

# Colonial America's Dark Side

Some people in the modern church hold the early American colonists in high regard, and there are some good reasons for that esteem. Groups such as the Puritans played a key role in the founding of the United States. They were a brave group of Christians who fled terrible persecution to start a new life in a new land. Many of them died in the process. They were a devout people who risked their lives to found a new society where they might be free.

However, there's more to that history than some people realize. The Puritans were an amazing group, but they weren't without fault – and some of the more disturbing parts of their history aren't widely known. The story of the Salem Witch Trials is famous but that's not the only troubling incident in their history. There are some parts of their past that shouldn't be forgotten. It's easy to look back through time and think that the modern church should be more like them, but do people actually know what colonial America was like?

Let's take a look at the 17<sup>th</sup> century and review some of the lesser-known episodes from this nation's. There's a lot we can learn.

## The Commune

When the colony at Plymouth was founded in 1620 the Puritans decided to form an ideal society. In this society there would be no private property. No one would own land; instead all of the land would be communal. Everything would be shared equally: the food, the clothing, and so forth. Everyone would work for the good of everyone else. Whatever you produced wouldn't go to your family; instead it would be shared among the entire community.

How did this work out? Not very well at all. William

Bradford was a historian who lived during that era (he was born in 1590 and died in 1657). Bradford reported that the people *hated* it:

“For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

Bradford reported that the men were upset that they were working to support the families of other people, and that the fruits of their labor was going to others instead of to their own wives and children:

“For the young men that were most able and fit for labor and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

The men who were young and strong and who could produce the most goods were upset that their labors were given to others, and that they didn't receive anything more than those who produced very little or nothing at all:

“The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and not able to do a quarter the other could; this was thought injustice.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as record in *The Annals of America*, p72)

The wives didn't like the fact that they were having to do

laundry for men that they weren't married to:

“And for men's wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery; neither could many husbands well brook it.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p73)

In the end this arrangement caused so many serious problems that people lost respect for one another:

“if it did not cut off those relations that God has set among men, yet it did at least much diminish and take off the mutual respects that should be preserved among them.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p73)

But that's not all. Since people were unwilling to work, food didn't get planted – and because food didn't get planted, the harvests were meager and many people died. The Puritan's communistic society was on the verge of utter collapse, so they reluctantly decided to reinstate private property. They didn't want to do it, but since they were starving to death they didn't have much choice:

“So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the governor (with the advice of the chief among them) gave way that they should set corn, every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves; in all other things to go on in the

general way as before. And so [was] assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number.." (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

This had amazing results. As soon as people had their own property and were working to support their own families, the situation changed. People began going out and working again:

"This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn, which before would allege weakness and inability, whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression." (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

The Puritans weren't happy that this new arrangement worked. They were convinced that the original way (which was a form of Communism) was better, even though it was killing them in large numbers. Since they were starving to death they were forced to change to a more capitalistic society, which didn't please the Puritans at all. They believed that by doing so they were giving in to people's innate corruption:

"Let none object this is men's corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them." (*Of*

*Plymouth Plantation, as recorded in The Annals of America, p73)*

I don't know how the Puritans were able to read their Bibles and come away with the idea that God forbade the ownership of private property and commanded everyone to live together in a single commune. All throughout the Bible families owned their own land, where they grew food for their own families. Each person had their own possessions, and when someone else took those away God became unhappy with it and called it *stealing*. Yet the Puritans were convinced that this was a bad system and tried to change it!

Nowhere in the Old or New Testament did God command all Christians to live together in one society and share all things equally. Yes, there were times in the Bible when Christians came together and gave to those who were in need (Acts 4:34-37), but those were acts of charity that met a temporary need. That's *entirely* different from banning ownership of property and taking away a person's harvest to give it to someone else! The Puritan's experiment with communism did *not* go well for them.

## **Religious Intoleration**

One of the key reasons the Puritans came to the new world was to flee persecution. They didn't like being forced to worship in ways that violated their conscience, and they wanted to live in a place where they might be free. It therefore may come as a surprise to learn that one of the first things the colonists did was create a society that was just as intolerant as the one they had left. It turns out that they didn't actually object to persecution at all. They didn't have any moral problems with killing people who disagreed with them. Instead what they really wanted was to be the ones who were doing the persecuting.

For example, the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 (which was typical of the Colonial era) stated that you had to be a Christian *on pain of death*:

“...whatsoever person or persons within this province and the islands thereunto belonging shall henceforth blaspheme God, that is, curse Him, or deny our Savior Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, or shall deny the Holy Trinity - the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost - or the Godhead or any of the said three Persons of the Trinity or the unity of the Godhead, or shall use or utter any reproachful speeches, words, or language concerning the said Holy Trinity, or any of the said three Persons thereof, shall be punished with death and confiscation or forfeiture of all his or her lands and goods to the Lord Proprietary and his heirs.” (*Maryland Toleration Act of 1649*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p88)

If you blasphemed the name of the Lord you would be put to death. If you didn't believe in Jesus or the Trinity you would be put to death. If you said anything bad about God you would be put to death. This is enforcing Christianity at the point of the sword, which is a gross perversion of what the Bible teaches. God *never* gave the church the power to kill those who reject the gospel (or have the government do it for them) – but according to this law people would either convert and become a Christian or they would be executed. There was no room for unbelievers in that society.

If you worked on the Sabbath you would be heavily fined:

"...that every person and persons within this province that shall at any time hereafter profane the Sabbath or Lord's Day called Sunday, by frequent swearing, drunkenness, or by any uncivil or disorderly recreation, or by working on that day when absolute necessity does not

require it, shall for every such first offense forfeit 2s. 6d..." (*Maryland Toleration Act of 1649*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p89)

Colossians 2:16 tells us that God doesn't require the church to keep the Sabbath day holy. We're free to either work on that day or rest. What we must *not* do is judge other people based on whether they keep the Sabbath – which is exactly what these Sabbath laws were doing. This was a wicked law that never should have been enacted.

Maryland wasn't the only place that had these kind of laws. They were pretty typical of the day. Here are some examples that were taken from the Code of the Connecticut General Court (1650):

"If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other God but the Lord God, he shall be put to death." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

"If any person shall blaspheme the name of God the Father, Son, or Holy Ghost with direct, express, presumptuous, or high-handed blasphemy, or shall curse in the like manner, he shall be put to death." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

"If any child or children above sixteen years old and of sufficient understanding shall curse or smite their natural father or mother, he or they shall be put to death..." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

But that's not all. In colonial America you were required to always agree with everything the preacher said. If you dared to disagree with the preacher and claimed that he was in error, the Connecticut Code said you would be *criminally prosecuted*:

"...if any Christian... shall contemptuously bear himself toward the Word preached... either by interrupting him in his preaching, or by charging him falsely with an error, ... that every such person or persons, whatsoever censure the church may pass, shall, for the first scandal, be convented and reproved openly by the magistrates... And if a second time they break forth into the like contemptuous carriage, they shall either pay 5 pounds to the public treasure, or stand two hours, openly, upon a block or stool four foot high, upon a lecture day, with a paper fixed on his breast written with capital letters, AN OPEN AND OBSTINATE CONTEMNER OF GOD'S HOLY ORDINANCES, that others may fear and be ashamed of breaking out into the like wickedness." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p201)

Disagreeing with your pastor was a matter that would cause you to get hauled up before a court judge! If the judge decided that he agreed with your pastor's interpretation of the Bible, you would be hit with a *huge* fine. Under these sort of laws you had no right of conscience. You had to believe whatever the pastor told you to believe, whether you thought it was true it or not. (Does the Bible teach that pastors are infallible and must never be disagreed with? No, it doesn't. These type of laws are grossly unbiblical and deeply immoral. No pastor has the right to force other people to agree with him on pain of criminal prosecution.)



The Code also required you attend church *without exception* every Sunday. If you didn't then you would be prosecuted and heavily fined:

"It is ordered and decreed by this Court, and authority thereof, that wheresoever the ministry of the Word is established, according to the order of the Gospel, throughout this jurisdiction, every person shall duly resort and attend thereunto respectively upon the Lord's Day, and upon such public fast days and days of thanksgiving as are to be generally kept by the appointment of authority. And if any person within this jurisdiction shall, without just and necessary cause, withdraw himself from hearing the public ministry of the Word, after due means of conviction used, he shall forfeit for his absence, from every such public meeting, 5s, all such offenses to be heard and determined by any one magistrate, or more, from time to time." (Code of the Connecticut General Court, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p202)

The law required you to be a Christian (according to their definition of the term). It also required you to go to church and always agree with your pastor. If you didn't then you would find yourself in court facing ruinous fines. In colonial America you had to attend the state-mandated church, listen to the state-mandated pastor, agree with the state-mandated beliefs, and pay the state-appointed pastor your tithes. This wasn't optional! It was *required*. There was no religious freedom to be found.

The Puritans hated living in a society where they were forced into a state church they didn't agree with – so they came to this country and *established their own state church*, and threatened to kill anyone who didn't belong to it. They established *exactly* the same sort of oppressive system that they had fled from

in the first place! The only difference was that *they* were the ones who were in charge of this oppressive state church.

This raises a very important question. When God established His church in the New Testament, did Jesus tell His disciples to go into all the world and kill those who refused to convert? Actually, no, He most certainly did not:

**Mark 16:15:** “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

There's nothing in the Great Commission about finding unbelievers and forcing them to either convert or die! In Paul's letters to the churches he never said anything about killing unbelievers, nor did he say that Christians should seize governmental power so they could force the gospel upon everyone on pain of death.

It's true that in the Old Testament the Lord gave Israel the Mosaic Law, and under that law things like blasphemy and idolatry were crimes that were punishable by death. However, there's an *enormous* difference between what God commanded Israel to do in the Old Testament and what He commanded His church to do in the New Testament! We can see this illustrated in 1 Corinthians. When a church member was caught having sex with his stepmother, Paul only commanded that he be evicted from the church:

**1 Corinthians 5:1:** “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.

2 And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you...

13 But them that are without God judgeth.

Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Under the Mosaic Law this person would have been put to death. However, Paul only commanded that he be removed from the church until he repented, at which time he could rejoin. (2 Corinthians 2:6-7 tells us that the person did repent, so Paul commanded he be brought back into the church.) Nowhere did Paul even *suggest* that this person should be executed. God hasn't given His church the power of the sword.

Do you know what happens when you tell people that if they don't become a Christian they'll be executed? You get a whole lot of false converts. If you force people to go to church then they might attend, but they're not attending out of a sincere desire to worship God. No, they're going because *you're forcing them to be there*.

Colonial America forced their version of Christianity on everyone on pain of death. This was a *very* bad thing to do! We rightfully get upset with religions who force people to convert or die. Christianity must *not* be one of those religions. That's not how Christ commanded His church to behave!

Interestingly, there were some people in Colonial times who understood this concept. In 1652 a man named Roger Williams wrote a sermon entitled *The Hireling Ministry*. He condemned the religious persecution that was going on in the colonies:

"The civil state of the nations, being merely and essentially civil, cannot (Christianly) be called "Christian states", after the pattern of that holy and typical land of Canaan... The civil sword (therefore) cannot (rightfully) act either in restraining the souls of the people from worship, etc., or in constraining them to worship, considering that there is not a tittle in the New Testament of Christ Jesus that commits

the forming or reforming of His spouse and church to the civil and worldly powers..." (*The Hireling Ministry*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p213)

Williams was absolutely right. The founding colonists had no right to enforce Christianity by the power of the government – but that's exactly what they did.

## Licensed Churches

Not only did the colonies force people to become Christians on pain of death, but they also required churches to be properly registered and licensed. If you didn't have state approval then you couldn't preach or teach the Word of God. This passage is taken from the New Netherlands Restrictions on Religious Meetings (1624):

"The director general and council have been credibly informed that not only conventicles and meetings have been held here and here in this province but also that unqualified persons presume in such meetings to act as teachers, in interpreting and expounding God's Holy Word, without ecclesiastical or secular authority... Therefore, to prevent this, the director general and council strictly forbid all such public or private conventicles and meetings except the usual and authorized ones, where God's Word, according to the Reformed and established custom, is preached and taught in meetings held for the religious service of the Reformed Church, conformably to the Synod of Dort... under a fine of 100 pounds Flemish, to be paid by all who, in such public or private meetings, except at the

usual authorized gatherings on Sundays or other days, presume to exercise, without due qualification, the duties of a preacher, reader, or chorister; and each man or woman, married or unmarried, who is found at such a meeting, shall pay a fine of 25 pounds Flemish." (*New Netherlands Restrictions on Religious Meetings*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p90-91)

It's true that the early settlers of this nation fled from religious persecution to found a new society where they could be free, but it's worth noting they only believed in freedom for *themselves*. Under these sort of laws you weren't allowed to preach or teach without state approval. Even *attending* an "unapproved" church made you a criminal! You were only allowed to attend state churches that had state preachers who preached the state-mandated message. If you attended anything else the power of the state would be wielded against you.

Is it Biblical for the state to have total control over churches? Absolutely not! Is it wise for the government to decide who can and cannot preach the gospel? Certainly not. Yet that's exactly the sort of system that existed in colonial America.

## **Wage Controls**

One of the problems with life in the new world was that everything was scarce – including labor. There was far more work to do than people to get it done. Since the demand for labor exceeded its supply, people began asking for more money. There's nothing surprising about this! That's how supply and demand works. Whenever there's a shortage of something, prices go up.

The Puritans weren't happy about this aspect of economics. John Winthrop, who was appointed governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, tells us that in 1633 the Puritans decided to combat this by enacting wage controls:

"The scarcity of workmen had caused them to raise their wages to an excessive rate, so as a carpenter would have 3s the day, a laborer 2s 6d etc, and accordingly those who had commodities to sell advanced their prices sometime double to that they cost in England, so as it grew to a general complaint, which the court, taking knowledge of, as also of some further evils which were springing out of the excessive rates of wages, they made an order that carpenters, masons, etc. should take but 2s the day, and laborers but 18d, and that no commodity should be sold at above 4d in the shilling more than it cost for ready money in England; oil, wine, etc..."  
(*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p132)

Apparently the Puritans believed that the increased prices for services was a form of price gouging. They seemed to believe that everything should be same price that it was in England – even though England was home to a centuries-old civilization, while the new world was not. Despite the fact that labor was plentiful in England and scarce in the new world, the Puritans believed that wages shouldn't be impacted by things like supply and demand. They thought that charging more money for scarce labor was a terrible evil that had to be stopped.

This policy wasn't free from consequences. Instituting price controls has a number of important side-effects:

- **Shortages:** Since there was more demand than supply, the supply ran out. There wasn't enough to go around.
- **Waste:** When prices are allowed to rise, only the people who need labor the most will buy it. The rest will have to find an alternative solution. However, when prices are frozen the market can't prioritize the labor. This means

that people who don't need it will buy it because it's cheap, and people who desperately need it the most aren't allowed to pay extra for it and have to go without.

- **Reduced production:** When prices rise it encourages other people to get into the market and start supplying that good. If prices are frozen below the market rate then people aren't as motivated to enter the market. That means the shortage will be made worse because new producers won't appear.

The Puritans never seem to have understood that increased wages are an important market function. The increased price encourages people to conserve that form of labor, and it also encourages other people to enter that market. Over time this eliminates the shortage by increasing production and decreasing demand. Creating price ceilings only makes matters worse and prolongs the suffering.

There's another side to this. If a person says “I will work for \$20 an hour” and the state comes along and says “\$20 an hour is forbidden; you'll either work for \$10 an hour or you won't work at all”, then what you have is a form of slavery. You're requiring a person to work at a wage far below what they've set for themselves. A person should be allowed to set his own rate at which he will work. After all, *no one is required to pay that rate!* Now, if no one wants to pay that rate then the person will have to make some decisions. He may have to change his rate, or find a different career, or move to a location that values his services more. But that's very different from saying “You're asking too much money for your services so I'm going to force you to work for less.” That's tyranny and oppression.

## **State-Mandated Preaching**

In colonial America you had to preach whatever the state told you to preach. If you attacked an official state-sponsored

doctrine or preached the wrong sermon on the wrong occasion, you would find yourself in a lot of trouble. John Winthrop reports this event from 1636:

"Mr. Wheelwright, one of the members of Boston, preaching at the last fast, inveighed against all that walked in a covenant of works, as he described it to be, viz., such as maintain sanctification as an evidence of justification, etc., and called them antichrists, and stirred up the people against them with much bitterness and vehemency. For this he was called into the Court, and his sermon being produced, he justified it, and confessed he did mean all that walk in such a way. Whereupon the elders of the rest of the churches were called and asked whether they, in their ministry, did walk in such a way. They all acknowledged that they did. So, after much debate, the Court adjudged him guilty of sedition, and also of contempt, for that the Court had appointed the fast as a means of reconciliation of the differences, etc., and he purposely set himself to kindle and increase them..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p135)

It seems that a preacher by the name of Mr. Wheelright preached a sermon that upset the government. He taught that if you believed genuine salvation produced a life of good works, you were preaching salvation by works and you were an antichrist. Now, from a theological perspective I believe that Mr. Wheelright was in error. The Bible really *does* teach that all genuine Christians will show the fruits of the Spirit in their life (see 1 John 2:1-5). However, what concerns me is that the government *prosecuted* Mr. Wheelright for his preaching. Not only did they prosecute him, but they found him guilty of



“sedition” – which is another word for *treason*!

This raises a few questions. Is it Biblical for the state to mandate what churches can or cannot preach? The Puritans thought it was. Is it wise for the government to prosecute a pastor for *treason* if he preaches something that they doesn't like? That's exactly what happened here. The Puritans were convinced that the government should control everything that was preached, and be the one who decides what's true and what's false – *even though that was one of the key reasons why they left the old world in the first place!* The Puritans wanted religious freedom for themselves but they were completely unwilling to extend that same freedom to anyone else. If *they* disagreed with the churches in the old world then that was just and right, but if someone came to their colony and disagreed with them then that was treason.

## Illegal Profit Margins

In Puritan society you were required to keep your profit margin low. If the markup on your goods was too high then the Puritans would take you to court and prosecute you – as one unfortunate shopkeeper found out. This is what John Winthrop reported in 1639:

"At a General Court held at Boston, great complaint was made of the oppression used in the country in sale of foreign commodities; and Mr. Robert Keaine, who kept a shop in Boston, was notoriously above others observed and complained of; and, being convented, he was charged with many particulars; in some, for taking above 6d in the shilling profit; in some above 8d; and, in some small things, above two for one; And being hereof convict (as appears by the records), he was fined 200 pounds... For the cry of the country was so great against oppression, and some of the elders and

magistrates had declared such detestation of the corrupt practice of this man..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p136-7)

Let's break this down. "6d" is 1 sixpence, or half a shilling. In the new world, where goods were scarce, this man was charging more for his merchandise than people would have payed if they still lived in London. His markup ranged from 50% to 100%. Since his profit margin was too high he was taken to court and prosecuted. He wasn't allowed to charge that much for his goods – so the government hit him with an enormous fine. According to the Puritans, having a high profit margin was detestable corruption (even though the Bible says no such thing).

Let's talk about that for a minute. Suppose that you sailed to England, bought 100 turnips for \$1 each, and then took them to the new world and sold them for \$2 each. That would represent a 100% markup. Surely that means you made a lot of money, right? Well, not necessarily. First of all, how much money did it cost you to travel to England, and how much did it cost to carry the turnips back to America? If your expenses were more than \$100 then you actually *lost* money. Your high markup didn't even cover your transportation costs.

There's also the matter of spoilage. If it cost you \$50 to make the round trip then you could make \$50 – unless half of your turnips went bad during the voyage. In that case the best you could do is break even, in spite of your high margin. Or what if none of them went bad and you reached the new world with your whole crop, but only half of them sold? In that case you once again broken even. Even if you had a staggering \$10 markup, that would do you no good if you only sold one turnip!

A high markup does *not* mean you're making a lot of money. It's entirely possible to have a high markup and still go bankrupt due to overhead or other costs. In some industries high margins are critically important – without them the industry couldn't function. They're *not* a sign of oppression!

What was really going on here was that the Puritans were oppressing this shopkeeper. Mr. Keaine was selling them goods at a certain rate, and the Puritans didn't want to pay that rate. They wanted to pay the same rate they would have paid back in England, where goods were plentiful and there was a huge civilization instead of a wilderness. They hated the idea that prices went up when supply was low, and they believed that things like supply and demand shouldn't impact prices at all.

Now, the Puritans could have started another shop of their own and sold merchandise more cheaply. That would have either forced Mr. Keaine to lower his prices or put him out of business. But the Puritans weren't interested in competing with him. Instead they wanted lower prices without any effort, so they brought him to court and prosecuted him. They did this in spite of the fact *there was no law against what he was doing*:

"Yet most of the magistrates... would have been more moderate in their censure: (1) Because there was no law in force to limit or direct men in point of profit in their trade..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p137)

The Puritans fined this man a year's wages *in spite of the fact he had broken no laws!* They just decided on the spot they didn't like what he was doing and so they found him guilty. In Puritan society you could be found guilty *even if you had broken no laws!* The Puritans didn't need laws to find people guilty.

Now, the Puritans *could* have let this man go on the grounds that he wasn't doing anything illegal, and then passed a misguided law that forbade high markups. But they didn't do that. Instead they found a man guilty of breaking a non-existing law, which is appalling. Is it Biblical for the government to find people guilty even if they hadn't broken any laws? That should horrify us – but that's how the Puritans did things.

Mr. Keaine was fined a huge sum of money, but his

punishment didn't stop there. The Puritans also forced him to appear before his church and repent *with tears*:

"After the Court had censured him, the church of Boston called him also in question, where... he did, with tears, acknowledge and bewail his covetous and corrupt heart..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

Was this man guilty of sin? Absolutely not. By no stretch of the imagination did he violate any of the Ten Commandments! He wasn't guilty of stealing because he hadn't taken anything from anyone. Mr. Keaine wasn't forcing people to buy from him, nor was he preventing other shopkeepers from competing with him. All he did was tell people that if they gave him a certain sum of money then he would give them his goods in exchange. No one forced anyone to buy from him! But because the *Puritans* wanted to pay less than what he was charging, they brought him to court, prosecuted him, found him guilty even though he had broken no laws, and made him repent *with tears* in front of his church. That's how the Puritans treated business owners! Oh – and they also considered *excommunicating* him for this:

"The cause being debated by the church, some were earnest to have him excommunicated..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

That's right: having a high profit margin was such a serious a sin that it warranted being *kicked out of church*. The Puritans apparently believed it put you on the fast track to Hell.

Are there any Bible verses that say that certain profit margins are a sin? Absolutely not! A person is free to ask whatever they want in exchange for their property. After all, *it's their property!* When Abraham purchased a cave to bury his wife

Sarah (Genesis 23), the children of Heth asked Abraham to pay *twenty times* what the cave was worth. Abraham didn't complain about it or accuse them of price-gouging. Instead he simply paid it.

The Puritans were nothing like Abraham. In fact, after prosecuting Mr. Keaine and forcing him to repent with tears, Cotton Mather preached an entire sermon on the evils of this wicked business owner who dared to provide them with merchandise in the wilderness. Mather wanted everyone to understand that profitable businesses were of the devil:

“These things gave occasion to Mr. Cotton in his public exercise the next lecture day, to lay open the error of such false principles, and to give some rules of direction in the case. Some false principles were these:” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

What were the “false principles” that the Puritans condemned? The very first one, at the top of the list, was a condemnation of the concept of buying low and selling high:

“1. That a man might sell as dear as he can, and buy as cheap as he can.” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

That's right! According to the Puritans, if you purchased a good when it was cheap and sold it when the price went up then you were a wicked sinner on the road to Hell. This shows an astonishing amount of ignorance regarding how economies function. “Buying low” means you're purchasing goods at a time when there's a surplus, and “selling high” means you're selling goods during a time of shortage. Do you know what the market needs when there are shortages? *More goods!* Selling when there's a shortage is *precisely* the right thing to do to relieve the

shortage and drive the price back down. When people buy low and sell high they're transferring the goods to times when there are shortages. This is something you *want* to happen. If you forbid this activity then you'll get even worse shortages!

But Mather was just getting started. He said you were also of the devil if you raised prices to cover your losses:

“2. If a man lose by casualty of sea, etc., in some of his commodities, he may raise the price of the rest.” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

If your boat encountered problems on the way to the new world then you weren't allowed to raise your prices to cover your losses. This meant the trip would ruin you financially! Do you know what merchants do when they can't make money? *They close up shop*. Once the merchants go out of business the supply drops to *zero*. The Puritans believed that merchants had to assume all of the risk. They couldn't pass on rising costs to their customers:

“3. That he may sell as he bought, though he paid too dear, etc., and though the commodity be fallen, etc...” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

Mather taught that if the price of your goods went up then *you weren't allowed to raise your prices* in response to your higher costs. No, you had to keep selling at the old price because that's the price people wanted to pay. Do you know what happens when this rule is enforced? Businesses go bankrupt and stop operating, and the supply of goods drops to zero.

But Cotton Mather *still* wasn't done. He said the Puritans should enact new business rules:

“The rules for trading were these:

1. A man may not sell above the current price, i.e., such a price as is usual in the time and place...
2. When a man loses in his commodity for want of skill, etc., he must look at it as his own fault or cross, and therefore must not lay it upon another.
3. Where a man loses by casualty of the sea, or, etc., it is a loss cast upon himself by Providence, and he may not ease himself of it by casting it upon another; for so a man should seem to provide against all providences, etc., that he should never lose;..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

Any nation that enforces these three rules won't have an economy for very long. These rules state that businesses can't raise prices when the market changes, which means they'll lose money and go bankrupt. They state that all losses *must* be absorbed by the business and can't be passed on to customers – and since profit margins aren't allowed to be high enough to absorb those costs, that means certain bankruptcy. With rules like these it's no wonder so many of the early Puritans starved to death! The Puritans did everything they could to make it impossible to run a business.

Colonial Americans *loved* price controls. This example is taken from Regulation of Wages and Prices in Connecticut, which was passed in 1676 (more than 30 years later):

"...no merchant or trader shall advance above 2d upon the shilling for profit, charge, and venture from Boston, or other market of like distance..."  
(*The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, as recorded by *The Annals of America*, p247)

It seems they finally *did* get around to passing laws

making certain profits illegal.

## Torture

The Puritans actually legalized torturing people in order to get them to confess. This is from the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641):

"No man shall be forced by torture to confess any crime against himself nor any other unless it be in some capital case, where he is first fully convicted by clear and sufficient evidence to be guilty, after which, if the cause be of that nature that it is very apparent there be other conspirators or confederates with him, then he may be tortured, yet not with such tortures as be barbarous and inhumane." (*Massachusetts Body of Liberties*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p165)

The Puritans hated it when *they* were tortured in the old world, but they legalized it in their society when it was in their benefit. Who needs due process when you can torture a confession out of someone?

It's true that the person had to be convicted first, but keep in mind the Puritans didn't have a high standard of what constituted "sufficient evidence". During the Salem Witch Trials the court believed that if someone looked at a child and that child went into fits, that was evidence the accused person was a witch:

"The justices order the apprehended to look upon the said children, which accordingly they do; and at the time of that look... the afflicted are cast into a fit... the apprehended persons... are forthwith committed to prison on suspicion of



witchcraft." (*Thomas Brattle*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p286)

Another test for witchcraft was tying a person up and trying to drown them. If they drowned then they were innocent, but if they floated they were a witch:

"...for if a witch cannot be drowned, this must proceed either from some natural cause, which it does not, for it is against nature for human bodies, when hands and feet are tied, not to sink under water... This miracle would the devil imitate in causing witches, who are his martyrs, not to sink when they are cast into the waters."  
(*Increase Mather*, as record in *The Annals of America*, p294)

In those days that's how people tested suspects for witchcraft: they tried to drown them. If they survived then they were a witch. (For the record, Increase Mather was *condemning* this practice of his day, not defending it, but his words are an accurate summary of what happened.) This level of "evidence" would be appalling in even the most corrupt courts in the world, yet that's how the Puritans did things.

## **Hatred of Democracy**

The Puritans *hated* democracy. They were convinced it was of the devil and an affront to God Himself. This is what John Winthrop recorded in 1642:

"Now if we should change from a mixed aristocracy to a mere democracy, first, we should have no warrant in Scripture for it; there was no such government in Israel. We should

hereby voluntarily abase ourselves, and deprive ourselves of that dignity which the providence of God has put upon us, which is a manifest breach of the Fifth Commandment; for a democracy is, among most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government..." (*John Winthrop*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p169)

Do you know what the Fifth Commandment is? I'll let you read it for yourself:

**Exodus 20:12:** "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."

You read correctly: it's to honor your father and mother. The Puritans believed that democracy was a violation of the Fifth Commandment! That conclusion is so far from being reasonable that it just boggles the mind. There are a lot of negative things you can say about democracy, but calling it a violation of the Fifth Commandment is completely ludicrous.

The Puritans believed that some people were just better than others, and those people should be in charge. They believed that giving "lesser" people the right to vote was a horrifying thought – in fact, it was a *sin*:

"I say, we should incur scandal by undervaluing the gifts of God – as wisdom, learning, etc. - and the ordinance of magistracy, if the judgment and authority of any one of the common rank of the people should bear equal weight with that of the wisest and chiefest magistrate..." (*John Winthrop*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p169)

That's right. The Puritans believed that democracy was sinful. The “better” people should be in charge and the “lesser” people should do what they're told.

## Caste System

In Puritan society there were some poor people who managed to save up enough of their own money to be able to afford nicer clothing. This made the Puritans angry because the poor were starting to dress like the wealthy – and that made it hard to tell the classes apart. The Puritans demanded that poor people start dressing like poor people. In fact, in 1651 they passed a law which made it *illegal* for the poor to wear nice clothes:

"It is therefore ordered by this Court, and the authority thereof, that no person within this jurisdiction, nor any of their relations depending upon them, whose visible estates, real and personal, shall not exceed the true and indifferent value of 200 pounds, shall wear any gold or silver lace, or gold and silver buttons, or any bone lace above 2s per yard, or silk hoods, or scarves, upon the penalty of 10s for every such offense..." (*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p210)

Not only did the Puritans do their best to make sure that the poor remained dressed in rags, but they actually established a special police force that went around town and made sure the poor weren't breaking the law! This group had the power to decide who was poor and who wasn't, and who could wear nice clothing:

"It is further ordered by the authority aforesaid,

that the selectmen of every town... are hereby enabled and required, from time to time, to have regard and take notice of apparel of any of the inhabitants of their several towns... and whosoever they shall judge to exceed their ranks and abilities in the costliness or fashion of their apparel in any respect... the selectmen aforesaid shall have power to assess such persons... provided this law shall not extend to the restraint of any magistrate..." (*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p211)

The magistrate exempted *themselves* from the law. It seems that the laws only applied to the little people.

Does the Bible really say that poor people are required to dress poorly, and should be forbidden by law from wearing nice clothing? Absolutely not! Forbidding the poor from having nice clothing is a staggering act of brutal selfishness.

## Dancing

The Puritans *hated* dancing. Not just dancing as it exists today, but all forms of dancing that have ever existed in any society anywhere. In 1684 Increase Mather wrote *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing*. This is what he had to say:

"Concerning the controversy about dancing, the question is not whether all dancing be in itself sinful. It is granted that pyrrhical or polemical saltation, i.e., when men vault in their armor to show their strength and activity, may be of use. Nor is the question whether a sober and grave dancing of men with men or of women with

women be not allowable; we make no doubt of that, where it may be done without offense, in due season and with moderation... But our question is concerning gynecandrical dancing, or that which is commonly called mixed or promiscuous dancing, viz., of men and women (be they elder or younger persons) together. Now this we affirm to be utterly unlawful and that it cannot be tolerated in such a place as New England without great sin." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p272)

By "promiscuous dancing" what he means is "men dancing with women". Mather condemns this as an incredibly serious sin. Now, the Puritans didn't have modern "dirty dancing" in mind. What they hated were things like ballroom dancing and every other form of dancing, no matter how innocent it might be. Increase Mather went on to say that the Bible forbids all forms of dancing:

"... the Scripture condemns promiscuous dancing. This assumption is proved from the Seventh Commandment. It is an eternal truth to be observed in expounding the Commandments that whenever any sin is forbidden, not only the highest acts of that sin but all degrees thereof and all occasions leading thereto are prohibited." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p273)

For what it's worth, this is what the seventh commandment actually says:

**Exodus 20:14:** "Thou shalt not commit

adultery.”

Notice that the verse doesn't say “Thou shalt not dance in mixed groups”. Adultery has a pretty specific definition and it's completely different from dancing. Take a look at what the dictionary says:

**Adultery:** voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than his or her lawful spouse.

**Dancing:** a successive group of rhythmical steps or bodily motions, or both, usually executed to music.

It should be obvious that dancing with someone in a ballroom is *completely different* from having sex with them. Saying that dancing is the same thing as adultery is ludicrous! Increase Mather couldn't point to a single Bible verse that prohibits dancing because there aren't any. Instead he says that any activity that *could* lead to a sin is sinful. Since it's *theoretically possible* for dancing to lead to sin, dancing is therefore sinful.

Let's stop and think about that for a moment. The Puritans taught that any activity which might lead to a sin is sinful. As it turns out, that covers any activity that anyone might ever do! You could use that to condemn *everything*. Hanging out with friends? That could lead to a sin, so it's sinful. Calling your friend on your phone? That could lead to a sin, so it's sinful. Going to work? Driving down the road? All of those things could lead to sins, so they must be sinful. By that standard even *going to church* would be sinful because people have certainly sinned in church before. Increase Mather's philosophy is so broad that it condemns all known human activities.

He even condemned dancing as sin if the people who were doing the dancing weren't tempted to sin and *never even imagined*

anything sinful:

"Whereas some object that they are not sensible of any ill motions occasioned in them, by being spectators or actors in such saltations, we are not bound to believe all which some pretend concerning their own mortification..." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p273)

The Puritans didn't care that *you* didn't have a problem with it. All that mattered was that someone, somewhere, didn't like it – and that was enough to condemn the whole activity as being of the devil.

Remember, in Puritan society you weren't allowed to disagree with your pastor. That would have been treason.

## Conclusion

The passages listed in this document aren't the only horrors that were found in colonial America. There are others as well. This isn't intended to be an exhaustive study. It's meant to illustrate the point that the founding colonists were very different from what some people think.

It's true that they fled from persecution – but they did that to set up their own system of persecution. It's true they called themselves Christians – and they demanded that everyone else be Christians as well or else they would be put to death. It's true that they built churches – and people were required to attend them every Sunday and were forbidden from disagreeing with their pastor. If people didn't attend the state-approved church with the state-appointed magistrate who was preaching the state-approved sermons, you were a criminal and you would be prosecuted. If you dared to preach a sermon that the state didn't like then you would face charges of treason.

Oh – and don't even think about trying to open a business.

Prices were fixed, wages were fixed, and if you made too much money you would face ruinous fines. Even if you weren't breaking any laws you could still be found guilty regardless!

It's true the Puritans and the other colonists weren't any different from the other societies of their day. What they were doing was commonplace during that time period. These colonists weren't necessarily worse than others – but that doesn't make these horrors any less appalling.

Colonial America was *not* a paradise on Earth. If the modern government did the same things the early colonies did, we would call it horrific tyranny – and we would be right.