

John Winthrop – A Model of Christian Charity (1630)

A Reader's Edition

John Winthrop's (1587–1649) sermon, 'A Model of Christian Charity' (1630) surely ranks among the greatest literary productions of Colonial America. More importantly, Christians may well maintain that in it Winthrop articulates a genuine covenant between the American people and God: inasmuch as we are a self-invented country, free and prosperous to an unprecedented degree, it is both our prerogative and responsibility to create a model society; to do less is to deserve just censure. The ethical message is no less important for non-Christian Americans; one need merely substitute the word 'Conscience' for 'God' and the logic remains intact — for even if other people may forgive our dereliction of duty, Conscience cannot. Truly it is said: of whom much is given much is required.

May we take Winthrop's expressed vision of America as a model of Christian charity as prophetic and inspired? Why not? Winthrop no doubt prayed long and hard for guidance in what to tell his fellow voyagers to New England. The eloquence, lucidity, grace, and persuasiveness of the sermon are themselves evidence of his prayers being answered.

The rehabilitation of America would be much facilitated were more Christians today to read and reflect upon this work — which amounts to perhaps the finest sermon on Pauline social ethics ever made. This cause, however, is not helped by the presence of multiple, conflicting versions of the sermon in print and on the internet. "The man with two clocks never knows the time." Imagine the confusion if there were in circulation several conflicting versions of the Declaration of Independence. The present edition has been prepared with an aim to removing that obstacle by producing, insofar as possible, a single more reliable version. Details on sources and methods are supplied in the Appendix.

Pursuant to the aim of encouraging careful reading of and reflection on this masterful work, the first few pages of the sermon are omitted. That section, which treats of rules for lending and borrowing amongst the colonists, is markedly different in style, tone, beauty, and logical coherence. (Those interested may find it [here](#).) The difference is so striking that one could easily believe it was composed separately. While these initial remarks are

doubtless of historical interest, they really have little to do with what is the main purpose of the sermon, namely to express the vision of America as a model of charity.

A
Model of Christian Charity

Written
Onboard the Arbella,¹
On the Atlantic Ocean
By the Honorable John Winthrop Esq.

In his passage, (with the great company of religious people, of which Christian tribes he was the brave leader and famous governor;) from the island of Great Britain, to New England in the North America.

Anno 1630.

Having already set forth the *practice* of mercy² according to the rule of God's law, it will be useful to lay open the *grounds* of it also, being the other part of the Commandment; and that is the *affection* from which this exercise of mercy must arise. The Apostle tells us that this *love is the fulfilling of the law*.³

Not that it is enough to love our brother and so no further. But in regard of the excellency of his parts giving any motion to the other, as the soul to the body, and the power it has to set all the faculties on work in the outward exercise of this duty. As when we bid one make the clock strike, he does not lay hand on

¹ MC incorrectly spells this "Arrabella", which has produced some confusion. The autograph of Winthrop's *Journal* (p. 1) clearly spells the ship's name "Arbella". Previously called *Eagle*, it was re-named in honor of Lady Arbella Johnson, a prominent Puritan who accompanied the expedition, but who sadly died two months after arriving in Massachusetts. The handwriting of this title page is different from that of the sermon itself.

² Referring to the first part of the sermon (called a "preface" by Winthrop), which discusses rules for lending and borrowing amongst colonists, rich and poor.

³ Rom 13:10.

the hammer, which is the immediate instrument of the sound, but sets on work the first mover or main wheel, knowing that will certainly produce the sound which he intends — so the way to draw men to the works of mercy is not by force of argument from the goodness or necessity of the work. For though this course may enforce a rational mind to some present act of mercy, as is frequent in experience, yet it cannot work such a *habit* in a soul as shall make it prompt upon all occasions to produce the same effect but by framing these affections of love in the heart, which will as natively bring forth the other as any cause does produce the effect.

The definition which the Scripture gives us of Love is this: "*Love is the bond of perfection.*"⁴ First, it is a bond, or ligament. Secondly, it makes the work perfect. There is no body but consists of parts. And that which knits these parts together gives the body its perfection, because it makes each part so contiguous to [an]other as thereby they do mutually participate with each other, both in strength and infirmity, in pleasure and pain. To instance in the most perfect of all bodies, Christ and his Church make one body: the several parts of this body considered apart, before they were united, were as disproportionate and [with] as much disordering as so many contrary qualities or elements; but when Christ comes and by his Spirit and Love knits all these parts to himself and each to other, it is become the most perfect and best proportioned body in the world. "*Christ, by whom all the body being [coupled and] knit together by every joint, for the furniture thereof according to the effectual power which is in the measure of every perfection of parts*" (Eph 4:[15–]16),⁵ "*a glorious body without spot or wrinkle*";⁶ the ligaments hereof being Christ, or his Love, for Christ is Love (1 John 4:8).⁷ So this definition is right: "*Love is the bond of perfection.*"

From hence we may frame these conclusions:

⁴ Col 3:14.

⁵ This verse is awkwardly phrased in the Geneva and King James translations. One modern rendering is: "Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function." (Jerusalem Bible)

⁶ Eph 5:27.

⁷ The verse, of course, actually says *God is Love*.

First, all true Christians are of one body in Christ. (1 Cor 12:12, 13, [27])⁸ "*Ye are the body of Christ and members of [your?] part.*"

Secondly. The ligaments of this body which knit together are Love.

Thirdly. No body can be perfect which wants its proper ligaments.

Fourthly. All the parts of this body being thus united are made so contiguous in a special relation as they must needs partake of each other's strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe. "*If one member suffers, all suffer with it; if one be in honor, all rejoice with it.*" (1 Cor 12:26)

Fifthly. This sensibleness and sympathy of each other's conditions will necessarily infuse into each part a native desire and endeavor to strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort the other. To insist a little on this conclusion being the product of all the former, the truth hereof will appear both by precept and pattern: "Ye ought to lay down your lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16),⁹ *Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Gal 6:2)

For patterns we have that first of our Savior, who out of his good will in obedience to his Father, becoming a part of this body, and being knit with it in the bond of Love, found such a native sensibleness of our infirmities and sorrows as he willingly yielded himself to death to ease the infirmities of the rest of his body, and so heal their sorrows.

From the like sympathy of parts did the Apostles and many thousands of the Saints lay down their lives for Christ again. The like we may see in the members of this body among themselves. Paul could have been contented to have been separated from Christ that the Jews might not be cut off from the body. (Rom 9[:2-4])¹⁰ It is very observable which he professes of his affectionate part[ak]ing

⁸ All of 1 Cor 12:12-27 applies.

⁹ MC mistakenly gives this as 1 John 3:10.

¹⁰ MC appears to say "1 Rom 9", but there is of course only one epistle to the Romans.

with every member: *Who is weak* (says he) *and I am not weak? Who is offended and I burn not;*¹¹ and again, "*Therefore we are comforted because ye were comforted.*" (2 Cor 7:13) Of Epaphroditus he speaks that he regarded not his own life to [do] him service (Phil 2:30). So Phoebe and others are called the servants of the Church.¹² Now it is apparent that they served not for wages or by constraint, but out of love.

The like we shall find in the histories of the Church in all ages: the sweet *sympathy of affections* which was in the members of this body one towards another; their cheerfulness in serving and suffering together; how liberal they were without repining, harborers without grudging, and helpful without reproaching. And all from hence they had fervent love amongst them which only make[s] the practice of mercy constant and easy.

The next consideration is *how this love comes to be wrought*. Adam, in his first estate,¹³ was a perfect model of mankind in all their generations, and in him this love was perfected in regard of the habit. But Adam, rent in himself from his Creator, rent all his posterity also one from another. Whence it comes that every man is born with this principle in him: to love and seek himself only. And thus a man continues till Christ comes and takes possession of the soul and infuses another principle: of love to God and our brother. And this latter, having continual supply from Christ as the head and root by which he is united, gets the predominance in the soul, so by little and little expels the former. *Love cometh of God and every one that loveth is born of God* (1 John 4:7), so that this love is the fruit of the new birth, and none can have it but the new creature. Now when this quality is thus formed in the souls of men, it works like the Spirit upon the dry bones. (Ezek. 37) Bone came to bone. It gathers together the scattered bones or perfect *old man*, Adam,¹⁴ and knits them into one body again in Christ whereby a man is become again *a living soul*.¹⁵

¹¹ 2 Cor 11:29.

¹² Rom 16:1.

¹³ i.e., before the fall; cf. Jude 1:6.

¹⁴ Col 3:9–10; Eph 4:22; Rom 6:6.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15:45; Gen 2:7.

The third consideration is concerning the *exercise* of this love, which is twofold: inward or outward. The outward has been handled in the former preface of this discourse. For unfolding the other we must take in our way that maxim of philosophy, *simile simili gaudet*¹⁶ or like will to like; for as it is, things which are carved¹⁷ with disaffection to each other, the ground of it is from a dissimilitude¹⁸ or [*blank*]¹⁹ arising from the contrary or different nature of the things themselves; so the ground of love is an apprehension of some resemblance in the things loved to that which affects it. This is the cause why the Lord loves the creature, so far as it has any of His Image in it. He loves His elect because they are like Himself. He beholds them in His beloved Son.

So a mother loves her child, because she thoroughly²⁰ conceives a resemblance of herself in it. Thus it is between the members of Christ: each discerns by the work of the Spirit his own image and resemblance in another, and therefore cannot but love him as he loves himself. Now when the soul, which is of a sociable nature, finds any thing like to itself, it is like Adam when Eve was brought to him. She²¹ must have it one with herself. "*This is flesh of my flesh,*" (says she) and "*bone of my bone.*"²² She conceives a great delight in it; therefore she desires nearness and familiarity with it. She has a great propensity to do it good, and receives such content²³ in it, as fearing the miscarriage of her beloved, she bestows it in the inmost closet of her heart. She will not endure that it shall want any good which she can give it. If by occasion she be withdrawn from the company of it, she is still looking towards the place where she left her beloved. If she hear it groan, she is with it presently. If she find it sad and disconsolate, she sighs and mourns with it. She has no such joy, as to see her beloved merry

¹⁶ More commonly, *similis simili gaudet*.

¹⁷ v1931 notes "The text is here evidently corrupt."; v1838 reads "turned".

¹⁸ i.e., dissimilarity.

¹⁹ MC: a large, intentionally blank space here indicates one or possibly more missing words.

²⁰ MC: "thoroughly".

²¹ i.e., the mother; or, possibly, a soul; v1838, wrongly taking it to refer to Eve, changes the last word of this sentence to "himself", meaning Adam.

²² Gen 2:23.

²³ i.e., contentment.

and thriving. If she see it wronged, she cannot bear it without passion. She sets no bounds of her affections, nor has any thought of reward. She finds recompense enough in the exercise of her love towards it.

We may see this acted to life in Jonathan and David. Jonathan, a valiant man endued²⁴ with the spirit of Christ, so soon as he discovers the same spirit in David, had presently his heart knit to him by this linement²⁵ of love, so that it is said he *loved him as his own soul*.²⁶ He takes so great pleasure in him that he strips himself to adorn his beloved. His father's kingdom was not so precious to him as his beloved David; David shall have it with all his heart. Himself desires no more but that he may be near to him to rejoice in his good. He chooses to converse with him in the wilderness even to the hazard of his own life, rather than²⁷ with the great courtiers in his father's palace. When he sees danger towards him, he spares neither care, pains, nor peril to divert it. When injury was offered his beloved David, he could not bear it, though from his own father. And when they must part for a season only, they thought their hearts would have broke for sorrow, had not their affections found vent by abundance of tears.

Other instances might be brought to show the nature of this affection, as of Ruth and Naomi and many others, but this truth is cleared²⁸ enough.

If any shall object that it is not possible that love should be bred or upheld without hope of requital, it is granted — but that is not our cause,²⁹ for this love is always under reward. It never gives but [that] it always receives with advantage.

²⁴ i.e., endowed.

²⁵ In 17th century English, this word is both a variant spelling of liniment (a healing or soothing ointment), and a different term meaning something like alignment; v1838 gives "ligament".

²⁶ 1 Sam 18:1.

²⁷ Throughout MC the word 'then' appears where 'than' would be expected; according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, 'then' and 'than' were not distinguished by spelling until c.1700.

²⁸ 'clarified' or 'made clear' would be modern equivalents.

²⁹ i.e., such is not the case here.

First, in regard that among the members of the same body, love and affection are reciprocal in a most equal and sweet kind of commerce.

Secondly,³⁰ in regard of the pleasure and content that the exercise of love carries with it: as we may see in the natural body, the mouth is at all the pains to receive and mince the food which serves for the nourishment of all the other parts of the body, yet it has no cause to complain. For first, the other parts send back by secret passages a due proportion of the same nourishment in a better form³¹ for the strengthening and comforting [of] the mouth. Secondly, the labor of the mouth is accompanied with such pleasure and content as far exceeds the pains it takes. So is it in all the labor of love.³² Among Christians the party loving reaps love, again as was shown before, which the soul covets more than all the wealth in the world.

Thirdly,³³ nothing yields more pleasure and content to the soul than when it finds that which it may love fervently, for to love and live beloved is the soul's paradise, both here and in heaven. In the state of wedlock there be many comforts to bear out the troubles of that condition; but let such as have tried the most say if there be any sweetness in that condition comparable to the exercise of mutual love.

From the former considerations arise these conclusions.

First, this love among Christians is a real thing, not imaginary.

Secondly. This love is as absolutely necessary to the being of the body of Christ as the sinews and other ligaments of a natural body are to the being of that body.

³⁰ v1931: "2ly [3ly]".

³¹ e.g., glucose sent by blood to supply the mouth's muscles.

³² Perhaps meaning, 'Such is the case in all labors of love.'

³³ MC wrongly numbers this "2ly"; v1931 suggests this should be "4ly", which also seems incorrect.

Thirdly. This love is a divine spiritual nature — free, active, strong, courageous, permanent, undervaluing all things beneath its proper object — and of all the graces this makes us nearer to resemble the virtues of our heavenly Father.

Fourthly, it rests in the love and welfare of its beloved.

For the full and certain knowledge of these truths concerning the nature, use, [and] excellency of this grace, that which the Holy Ghost has left recorded, 1 Cor 13, may give full satisfaction — which is needful for every true member of this lovely body of the Lord Jesus to work upon their hearts by prayer, meditation, [and] continual exercise at least of the special [*blank*]³⁴ of this grace till Christ be formed in them,³⁵ and they in him, all in each other knit together by this bond of Love.

It rests now to make some application of this discourse by the present design which gave the occasion of writing of it. Herein are four things to be propounded: first, the persons; secondly, the work; thirdly, the end; fourthly, the means.

First, for the *persons*. We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ. In which respect, only though we were absent from each other many miles and had our employments as far distant, yet we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of Love and live in the exercise of it if we would have comfort of our being in Christ. This was notorious in the practice of the Christians in former times, as is testified of the Waldenses³⁶ from the mouth of one of the adversaries, Æneas Sylvius,³⁷ *mutuo [solent amare] pene antequam norunt*,³⁸ "they used to love any of their own religion even before they were acquainted with them."

³⁴ MC places a blank space here to indicate a missing word; v1838: "[influence]"; v1931: "[power]".

³⁵ Gal 4:19.

³⁶ A proto-Protestant sect founded by Peter Waldo in the 13th century, subjected to especially harsh persecutions in 1487 and 1545.

³⁷ Pope Pius II (1405–1464).

³⁸ MC: a blank space here indicates one or more missing words; last Latin word incorrectly spelled "norint"; v1931 suggests *solent amare* instead of *ament*.

Secondly, for the *work* we have in hand. It is by a mutual consent through a special overruling providence, and a more than an ordinary approbation of the Churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government, both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this the care of the public must overweigh all private respects, by which not only Conscience,³⁹ but mere civil policy does bind us; for it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.

Thirdly, the *end* is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord: the comfort and increase of the body of Christ whereof we are members, that ourselves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world to serve the Lord and "*work out our salvation*"⁴⁰ under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.

Fourthly for the *means* whereby this must be effected. They are twofold: a conformity with the work and end we aim at. These we see are extraordinary. Therefore we must not content ourselves with usual ordinary means whatsoever we did or ought to have done when we lived in England. The same must we do and more also where we go. That which the most in their churches maintain as a truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice, as in this duty of Love we must love brotherly *without dissimulation*;⁴¹ we must *love one another with a pure heart fervently*;⁴² we must *bear one another's burdens*;⁴³ we must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren.

Neither must we think that the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as He does from those among whom we have lived, and that for three reasons.

³⁹ v1931: "The copyist wrote 'consequence,' above which a later hand has interlined 'conscience.'"

⁴⁰ Phil 2:12.

⁴¹ Rom 12:9–10.

⁴² 1 Pet 1:22.

⁴³ Gal 6:2.

First, in regard of the more near bond of marriage between Him and us, wherein He has taken us to be His after a most strict and peculiar manner which will make Him the more jealous of our love and obedience. So He tells the people of Israel: "*You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for your transgressions.*"⁴⁴

Secondly, because the Lord will be sanctified in them that come near Him. We know that there were many that corrupted the service of the Lord, some setting up altars before His own, others offering both strange fire and strange sacrifices also; yet there came no fire from heaven, or other sudden judgment upon them, as done⁴⁵ upon Nadab and Abihu,⁴⁶ who yet we may think did not sin presumptuously.

Thirdly, when God gives a special commission He looks to have it strictly observed in every article. When He gave Saul a commission to destroy Amalek,⁴⁷ He indented⁴⁸ with him upon certain articles and because he failed in one of the least — and that upon a fair pretense⁴⁹ — it lost him the kingdom which should have been his reward if he had observed his commission.

Thus stands the cause between God and us: we are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord has given us leave to draw our own articles; we have professed to enterprise these actions upon these and these ends; we have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then has He ratified this Covenant and sealed our commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it. But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles, which are the ends we have

⁴⁴ Amos 3:2.

⁴⁵ MC: "did".

⁴⁶ Lev 10:1–2.

⁴⁷ 1 Sam 15; 28:16–18.

⁴⁸ An archaic term (related to 'indentured') for which we might substitute 'contracted'; God's instructions, delivered through the prophet Samuel, were that Saul should utterly destroy the Amalekites — killing even infants and animals. Saul, however, captured King Agag alive and spared the best livestock for later sacrifice.

⁴⁹ 1 Sam 15:21.

propounded, and dissembling with our God shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

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.*"⁵⁰ 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, our community as members of the same body. So shall we *keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*⁵¹

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, "the Lord make it like that of New England."

For we must consider that we shall be as a "*city upon a hill.*"⁵² 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

⁵⁰ Mic 6:8.

⁵¹ Eph 4:3.

⁵² Matt 5: 14; in this section Winthrop is implicitly referencing all of Matt 5:13–16.

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 whither⁵³ we are going.

And to shut up this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel (Deut. 30):⁵⁴

Beloved, "there is now set before us life and good, death 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 pleasures 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.

⁵³ Here and twice below MC gives "whether" ('if') when "whither" ('to where') is indicated. These two terms were distinct in meaning and spelling even in Winthrop's time. Winthrop is quoting and paraphrasing Deut 30, where, in both the Geneva and King James versions, the word "whither" is used.

⁵⁴ The sermon ends with a close paraphrase of Deut 30:15–20 (Moses' last words to the Israelites), but with pronouns changed to reflect that, unlike Moses, Winthrop includes himself among those being addressed.

References⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ In chronological order.

Appendix: Methods, Sources and Notation

Notation:

MC (manuscript copy) = the handwritten copy, now held by the New York Historical Society, of a presumed autograph by Winthrop or of an earlier copy.

v1838 = the 1838 published transcription of MC made under the supervision of James Savage of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

v1931 = the 1931 published transcription of MC edited by Dr. Stewart Mitchell of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Square brackets ([]) indicate actual or conjectured missing words.

Occasional words or phrases it would have been natural to emphasize in a sermon are italicized.

Scripture citations: Those supplied by Winthrop are placed in the text; per modern convention, these are moved to follow rather than precede the material to which they apply. Additional scriptural citations are placed in footnotes.

Scriptural quotes: (1) *unquoted italics* indicate a verbatim passage as it appears in the Geneva Version (GV) or King James Version (KJV) — Winthrop mostly quoted from the former, but not always; "*quoted italics*" indicate a nearly exact quotation; "quoted, non-italicized" passages indicate a looser paraphrase.

Methods: the present edition is mainly based on the 1838 and 1931 transcriptions of MC published by the Massachusetts Historical Society. Computer software was used to (1) modernize the spelling of both versions, and (2) to compare the two resulting modernized versions. In the latter case, discrepancies were resolved by referring to high-resolution scanned images of MC. The resulting text was then compared with an 'independent' transcription of MC published the Old South Society (1916) and modernized by Prof. Mark Kalthoff of Hillsdale College; again discrepancies were resolved with recourse to scanned images of MC. A slightly revised version of v1931 prepared by Lawrence Towner (1969) was also consulted.

Archaic words (except those in scriptural quotes) have been replaced by their modern equivalents.

The extremely long paragraphs of MC (possibly a strategy to save paper) have been broken into smaller ones to help reveal the structure and logic of the sermon. Punctuation has been added or modified to break up long sentences and otherwise conform to modern conventions. In defense of this it should be noted that punctuation in MC is rather haphazard; and also that, for all we know, MC derives from a stenographer's transcription of the oral sermon, in which case its punctuation and paragraphs would be somewhat conjectural and potentially incorrect.

Capitalization modified per modern conventions.

Version history:

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