

John Winthrop's "City Upon A Hill"

John Winthrop, Puritan minister, lawyer, & governor of Massachusetts explains his vision for planting a new society in the perilous environment of the New World



Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. "Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil," in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity

Source: John Winthrop, A Modell of Christian Charity (1830), https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php

1. DEFINE: posterity – affection – abridge – superfluities – commerce – meekness – liberality – acquainted – byword
2. What specific suggestions does Winthrop give of how the Puritans can succeed in creating their colony? Put another way, how must the Puritans act if the colony is to succeed?
3. What "proof" does Winthrop give that will prove that the Puritans are being successful (starting with "So shall we keep the unity..."). Create three "bullet points" from the "evidence" that Winthrop pinpoints.
4. The next part of the speech has become an ageless metaphor for America. Read it and explain what Winthrop means. It is the "city upon a hill" part of his speech.
5. Over the centuries, why do you think many American thinkers have believed the American experience was/is exceptional (a "city on a hill") when compared with the rest of the world? Do you agree or disagree with them?
6. What will happen in Winthrop's eyes if the Puritan's turn away from obeying God and loving others?