications that will suit the audience, the occasion, and your own style and manner of speech; and time your own, so you will know that you will fit in the time allotted.]

Thank you, Mr./Ms. _____. It's wonderful to have the opportunity to address the _____ today.

What does the word "Puritan" mean to you? In 1620 a small group of Puritan men, women, and children whom we now call "The Pilgrims" landed in Massachusetts. They sailed from England to make a new life for themselves in a place beyond the convenient reach of His Majesty's state church. Those Pilgrims impacted the subsequent life of the United States of America out of all proportion to their numbers because they were among the earliest to arrive, and their unique approach to their church life offered a workable pattern for self-government. These Pilgrims were also the leading edge of the great Puritan migration to America whose religious and political beliefs defined New England, which is where the American Revolution began.

They built a Colony they called Plymouth. It is now the Four Hundredth Anniversary of their arrival. In this year of anniversary, you may hear many things about the Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers, but we who share their Congregational

Christian convictions today see the main point of this anniversary as an occasion to celebrate the distinctive form of church life that they brought to America in 1620.

Upon their arrival the Pilgrims drafted the Mayflower Compact, the first document to establish a civil government on American soil in the absence of royal authority. The significance of that event is that the Pilgrims modeled their civil government on their congregational form of church government *in which the membership controlled the decision making process*. Congregational self-governance—the autonomy of the local church—was a revolution in itself. When transplanted to the American colonies, it became one seed of that broader American Revolution that gave us our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our whole system of democratic self-government.

The defining features of our Federal government that we take for granted—democracy; freedom of speech; a system of checks and balances to keep any one part of the government from becoming oppressive—are not easy or obvious governing principles. As political ideas they were controversial, and untested. The battles over them were bitter and hard fought during both the American Revolution and the Constitutional Convention.

One of the reasons we have a set of political institutions governed by agreed-upon rules is because during the English Reformation, a few brave souls, at great risk to themselves, dared to challenge the Church authorities. They dared to say,

“We can run the affairs of our local church ourselves. God in Holy Scripture has given us the authority to do that. ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matthew 18:20).”

So although we now have separation of church and state, it was the self-governed local Congregational churches that showed the way for citizens to take on themselves the mantle of government. And they did that not in order to establish civil government, but rather as a by-product of advancing their primary purpose for coming to America: freeing themselves from autocratic Church authorities so that they might better *discern and do the will of God according to their own conscience*.

As we celebrate the arrival of the first Congregationalist settlers on the shores of New England four hundred years ago in search of religious freedom for themselves, we must also remember that they brought with them the concept of responsible citizenship in a participatory form of government. That is something for which all Americans, religious or otherwise, can give thanks.

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