Prayer
Scripture: Ezra 8:21
Hymn: 364 "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come"

One of the largest and most influential churches of the American colonies was the Congregational Church of New England that developed out of the Pilgrim settlement at Plymouth and the Puritan settlement at Salem. The Pilgrims of Plymouth were representatives of the Separatist Puritans of England. The Puritans of Salem were Non-Separatist Puritans from England. They were joined by other Non-Separatists settlements to form the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Plymouth Colony and the Massachusetts Bay Colony were joined by the Connecticut Colony centered in Hartford and by the New Haven Colony. Each of these four New England Colonies was organized and developed around a covenant that the members of the colony made with each other and with God. The members of the colonies considered the English people an "Elect Nation" and their church the true church carrying out God's plans for his church in these latter times. In the New World all these colonies moved in a Separatist direction. For two centuries from their founding their Puritanism dominated New England. It was in New England that Puritanism had an opportunity to mature and reach its fullest development. The churches of the Puritan colonies developed into the Congregational Church.

THE ENGLISH BACKGROUND

Almost from the beginning of the Reformation in England under King Henry VIII there were those who wanted a more thoroughgoing reform than the one being conducted by the king. The Reform under King Edward VI was more to their liking. Many of the English Reformers fled to the continent under Queen Mary. They were welcomed by Calvin in Geneva and came to admire both the doctrine and organization of the church that they saw in Calvin's reformation. Many of these Englishmen returned to England under Queen Elizabeth with their hearts set on purifying the English Church of Everything Romish. Queen Elizabeth's middle of the road reform with the Thirty Nine Articles did not go far enough. The growing protest against the Queen's reformation became known as Puritanism. Queen Elizabeth and Archbishop Parker had no love for Puritans. The Puritans wanted to abolish clerical clothes, kneeling at communion, and all ceremonies that they associated with Catholicism, and the offices of Archbishop and bishop. They advocated that the Scriptural offices in the church were ministers, elders, deacons, and teachers chosen by the congregation--the plan they had learned in Geneva under Calvin.
In 1566 Archbishop Parker in his "Advertisements" sought to get rid of Puritans by requiring all the clergy to secure a new licence. A number of Puritans were deprived of their offices and a few like Thomas Sampson (1517-1589) were imprisoned.

The Puritans, led by Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) continued their agitation for reform until Cartwright was removed from his professorial chair at Cambridge University and forced to take refuge in Holland. John Field and Thomas Wilcox circulated tracts by Cartwright and continued the agitation. The Puritans did not want to separate from the Church of England. They hoped to provoke the church to reform. They looked to the government to carry out the reformation.

There were Puritans who grew weary of waiting and felt that further delay could not be justified. They advocated withdrawing from the Church of England to establish congregations modeled on the Scriptural pattern as they understood it. They became known as Separatists. In 1567 the "Plumbers" Hall group was raided by the Queen's police. This group had separated from the Church of England and had chosen its own officers with Richard Fritz as minister. Other non-conformist groups began to form.

Robert Browne (1550-1633) and Robert Harrison formed a separated church in Norwich in 1581. Browne was imprisoned. Upon his release he led his congregation to Middelburg in the Netherlands. He published his A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for anle in which he pictured the true church as a body of believers who voluntarily entered into a covenant to serve the Lord. The congregation would choose its own officers: a pastor, a teacher, elders, deacons and widows. No congregation would have any authority over another congregation. Browne became disgusted with quarrelling in his church and returned to the Church of England. Separatism waned for a time.

In 1587 Henry Barrow and John Greenwood were arrested for holding Separatist meetings in London. Their writings against Anglicans and Non-Separatist Puritans were smuggled from prison, printed in the Netherlands and then circulated in England. In 1592 a Separatist congregation was formally organized in London with Francis Johnson as pastor and Henry Ainsworth as teacher. Barrow and Greenwood were hanged for denying the Queen's supremacy in ecclesiastical matters and Johnson was imprisoned for a time. Parliament passed laws proclaiming banishment for any who denied the Queen's ecclesiastical authority, for those who refused to attend the services of worship in the established church, and for those who attended unlawful worship in a conventicle. The London congregation fled to Amsterdam. By the end of Elizabeth's reign most Separatists had gone underground or had fled to the Netherlands.

William Ames (1576-1633) a Cambridge divine who took refuge in the Netherlands published his Medulla Theologiae which became the textbook of Calvinist theology among the Puritans. In his The First Book of Divinity he asserted that the true church was a collection of sovereign congregations loosely associated in a
federation. The state had the right and duty to suppress all ministers and groups who would not conform to this established true church.

King James I proved a bitter disappointment to the Puritans. He rejected their Millenary Petition for Reform and in the Hampton Court Conference denounced their leaders and threatened to harry them out of the land if they did not conform.

Early in the reign of James I, John Smyth organized a Separatist church at Gainsborough. Persecution was so severe that Smyth led his congregation to Amsterdam in 1608. Smyth moved to a Baptist position and in 1609 baptized himself by pouring. Members of this first English Baptist Church on Dutch soil followed Smyth in moving to an Arminian position. After his death some joined the Mennonites and others returned to England to establish the first "General Baptist" church; they championed religious toleration.

A second Separatist church gathered in Scrooby under William Brewster and John Robinson. In 1609 this church moved to Leyden. One member of the congregation, Henry Jacob, joined with William Ames and William Bradshaw to form an Independent or Non-Separatist Congregational Church. Jacob returned to England where he planted a Non-Separatist Congregational Church in Southwark in 1616. He worked to establish a nation-wide system of Congregational Churches. In the 1630's a small group split off from Jacob's church to form the "Particular Baptists"—Calvinistic Baptists. In 1641 they adopted immersion as the only Scriptural baptism.

Robinson and the Leyden congregation adjusted to Dutch economic life after a bitter struggle. They managed to survive but did not prosper as they had hoped. They did not feel at home. They became alarmed that their children were adopting the Dutch language and Dutch ways. Parents became fearful that in time they would abandon the "true religion" for which they had fled England. There was a growing threat of renewed war between Holland and Spain. They heard reports of colonization in America. These were the people who would become the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony.

PLYMOUTH COLONY

As early as 1617 representatives of the Leyden congregation sought a patent from the king that would grant them land in northern Virginia. After two years, through the good offices of Sir Edwin Sandys, a member of the Virginia Council, they received a patent from the Virginia Company. King James was very suspicious of them as Separatists, but he grudgingly gave his consent for them to found a colony, hoping the colony would furnish much needed raw materials.

The members of the Leyden congregation were poor men, coming mostly from the lower and lower-middle classes. They accepted
the offer of a group of London merchants, led by Thomas Weston, to join in a joint stock company. The merchants would invest 7,000 pounds in the company to provide ship passage and equipment. The Leyden Separatists would furnish bodies and labor. For the first seven years all profits from fishing, trapping of furs, crops, timber, and other pursuits would be divided equally between the settlers and the financiers.

In Leyden a congregational meeting was held to call for volunteers. It was agreed that the youngest and strongest members with the fewest personal ties should go ahead and start the colony. If a majority of the congregation volunteered to go to America, then the pastor, John Robinson, would accompany them. If only a minority volunteered the pastor would remain with the majority and Mr. Brewster, the ruling elder, would accompany the minority. The majority decided to stay in Holland and Robinson stayed with them.

On July 21, 1620 the Leyden congregation met together for the last time and John Robinson preached a farewell sermon. He urged the congregation to follow no man any farther than he followed Christ. He urged, "Let us be certain, brethren, that the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word. It cannot be possible that we have so recently come out of such great anti-Christian darkness and already stand in the full light of divine truth."

The "Pilgrims" bound for a new world left Leyden and on July 22, 1620 sailed from Delfshaven on the Speedwell to Southampton. The company was supposed to provide two ships. It was discovered that the Speedwell was not seaworthy. After vexing delays and complex negotiations a crew of forty-eight and one hundred and one passengers sailed from Plymouth harbor on September 16, 1620, in the overcrowded and under provisioned Mayflower. Of the passengers thirty-five were from Leyden and sixty-six were from London and Southampton, people who were recruited for the venture—a number of whom were not Separatists. There were fifty-six adults, fourteen of whom were servants and hired artisans who were not Separatists. There were thirty-one children, seven of whom were waifs who belonged neither to the Separatists nor to the other passengers.

The voyage took sixty-five days. One passenger died and two were born. On November 11, 1620 the crew cast the anchor off the barren coast of Cape Cod—far north of the land to which they held a patent. Almost a month was spent in uncertainty and vacillation, searching for a good place to land. Finally, in spite of their lack of any legal status, they decided to land at a place they named "Plymouth" in memory of the port from which they had sailed. Fortunately a year later they were able to obtain a patent from the New England Company.

On account of discontent among the Non-Separatists and fear of mutiny, the leaders of the Separatists met in the cabin of the Mayflower before landing and drew up the famous Mayflower Compact to form the basis of the government of the colony. The
colonists signed it before disembarking.

In ye name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by ye grace of God, of Great Britaine, France, & Ireland king, defender of ye faith, etc., having undertaken, for ye glorie of God, and advancemente of ye Christian faith, and honour of our king & countrie, a voyage to plant ye first colonie in ye Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutualy in ye presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves togetheer into a civill body politick, for our better ordering & preservation, & furtherance of ye ends aforesaid; and by vertue hereof to enact constitute, and frame such just & equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for ye generall good of ye Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap Codd ye 11. of November, in ye year of ye raigne of our soveraigne lord, King James, of England, France, & Ireland ye eighteenth and of Scotland ye fiftie fourth. Ano.Dom. 1620.

The Compact would remain the basis of the government of the Plymouth Colony until 1691 when the colony united with the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

From the first the Separatists were determined to keep the reins of power in their own hands. Suffrage was to be extended only to the original landowners and orthodox freemen. These qualified persons would elect a governor annually and a Council of Assistants. The Separatists believe that limiting suffrage was the only way to preserve orthodoxy. They did admit Non-Separatists and even Anglicans to the colony.

Before leaving England the Separatists had elected John Carver to be governor. When he died William Bradford was chosen to take his place. For thirty years he was annually reelected. William Brewster served as ruling elder. Other leading men were Miles Standish, Edward Winslow, and Deacon Samuel Fuller.

On Christmas Day they asserted their freedom from "popish festivals" and began work on the common stores building.

For nine years the Pilgrims of Plymouth were without a pastor. William Brewster, the ruling elder, taught the Word of God twice every Sabbath and led the congregation in prayer. He abided by the instructions of the Leyden pastor, John Robinson, that he could not administer the sacraments. Brewster was a well-educated and devout man. In the simple meeting house with its bare wood benches he preached and taught with great effectiveness. He avoided lengthy sermons and long prayers except on "solemne days of humiliation."

The first winter at Plymouth was dreadful. Half the settlers died of scurvy, cold, general debility, and other causes. The others managed to survive only because of the help from the friendly Wampanoag Indians and their chief, Massasoit. After
a moderately successful summer and fall harvest in 1621, the Pilgrims held their First Thanksgiving Day praising God for their triumph over the wilderness. They invited the Indians to join in their feast.

The colony grew very slowly, due partly to the poorness of the soil, partly to the smallness of the number of the Separatists in England, and partly because the strictness and exclusiveness of the Separatists in Plymouth was not attractive to outsiders. It took two years to replenish the losses of the first winter. There was almost constant tension with the London financiers. The returns to the London merchants on their investment were very small. The merchants wanted profits. The main concern of the Pilgrims was the building and maintaining a true church. The merchants wanted to send over active young men who would make good fishermen, fur gatherers and timber cutters. The colonists wanted to bring over the remainder of the Leyden congregation. Additional recruits were sent in but Governor Bradford and Elder Brewster and the small group of Separatists retained control of the government. They maintained that the purpose of the colony was to worship God. Everything else was secondary. Though the Pilgrims were a minority they allowed no religious alternative for the majority. Any one who did not like the Pilgrim practices was free to depart. As more settlers poured in the Separatists held firm. In 1624 the merchants sent an Anglican, John Lyford, to be minister to the colony. When the Pilgrims learned that he was an Anglican determined either to introduce Anglican practices or to start a rival colony that would follow Anglicanism, Governor Bradford expelled him from the colony.

The merchants became distrustful of the enterprise and after some negotiations the colony bought itself free from the unsympathetic partners. The colonists agreed to pay $1,800 pounds in nine annual installments. Soon after the agreement the colonists began making plans to bring the remainder of the Leyden congregation to Plymouth and this was completed in the next few years. Pastor Robinson had died in the Netherlands in 1625/26. Economic conditions improved after 1624. The colony never became wealthy but by skillful trading and hard work they paid off their debt and exporting lumber, corn, and furs they attained a relative prosperity.

In 1627 a Dutch merchant from New Amsterdam visited Plymouth. He recorded his description of the colony. The heart and center of its life was the church. On the hill was a large square meeting house with a flat roof. It was constructed of oak beams and thick sawn planks. On the top of the meeting house there were six cannons that shot iron balls weighing four or five pounds. Worship was held in the lower part of the house on Sundays and holidays. The members assembled by drum beat, each with musket and firelock in hand. They assembled in front of Captain Myles Standish's door. They marched three abreast to the meeting house, led by the sergeant without drum beat. Behind the sergeant was Governor Bradford in his long robe. Beside him on his right was Elder Brewster, the preacher. On the governor's left was
Captain Standish with side arms. They marched in good order. The rude street was lined with hewn-plank houses and on the hill was the windswept graveyard that bore mute witness to how much the colony had cost.

In 1629 the Plymouth colony secured its first minister. He was Ralph Smith, a Separatist from Salem. By 1630 Plymouth had 300 inhabitants. Smith gave great encouragement to the Separatists who were having trouble holding the colony to its religious foundation. Governor Bradford bemoaned the fact that so many wicked and profane people had come so quickly to America. As early as 1621 Governor Bradford had had to rebuke some Non-Separatists for merrymaking, gaming, and revelling. In 1627 Thomas Morton, a pleasure-loving Anglican lawyer set up a Maypole and there was drinking and dancing and worse. Indian women were invited. Governor Bradford deported Morton to England.

Mission work among the Indians was disappointing. Through trading contacts the colonists found opportunities to evangelize and teach the friendlier and more docile Indians. Intermittent attacks by hostile Indians seriously limited the mission work.

As Plymouth grew and more settlers came new settlements were started. In the 1630's Non-Separatist Puritans flocked to America. Some found their way to Plymouth. In England Non-Separatists did not think much more of Separatists than did Anglicans. In the early years Salem and the Massachusetts Bay Colony regarded Plymouth with suspicion. The only physician on the New England coast was the good deacon-doctor at Plymouth, Samuel Fuller. In 1629 many at Salem fell ill. Governor John Endicot wrote to Plymouth begging the doctor to come to their aid. Fuller by his loving and self-sacrificing ministrations in Salem created a better feeling toward Plymouth. Endicot sent Governor Bradford a warm letter of thanks, declaring that God's people should have one and the same heart.

Roger Williams arrived in Plymouth in the summer of 1631 and for two years assisted the minister, Ralph Smith, without formal appointment or stipend. Bradford later evaluated him as "a man godly and zealous, having many precious parts, but very unsettled in judgmente." Williams alienated the Plymouth colonists by declaring that the king had no right to grant them lands without first making a settlement with the Indians. Plymouth was relieved when Williams decided to move to Salem.

The Pilgrims had few academic and intellectual aspirations. For fifty years the colony lacked a public school and sent no one away to a university. In the colony's first three decades less than twenty men with university training came to the colony. Only three remained—all three were ministers.

By 1643 the Pilgrims had established ten towns. Together the Pilgrim towns had about 2,500 settlers. By 1691 the colony's population was about 7,500. Plymouth tried to secure a royal charter. When the colony failed to get a royal charter it
decided in 1691 to accept incorporation with the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

According to their own definition of a true church the Plymouth Colony did not have a church until the coming of its first minister, Ralph Smith, in 1629. As we look back now it is clear that in the conduct of its affairs it was truly a "Congregational" church.