

## A Pox to You! Cotton Mather, the Inoculation Crisis, and Purpose

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can Cotton Mather's commitment to the people of Boston help you understand your own purpose?
- **Virtue:** Purpose
- **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question "why do I exist?" It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question "what are you for?"
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the work and life of Cotton Mather and how it was shaped by his purpose. They will explore how his actions and his identity helped him achieve a great advancement for modern medicine and through his example, learn how they can pursue their own purpose for the greater good of mankind.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Cotton Mather's performance during the smallpox outbreak in Boston in the eighteenth century
  - Students will understand how they can pursue their purpose in their own lives
  - Students will apply this knowledge to pursue the purpose in their own lives.
- **Background**
  - Smallpox was one of the deadliest diseases in colonial America. The disease would spread through port cities about once a generation when enough of a population existed that was never exposed and thereby had no immunity. Although inoculation existed in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the procedure did not yet exist in Europe or America. In 1721, Puritan minister Cotton Mather and physician Zabdiel Boylston attempted to introduce the procedure to save lives during a smallpox epidemic in Boston. Despite great opposition, they proved that inoculation was a viable medical procedure. From there, it would spread slowly to the other colonies. Although it would continue to arouse great animosity wherever it was attempted, the great medical discovery saved thousands of lives in colonial America. By the time of the American Revolution, General George Washington would order the procedure for his troops and those wishing to enter the Continental Army.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Contagion
  - Afflicted
  - Epidemic
  - Quarantined
  - Inoculation
  - Immunity
  - Scurrilous
  - Satirical
  - Tormented
  - Mercilessly
  - blaspheme
  - Invective
  - Irate
  - Beleaguered
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- What role did Cotton Mather play in the advancement of modern medicine?
- How did this discovery benefit mankind?
- What responsibility does Cotton Mather feel toward his fellow citizens in Boston? How does this shape his purpose?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
  - What is the historical context of the narrative?
  - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
  - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
  - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
  - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
  - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
  - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
  - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Mather, Cotton. *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*. Boston: Society, 1911.
- Tony Williams, *Pox and the Covenant: Mather, Franklin, and the Epidemic that Shaped America's Destiny* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2010).
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, 1706-1757*. Auckland, N.Z.: Floating Press, 2009.
- Brands, H. W. *The First American: The Life and times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

## Handout A: A Pox to You!: Cotton Mather, the Inoculation Crisis, and Purpose

### Background

Smallpox was one of the deadliest diseases in colonial America. The disease would spread through port cities about once a generation when enough of a population existed that was never exposed and thereby had no immunity. Although inoculation existed in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the procedure did not yet exist in Europe or America. In 1721, Puritan minister Cotton Mather and physician Zabdiel Boylston attempted to introduce the procedure to save lives during a smallpox epidemic in Boston. Despite great opposition, they proved that inoculation was a viable medical procedure. From there, it would spread slowly to the other colonies. Although it would continue to arouse great animosity wherever it was attempted, the great medical discovery saved thousands of lives in colonial America. By the time of the American Revolution, General George Washington would order the procedure for his troops and those wishing to enter the Continental Army.

### Narrative:

In the spring of 1721, Rev. Cotton Mather received frightening news that spread like wildfire through the streets of Boston. A sailor from the HMS Seahorse had landed in Boston with smallpox and unknowingly spread the contagion throughout the city. As the number of afflicted multiplied, Rev. Mather was gravely concerned about safety of the townspeople, the members of his congregation, and his own children. He had a brilliant and innovative idea to combat the growing smallpox epidemic, but one that would stir up fierce opposition and endanger his life. He would have to muster every ounce of courage he had to face the trial and stick to his purpose of saving lives.

On May 8, the leaders in the town government learned that the sailor and one other person had smallpox. They immediately quarantined the ship in Boston Harbor and the sick persons in homes with guards posted. They learned two weeks later that their countermeasures were ineffective as eight more cases appeared and in every corner of Boston. The government gave up any hope of stopping the disease and let it run its course through the population, which meant allowing hundreds of people to die. When they learned of the growing epidemic, one thousand residents fled out of Boston as fast as their horses could carry them. Mather would not give up so easily.

Rev. Mather had learned about a life-saving procedure of inoculation from a slave and a journal of the prestigious British Royal Society of scientists, of which he was a member. Inoculation was a simple procedure in which live smallpox virus would be mixed into the blood of a patient who would thereby suffer a less deadly form of the disease and acquire lifetime immunity. When he learned about inoculation five years earlier, Mather had pledged to himself: "If I should live to see the smallpox again enter into our city, I would immediately procure a consult of physicians to introduce a practice, which may be of so very happy a tendency" because it would save many lives. In June, 1721 Mather resolved to introduce inoculation into Boston and proposed the idea to the city's doctors, but they refused to attempt it because they feared that it would contribute to the epidemic. They also did not want to interfere against what they perceived as God's will in bringing the disease and doubted Mather's information because it was gained from a slave.

Mather persisted despite the doctors' opposition and eventually persuaded one physician, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, to try inoculation on his own son and two slaves who survived it. In July, several people came to Dr. Boylston to be inoculated. Popular hostility to inoculation grew as the citizens learned of the procedure, and the doctors published newspaper articles and pamphlets against it. The town government investigated the matter and ordered Dr. Boylston to stop inoculating people, but he ignored them because he was saving lives.

While the debate raged on in the newspapers and pamphlets, the death toll mounted. Eleven Bostonians died in July and twenty-six the following month. Fear gripped the city, and social intercourse abruptly ended as people shut up their homes against the disease. Businesses closed, boatmen refused to bring firewood, and church congregations did not see all of their members at services.

Rev. Mather felt the strain from all sides during the growing crisis. He prayed for hundreds of sick members of his congregation every day. He was the victim of abusive words of doctors and others in town publications. In August,

a young Benjamin Franklin and his brother James even started an anti-inoculation newspaper that served as a mouthpiece for the opposition and published every scurrilous and satirical attack on the minister and his dangerous medicine. Mather suffered perhaps the greatest stress when his own son returned home from Harvard and wanted to get inoculated. Mather had to confer with his own father, Rev. Increase Mather, because he was tormented and paralyzed with fear by the possible loss of his son. Weeks later, he did tragically lose a beloved adult daughter to a fever unrelated to smallpox. Still, he persisted in his chosen course of action because it believed it right.

Mather tried to cling to his purpose, but he felt besieged from every side. He complained that his opponents mercilessly attacked him and Dr. Boylston. "They rave, they rail, they blaspheme . . . And not only the physician who began the experiment, but I also am an object of their fury – their furious obloquies and invective." He did not quit however.

The death toll achieved frightening proportions as 101 victims succumbed to smallpox in September and over 400 in October. Thousands of Bostonians were abed with the disease. Furious townspeople confronted Mather in the street and accused him of contributing to the deadly outbreak. The printed attacks on the minister were scandalous for a Puritan society in which ministers were highly respected as natural leaders. Nerves were stretched beyond the breaking point. Mather and James Franklin angrily met in the street one day in early November and exchanged irate words.

A few days later, an unknown person slipped through the night with murderous intent and crept through the darkness toward the Mather home. Lifting the fuse of a homemade grenade to a flame, the assassin lit the bomb and then hurled it through a window of Mather's home. The home's inhabitants, including some recovering inoculation patients, were startled awake by the breaking glass, however, they were very relieved to see that the bomb failed to explode. It carried a note that read, "Cotton, you dog . . . I'll inoculate you with this, with a pox to you!" With some exaggeration, the beleaguered Mather confided to his diary that he felt like a victim, but he was not to be diverted from his purpose.

The disease ran its course with the arrival of winter and a shortage of human hosts for the disease. Mather and Boylston's inoculation program was very successful. Their persistence resulted in the successful inoculation of nearly 250 volunteers. Only six patients possibly died from the procedure. Contrarily, nearly 1,000 people died from the smallpox epidemic. An unlikely alliance between a minister and one lone doctor led to its first introduction into the American colonies. Their purpose of saving lives by inoculating people over great popular and professional opposition strengthened them to persist even when their lives were threatened and the majority of people thought they should stop.