

# John Winthrop

## A Modell of Christian Charity (1630)

### [Abridged]

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Historical Background: When King Charles I began persecuting Puritans, John Winthrop, with the Massachusetts Bay Company, helped to found the second major Puritan settlement in North America, after the Plymouth colony. In 1630, he traveled with hundreds of people in a fleet of ships, carrying the charter to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Winthrop was an English Puritan, from a wealthy family, and trained in law. He became the first Governor of the colony, and served twelve annual terms. As his ship, the *Arabella*, sailed across the Atlantic, he composed a sermon, and delivered it to those aboard. The sermon described his hopes, as a Puritan, of creating a model community, free of the corruption the Puritans felt was plaguing the Anglican Church and English society as a whole. He articulated a structured hierarchy, admonishing the new colonists that success in the dangerous endeavor was dependent upon obedience to what he proposed was the plan of "God Almighty." During the 1630s, more than 20,000 Puritans migrated to the New England area, and Winthrop's sermon remained an influential guide for their society.

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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....

**John Winthrop,  
"What Warrant Have We to Take That Land?"  
England, 1629**

*John Winthrop (1588-1649), lawyer and leader of the 1630 migration of English Puritans to Massachusetts Bay Colony, penned a brief document in 1629 that answered several objections to the project. In the passage below, he drew on the Bible to justify settling land that was already occupied by other "sons of Adam." Earlier in the text, he had asserted that "The whole earth is the Lord's garden and he hath given it to the sons of Adam to be tilled and improved by them." The argument below reflects this understanding of the proper relationship between humans and the land. Non-standard spellings have been modernized. --D. Voelker*

Obj. 5. But what warrant have we to take that land, which is and hath been of long time possessed of others the sons of Adam?

Ans. That which is common to all is proper to none. This savage people ruleth over many lands without title or property; for they enclose no ground, neither have they cattle to maintain it, but remove their dwellings as they have occasion, or as they can prevail against their neighbors. And why may not Christians have liberty to go and dwell amongst them in their wastelands and woods (leaving them such places as they have manured for their corn) as lawfully as Abraham did among the Sodomites? For God hath given to the sons of men a twofold right to the earth; there is a natural right and a civil right. The first right was natural when men held the earth in common, every man sowing and feeding where he pleased: Then, as men and cattle increased, they appropriated some parcels of ground by enclosing and peculiar manurance, and this in time got them a civil right. Such was the right which Ephron the Hittite had to the field of Machpelah, wherein Abraham could not bury a dead corpse without leave, though for the out parts of the country which lay common, he [Abraham] dwelt upon them and took the fruit of them at his pleasure. This appears also in Jacob and his sons, who fed their flocks as boldly in the Canaanites' land, for he [Jacob] is said to be lord of the country; and at Dotham and all other places [where] men accounted nothing their own, but that which they had appropriated by their own industry, as appears plainly by Abimelech's servants, who in their own country did often contend with Isaac's servants about wells which they had digged; but never about the lands which they occupied. So likewise between Jacob and Laban; he would not take a kid of Laban's without special contract; but he makes no bargain with him for the land where he fed. . . .

2dly, There is more than enough for them and us.

3dly, God hath consumed the natives with a miraculous plague, whereby the greater part of the country is left void of inhabitants.

4thly, We shall come in with good leave of the natives.

Source: John Winthrop, "General Considerations for the Plantations in New England, with an Answer to Several Objections," *Winthrop Papers*, vol. II (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), p. 120.