

Slip-Sliding Away

BY JEFF SIEMON

A FEW WEEKS AGO, our Search staff returned from the yearly summer national staff conference. This has historically been a time to reconnect with colleagues from around the nation and enjoy a time of inspiration and refreshment for four or five wonderful days.



Pilgrims we met from the Plymouth plantation

those of us who are historically inclined, this year's trip

took the cake! Plymouth, Massachusetts was our conference setting and almost all of us took special excursions to see Boston, Cape Cod and other New England sites.

With all of my travels over so many years, I had surprisingly never set foot in Massachusetts except once to play the New England Patriots in 1979. And all I saw on that particular trip was Logan Airport, a hotel in Foxboro and the football stadium.

Plymouth and Boston were a delight beyond words! Of course, Plymouth was the place where so much of our national history had its origin. We stood before Plymouth Rock, toured an exact replica of the Mayflower, and visited the historic graveyard that was graced with such prominent headstones as those of William Bradford, John Alden, William Brewster, Miles Standish, and Adoniram Judson. We even enjoyed a traditional Pilgrim meal (forks excluded!) at the Plymouth Plantation.

And then there was quaint and charming Boston with its 18th century cobblestone streets, Boston Harbor, Fenway Park, Beacon Hill, Boston Common, the Old North Church, Harvard University and more. Most of us walked the Freedom Trail so as to be reminded of the significant events that led to the ultimate rupture with England and the Revolutionary War.

As I walked through history, it became apparent that there were two powerful forces that had profoundly influ-

enced New Englanders. These forces have helped to not only shape the people who live in this part of our country but our national identity as well.

The primary force was that of faith, manifested in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the sacred Scriptures from which that Gospel is recounted. The Pilgrims were mostly Puritans as were the thousands of other immigrants who followed them to the New World in the years after the initial journey in 1620. In the history of our nation, one would be hard pressed to find a more passionate, God-fearing collection of people than these Puritans. Whether or not one agrees with the separatistic, quasi-theocratic brand of Christianity that some Puritan communities practiced, there is little debate about the deep spiritual commitment that defined and motivated their impressive lives. I would go so far as to suggest that they may well have been the most influential people in the history of our national life and in the shaping of the American spirit.

The second force that influenced the Puritans and, ultimately, New Englanders in general, is the priority given to the life of the mind. This focus followed naturally from the Puritan belief that God has most specifically revealed Himself in the divinely inspired Holy Scriptures. It was there that the more learned person could most ably mine the unfathomable riches of God's Word both for his own edification and as well as for the instruction of others.

Accordingly, one of the first enactments of the colonial community was to establish a college in 1636 for training of pastors for professional ministry. That college came to be known as Harvard and its central focus is described in one of its prominent rules:

"Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."

Puritan pulpits were filled by the best and the brightest the New World had to offer and they provided a compelling model for parishioners who desired to follow Christ with all of their hearts and minds.

Over sixty colleges and 250,000 students residing in the Boston area alone is evidence that New Englanders continue to be influenced by the priority of the mind. At the same time, today one could hardly find a more secular

region in our nation. A recent and exhaustive Barna poll cites Massachusetts as the state with the lowest level of traditional Christian belief. What has happened to that initial pillar of faith that had such a dramatic influence in the New World?

Biblical orthodoxy is difficult to maintain in the best of circumstances. There almost seems to be an inevitable process of incremental deterioration over time as witnessed in many of today's religious colleges and even in several Christian denominations. By the early 19th century, the Enlightenment was in full flower and the determination to throw off the shackles of "repressive religious ideology" was having its effect on New England. Many traditionally conservative Congregational churches gave way to the seduction of Unitarianism which denied the deity of Christ, the fallenness of humanity, and the inspiration of the Bible, while trumpeting reason and conscience as the only guides to religious truth. Boston was the center of this new and tolerant reformulation of "Christianity."

It wasn't just a watering down of the gospel that marked 18th and 19th century New England, but it was also the introduction of many novel and avant-garde ideas, a good number of which had their origin in Eastern mysticism. Ralph Waldo Emerson was in many ways the proto-typical, 19th century, intellectual Bostonian. He had graduated from both Harvard University and Harvard Divinity School, became a Unitarian minister and ultimately abandoned even that unorthodox faith to embrace Transcendentalism (a movement influenced by German Romanticism and Eastern mysticism).

Later in the 19th century, Boston also became the center for the new religion of Christian Science as Mary Baker Eddy polished and repackaged the Eastern mystical teachings of Phineas Quimby. This movement had its heyday in the first half of the 20th century especially attracting well-educated and genteel Americans. While on our recent trip, it was fascinating to observe Christian Science's massive headquarters in downtown Boston and tour its many exhibits. In spite of the significant following Christian Science once enjoyed, I am told its massive 4,000-seat, downtown-campus church today only draws a



Old North Church, where Paul Revere's two lanterns were hung.

couple hundred elderly people for Sunday worship services.

The common theme in Boston and New England's spiritual and cultural decline has been the elevation of human reason above all other ways of knowing and the corresponding decline of biblical faith. Placing human reason above God's revelation is rooted in the sin of pride. It is not surprising that Augustine warned that intellectual pride was the most sinister form of pride because more than any other, it powerfully feeds into mankind's native arrogance and his quest for autonomy.

The Apostle Paul has warned us just as he warned the children and grandchildren of the New England Puritans when he wrote: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they

will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Bostonians and New Englanders have largely given up on their biblical roots and have gone the way of secular Europe. There is a good chance that Minneapolis and St. Paul may not be far behind. What can a follower of Christ do in the midst of this strong tendency toward spiritual and cultural drift? Our needed and prescribed response is found in this same passage in 2 Timothy (v. 2): "Preach the Word ... in season and out of season; ... with great patience and careful instruction." And a little later in verse five: "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

This is precisely what we have been attempting to do through the ministry of Search over the past twenty years. Like the Puritans of old, we are encouraging spiritual insiders and outsiders to engage the intellect but to keep it tethered to the Mind above all minds and to His eternal Word. By God's grace, and through the loving witness of His people, may you and I, and the Twin Cities as a whole, avoid the spiritual and cultural drift of Boston and New England and become that "city on a hill" that John Winthrop and the Pilgrim's envisioned. ■