



JOHN ELIOT 1604 – 1690

The 1628 charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company stated that one of the chief purposes of establishing a colony in New England was “to win the natives of the country to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Savior of mankind.” The seal of the colony had the picture of an Indian and the words of the Macedonian to Paul from Acts 16:9 “Come Over and Help Us.”

John Eliot took that directive to heart. He was known as “The Apostle to the Indians” among the early Puritan colonies in America. Having come to Massachusetts in 1631, he became the pastor of the church in Roxbury the next year. However, during his fifty-eight-year ministry, he considered it his mission not only to pastor the colonists there, but also to reach the surrounding Indian tribes with a Christian witness. John Eliot had been studying the Algonquian language, one which was understood by most of the New England tribes. He began to speak with the Indians who were captured in the inter-tribal Pequot war. However he was not satisfied with a mere outward change of religious beliefs, but emphasized repentance and belief in Jesus Christ as Savior.

Speaking in Algonquian, Eliot began by giving them gifts and he would describe the glorious power, goodness, and greatness of God as seen in His creation, the Ten Commandments and the punishment for breaking the Holy Law. He explained their need for salvation and finally offering the comforting words that “God had sent Jesus Christ to die for their sins.” John Eliot spent time listening to the Indian’s questions and answering them, using their culture as examples to explain Biblical truths. Those who believed often left their nomadic lives and established villages to separate themselves from their pagan backgrounds. These became known as “praying Indian towns.”

Both John Eliot and the Puritans recognized that as the Indians believed, the entire fabric of their lives was changing. To give them a standard for Christian living, they would need a translation of the Bible in their heart language. So, John Eliot began the immense task of translating the Bible into Algonquin. In 1663 this translation became the first Bible printed in America. He also composed an Indian primer, an Indian grammar and an Indian psalter.

John Eliot died at the age of 85, having lived a life full of service to the Lord. The hard labor of his life was characteristic of Puritans in all occupations. He was mourned by his congregation and his beloved Indian neighbors.