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The Spiritual Legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1920.

COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS BY ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF THE PILGRIM
FATHERS," AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
NOVEMBER 14, 1920, - CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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It is now three hundred years since a group of men assembled in the cabin of their vessel, which was then in sight of the unknown shores of New England, and there signed a solemn Compact, which was the basis of the new Commonwealth which they were to establish upon the shores of this continent.

This act was unheralded; it was not attended by any pomp or circumstance. The forty-one male adults who signed this Compact were simple folks, only twelve of whom could pride themselves upon the title of "Master" or "Mister," which was then of some importance and significance. There was nothing of the pageantry which attends often the inauguration of a new government. They were exiles, these men and women, driven from their home by the tyranny of intolerance, and by a love for freedom, sustained in the sixty-three days of the stormy voyage across the uncharted Atlantic by this faith and this hope.

And yet this day when this Compact was signed, and the place where it was signed, marks the birth place of popular constitutional liberty in America. Within four months after the signing of this Compact, one-half of this

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simple group of one hundred and two persons--men, women and children--were dead. They ~~had~~ died of hunger and exposure. Many a day there were no more than six or seven men left to attend the sick and to bury the dead. They buried their dead in unmarked graves, lest the natives would realize how sadly the ranks of these people had been decimated and how safe an attack upon them would be. All the rigors of a New England winter were unleashed against these exiles; they were sorely tried. And yet they endured; and because of the heroic endurance of this handful of men and women, they were destined to become the nucleus not alone of a great state but of a new civilization.

Now, who were these men? What was it they were seeking in this new land? Unlike some who preceded them and many who followed them, they were not in search of wealth. They were not adventurers, who desired to exploit the fabulous wealth of the new continent; they were not of the unfortunate riff-raff of the Old World, who were deported to the New World, there in exile to atone for their crimes. They were simple folks--yeomen, artisans, day laborers--pilgrims, volunteer exiles, in quest of liberty; and even of something more than liberty. For in Holland, whither these men had first fled from England, and where they had lived in comparative peace for ten years, they were able to find that religious tolerance which they sought, for Holland was perhaps one of the two lands in the whole of Europe where toleration and liberty of

conscience prevailed.

But in spite of the fact that they enjoyed comparative freedom in Holland, they were unhappy, because they dwelt in the midst of an alien--even if kind--people. Their children were being gradually weaned from them; they were losing those traits of conduct and character and speech that were dear to their hearts--traits which they wished to see preserved and perpetuated in their race. They were losing their cultural identity in this strange land.

And so they determined, after living ten years in this free land, to surrender the comparative ease and comfort and set out on a venturesome voyage into an unknown land, in order that they may enjoy not only freedom, but in order that they may live their own lives, preserving unto themselves and for their children those traits of character, and those habits of conduct and thought, those racial and cultural characteristics which were dear to their hearts.

What sort of liberty did they seek--these Pilgrims? Principally religious liberty. (It is well worth remembering that primitive Christianity was democratic in its constitution and in its makeup. The religious communities of early Christianity were self-governing bodies; they appointed their own leaders. But from the day when Christianity under Constantine became a state religion, unto the day when Martin Luther nailed upon the

doors of the church at Wittenburg the ninety-five theses which heralded the coming of the Reformation, --during that period of over a thousand years the church grew evermore autocratic and absolute in its power.

The power was gradually, slowly but surely, concentrated into the hands of a few. Church and state were identified, and temporal power was frequently called to enforce spiritual decrees and to crush disobedience. There was very little room for freedom of thought, for the free expression of religious conviction in Europe during those centuries.

Now, in the sixteenth century an attempt was made to destroy the absolute authority of the church as represented in its chief, the pope. It was claimed that the only source of religious authority was the Bible, the revealed Word of God; and so the Bible was placed into the hands of the common people, and the men became the ultimate arbiters of religious ideas.

Coincident with this attempt to challenge the absolute authority of Rome was this other attempt made to reform the service of the church--to strip it of its vast ceremonialism, and what they called barbaric display, which had grown upon it during the centuries. In other words, an attempt to restore the simplicity of worship of primitive Christianity.

Now, in England the break with Rome took place under Henry VIII. The motives which prompted Henry VIII

to break with Rome were not of the noblest. What he was after, principally, was greater license in his matrimonial ventures; but Henry VIII would never have dared to break with Rome had the minds of the people at large not been prepared for such a decisive step. But the Reformation, inaugurated by Henry VIII, was not sufficiently thoroughgoing. While the authority of the pope was abolished, the king erected unto himself the power of the pope. The king became the head of the church, and state and church remained one as before.

There was very little of theologic revision of the creed; there was very little revision of the ceremonies, of the ritual. And so before very long there arose in England a movement to purify the faith. A body of Puritans arose to ask for a more thoroughgoing reform within the fold. They asked for the abolition of the vestments, of the college of bishops; they asked for a less rigid ritual. The Puritans were not Nonconformists; the Puritans did not leave the established church. They hoped to remain within the church, to reform it from within.

But they made very little progress. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth an Act of Conformity was passed, which compelled every minister to use only that ritual adopted by Parliament. Under the reign of James I very little progress for real reform was made in England. So ^{They were} that a group of people, dissatisfied with the conditions as they were, and entertaining little hope as to the

possibility of reforming the church within, decided to break with the church, to separate from the church and to found independent congregations. They were known as the Dissenters, the Nonconformists, ^{the Brownists}, after the name of one of their great leaders; and ^{of} these Separatists, these Nonconformists, the Pilgrim Fathers came.

It stands to reason that these ^{men} were soon persecuted. No autocratic religion permits dissension and difference of opinion. Their worship was broken up by mobs, the worshippers were publicly insulted, their leaders were imprisoned,--every obstacle was put in their way, until some of the communities soon realized that England was no spiritual home for them; that they could not worship God as they pleased in their own native land.

^{They fled to the Netherlands}
(And so in 1595 one small London congregation fled to Amsterdam, and a few years later, in 1606, another small congregation from Gainsborough fled to Holland; and in 1608, two years later, still another small congregation of a hundred souls fled from the little village of Scroobe, in Yorkshire, to Amsterdam; from Amsterdam they went a year later to Leyden, Holland, remaining in Leyden another year; and from this small congregation coming from Scroobe, this little village in England, came the Pilgrim Fathers.)

^{After} After ten years in Holland they determined, (as I said before,) to leave Holland, because the land, the civilization, did not promise them to perpetuate those things within themselves which they held dear. And so

they set sail from Leyden for Southampton, and from Southampton, after many experiences, they arrived off the shores of New England, on November 11, 1620, in the Mayflower. And on that day, before they set foot on the American soil, they assembled in the cabin of the ship, and there drew up this Compact which was to guide them in their political organization in the New World:

"In the Name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britaine, France & Ireland kind, defender of the faith, haveing undertaken, for the glorie of God, and advancements of the Christian faiths, the honour of our king & countrie, a voyage to plant the first colonie in the Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutually, in the presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civill body politick for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by vertue hereof to enacte, constitute and frame such just & equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for the generall good of the Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

"In witness whereof, we have hereunder
subscribed our names at Cape Codd the II of
November, in the year of the raigne of our soveraigne
lord King James, of England, France & Ireland, the
eighteenth, and of Scotland the fiftie-fourth, An^o:
Dom. 1620."

Now, in seeking religious freedom the Pilgrim
Fathers were also seeking political freedom. It is very
interesting to note how closely religious freedom and
political freedom have been at all times. Their progress
was parallel; they marched hand in hand. A people that
despises autocracy in religion, that refuses to submit to
papal authority--to the dictates of one individual or to
a group--an oligarchy, will ultimately ^{resist} ~~gain~~ similar
absolute power in political life.

(It has been truly observed that political progress
was swifter and more certain in Protestant lands than in
Catholic lands, because where people once began to question
the authority of the church, they were inevitably led to
question the authority of the king. When they demand of
their ministers that their religious leaders be elected
by themselves, they will soon demand that their political
leaders and spokesmen be elected by themselves and from
and among themselves.

Up to very recently the only countries in Europe
where freedom existed were the Protestant lands. It is
very interesting to note that revolutions in Protestant
lands are almost always inspired by a religious conviction,

and that the revolutionists are deeply pious and religious men, while in Catholic lands, or in lands where there is a church that is absolutely autocratic, the revolutionists, as a rule, are frankly anti-religious.

When Cromwell and his men marched into battle they sang songs, but in France, where Protestantism had made no progress, the exponents of revolution were frankly and openly hostile to religion, and during the Revolution the churches were turned into temples dedicated to the Goddess of Reason as opposed to the God of Faith.

In Protestant lands political freedom emanates directly from a combination of religious freedom; in Catholic lands, or in all lands where religion is absolute and despotic, where the church and the state are one in their theory and in their philosophy of absolute divine power, the one who fights the state must also fight the church. You have that remarkable example, also, in Russia today. The revolutionists of Russia are frankly anti-religious. And why? Because the church of Russia heretofore was absolute, despotic, undemocratic in its conception and in its organization. It was one with the state; it indorsed the acts of the state; it taught absolute obedience to the state. So that when the revolutionists began to undermine the authority of the state they felt compelled at the same time to undermine the authority of the church.

But the English revolutionists were deeply pious

and religious men, and their demands for political freedom were based upon religious tenets and upon the Bible; so that when the Pilgrims sought religious freedom in the New World , they naturally and logically also sought political freedom. And in that small group of Pilgrims there was the seed of republicanism, of absolute democracy, which was to see its fruition in the Revolution.

That was not so in a colony like Virginia, because the colonists of Virginia were adherents to the established church; they were Loyalists throughout, and during the Cromwell uprising they sided with the king as against Cromwell and Parliament.

The Pilgrims can be said to have been the first exponents and champions not alone of religious freedom in America, but the political freedom as well; and in this demand for democratic freedom--political equality, they were helped and indorsed by the Bible. One cannot over-estimate the part which the Bible played in the lives of these Pilgrims in their conceptions, in their habits of thought, of conduct, of speech. The Bible was their sole and only guide. They accepted the Word of the Bible literally in its absolute significance.

They spoke the language of the Bible; they named their children after the Biblical characters--the characters of the Old Testament. Their whole life was saturated with the spirit of the Hebrew Bible. They looked upon themselves as the children of Israel coming out of England, which

was to them Egypt; and from the yoke of the king, who was to them a Pharaoh,--coming to the new land, which was to them a new Canaan. And they looked to the Bible for the inspiration of founding the perfect type of government--the new commonwealth.

(It is well to remember a fact very often overlooked--that the early government of our ancestors was perhaps the most perfect democratic form known to history. From the time when our ancestors left Egypt until the time when the first king--Saul--was crowned, a period of perhaps four hundred years or more, our people lived under a perfect democratic form of government. Their chief spokesman--their leader--was a judge selected by themselves. He gathered about him a group of seventy elders, selected from the people, but the ultimate authority and power was vested within the popular assembly of the people. There was no man of absolute power; there was no oriental obedience and submission given unto anyone; there was no pomp, and no display, and no pageantry and heraldry of royalty. The judge was just the "first among his equals," selected by the people, to do the will of the people, and subject to the absolute recall of the people.

It was only when external pressure arose--the need of uniting against the incoming hordes of the Philistines, the external pressure which forced the tribes into a compact union, and ultimately compelled them to select a king to rule over them, that the old democratic

form of government yielded to a monarchical form of government. And you will recall that the prophet Samuel denounced the people for asking for a king. The prophet Samuel said unto them: "God will give you a king as a punishment for your sins."

And the Pilgrims caught the tremendous significance of that statement--that God looks with disfavor upon royalty; and over and again they quoted this remarkable statement of the prophet Samuel as proof that royalty is in disfavor with God; that obedience to tyranny is not the will of God, but that disobedience to tyranny is obedience to God.

It is a very interesting thing to remember that the first seal and legend drafted for the new United States by Adams, Franklin and Jefferson had a picture of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, the Egyptians sunk into the waters of the Red Sea, and the figure of Moses pointing to the Promised Land; and around this picture was the inscription, "Disobedience to tyrants is obedience to God."

It is well to remember what a dominant, determining force the spirit of the Hebrew Bible and the spirit of the Jew played in those critical moments of the founding of our Republic. The Pilgrims--the Puritans--were the Christian Hebrews; they lived in the spirit, in the atmosphere of the Old Testament, and that is why their form of government was democratic, and their sense of

righteousness and social justice so absolute and so complete.

What is the spiritual legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers? In the first place, perhaps their most precious legacy unto their descendents today is the thought, the conviction, the principle of absolute religious freedom and toleration. The Pilgrim Fathers themselves tried to remain true to this principle. Those who followed them-- the Puritans who came over a few years later, believed in freedom of conscience, but only for themselves and not for others. They forgot their persecutions and in turn became persecutors of others.

It is really a most remarkable thing to note, throughout history in religious life or in political life, how readily a group of people that had been suffering under the yoke of oppression, once freed turns in blindness and stupidity to oppress other people. (You have that case in Poland today. Poland, oppressed for a century, denied its rights and its privileges, once released from oppression, seizes upon the first opportunity to turn against its weaker neighbors to oppress them.

You have the case of a minority such as is today dominating and controlling the destinies of Russia, who, when they were out of power, cried against and denounced the authority of a king or czar, that held them in subjection and oppressed them; but once they seized power they in turn became the oppressors of other minorities.)

People want freedom, liberty of conscience,

freedom for self-expression for themselves, and once they obtain that they forget about other men. And so the Puritans had not been in this land five years before they drove from their midst the man who was perhaps the most inspiring figure of the first ^{few} hundred years of American history,--Roger Williams. They drove him into the wilderness to face death from exposure or from the hands of the Indians, because he differed in religious convictions from these Puritans, who themselves had fled from persecution.

It is well to remember this fact: We all pay lip service to the principle of religious toleration, but when we are about to put it into actual practice, we forget it. Religious toleration means, in its fullest sense, religious freedom to every group, however small; and for every religious conviction, however, distasteful, to live its own life and to express itself without let or without hindrance.

Religious antipathies are not dead, and religious hatreds have not been relegated to the limbo of the past. Do not think yourselves into a beatific state of beatitude--into a fool's paradise; the monster of religious prejudice is only slumbering, and may be awakened into a vicious and destructive existence at any time and at any moment. Let loose into this land a few irresponsible, semi-demented individuals, who, in the name of religion, would preach suppression, intolerance, bigotry, and you will have

religious persecutions, as you had them in this land centuries ago.

We must constantly be on the alert to defend this fundamental right without which nothing else is of value, because it is basic to everything else,---The right of peoples of all shades of opinion to worship as they please. Any man or any group of men that artificially stimulates hatred against one group or another, that spreads suspicion and libel and unfounded charges against one group or another, are hostile, are traitors to the spirit of this land.)

That is the legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers. And with it goes their political legacy, political freedom--the right of groups to express themselves freely--their political convictions and their political ideas. The majority is to rule, but the minority is to make itself heard; without it progress is impossible. The majority, because of its ~~vastness~~ in number, and because of its control and its power, must never assume that the minority must be disregarded or suppressed; that its convictions are of little consequence because it is very small in number.

Progress is made possible through the insistence of a few upon ideals unaccepted as yet by the many. All reformations, (all pilgrimages), are initiated by a few simple folks. All reformations, as a rule, come from the lowly, from the poor, from the denied, from the oppressed, because the powerful and the privileged are satisfied with

the status quo, and are content to let things alone; the minority must not try to rule; the minority must not try by force or violence to seize the reins of the government. But it must try--it is its sacred duty to try, if it is convinced of its ideals and its principles, to propagate, to educate men, so that before long, or after many years, they will be the majority.

I believe there is a spirit creeping into our own land today, a spirit of unfortunate intolerance, which does not auger well for the future peace of our land; a spirit not at all in consonance with the spirit which dominated our conduct for the past two hundred years; a spirit of the arrogant majority that ruthlessly and scornfully has stamped out every opinion because it is radically different from the opinions of the majority.

The legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers is the legacy of absolute freedom--the right of free expression of economic opinion in this land.

And there is yet another legacy which they have left for us to treasure, to emulate, and that is the legacy of pilgrimage; that a few men left the comforts of home for the sake of an ideal. Today there are too many of us who leave our ideals for the sake of the comforts of life. The first great pilgrim in history was Abraham, our ancestor, who left his home, his land, his friends, his comforts, and went out into the wilderness to worship God as he pleased.

The time has not yet come when men and women can

forget this ideal of pilgrimage--not so much in a physical, geographic sense, but in a spiritual sense,--the readiness and the willingness to sacrifice comforts and luxuries, and even the good opinions of your friends--influence, position, friends, for the sake of an overpowering ideal which grips you, and holds you, and dominates you completely.

We value so much today the practical man, the man who deals very little in theories and in ideals; the man who fits in admirably with our ideals. But the man who fits in admirably is not always the leader, the pathfinder, the prophet of the new day. It is the man who cannot fit in; it is the man you cannot always call practical, but who is, in the ultimate sense of the word, the most practical because he is the most forward looking man. It is the pilgrim that makes progress in civilization possible. That, to my mind, is a legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers.

And, lastly, there is this legacy--the legacy of strong, robust, hardworking, serious-minded, adventuresome and enterprising men and women--pioneers of a new order and a new day. This land would not be what it is if it were not for this robust, healthy, strong spirit of its early founders. There was nothing pampered and nothing weak and nothing feminine about them. They went out and faced all the accumulated hostility of hard Nature. And they endured.

Now we had that race with us, of sturdy pioneers, as long as our frontiers had not been reached. But our

frontiers have been reached, and our continent has been exploited, and there is the danger that we are losing that physically and morally sturdy, independent, self-reliant type of men and women, who can cut through the wilderness of a continent in order to make it comfortable and habitable.

(I understand that we can pride ourselves today upon fifteen thousand millionaires in this land, and there is a danger that this profuse wealth of our land is undermining the stamina, the strength of our people; that we are becoming a little more pampered and weakened by luxury. And when that happens we are spiritually demoralized; we are degenerating.)

Where the pilgrims, and the pioneers, and the frontiersmen of a hundred, and two hundred, and three hundred years ago found the challenge to Nature, we must substitute another type of challenge, another type of discipline for our young men and young women, and for our old men and old women. (We must set up as the ideal of life, purposeful, strenuous exercise. I think it was Theodore Roosevelt who seized that thought in its fulness; and because of that he began to preach the strenuous life, not because he was so much an adherent of physical exercise, but because he realized that without the strenuous discipline of men and women we grow flabby and weak and impotent.)

And this strenuous life one can find not alone in the physical life but in the spiritual life; one can

find not alone in the great outdoors of God but in the indoors of one's soul. We must set up the ideal of service, of social service among men and women. No one can live unto himself, because in living unto himself one is narrowed and weakened; but one must live unto himself, his people and his fellowmen.

That, to my mind, is the precious heritage which we are privileged to treasure from the Pilgrim Fathers--religious freedom, political freedom, and spiritual and physical discipline, and a readiness to set out at all times upon new pilgrimages which are to bring us to distant lands of greater happiness.

