

GOD'S WORK STANDS

Reflections on the Influence of Christianity
In Virginia's First Colonial Period and the Implications for the
Ministries of the Christian Broadcasting Network and Regent University

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I. THE REGENT VISION

In the summer of 1977, the vision for Regent University became a reality. From the small beginnings of a school in television, journalism and film, a fully accredited, freestanding graduate institution now exists. Today, its alumni provide dynamic, pro-active leadership in the arenas of communications, education, business, theology, law, government, psychology, counseling and leadership studies. Regent University is a bold innovator and a recognized model for Christ-centered and biblically anchored higher education in the United States. This vision for Christian leadership to change the world is being extended to thousands across the globe through expanded on-line, international and undergraduate programs.

What motivated the development of such a powerful and creative program for leadership training? Why would a worldwide evangelistic ministry, like the Christian Broadcasting Network, take on such a responsibility? Is Regent University a new concept for "Kingdom work" or is it rooted in the Great Commission mandate and subsequent covenant relationships with God and His people across generations? The answers to these questions are found in an historical perspective dating back 400 years in the great story of America.

II. BEGINNINGS

Regent's vision began in August 1975 at Disneyland's Grande Hotel just outside Los Angeles, California. M. G. "Pat" Robertson, Founder and President of the then fifteen year old Christian Broadcasting Network, bowed his head to give thanks for a lunch of cantaloupe and cottage cheese. He was seeking God about the decision to purchase a few acres of land in Virginia Beach, Virginia to build larger facilities for his rapidly expanding television ministry.

The WYAH studio building located in Portsmouth, Virginia, and headquarters for the Christian Broadcasting Network, was taxed beyond its limits. "As I bowed my head," Pat recalls, "I sensed the Lord speak to me. Buy all 143 acres and build an international communications center and school for my glory to take the message of Jesus Christ to the world. Little did I know then what God was about to do".

What was God about to do? What impact would this west coast response to Pat's prayers have on an east coast ministry, a country and a world? The answers to these questions are anchored further back in history in another place and time.

That place was the King's palace in London, England. That time was spring, 1606. Richard Hakluyt waited to be summoned before the Privy Council of King James I. Often this Anglican clergyman dreamed of settling the New World he had heard so much about. Years of praying and working were coming to fulfillment.

His passion for this cause began, when as a lad, he visited his lawyer, geographer cousin in London. During those visits, he heard the stories of a new world across the great sea teeming with inhabitants who knew nothing of the Christian faith. With the information and artifacts he collected from the journeys of men like Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake, "Preacher Hakluyt" put together a comprehensive collection of maps and information on this land called "Virginia."

Finally, his dream of a permanent English settlement, an outpost for new world evangelism, would be realized. "Today must be the day," Hakluyt may have prayed as he stood waiting with his merchant friends. King James was a learned and skilled man who appeared to be as concerned about the things of the Christian faith as he was the future of England. He listened intently to the presentation of the London Company that day. Their vision, commitment and sense of divine destiny stirred within him a sense of divine mission. The London Company received their charter and with it the responsibility of settling this virgin land for God, the King and England.

In issuing the London Company charter the King wrote:

"We greatly commend and graciously accept their desires for the furtherance of so noble a work, which may, by the providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the glory of His Divine Majesty, in propagating of Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God and may in time bring the infidels and savages living in those parts to human civility and a settled, quiet government."

The London Company's stated mission included a spiritual priority. In the Company's published tract entitled A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purposes and Ends of the Plantation, they wrote:

"First, to preach and baptize into Christian religion and by the propagation of the Gospel, to recover out of the arms of the devil a number of poor and miserable souls wrapped up into death in almost invincible ignorance; to endeavor the fulfilling and accomplishments of the number of the elect which

shall be gathered from out of all corners of the earth; and to add to our myte the treasury of heaven.”

On December 20, 1606, 105 settlers and 40 seamen set sail from England in three vessels to begin their purposed task. Hakluyt, unable to make the journey for reasons history does not record fully, probably stood by and watched as the Rev. Robert Hunt was installed as the spiritual leader for this expedition.

After what the records describe as a difficult and perilous voyage, they landed at the windswept dunes of present day Virginia Beach on April 26, 1607. Before permitting the settlers to move on, Hunt required that each wait before God in a time of personal examination and cleansing. On April 29, they erected a wooden cross, claimed the land for God and the King holding the first recorded prayer service of the new land in a spirit of thanksgiving for God’s mercy and grace. They named the place Cape Henry after James’ son, Henry Prince of Wales.

In that sacred moment, a covenant was made in response to a vision. Hunt declared, “From these very shores the Gospel shall go forth not only to this New World but the entire world.” Act 1, Scene 1 in the unfolding drama of America had begun.

While we are unsure of the scriptural meditation used by Chaplain Hunt that day, it might well have been the words written by the Apostle Paul about Abraham in Romans 4:20, 21 “He, (Abraham) staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God and being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform.”

With the vision caught and the covenant made, the settlers boarded their ships, moved into the Chesapeake Bay and on up the King’s (James) River. At a spot, 40 miles from the river’s mouth, they constructed Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the new world. The task of taming the wilderness and evangelizing the Indians had begun.

Much has been written about the trials and exploits of those early days in Jamestown. Famine, disease and unpredictable relations with the Indians added to the constant burden of the unfriendly environment. There was no gold the size of pomegranates lying on the beaches as some had been told when they were recruited for this journey. Only stalwart courage and the protecting hand of Providence kept Hakluyt’s vision alive despite the conditions and imperfect motivations of many.

THE VISION EXPANDS

We turn to the second act in Virginia’s history of progress and development. England and Spain were at war. The history of both countries is filled with stories and legends of the swashbuckling encounters between the Spanish Armada and the Royal Navy. That war threatened to move across the ocean to the shores of

Virginia. Fearful of the Spanish, the colonists decided to move further up the James River to find “a more secure seat of government.” At a spot twelve miles south of the current city of Richmond, they located a peninsula surrounded on three sides by water.

In 1611, they established the village of Henricus named in honor of England’s patron Prince Henry. With the Spanish threat minimized, relations with the Indians stabilized and shelters built, they turned their attention more fully to the spiritual purpose that drew them to this land - reaching the Indians with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Under the leadership of the Rev. Alexander Whitaker, known to historians as the “Apostle of Virginia,” the mission to “rest these savages from invincible ignorance” took on new energy. The burden that Whitaker felt for this important task is illustrated in his sermon entitled “Good News from Virginia” published in 1612. It was sent to England to rally financial support for the Church’s work at Henricus and Jamestown. The following excerpt provides insight into the intensity of Whitaker’s call.

“Let the miserable condition of these naked slaves of the devil move you to compassion. They acknowledge that there is a great good God, but they know Him not. Wherefore they serve the devil for fear after a most base manner. If this be their life, what think you shall become of them after death, but to be partakers with the devil and his angels in hell forevermore?

And you, my brethren, my fellow laborers, send up your earnest prayers to God for his church in Virginia, that since his harvest is great, but the laborers few, He would thrust forth laborers into his harvest; and pray also for me that the ministration of His gospel may be powerful and effectual by me to the salvation of many, and advancement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory forevermore, Amen.”

From the beginning of the English explorations, the Indians, under the leadership of Chief Powhatan, father of Princess Pocahontas, generally were friendly and helpful. John Rolfe’s marriage to Pocahontas, and the resulting trip to England where she won the hearts of the British people, did much to open the doors for evangelization. Pocahontas is considered the first convert to the Protestant Christian faith from the New World. Her untimely death, along with some misdirected evangelistic zeal of colonists, led to strained relationships between the Indians and the settlers.

IV. THE EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE

The next phase of the vision involved the children of the Indians. It was felt that if they could embrace Christianity before being entrenched in the faith of their

forefathers that the Gospel might have a foothold. It was here the idea of education emerged as the primary method for evangelization.

In the spring of 1617, Rev. Whitaker tragically drowned attempting to cross a section of the James River. The Rev. Patrick Copeland, sent to Henricus to continue Whitaker's work, wrote back to England "there is a much greater want of schools rather than churches in this new land." The vision of effective ministry now had the new dimension of education. Through formal schooling, the Indians could be "wrest from invincible ignorance," taught how to read the Scriptures and convinced of the Truth of the Gospel. The new King James Version of the Scriptures, published in 1611, became the primary textbook.

In 1618, the London Company submitted another request for a charter to begin an educational program in the New World. The school, called Henricus College, was to be a comprehensive educational institution. Copeland envisioned a program that included the full spectrum of education from grammar school to post university level curricula. The stated purpose was "education for the training of the Indians in the true knowledge of God and in some useful employment and to educate the children of the settlers who were now deprived of formal education." They planned a university level program modeled after Cambridge and Oxford. After that, the grammar school activities would begin. Education, in keeping with the "teaching them to observe all that I commanded" of Jesus' Great Commission now became the main vehicle through which the promise made at Cape Henry would be achieved.

Excitement swept the English Church. The King approved the charter and set aside ten thousand acres as an endowment for construction and operations. Offerings were collected and gifts solicited by the Archbishop of Canterbury. A communion set and altar furnishings were secured for the Chapel. Trustees were appointed and a head master employed to develop the curriculum, purchase the books and begin the selection of faculty. Lastly, the chief builder, a soldier of suitable reputation and renown, Captain William Weldon, was commissioned to begin construction immediately.

On August 28, 1619, a year after the charter was approved, William Weldon set sail with a crew of 50 skilled workmen to begin the task of clearing the land and erecting the university. They landed at Jamestown on November 4, 1619, after what the records describe as a miraculous voyage of good weather and God's speed. Among them was the ship's surgeon John Woodson about whom history records was "a man of high character and of great value to the young colony".

However, storm clouds began to gather. While Weldon's war record was exceptional, he was ill prepared of spirit and temperament for the challenges the primitive life style would bring. He was skilled at fighting and working in a civilized environment. Life in the Virginia wilderness however was more difficult than Weldon expected. He discovered that the fulfillment of this great vision would

require sacrifice, inconvenience and continual hardship - obstacles he was unwilling to face. Within a few days after landing, he dismissed forty of the workmen, freeing them from their commitments and sending them off to survive as best they could. Communications between England and Virginia were limited. The London Company and the King assumed all was moving as planned.

Meanwhile, Weldon excused his lack of progress on shortages of materials, lack of cooperation and limited help from England. During the three years Weldon was in charge, the records declare, "no timber was squared nor brick laid". Weldon was called home to give an accounting for his poor stewardship.

The task of evangelism pressed in on the settlers during those unproductive years. Seeing little progress on the educational vision, they turned to other methods of outreach and persuasion. They tampered with the vision and took things into their own hands. Witch doctors were kidnapped, tortured and killed if they refused to convert. Indian children were taken from their parents. Methods ranging from barbaric cruelty to inviting Indian families to live in the homes of the settlers were employed to a limited effect.

On March 22nd 1622, the Indian Chief Opechancanough launched a treacherous and skillfully conceived attack against the English settlements throughout Virginia. Henricus was destroyed. The records of these assaults make gruesome reading. Had it not been for the thirty-minute advance warning of a young Indian boy, recently converted to the Christian faith, the Jamestown settlement would have been obliterated. A plaque in his honor hangs today in the ruins of the Jamestown church. As it was, one third of the settlers were killed. Some villages were destroyed so completely that only recently have archeologists discovered their existence. The ongoing excavations of Wolstenholme Towne and Martin's Hundred, on the Carter's Grove Plantation near Williamsburg, reveal the thoroughness and horror of the attacks.

Word reached England and took its toll. The vision was obscured by the unfaithfulness of one man. Zealous, well-meaning individuals changed the plan. The passion for evangelism was gone. Anger and revenge filled British hearts. Attention turned northward to the efforts of the Plymouth Company – another group chartered by King James. Hakluyt's vision and the sacrifices of Hunt, Whittaker and Copeland appeared to be lost and forever forgotten.

But there was a word, penned ten years earlier, that echoes across colonial history like a prophetic utterance. The Rev. William Crashaw, writing in the introduction to Whitaker's sermon "Good News from Virginia" declared:

"This work is of God and will therefore stand. It may be hindered, but it cannot be overthrown. If we then, were so base as to betray and forsake it, God's whose it is, will stir up our children after us and give them that good land to enjoy that men shall say, God hath made His ways known upon the earth and His saving health among all nations."

God's people made a commitment. God added to it His promise. An unalterable covenant was made that Providence would not forget. The visions, prayers and promises of the faithful are never forgotten and always kept. "For the Lord thy God is a merciful God; He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto thee" (Deut. 4:31).

V. THE COVENANT CONTINUES

Pat opened his eyes and looked up from the table. God said, "Build it." He had learned over the past fifteen years to take God at His Word. Step by step, God ordered the events and unfolded His plan. Pat purchased all 143 acres of prime commercial property. It was virgin land, preserved for this great purpose and described in the historical plats as "New Light". CBN was awarded the first license for a Christian organization to build and operate a satellite communication dish beaming the message of Christ to the nations "from these very shores". The Lord unveiled the plan for Regent University - to train men and women in the things of God and in useful employment taking the message of Jesus Christ to a waiting world trapped in what appears to be almost invincible ignorance. Pat's wife, Dede, was led to what is the biblical cornerstone for Regent's mission.

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

II Tim. 2:2 NKJV

Today, four centuries after Cape Henry and Henricus College, the message of Jesus Christ broadcasts daily throughout North America and many countries of the world. Today the foundations of a Christian University, committed to Jesus Christ and anchored to the Truth of the Scriptures, are firmly established. Timbers are squared and bricks laid. Thousands of God's brightest and best take classes in graduate schools of Communications, Education, Divinity, Business, Law, Government, Psychology/Counseling and Leadership Studies. Many more are taught by extension and in executive seminars - all in a model reminiscent of the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. Hundreds of thousands throughout the world can be reached through the next phases of Regent's undergraduate efforts.

Today the CBN Center and Regent University are located just twelve miles from the Cape Henry landing memorial. Research revealed that Pat's ancestral lineage dates back to the family of the Rev. Robert Hunt, the colony's first Chaplain. John Woodson, ship's surgeon on the expedition that brought the crew to begin the University construction, is also a relative of the Robertson's. Today, "from these very shores", the Christian Broadcasting Network and Regent University stand together as partners in one of the most significant ministries of world outreach in the history of the Christian movement.

Why did CBN move into higher education? The answer – when God makes a covenant, He keeps it - completely. God calls and equips the generations that will do His will and serve His purposes. The Great Commission’s “teaching them to observe all I have commanded” requires that disciple making, through instruction anchored to God’s unchanging Word and empowered by His Holy Spirit, be an essential part of our Lord’s saving and transforming mission.

Now the responsibility for the covenant’s fulfillment comes into our hands for what might well be one of the most important periods in human history. God is never late - His promises are never forgotten. He has raised up another generation, the children’s children of those early settlers, and given them this land as their inheritance. God’s work stands. And we must stand with it “so that men may say that God has made His ways known upon the earth and His saving health among the nations”.

Notes: The historical context of the preceding article came out of Dr. David Gyertson’s research on higher education in Colonial America done in 1977 and 1978 as a part of his Doctoral defense and dissertation preparations at Michigan State University. The findings, upon which this article is written, were presented March 28, 1992 by Dr. Gyertson as the keynote address at the American Heritage Continuing Education Conference in Williamsburg Virginia under the title of “Henricus College (1619) America’s First Colonial College”. A highlight of the conference was the participation of a direct descendant of Chief Opechancanough who today embraces the Christian faith. Dr. Gyertson owes a debt of gratitude to Phyllis Mackall, former Editor of the monthly “Flame” publication of the Christian Broadcasting Network, for her pioneering and inspiring work on the lives of Richard Hakluyt, Robert Hunt and Alexander Whitaker. The bibliography, used in Dr. Gyertson’s research, is attached.

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