

## JOHN COTTON

*God's Promise to His Plantations* (1630)

WHILE PREPARING for their voyage, Winthrop and his company composed *The Humble Request of . . . the Company Late Gone for New England*, in which they denied any intention of separating from the Church of England. Their protestations, often plausibly interpreted by later readers as an attempt to keep Laud off the scent, can also be read as a rejoinder to those English Puritans who were dubious about what seemed desertion from the ranks of the faithful. Also in 1630 there appeared *The Planter's Plea*, written by John White, one of the founders of the Dorchester Company and later of the Massachusetts Bay Company, who rehearsed many of Winthrop's arguments in defense of migration. White too insists that the planters are no Separatists, but in his extended analysis of English social, economic, and political conditions, as in his answers to "objections," White's presumed audience and intentions are ambiguous: is he seeking to soothe the bishop, or is he, like Winthrop, attempting to dispel the aspersions of other Puritans? In some respects, his plea can be read as addressed to those who have removed to New England, seeking once more to salve their consciences.

The most effective balm for those aboard the Winthrop fleet was, however, John Cotton's appearance at Southampton to preach a sermon blessing the venture. In 1630 Cotton was recognizably the pre-eminent English Puritan clergyman and intellectual, and his *nihil obstat* served as the ultimate in reassurance to both those who sailed and those who remained behind. But Cotton's blessing was far from unqualified. Although he notes a variety of social and economic circumstance that might lead some to choose exile, his depiction of England's condition and destiny falls far short of Hooker's nearly apocalyptic sense of impending national doom. Moreover, Cotton views migration neither as flight to avoid contamination nor as refuge from an irredeemably corrupt England. He carefully limits his characterization of the proper frame of mind in which to undertake removal, and he sketches, however briefly, the

more positive opportunities open to those about to settle in New England.

Most pointedly, Cotton reminds Winthrop's company of what lay in store should its members forswear, or forget, their brethren still in England, and the church of which all, he insists, are fellow members. Clearly at this point Cotton had no intention of joining in the migration himself. Though he spoke in other sermons of the possibility that God might "transplant us," he also consoled his people in Old Boston with the reminder that those who kept the faith amid the briars and thorns of Old England also had a promise from God: "fear not; there are more with us than against us." Indeed, not too long after the settlement of Massachusetts Bay, Cotton was writing to its clergy as a spokesman of English Puritanism, angrily asking an explanation for what he had heard of the practice, in some of the Bay churches, of refusing to accept English credentials of communion. His fears that those whom he had blessed were forming into Separate conventicles underlay many of the challenges he mounted after his own arrival in New England: his definition of the proper test of church membership (which divided him almost immediately from Thomas Hooker), his long debate with Roger Williams, and his sometimes rancorous disdain for the history and polity of Plymouth. But in 1630 his Southampton sermon was less a harbinger of his own later career than a vigorous reminder to the Winthrop company of just how sharp was the razor's edge on which their consciences were balanced.

The text of *God's Promise to His Plantations* is from *Old South Leaflets*, no. 53. Reprinted by permission.

### ☪ *God's Promise to His Plantations*

*II Samuel 7:10. Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more.*

... In this tenth verse is a double blessing promised:

First, the designment of a place for his people.

Secondly, a plantation of them in that place, from whence is promised a threefold blessing.

First, they shall dwell there like freeholders<sup>1</sup> in a place of their own.

Secondly, he promiseth them firm and durable possession; they shall move no more.

1. Freeholders owned their land outright—as opposed to copyholders, who held their land by a contract that subjected their heirs to "entry" fees and could be terminated by the landlord at virtually any time.

Thirdly, they shall have peaceable and quiet resting there. The sons of wickedness shall afflict them no more . . .

Now God makes room for a people three ways:

First, when he casts out the enemies of a people before them by lawful war with the inhabitants, which God calls them unto, as in Psalms 44:2, *Thou didst drive out the heathen before them . . .*

Secondly, when he gives a foreign people favor in the eyes of any native people to come and sit down with them either by way of purchase, as Abraham did obtain the field of Machpelah; or else when they give it in courtesy, as Pharaoh did the land of Goshen unto the sons of Jacob.

Thirdly, when he makes a country though not altogether void of inhabitants, yet void in that place where they reside. Where there is a vacant place, there is liberty for the sons of Adam or Noah to come and inhabit, though they neither buy it, nor ask their leaves . . .

It is a principle in nature, that in a vacant soil he that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his right it is . . .

This placing of people in this or that country is from God's sovereignty over all the earth, and the inhabitants thereof, as in Psalms 24:1, *The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof . . .* Therefore it is meet he should provide a place for all nations to inhabit, and have all the earth replenished. Only in the text here is meant some more special appointment, because God tells them it by his own mouth; he doth not so with other people, he doth not tell the children of Seir<sup>2</sup> that he hath appointed a place for them: that is, he gives them the land by promise; others take the land by his providence, but God's people take the land by promise: and therefore the land of Canaan is called a land of promise. Which they discern, first, by discerning themselves to be in Christ, in whom all the promises are yea, and amen.

Secondly, by finding his holy presence with them, to wit, when he plants them in the holy mountain of his inheritance, Exodus 15:17. And that is when he giveth them the liberty and purity of his ordinances. It is a land of promise, where they have provision for soul as well as for body. Ruth dwelt well for outward respects while she dwelt in Moab, but when she cometh to dwell in Israel, she is said to come under the wings of God, Ruth 2:12. When God wraps us in with his ordinances, and warms us with the life and power of them as with wings, there is a land of promise.

2. The land given by God to Esau and his descendants: "I gave unto Esau Mount Seir to possess it, but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt" (Joshua 24:4). Cotton here distinguishes between the people in covenant and "the children of Seir," who have been separated from God's ancient promise to Abraham: "I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee . . . all the land of Canaan; for an everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8; restated to Moses in Exodus 3).

This may teach us all where we do now dwell, or where after we may dwell. Be sure you look at every place appointed to you, from the hand of God: we may not rush into any place, and never say to God, "By your leave"; but we must discern how God appoints us this place. There is poor comfort in sitting down in any place, that you cannot say, "This place is appointed me of God." Canst thou say that God spied out this place for thee, and there hath settled thee above all hindrances? Didst thou find that God made room for thee either by lawful descent, or purchase, or gift, or other warrantable right? . . . If a man do remove, he must see that God hath espied out such a country for him . . .

*Question:* But how shall I know whether God hath appointed me such a place; if I be well where I am, what may warrant my removal?

*Answer:* . . . First, we may remove for the gaining of knowledge. Our Savior commends it in the queen of the south, that she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, Matthew 12:42. And surely with him she might have continued for the same end, if her personal calling had not recalled her home.

Secondly, some remove and travail for merchandise and gain-sake: *Daily bread may be sought from far*, Proverbs 31:14. Yea our Savior approveth travail for merchants, Matthew 13:45-46, when he compareth a Christian to a merchantman seeking pearls: for he never fetcheth a comparison from any unlawful thing to illustrate a thing lawful. The comparison from the unjust steward, and from the thief in the night, is not taken from the injustice of the one, or the theft of the other; but from the wisdom of the one, and the suddenness of the other; which in themselves are not unlawful.

Thirdly, to plant a colony, that is, a company that agree together to remove out of their own country, and settle a city or commonwealth elsewhere. Of such a colony we read in Acts 16:12, which God blessed and prospered exceedingly, and made it a glorious church. Nature teacheth bees to do so when as the hive is too full, they seek abroad for new dwellings: so when the hive of the commonwealth is so full that tradesmen cannot live one by another, but eat up one another, in this case it is lawful to remove.

Fourthly, God alloweth a man to remove, when he may employ his talents and gifts better elsewhere, especially when where he is, he is not bound by any special engagement. Thus God sent Joseph before to preserve the church: Joseph's wisdom and spirit was not fit for a shepherd, but for a counsellor of state, and therefore God sent him into Egypt . . .

Fifthly, for the liberty of the ordinances . . . This case was of seasonable use to our fathers in the days of Queen Mary, who removed to France and Germany in the beginning of her reign, upon proclamation of alteration of religion, before any persecution began.

There be evils to be avoided that may warrant removal. First, when some grievous sins overspread a country that threaten desolation . . . as in a threatening a wise man foreseeeth the plague, so in the threatening he seeth a commandment, to hide himself from it. This case might have been of seasonable use unto them of the Palatinate, when they saw their orthodox ministers banished, although themselves might for a while enjoy liberty of conscience.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, if men be overburdened with debts and miseries, as David's followers were: they may then retire out of the way (as they retired to David for safety) not to defraud their creditors (for *God is an avenger of such things*, I Thessalonians 4:6) but to gain further opportunity to discharge their debts, and to satisfy their creditors, I Samuel 22:1-2 . . .

*Use:* . . . when you have found God making way and room for you, and carrying you by his providence into any place, learn to walk thankfully before him, defraud him not of his rent, but offer yourselves unto his service: serve that God, and teach your children to serve him, that hath appointed you and them the place of your habitation . . .

*Question:* What is it for God to plant a people?

*Answer:* It is a metaphor taken from young imps;<sup>4</sup> I will plant them, that is, I will make them to take root there; and that is, where they and their soil agree well together, when they are well and sufficiently provided for, as a plant sucks nourishment from the soil that fitteth it . . .

He would give his people a *nail*, and a *place in his tabernacle*, Isaiah 56:5. And that is to give us part in Christ; for so the temple typified.<sup>5</sup> So then he plants us when he gives us root in Christ . . .

*Question:* What course would you have us take?

*Answer:* Have special care that you ever have the ordinances planted amongst you, or else never look for security. As soon as God's ordinances cease, your security ceaseth likewise; but if God plant his ordinances among you, fear not, he will maintain them . . .

Secondly, have a care to be implanted into the ordinances, that the word may be ingrafted into you, and you into it: if you take rooting in the ordinances, grow up thereby, bring forth much fruit, continue and abide therein, then you are vineyard of red wine, and the Lord will keep you . . .

Thirdly, be not unmindful of our Jerusalem at home, whether you leave us, or stay at home with us. *Oh pray for the peace of Jerusalem, they shall prosper that love her*, Psalms 122:6. *They shall all be con-*

3. The Protestant clergy was expelled from the Palatinate by Duke Maximilian in 1623.

4. Saplings.

5. "Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off" (Isaiah 56:5).

*founded and turned back that hate Sion*, Psalms 129:5. As God continueth his presence with us (blessed be his name), so be ye present in spirit with us, though absent in body: forget not the womb that bare you and the breast that gave you suck. Even ducklings hatched under an hen, though they take the water, yet will still have recourse to the wing that hatched them: how much more should chickens of the same feather, and yolk? In the amity and unity of brethren, the Lord hath not only promised, but commanded, a blessing, even life forevermore, Psalms 133:1-2.

Fourthly, go forth, every man that goeth, with a public spirit, looking not on your own things only, but also on the things of others, Philippians 2:4. This care of universal helpfulness was the prosperity of the first plantation of the primitive church, Acts 4:32.

Fifthly, have a tender care that you look well to the plants that spring from you, that is, to your children, that they do not degenerate as the Israelites did; after which they were vexed with afflictions on every hand. How came this to pass? Jeremiah 2:21, *I planted them a noble vine, holy, a right seed, how then art thou degenerate into a strange vine before me?* Your ancestors were of a noble divine spirit, but if they suffer their children to degenerate, to take loose courses, then God will surely pluck you up . . .

Sixthly, and lastly, offend not the poor natives, but as you partake in their land, so make them partakers of your precious faith: as you reap their temporals, so feed them with your spirituals: win them to the love of Christ, for whom Christ died. They never yet refused the gospel, and therefore more hope they will now receive it. Who knoweth whether God have reared this whole plantation for such an end.

*Use:* . . . for consolation to them that are planted by God in any place, that find rooting and establishing from God, this is a cause of much encouragement unto you, that what he hath planted he will maintain. Every plantation his right hand hath not planted shall be rooted up, but his own plantation shall prosper, and flourish. When he promiseth peace and safety, what enemies shall be able to make the promise of God of none effect? Neglect not walls, and bulwarks, and fortifications for your own defense, but

ever let the name of the Lord be your strong  
tower; and the word of his promise the  
rock of your refuge. His word  
that made heaven and earth  
will not fail, till hea-  
ven and earth be  
no more.  
Amen.