



*Why America is Great:*

**Self-Government**

**Volume IV**

## THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

*“In most European nations, political existence began in the higher regions of society and was communicated little by little and always in an incomplete manner to the various parts of the social body. In America, on the contrary, one can say that the township had been organized before the county, the county before the state, the state before the Union.”*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*<sup>1</sup>

The *Declaration of Independence* signaled the birth of a new nation—a nation built not on a particular ethnicity or culture, but on a set of principles. And the Founding Fathers knew that in order for a nation to run on principles, the people of that nation must be able—and willing—to *abide* by those principles without coercion or supervision. This concept of individual responsibility took a unique form in America, and it is what we now call *self-government*. The founders of our nation—going all the way back to the Pilgrims who first settled the shores of New England—knew that those who live in a self-governing nation must be able to govern *themselves*, and that those who wish to exercise *rights* must also be able to exercise *responsibility*. These concepts, as we shall see, are absolutely essential to the survival and continuing prosperity of our American republic.

### The English Puritans: A Singular People

When Alexis de Tocqueville was researching American culture in the early 19th century, he was continually amazed by what he read about the “singular” people who first settled the nation’s shores: the English Puritans. As Tocqueville studied the Puritans and their indelible imprint on New World, he saw in them none of the characteristics typical of colonial settlers. “Almost all colonies,” he wrote, “have had for their first inhabitants men without education and without resources, whom misery and misconduct drove out of the country that gave birth to them, or greedy speculators and industrial entrepreneurs” (or pirates, he added). But the Puritans, he said, were neither adventurers nor malcontents. Educated and middle class, they had no great need to improve their wealth. Patriotic and loyal, they cherished England and her laws. Even so, as Tocqueville observed, “they tore themselves away from the sweetness of their native country to obey a purely intellectual need; in exposing themselves to the inevitable miseries of exile, they wanted to make *an idea* triumph.”<sup>2</sup> And that idea was to create a community where people were free to live and worship God as they chose.





This specific “idea” at the heart of the Puritan movement had evolved over time. It had begun to take shape in the early 16th century—years before the English were actively exploring the New World—when King Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. At the time, legislation was passed requiring all Englishmen to join and embrace the state-established church, regardless of religious background or belief. Those who refused were considered traitors to king and country, and were harshly persecuted.

Over the next several decades, various religious groups both challenged the doctrines of the Church of England and protested the corruption bred from the church-state partnership. One of the larger of these groups, the Congregationalists, disputed with the established church on two fronts. First, they argued, the church had no right or ability to force individuals to accept certain beliefs or doctrines. After all, they said, the believer does not come to faith through bishops or priests, but through his or her direct relationship with God, aided by the Scriptures and the work of God’s Spirit upon a willing heart. Second, they said, no person or group of people had an inherent right to dictate God’s will to another. Thus, individual church congregations, enlightened by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, were capable of governing themselves and choosing their own leaders, rather than having such decisions made for them by an overarching bishopric or authority. A true church, said the Congregationalists, is a *self-governing* body of believers, willingly coming together under divine authority and in shared faith, to worship God and abide by scriptural principles.

But the Congregationalists didn’t stop there. Their beliefs on individual responsibility and self-government carried over to civil society as well. They believed a strong, orderly community, just like a strong church, was formed by individuals coming together and agreeing to live according to a certain code or law of conduct. Individuals joined the community and submitted to its laws *by their consent*. No one was coerced to join the community, but those who *chose* to join were thereby committing themselves to abide by its laws. In this way, the people of both the church and community were able to make decisions together according to their own particular needs and desires. Both were free, self-governing “associations of the willing faithful.”<sup>3</sup>

Congregationalists derived their beliefs on individual liberty and self-government from the scriptural model of the *covenant*. By Biblical definition, a covenant is a voluntary agreement between God and people, or between different groups of people in the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> For the Congregationalists, the covenant model made every member of a congregation equal, for all individuals have equal access to the grace of God. They also argued that, because of this, individual *congregations* should be allowed to govern themselves and to choose their own leaders, rather than having decisions made for them by an overarching (such as a denominational) authority. Congregationalists supported these covenantal claims by pointing first to the example of the ancient Israelites, who lived directly under God’s



authority in what is now known as the Mosaic Covenant, and then to that of the early Christians, who “had all things in common,” living as equals under the lordship of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

As Congregationalist teaching spread throughout England at the beginning of the 17th century, both ecclesiastical and political authorities began to feel threatened. The leaders of the established church were apprehensive of covenantal doctrine because it not only encouraged individuals to bypass the established clergy in their search for truth, but also urged congregations to assert their independence from the state, to which the power of the church was closely tied. At the same time, King James I (r. 1603–1625) feared religious dissenters for political reasons. Congregationalists, after all, were strong supporters of Parliament, for though they respected the king’s authority, they believed that *law*, and not the king, was sovereign. They also adhered to common law theory, which taught that if any temporal authority violated the rights of his subjects, those subjects had a right to reject that authority.

The king and the church made every attempt to suppress covenantal doctrine and its adherents. Clergymen who preached Congregationalist principles were deprived of their benefices. Citizens who refused to attend Anglican services or who spoke out against the state church were hauled into court, imprisoned, and sometimes even executed. Congregationalists responded in one of two ways. Some chose to abandon the Church of England altogether; they were called “Separatists.” Some stayed within the church, hoping to purify it by their influence; they were called “Puritans.” Groups from both communities would eventually find their way across the sea to America.

The first group of Congregationalists to consider emigrating to America was a small Separatist congregation in the village of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire. They had first reacted to persecution at home by fleeing to Holland, which was known for its freedom of religion. While Holland afforded them the opportunity to worship freely, the Separatists had trouble relocating their trades to a foreign market. They also feared the effect of Dutch “licentiousness” upon their children.<sup>6</sup> As the years passed, they felt an increasing desire to establish a self-sustaining community in a place where they had room to grow. They believed that, just as God had called the Israelites out of Egypt, so He was now calling them out of a spiritual Egypt and preparing them to enter a Promised Land. Where was this special place? The New World.

The story of the Pilgrims, as this group came to be called, is well known in American history and folklore. However, an oft-neglected aspect of Pilgrim history is the uniqueness of the community they established in America. The Pilgrims were intent upon advancing the Kingdom of God in the New World and were determined to build their new society, as much as possible, according to the Scriptures. Therefore, as soon as they had sighted Cape Cod from the deck of the *Mayflower*, the Pilgrims drafted a covenant with each other. “Having undertaking for the Glory of God,” the document read, “and [for] the Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant... [a] colony in... [America]; [we] Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation.”<sup>7</sup> Signed by the head of each household, this agreement—known to history as the *Mayflower Compact*—defined for each person in the company his or her proper relationship to God and to neighbor. In this way, every member of the congregation was already aware of his or her basic societal responsibilities before even stepping ashore.

As the Separatists settled in America, back in the England, the Puritans’ vision of purifying the Church of England had dissolved under the state’s increasingly corrupt condition. A wealthy, prominent member of England’s Puritan community, John Winthrop, helped obtain a royal charter to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Puritans hoped to establish in New England a model Christian society that would be an example to the





rest of the world—a society of people dwelling together in peace and brotherly love, worshipping God according to their consciences. In 1630, Winthrop and several hundred of the brethren sailed for America.<sup>8</sup> A large-scale Puritan emigration would ensue, numbering over 20,000 people over ten years.

While the Puritans of New England had to struggle greatly in their efforts to fulfill their vision, they laid the foundation for what would grow into the most autonomous, self-governing society in the world at that time. And this process began at the *local* level.

### **The Covenant and the Early American Township**

Upon their arrival in the New World, the Puritans began to build their communities according to the covenant model they derived from their Christian beliefs. The cornerstone of each village or township was the local church, in which every member of the community had equal standing. Each congregation elected its own leaders, and each was completely independent from other churches in neighboring communities. Membership in the local church was required for those wishing to join the community; however, those who objected were at liberty to leave the village and establish their own community elsewhere. In England, this practice would have been difficult if not impossible, as little unowned land was available. But in the vast wilderness of America, there was room enough for every tender conscience.<sup>9</sup>

As in nearly every culture, the religious practices of the Puritans soon began to shape the character of their politics. Just as each church was self-governing, each village asserted its independence from other villages. Just as every member of the congregation was expected to “work out his own salvation with fear and trembling,” so every individual in the community was expected to behave responsibly as a citizen.<sup>10</sup> Just as each congregation elected its leaders, so every village began to elect their public officials, even to those posts that in England were still filled by royal appointment.<sup>11</sup> As Tocqueville would later observe: “The general principles on which modern constitutions rest, the principles that most Europeans of the seventeenth century hardly understood...were [by this time] all recognized and fixed by the laws of New England: intervention of the people in public affairs, free voting of taxes, responsibility of the agents of power, individual freedom and judgment by jury were established there without discussion and in fact.”<sup>12</sup>

These developments in self-government grew “organically,” as it were, from a soil rich in Protestant doctrine and the English common law tradition.<sup>13</sup> Protestantism emphasized personal morality and responsibility, teaching that each person is directly accountable in his or her spirit to God. Similarly, the English common law established an objective standard of social conduct for all men and women. These qualities protected the community from falling prey to a dictatorial leader, but it also presumed that citizens could and *would* abide by a moral code. These religious, legal, and societal ingredients, combined, produced a distinctly American strain of individualism. Because Anglo-Americans refused to acknowledge most conventional forms of class or social status, no one in the township was inherently beholden to another, except by their consent within the context of the community. Now, this type of individualism was not without risk—in fact, left uninhibited, it could have endangered America’s embryonic freedom. After all, an individual who disdains *all* social ties will take little interest in the needs of the community. And the individual who cares only for his own immediate needs will be willing to compromise his principles—or surrender his freedom—in order to meet them. So how were the Puritans to prevent their community of *self-governing* individuals from becoming a disjointed bunch of *self-serving* individuals?

The answer was the covenant model. A covenant holds the individual accountable not only to God, but also to the other members of the township through the power of the law. Individuals were *free* to do as they pleased as long as they conducted themselves according to the laws of the township. And if they *violated* the law, they came under the power of the law for punishment. Thus, a person’s freedom was tied to his ability to *govern himself* within the community. If he chose to forfeit that right, he forfeited some of his freedom also. In this way, the covenantal community compelled all members of the township to conduct themselves responsibly, for the good of the community and the good of the individual were inextricably linked. The individual’s self-interest was joined with the interest of the community. The township model harnessed the energy of the individual in such a way as to give him a vested interest in *public* affairs and still keep him accountable for his *personal*

affairs. This tension between the individual and the community protected the liberty of the people, and allowed that liberty to grow. These qualities later led Tocqueville to refer to the early township as “that fertile seed of free institutions.”<sup>14</sup> It was in the township that Americans began the “practice” of self-government. “It is...in the township that the force of free peoples resides,” Tocqueville would later write. “The institutions of a township are to freedom what primary schools are to science; they put it within reach of the people; they make them taste its peaceful employ and habituate them to making use of it. Without the institutions of a township a nation can give itself a free government, but it does not have the *spirit* of freedom.”<sup>15</sup>

This practice of self-government—on both an individual level and a communal level—laid the foundation for the American republic. And the practice of self-government in America, over time, would lead to *self-actualization*. For any person or nation that is able to govern itself will have the freedom to flourish—to discover its strengths and rectify its weaknesses—and to gradually become all it was meant to be.

The Puritan community-builders of the early 17th century were at the forefront of a dramatic emigration movement from the Old World to the New. Christian peoples from all over Europe fled religious persecution to settle in America. Several English groups obtained permission from Parliament to charter colonies. The colony of Maryland, for instance, was founded in 1632 as a settlement for Catholics; Pennsylvania, a haven for Quakers, was established by royal grant in 1681. Some communities were breakaways from the original New England townships. Minister Roger Williams (1603–1684), who had differences with the Puritans, left Massachusetts and founded Providence Plantations (part of today’s Rhode Island) as a refuge for those who had been persecuted for their beliefs and driven out of other settlements. (Such examples prompted American historian Daniel Boorstin to write, “A dissension which in England would have created a new sect within Puritanism, simply produced another colony in New England.”)<sup>16</sup> In certain regions across the new colonies, communities chose to join together for their mutual protection and prosperity. One of the first such unions was the Commonwealth or “Public State” of Connecticut, established in 1639. The people who came together to form Connecticut made a covenant with each other, setting in writing the laws and regulations that were to govern the new state. This document, the *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*, was America’s first written constitution. In each of these situations, settlers were able to establish communities that reflected their own interests, passions, and unique characteristics. And so the new country flourished.

### The Great Awakening

By the end of the 17th century, America was well on its way to becoming the most prosperous colonial establishment in the world. Indeed, as the townships of New England flourished into bustling cities, the Puritan church and other “old” denominations diminished in their centrality to the community. For many Americans, religion increasingly became an affair of form and habit, no longer deeply affecting the heart or personal behavior. But during the second decade of the 18th century, even as the faith of the city grew cold, the peoples of the frontier began to experience a new wave of Christian fervor.



CAVALIER.

PURITAN.

HOLLANDER.

FRIEND.



In 1719, a Dutch Reformed minister named Theodore Frelinghuysen (1691–1747) began preaching revival sermons to his congregation in New Jersey. An emigrant from Germany, Frelinghuysen had brought to America a teaching called *Pietism*, which encouraged believers to concentrate on the practice of holiness in daily life. Pietism appealed to the practical people of America because it emphasized personal responsibility over one's spirit, and deemphasized abstract doctrines and creeds.<sup>17</sup> Many Americans began to reconsider their level of faith and to cultivate deeper religious devotion.

As spiritual hunger grew, so did the number of passionate, itinerant preachers who were willing to proclaim the Gospel inside or outside of a church building. Some of the more prominent preachers of this period were educated at the "Log College," a school in Pennsylvania—housed in a log cabin—founded by Irish immigrant William Tennent for the purpose of training Presbyterian ministers. These young men began to travel through the colonies, preaching repentance and spiritual renewal.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1730s, a young Puritan minister named Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) responded to the growing revival by preaching rousing sermons on God's holiness and His grace toward sinners. Revival began to spread throughout the New England countryside and to the frontier. People gathered in fields and clearings to hear traveling preachers and hold prayer meetings. George Whitefield (1714–1770), an English Methodist minister, toured up and down the colonies, traveling as far south as Georgia. He preached rousing sermons in the open country, attracting and spellbinding crowds of more than 20,000 people.<sup>19</sup>

This Great Awakening (1720s–1740s), as the movement came to be called, invoked a fervor that no religious movement of any kind had been able to do in America. After all, the American continent did not lend itself to organized religion. While different denominations and sects had established footholds in certain regions—the Congregationalists in New England, for instance, or the Quakers in Pennsylvania—no one denomination had been able to claim predominance in the New World. Even the Church of England, which made a deliberate effort to put down roots in the British colonies, was unsuccessful in attaining any kind of exclusive recognition. America was a wild continent—vast, diverse, untamed. Religion was, accordingly, decentralized, and strongly based in local communities.<sup>20</sup>

In line with this trend, the Great Awakening was characterized by its inclusiveness. Its simple message of spiritual renewal was not limited to a certain class or ethnicity, or even a particular religious denomination. Both the message and the response were relatively universal.

The preachers themselves made this point. George Whitefield is recorded to have had the following exchange with his listeners while preaching in Philadelphia:

"Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven?" he [Whitefield] shouted. "Any Episcopalians?"

"No!" the people roared.

"Any Presbyterians?" . . . .

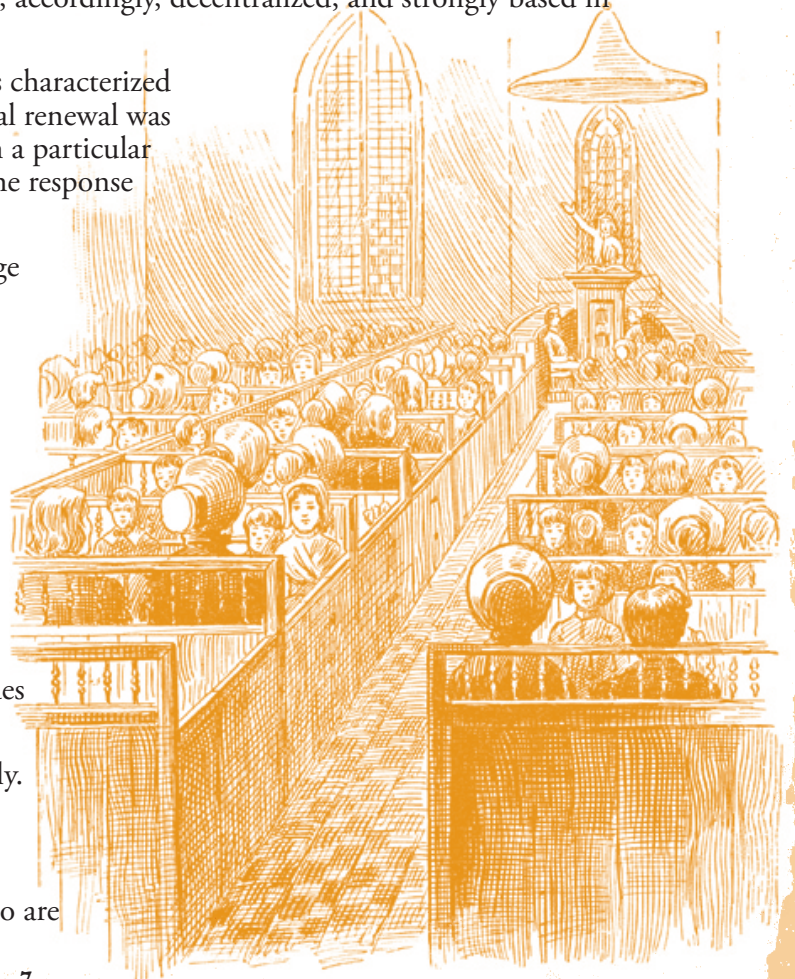
"No!"

"Any Independents or Seceders. New Sides or Old Sides, any Methodists?"

"No! No! No!" the crowd shouted in reply.

He called out, "Whom have you there, then, Father Abraham?"

We don't know those names here! All who are



here are Christians—believers in Christ, men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony...

God help me, God help us all, to forget having names and to become Christians in deed and in truth.”<sup>21</sup>

As the revival spread, Americans gradually, almost unconsciously, began to turn their attention inward, away from Europe and toward each other. Up until the 18th century, most American colonists had still considered themselves to be European, first and foremost. But with the advent of the Great Awakening, these Old World emigrants were reminded of what they had in common with each other. Some were Congregationalist, some Dutch Reformed, some Methodist, some Baptist—but they were all *Americans*.

The people of America began to feel a kinship with each other—a sense of shared calling as a “Chosen People.” They had come from afar in order to live as servants of God rather than as subjects of a king. These realizations inspired Americans to look beyond their cultural and denominational differences; they began to see each other as fellow countrymen, working alongside each other toward a common goal.

Years later, Tocqueville would observe and explain what he saw as a natural connection that arose at this time between religious faith and American patriotism. “The greatest advantage of religions is to inspire wholly contrary instincts,” he wrote. “There is no religion,” he continued, “...that does not impose on each [man] some duties toward the human species or in common with it, and that does not thus draw him, from time to time, away from contemplation of himself.”<sup>22</sup> Christianity, he discovered, taught Americans how to reconcile individual liberty with a concern for the community. “Religion,” Tocqueville concluded, “which, among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facilitates their use of it.”<sup>23</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 40.
2. *Ibid.*, 32. Emphasis original.
3. M. Stanton Evans, *The Theme is Freedom: Religion, Politics, and the American Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1994), 187.
4. A covenant can also apply on an individual level. For example, a covenant can be made directly between an individual and God (such as the Abrahamic Covenant described in Genesis 15), or between individuals before God.
5. Evans, 188. See also Acts 2:44-45 (New King James Version).
6. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608-1650* (San Antonio: The Vision Forum, 1998), 20-21.
7. *Mayflower Compact*, Nov. 11, 1620.
8. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1997), 31.
9. *Ibid.*, 46.
10. See Philippians 2:12b-13 (New King James Version).
11. Johnson, 71.
12. Tocqueville, 39.
13. Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1991), 331.
14. Tocqueville, 29.
15. *Ibid.*, 57-58. Emphasis added.
16. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 8.
17. Johnson, 110.
18. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed. *The Almanac of American History* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 80.
19. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 151-152.
20. Schlesinger, 19.
21. “1715: Controversial George Whitefield,” Christianity.com, <http://www.christianity.com/ChurchHistory/11630198/>. Emphasis added.
22. Tocqueville, 419.
23. *Ibid.*, 280.



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