

What You May Not Know About the Pilgrims' View of Women

The Pilgrims advanced the cause and status of women by their rejection of tyrannical authority. Tyranny is the abuse of authority in which one person exercises oppressive, unrestrained authority over another. The Pilgrims rejected such tyranny in both the church and the state, and this affected how they viewed male/female relationships and marriage.

The Pilgrims were a congregation of Separatist Puritans who had decided that the Church of England was too corrupt to be reformed. These Separatists chose to establish their own voluntary congregations made up of members who could testify of a living faith in Jesus Christ. Their actions in this regard were illegal, for the Church of England was the official church of England.

All Separatist Puritans came under severe persecution and one congregation, in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire County, decided to leave England and settle, first in Holland, and then in what today is New England. The members of this congregation were those who became known as "Pilgrims."

They Reject Tyranny in the Church and State

The Pilgrims were particularly despised for their rejection of the doctrines of the divine right of kings and the divine right of the episcopacy. These were medieval doctrines by which monarchs and church authorities wielded unmitigated authority over the masses. According to these doctrines, the monarch and the bishops ruled in the place of God, and the people were obligated by God to obey them without question.

William Bradford (1590-1657), who sailed on the Mayflower and became the governor of Plymouth, tells how God revealed to

them that they were not to submit to such tyrannical rule in either the state or the church. He says that the Lord revealed to them, not only the uselessness of high church liturgy, "but also that the lordly and tyrannous power of the prelates [religious rulers] ought not to be submitted unto" (Hyatt, *The Pilgrims*, 17).

Their rejection of the divine right of kings to rule their subjects, infuriated King James I of England. James, who authorized the King James translation of the Bible, warned the Pilgrims and other Separatists to conform, "Or I will harry you out of the land" (Hyatt, *The Pilgrims*, 18).

Because of their refusal to conform, the Pilgrims came under severe persecution. This led to the congregation in Scrooby migrating to Holland, where they resided for 12 years. From Holland they migrated to North America, landing at present-day Cape Cod in November of 1620. It was their journeys, inspired by their faith, that led to them being designated as "Pilgrims."

The Pilgrim's rejection of tyrannous authority became a part of the American psyche and helped fuel the American Revolution and its rejection of King George and the British Parliament. This is borne out by the popular statement of the Revolution, coined by Benjamin Franklin, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

Tyranny in the Home Also Rejected

The idea of rejecting tyranny in the church and civil government seeped down into the Pilgrims' thinking about male/female relationships and marriage. This is made clear by a statement by Bradford in his discussion about how their experiment with socialism almost destroyed their community.

This socialist approach was a part of their contract with the businessmen who funded their trip by renting the Mayflower and providing provisions for their journey. The Pilgrims promised

to repay them with the sale of furs, fish and whatever other goods they could acquire in their new home.

The contract also stated that, until their debt was paid, they would live communally with all earnings going into a common fund, from which each family or individual would receive an equal allotment. The rest would be used to pay their debt.

Bradford described how this socialist approach destroyed initiative because everyone knew that no matter how hard they worked, they would receive the same. Young men, therefore, who were capable of doing more work, tended to slouch because they knew they would receive the same no matter how hard or how little they worked.

Bradford also mentions that the women often refused to go to the fields to work, complaining of headaches and other minor ailments. He went on to say, "And to have compelled them to go would have been considered tyranny and oppression."

No Tyranny in the Home

Tyranny was not acceptable. A wife, therefore, could not be compelled by her husband to act in a way that violated her conscience, put her at risk, or demeaned her person. Patriarchy was not eliminated, but the man's authority was strictly limited.

This view of the Pilgrims became predominant in the thousands of Puritans who followed them to New England, and laws were passed to protect the wife from tyranny.

For example, James Harris of Suffolk County was fined 10 shillings and ordered to give bond for good behavior to the Suffolk County Court because of "disorderly carriage in his family, refusing to provide for them, and quarreling with his wife."

When Daniel Ela, in anger, told his wife Elizabeth that "she

was not his wife, she was but his servant," neighbors reported the incident to the authorities. Daniel was hauled into court and although Elizabeth told the court she had nothing against her husband, the Essex County Court fined him 40 shillings for his tyrannous behavior. The historian, Edmund Muske, wrote,

"The Puritan wife of New England occupied a relatively enviable position by comparison, say, with the wife of early Rome or of the Middle Ages or even of contemporary England; for her husband's authority was strictly limited. He could not lawfully strike her, nor could he command her anything contrary to the laws of God. In one respect she was almost his equal, for she had 'A joint interest in governing the rest of the Family'" (Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 45).

We Must Not Go Back

In the teachings of the shepherding/discipleship movement of the 1970s-'80s, Christian women were told to submit to their husbands without question. Even if a husband wanted his wife to act in way that violated her conscience or demeaned her person, she was told it was her duty to submit.

This teaching was a serious regression, taking the church back to the Middle Ages where wife abuse and beating were acceptable. Those who propagated this teaching seemed to have no concept of the progress that had been made by those Reformers, like the Pilgrims, who challenged erroneous teachings and traditions that had seeped into the church.

In many situations, the progress for women was a ripple effect from a connected area of reform. This was the case with the Pilgrims. They challenged the tyranny of civil rulers and church leaders and of necessity had to apply it to the home. It wasn't the final word, but it certainly was progress. {eo}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, The Pilgrims, available from Amazon and his website at . Eddie is a member of the board of God's Word to Women and speaks on

the subject of the equality of women and men in Christ. He is the author of Paul, Women and Church and Who's the Boss? both available from Amazon.