Christianity in the Americas and World Evangelization
The Seventeenth Century

Outline: Consider the presence of Christianity in the Americas; Puritans and dissenters in the Americas, and the big picture of God's glory among all nations.

I. Christianity in the Americas

Noah (Gen 7:13, 9:18)

Eight persons went into the ark before the flood. Except for these, all humanity died during the flood (Gen 7:21-24). Consequently, it was only the offspring of Noah that repopulated the earth after the great deluge.

Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9)

Noah's children were having an absolute field day until they decided amongst themselves to build a tower with its top in the heavens (Gen 11;3). Their problem was not that they desired to build tall buildings, it was their idolatry and shameless worship of themselves. They wanted to "make a name for [themselves]" (Gen 11:4).

So, the Lord confused their language, "so that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen 11:7). Not only this but the Lord also "dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (Gen 11:8).

Therefore, it was the descendants of Adam and Eve and particularly the offspring of Noah who repopulated the face of all the earth, including the Americas. It is presumed that these offspring traversed northeast through what is now Siberia and ultimately crossed the Bering Strait into what is now the Americas. These people then worked their way south and constitute what we call native americans.

The Americas in the Biblical Timeline

While the events of the Old Testament were unfolding in the Near East, the Americas were being filled with people from north to south. The nation of Israel was to communicate the saving grace of God to the nations through their holiness but those who wandered off to the Americas were far from that light.

Aztec and Inca Empires (1300s-1500s)

Eventually, great civilizations like the Aztecs and Inca emerged in central and south America that "possessed advanced cultures and evidenced architectural, engineering, agricultural, and communication skills. However, they did engage in ruthless and cruel tactics in conquering and subduing other native groups."[1] For hundreds of years the offspring of Noah lived and died in spiritual darkness.

Columbus arrives on the Scene (1492)

In 1492,... With Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Americas a new period of European exploration began in the New World. While Nordic and even Chinese explorers had likely strolled the shores of the continent prior to Columbus, it was his expeditions and the political timing that kicked off an age of European exploration of the Americas.

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[1]John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 283.

Woodbridge and James write about the complex motivations of European powers to explore, evangelize, and cultivate the New World:

> "The exploration of the non-European world seemed to indicate that greatly enhanced political and economic power in Europe might reside with the nation that laid claim to or acquired vast lands in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. A number of explorers sincerely professed a desire to see the peoples of these areas 'converted' to the Christian faith. Indeed, explorers and missionaries were on occasion one and the same persons. Their missionary efforts sometimes cost them their lives."[2]

The death of friar minor Juan de Padilla. So it was that in 1544, in what would now be the state of Kansas, a Roman Catholic friar minor named Juan de Padilla was killed by native americans. The circumstances of his death are murky but it was clear that his presence in the Americas was on behalf of the Roman church and their evangelization efforts.

The presence of European powers often did more harm to the native populations of this time than good. Huge numbers of native americans died from European diseases, steel, and political coups. The light of the gospel may have begun to shine in the New World but it was almost continually obscured by dark clouds of sin and theological error.

Sir Francis Drake at Pt. Reyes (1579)

In 1579 the first Anglican worship service to be conducted in the New World was led by Francis Fletcher likely near Drake's beach at Pt. Reyes—a special request by Sir Francis Drake's on his voyage to circumnavigate the globe.[3] These glimmers of truth's light were quickly extinguished like a candle in the wind. A greater dawn awaited the Americas.

II. Puritans and Dissenters in the Americas

Puritans and Pilgrims

Puritans in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded in 1628 by a royal charter from the King of England. The settlers of these colonies—what would become Salem and Boston—were Puritans. "Although repelled by many of its features, they did not mean to separate from the Anglican Church. Moreover, although animated strongly by a religious motive, theirs was primarily a commercial colony."[4]

The Puritans in Massachusetts operated their colonies as a theocracy. That is, they desired to have a unity between church and state as they had in England. This meant a strict enforcement of religious law by the government. Those who disagreed with the theological views of the governing authorities were not long tolerated.

Congregationalists in Plymouth. In contrast to the loyalty of the Puritans to the Church of England, a colony founded by Separatists existed a few miles to the South. In 1620, the first permanent English colony in New England was established at Plymouth. "The Pilgrims at

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[2]Woodbridge and James, 293.

[3]Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 283.

[4]Morton Dexter, "Congregationalists", in Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 234.

Plymouth… were Separatists. They had given up hope of reform within the Church of England, and they had begun a reform and had set up a church for themselves, 'without tarrying for any.' They were not Presbyterians, but Independents. They abjured altogether the theory of a national church."[5]

These Independents were distinct from the Puritans who desired to remain within the Church of England. They did not want to be compelled to be a part of any particular church or denomination. Rather, they desired a greater liberty of conscience to decide what their religious practice would be.

Augustus Strong contrasts the different impulses of Puritans and the Pilgrims, "The Puritan desired not only to walk in the right way himself, but to compel other men to walk in it also; the Pilgrim held in theory, and for a time at least, that religion was a voluntary matter, and that the State must do nothing but protect the Church against violence."[6]

The Dissenters

Roger Williams (1603-1683). For a while, New England's religious tolerance remained largely untested. That is, they were such a homogenous group that their patience was yet to be examined by those who would push the boundaries. An opportunity for this examination eventually came in the form of a man named Roger Williams (ca. 1603-1683).

Early life and immigration. Roger Williams was born in London in 1603 or 1604 and became a Puritan during his studies for the Anglican Ministry at Cambridge. However, because of the heavy hand of William Laud in England, he looked for greater liberty in the Americas.[7] "In 1630, he and his wife Mary Barnard, the daughter of a Puritan minister, sailed from Bristol, England, to Massachusetts, landing there on February 5, 1631."[8]

To quote extensively from Chute, Finn, and Haykin:

> During the voyage, Williams had time to conduct an intensive study of New Testament church polity, and he came to the conviction that the Puritans ought to be separate entirely from the established church in England…
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> When Williams arrived in New England, he was almost immediately invited to preach. But he found that the church in Boston was what he called "an unseparated church," he said he could not lead worship there. He was convinced that the presence of the unregenerate in church meetings polluted their worship. In William's thinking, the unregenerate had no more right to hear sermons than to receive the Lord's Supper. He was also deeply persuaded that the magistrate may not punish any breach of the first four of the Ten Commandments, namely, false worship, idolatry, blasphemy, and Sabbath breaking. He was certain every individual should be free to follow his own convictions in religious matters, for, in his own words, "forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God."[9]

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[5]Augustus H. Strong, *State and Church in 1492 and in 1892* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892), 35.

[6]Strong, 35.

[7]A.H. Newman, "Williams, Roger" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* ed. Jackson, (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 369.

[8]Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: Second Edition* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025), 64-65.

[9]Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 65.

Plymouth. From Boston he left to pastor the church at Plymouth which he did for two years. While there he spent much time among the Indians, his "soul's desire" being "to do the natives good." "God was pleased to give me a painful, patient spirit, to lodge with them in their filthy, smoky holes … to gain their tongue."[10]

Deportation. However, his missionary efforts were thwarted by his own divisive opinions. Not being able to keep the peace with those in Plymouth he moved to Salem. It wasn't long before a dispute over the charter of the colony and the rights to land that had him packing his bags yet again. Chute, Finn, and Haykin observe:

> In October 1635, the magistrates ordered him to be deported back to England… His radical tenets, including complete separation of church and state and absolute voluntarism in matters of religion, and his refusal to have communion with any who gave countenance or support to the existing order, made his banishment seem necessary to the leaders of Massachusetts.

Escape and Providence. However, before he could be apprehended and deported back to England, Williams escaped into the wilderness with the help of his native friends and—over the course of fourteen weeks—made his way West to found a new colony.[11] This new Colony, named Providence, would champion religious liberty by espousing a complete separation between church and state. Williams welcomed others who dissented with the Church of England as well as Quakers, Jews, and Baptists.

Baptist convictions. In 1638, Williams was persuaded that the baptism of believers was the correct mode to receive the ordinance. As such, he and several others formed the first baptist church in the Americas—First Baptist Church of Providence.

Theological wanderer. However, he only stayed with the congregation for several months after believing that the ordinance of communion had been lost with the apostles. It seems that Williams was never content with the churches that he led or the doctrine that they professed to believe. Consequently, he styled himself as a "Seeker", "always deeply religious and active in the propagation of Christian truth, yet not feeling satisfied that any body of Christians had all of the marks of the true Church."[12]

For the remainder of his life Williams supported the interests of the colony, attained an official charter for it from the British government, and argued extensively for freedom of conscience by writing and publishing popular pamphlets. He died in Providence in 1684.

Why Baptists?

Theological cousins. We might not have the same name as the Baptists but we have inherited many of their ideas. They're like our theological cousins. For example, consider these three pillars of their core convictions that we share: believer's baptism, regenerate church membership, and local church autonomy.

Believer's baptism. First, we both share the conviction that baptism is to be received by those who have made a profession of faith in Christ. It is a visible depiction of what God has done in the believer through the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

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[10]Newman, 369.
[11]Newman, 369.
[12]Newman, 370.

The Particular Baptists held this to be a central tenet of their beliefs in contradistinction from the Anglican milieu in which they lived. In fact, it was so vital to their convictions that it is the name by which they became known: the Baptists.

For us too, the affirmation of the baptism of believers is essential to how we understand the church. However, our context is significantly different than the early Baptists. They stuck out like a sore thumb, we fit in like… a normal thumb. This is in part due to the propagation of Baptists and their beliefs in the West in the centuries preceding us.

Regenerate church membership. Second, both the Particular Baptists and us believe in a concept called regenerate church membership. This goes hand-in-hand with believer's baptism and means that the visible church is composed of those who have made a profession of faith in Christ.

Local church autonomy. Third, we both affirm that each local church should be autonomous under the lordship of Jesus Christ. That is, there shouldn't be a board or hierarchy of people who exercise authority over churches in a given area. That is, the Particular Baptists did not want to participate in a system like the Anglican, Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic sects that have archbishops, synods, or cardinals and popes.

Instead, each church is equipped with elders and deacons as described in the New Testament. These men exercise oversight in the local church under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Lord Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean that there are not loving, accountable relationships among like-minded churches in a given geographical area. However, it does mean that there is no pope or archbishop who holds authority over a given geographical area or sect.

Since we share so much with this group and have received much from the fruit of their labors and persecutions, we ought to know their story. However, better still is to keep in view the big picture of God's purpose for all of Creation, America and her colonies included.

III. The Big Picture

What is the ultimate goal of the church? Worship is.[13] Consider the following passages:

- **Psalm 67**
- **Psalm 96**
- **Isaiah 61:11** "For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations."
- **Revelation 5:9-14**

What is the scope of the worship that God is to receive? The scope is the entire earth. Specifically, those from all nations.

- **Matthew 28:19-20**
- **Genesis 12:1-3**

God is to receive praise from every nation—*panta ta ethnē*. God has appointed that some from every ethnic group on the face of the earth will praise him. As the multitude in

[13]John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 3.

Revelation declare, “worthy are you… for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation…” (Rev 5:9).

Why should the nations be evangelized? For the glory of God out of a heart of love for him and the lost.

- **Romans 3:19**
- **Ephesians 2:1-4**

The Americas. At this point in our history, the Puritans, Separatists, and Baptists had all established a foothold in the Americas. However, they had yet to focus their energies beyond themselves to broadly consider their obligation to proclaim the glory of God to the nations that surrounded them.

These continents which had for millenia lived in the domain of darkness were suddenly assailed by the light. But it would be a while longer before missionaries would be sent to proclaim the riches of Christ to those who were sitting in darkness (Lk 1:77-79). Parts of that great missionary effort both in the Americas, Asia, and Africa will be considered in the following weeks.

Application. In the meantime, who do you know who doesn’t know the truth of Christ. Perhaps, who has never heard the gospel before? They may be just as in the dark as those who lived on the American continent were before they were introduced to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

I challenge you this week to pray for someone you know who doesn’t know the gospel. I challenge you not only to pray for them, but to pray that God would give you an opportunity to proclaim Christ to them, and, if no such opportunity presents itself, that you would have courage to make an opportunity to proclaim the gospel.