

Principles of the Mayflower Compact

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When the Pilgrims came to America on the *Mayflower*, they originally intended to sail to the English colony of Virginia. Upon arrival, however, they found themselves north of their destination and outside of England's jurisdiction. They were also outside the bounds of their charter from the king, which granted them the right to settle. Realizing they were in unchartered territory, some non-Pilgrims or "strangers" aboard their vessel talked of leaving the group and venturing out on their own. But the Pilgrims had selected every man on the trip according to his particular skills. They depended on one another for survival. So, while aboard the *Mayflower*, they made an unprecedented decision to draft and sign their own charter. The Mayflower Compact, as their charter became known, was a written agreement or covenant among themselves to stay together, create a civil body, and enact just laws in their new colony of Plymouth in present-day Massachusetts. This pact was the first self-governing document of their colony. It was signed on November 11, 1620, by all heads of households, Pilgrims and non-Pilgrims alike.

The Mayflower Compact was quite unique and revolutionary. Most charters at the time were between a king and his inferior subjects. But the Pilgrims' pact was among equals who recognized God as their High Authority to sanction their covenant. They saw God as their king. The Pilgrims and Puritans derived this idea from the Bible, often citing Isaiah 33:22 which says that "God is our Judge, Lawgiver, and King."

Covenants

With their Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims applied the principle of covenants to found their colony. A covenant is a voluntary, moral agreement or pact between two or more free and consenting parties, usually for a religious or civil purpose. It is secured by an oath or promise. This binding agreement centers on the relationship between the parties involved and defines the responsibilities of the relationship. Typically, a higher authority, like God or king, participates in a covenant. A covenant can be made between humans and a higher authority. Or it can be made among humans who validate it by the higher authority who acts as a witness or guarantor. Covenants enable fallible humans to secure mutual commitments to and from one another, and they often result in positive partnerships and outcomes. Civil covenants may be enacted to found a new people or nation. Civil covenants allow people in a community or nation to protect their rights and the consensual exercise of power. The Mayflower Compact was a civil covenant.

The Pilgrims recognized God as their High Authority to sanction their civil covenant. They saw God as their king. The Pilgrims and Puritans derived this idea from the Bible, often citing Isaiah 33:22 which says that "God is our Judge, Lawgiver, and King." Further, the Pilgrims drew the practice of covenants from the Bible—which tells the story of the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament and the early Christians in the New Testament. Covenants are the means by which God often relates with humans and how humans may effectively relate with one another.

In the Old Testament, in Genesis 15, 17, and 22, God covenants with faithful Abraham, promising that Abraham will become a "father of many nations," inherit the land of Canaan, and have a son with his wife, Sarah, in their old age. Centuries later, God renews the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham's descendants—Moses and the Israelites—who have become numerous. The Israelites receive from God at Mount Sinai the terms of this covenant to be God's people. These terms—the Ten Commandments—are found in Exodus 20 and 34. In Exodus 34:27, God tells Moses to "'Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'" The Israelites agree to be God's people and follow His laws. They enact covenants with their rulers to honor God and His commands.

In the New Testament, God makes a new, spiritual covenant of grace with all believers—both Jew and Gentile/non-Jew—through the mediator, Jesus Christ. In this new covenant, any person may receive spiritual salvation and eternal life through faith in Christ. Jesus declares this new covenant in Matthew 26:27-28 and Hebrews 9:15. Hebrews 9:15 says, “He [Jesus] is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions [sins] under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.” (*Miracle of America* 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 3.3, 6.7, 7.16, 7.20, 8.3, 8.14)

Self-Government

The Pilgrims’ Mayflower Compact differed from other charters in an important way. While charters were typically made between two politically unequal parties—king and people, ruler(s) and subjects—the Mayflower Compact was made among persons of equal position in the group or community. It was a strikingly new, democratic initiative of self-government among equals. It was also a demonstration of “popular sovereignty,” or the idea that since all people are equal, the whole people possess political power in their civil body. The Pilgrims’ compact created a civil self-government to govern their new colony by the people. At that time, self-governments did not exist anywhere else in the world.

The Pilgrims’ religious beliefs and practices affected their political views of government. They based their civil self-government on their experience with church self-government which they had practiced for years in their reformed Congregational churches. Pilgrim pastor Rev. John Robinson drew from the Bible to encourage civil self-government. In his farewell letter to the Pilgrims, Robinson instructed the Pilgrims to set up a colonial self-government with equal standing among men, chosen godly magistrates, and obedience to chosen officials who are “God’s ordinance for your good.” He echoed Deuteronomy 1:13 and Romans 13:1-5. In Deuteronomy 1:13, Moses tells the people of Israel to “Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and...make them heads over you.” In Romans 13:3-4, the Apostle Paul tells the church that a moral civil authority is “God’s minister to you for good.” (*Miracle of America* 1.2, 1.3, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 3.8, 3.10, 6.5, 6.6, 7.1, 7.11, 7.16, 7.18, 7.20, 8.3, 8.6, 8.14)

Bible Verses (New King James Version):

Isaiah 33:22: “For the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us.”

Genesis 15:4-6: “The word of the Lord came to him [Abram] saying, ‘...One who will come from your own body shall be your heir.’ Then He [God] brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. ... So shall your descendants be.’ And he [Abram] believed in the Lord, and He [God] accounted it to him for righteousness.”

Genesis 17:4-8: “[God to Abraham] My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ... I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Genesis 22:15-18: “Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: ‘By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore.... In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.’”

Exodus 20:1-17: “And God spoke all these words, saying [to Israel]: ² ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³ You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. ⁷ You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. ¹² Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.’”

Exodus 34:27: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’”

Matthew 26:27-28: “He [Jesus Christ] took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them [His disciples], saying ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.’”

Hebrews 9:15: “He [Jesus Christ] is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions [sins] under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

Deuteronomy 1:13: “[Moses to Israelites] Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.”

Romans 13:1-4: “[Apostle Paul to believers] Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good.”

Sources:

Kamrath, Angela E. *The Miracle of America: The Influence of the Bible on the Founding History and Principles of the United States of America for a People of Every Belief*. Second Edition. Houston, TX: American Heritage Education Foundation, 2014, 2015.

Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV), Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.org, Zondervan Corporation, 1995-2010. Text characteristics may differ.

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____ Topic _____

Principles of the Mayflower Compact – Questions

1. Define covenant in your own words.
2. How did the Pilgrims' belief in God as sovereign ruler or king affect their religious and political worldview and actions?
3. How did the Pilgrims' belief in the Bible affect their actions?
4. How did the Pilgrims' Mayflower Compact reflect a covenant?
5. Considering the Bible scriptures on covenants, how might the Mayflower Compact compare/contrast with the covenant between God and Israel in the Old Testament and/or between God and His believers in the New Testament?
6. Why did the Pilgrims want self-government and the ability to choose their magistrates? How did their views of government compare/contrast with the societies from which they came?