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## MATTERS OF LIFE & DEATH

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Three great “life passages” – birth, marriage and death - are almost universally recognized by human cultures. Each of these moments of transition triggers a deep human need for community response. This response generally takes the form of ritual.

A revolution in religious thought – as happened in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – can bring dramatic changes in the way people view their relationship with God and with their community, in turn bringing a total upheaval in rituals.

This happened with the introduction of Calvinism, a religious system of belief that was diametrically opposed to many of the previous universally-held medieval beliefs of Roman Catholicism.

Roman Catholics believed that salvation resulted from both good works and from grace; grace was given by God but could also be sought. The sacraments were seen as an effective way of bringing God’s grace to the participants. All three of the great life passages – birth, marriage and death – had sacraments associated with them. Baptism was necessary for salvation; marriages were required to be performed by a clergyman; and, at the end of life, Extreme Unction was administered. Even with this sacrament, imperfect human souls, upon death, entered a state of Purgatory, for purification. Prayers by the living on behalf of the dead were regarded as a source of grace that could help send the soul in Purgatory to heaven.

Calvinism (and Calvinism was the theological basis of all Puritanism, both of the Separating and non-Separating types) only recognized two sacraments, Eucharist and Baptism, as scriptural. Both sacraments were symbols, or “seals” of the covenant of grace that God had extended, by His choice only, to his elect.

One of the basic beliefs of Calvinism was Predestination. Once God had “elected” you or not, that was it! Heaven could not be gained by good work or partaking in the sacraments. There was no theological benefit, therefore, from encouraging rituals to grow up around the sacraments. There was, in fact, every reason to discourage ritual that might promote the erroneous (in Calvinist eyes) beliefs held by Roman Catholics.

Although Baptism and the Eucharist were regarded as powerful symbols, neither was absolutely necessary for a Christian community. Infants, if predestined for heaven, would not be denied entry if they died before baptism. Both sacraments could ONLY be administered by a minister (Plymouth Colony had no minister, and therefore no sacraments, for its first 8 years).

Beginning in the 1530s, when Henry VIII separated the English Church from Rome, the country underwent a change as Roman Catholic churches became Church of England.



**The ancient church of St. Helena's in Austerfield served as a Roman Catholic church for five centuries. At the time of William Bradford's baptism here, in 1590 during the reign of Elizabeth I, St. Helena's had become "Church of England."**



**The baptismal font at the church of St. Helena in Austerfield, where William Bradford was christened in 1590.**

By the 1590s, significant changes had been made. Many of the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church were discarded and ceremonies were much simplified. Some of the rituals, however, were retained. To the true Puritan (of both Separating and non-Separating variety), the ceremonies of the mainstream English Protestant church had not been simplified (or "purified") enough.

When William Bradford was christened at St. Helena's stone font on March 19, 1590, the residual ceremonies would have included dressing him in a christening gown (or wrapping him in a white christening cloth), "signing" him with the cross and having his name given by godparents. Edward Winslow's christening at St. Peter in Droitwich on October 20, 1595, would have involved similar rituals.

A Puritan baptism, in contrast, involved almost no ritual at all. Prayers were said and water was sprinkled or poured. An account of a Separatist Baptism held in London reported that there were no godfathers or godmothers, the infants had their faces "washed," and the minister said (without making the sign of the cross) "I do baptize thee in the name of the father, of the son. And of the holy ghost."

The English Protestant church had also simplified the rituals of marriage. Brides were no longer met at the church door and escorted to the altar; wedding rings were no longer blessed. According to the accepted rules, however, marriages still were performed in front of a minister and a wedding ring was still used. Although it was not "blessed," the ring was laid upon the prayer book and then given by the minister to the groom to give to the bride.

Puritans did not even regard marriage as a sacrament since they could find no scriptural precedent for a marriage service being performed by Christ or by any of the apostles. Early Plymouth weddings were civil affairs, although it was not regarded as an inappropriate time to seek a divine blessing. William Bradford wrote

*May 12 [1621] was the first marriage in this place which, according to the laudable custom of the Low Countries, in which they had lived, was thought most requisite to be performed by the magistrate, as being a civil thing, upon which many questions about inheritances do depend, with other things most proper to their cognizance and most consonant to the Scriptures (Ruth iv) and nowhere found in the Gospel to be laid on the ministers as a part of their office. 'This decree or law about marriage was published by the State of the Low Countries [The Netherlands] Anno 1590. That*

*those of any religion (after lawful and open publication) coming before the magistrates in the Town, or State house, were to be orderly (by them) married one to another.' ... And this practice hath continued amongst not only them, but hath been followed by all the famous churches of Christ in these parts to this time – Anno 1646.*

It is interesting to note that the May 12, 1621, marriage, the first in Plymouth Colony, was between widower Edward Winslow and widow Susanna White. Edward's first marriage (and perhaps Susanna's, as well) had been a civil ceremony performed in The Netherlands.

Civil ceremonies were the common practice in The Netherlands, where the Pilgrims spent many years before emigrating to America. There are many examples of Pilgrim civil marriages in the records of Leiden. For example:

*Allerton, Isaac of London, accompanied by Edward Southworth, Richard Masterson and Ralph Thickers his acquaintances, was betrothed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1611, married the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1611 to Mary Norris of Newbury in England, accompanied by Anne Fuller and Priscilla Carpenter, her acquaintances.*

and

*Fuller, Samuel of London, widower of Alice Glasscock, accompanied by Alexander Carpenter, William White his brother-in-law, Roger Wilson, and Edward Southworth his acquaintances, was betrothed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1613 and married on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1613 to Agnes Carpenter of Winton in England, she was accompanied by Agnes White and Alice Carpenter her sister.*

Civil marriages, however, horrified the more tradition-minded English Protestant church. For that institution, church weddings were more than a pleasant practice, they were mandated by law. Edward Winslow was briefly imprisoned on his return to England in 1635 because, as a magistrate in Plymouth Colony, he had performed civil weddings. Bradford reported that Winslow told

*...their Lordships that marriage was a civil thing and he found nowhere in the Word of God that it was tied to ministry. Again, they [the Plymouth colonists] were necessitated so to do, having for a long time together at first no minister; besides, it was no new thing for he had been so married himself in Holland by the magistrates in their Statt-house.*

It is also important to remember that, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, marriage was not "love's young dream." Marriage was a sober undertaking entered into by adults (the average age for Englishmen at the time of the first marriage was 27 or 28 for men, and 25 or 26 for women). Yes, there was love, very real and abiding love. But marriage was much, much more.

Marriage was serious business, changing the roles of both man and woman – transferring them into master and mistress of the household, giving them enormous responsibilities, bringing the probability of children with the moral and financial burden for the father, and the burden of care and the additional very real physical burden, even danger, for the mother.

The English church had also simplified funeral rituals. There still remained, however, an officially prescribed burial service performed by a minister in vestments, who prayed over the body, which was then interred in consecrated ground. Other rituals, such as the wearing of black garments, tolling the church bell, and erecting tombstones and monuments – customs that were seen as more social than religious – remained common.

Once again, Puritans thought the simplification had not gone far enough. For the Puritan, there was no sacrament connected to the final transition. They asked where, in scripture, were religious funerals to be found? They pointed out that, in fact, the Old Testament priests were not allowed to touch a dead body. And, believing that a person is either saved or not (and there is no purgatory), prayers after death were regarded as worthless.

In addition to this intellectual reaction against rituals that could not be found in scripture, Puritans had an emotional reaction against ritual. A genuine fear and horror of what was seen as the idolatry of Catholicism led to a rejection of individual symbols that were actually far older than Christianity itself. Rituals were not only regarded as useless superstition but as tools of evil, leading the unwary into erroneous beliefs.

Practices that had been an integral part of English life for centuries were abruptly discarded.

Edward Winslow's children, unlike Edward, would have had no white gowns or cloths, no font, no

signing and, perhaps, no godparents at their baptisms. Susanna Winslow, as the new mother, would have had no “churching” to celebrate her healthy return to community life. The Winslows may, however, have held a family dinner after the baptism.

During Pilgrim civil weddings, there was no “giving away” of the bride, there were no wedding rings (a practice to which the Pilgrims were particularly vehemently opposed), and there were no traditional words used.

After the simple ceremony, however, celebrations were not unusual.

Emmanuel Altham, who was in Plymouth in 1623 (he was captain of the Little James) described a wedding feast:

*Upon the occasion of the Governor's marriage [William Bradford], Massasoit was sent for to the wedding, where came with him his wife, the queen, although he hath five wives... And now to say somewhat of the great cheer we had at the Governor's marriage. We had about 12 pasty venisons, besides others, pieces of roasted venison and other such good cheer in such quantity that I could wish you some of our share. For here we have the best grapes that ever you saw – and the biggest, and divers sorts of plums and nuts.*

Pilgrim funerals, in contrast, were so austere as to be almost nonexistent. Bodies were interred with respect but absolutely no ceremony. Tombstones were not used. There were no sermons or graveside prayers - that would be a little too close to the Catholic custom of prayers for the dead. Also missing was any reassurance of certain resurrection, as well as any outward show of mourning, such as black clothing or the use of stone burial markers or other monuments to the dead.

This way of life was beautiful in its simple austerity and strong belief, but gave little comfort in times of stress and change. As long as the community was homogenous and united, this way was sufficient. As the Colony grew, however, and differences of religious opinions crept in, and as the severity of life lessened – ritual began to creep back in.

The area that most easily admitted ritual was, perhaps surprisingly, funerals. It seemed to have occurred to ministers fairly quickly that, by eliminating funerals, they were losing an opportunity to expound on true doctrine to a receptive congregation. And so a great age of funeral sermons began, sermons that not only commemorated the deceased as a good example for the living but that also taught doctrine.

Gravestones also are in use by the end of the 1600s, both as theological symbols and as signs of social status. The earliest stone on Plymouth's Burial Hill is that of Edward Gray with a date of 1681. The obelisk marking William Bradford's grave was placed in May of 1825, long after his death. The site of Bradford's grave was known because his son William – whose marker survives – had asked to be buried next to his father.

The obelisk, which is more than 8 feet tall, is made of white marble on a granite base. It reads “William Bradford of Austerfield Yorkshire England. Was the son of William and Alice Bradford. He was Governor of Plymouth Colony from 1621 to 1633, 1635, 1637, 1639 to 1643, 1645 to 1647.” On the north side is a sentence in Hebrew signifying “Jehovah is our help” and then “Under this stone rest the ashes of William Bradford, a zealous Puritan and sincere Christian. Gov[ernor] of Ply[mouth] Col[on]y from 1621 to 1657, (the year he died) aged 69, except 5 yrs. which he declined.”

Pallbearers, gifts of gloves to people attending the funeral, mourning rings – a variety of accoutrements (most of them social rather than theological) grew up around funerals.

Weddings also slightly expanded their rituals. And then christenings. New England Protestantism always remained, however, and still is today, noted for the simplicity of its understated celebrations. That is a direct legacy of the Calvinism brought here by the early settlers.

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