

## Part 4: The Modern Church (1600-2000) Week 12: How the Reformation Got to America

### **The Reformation Comes to America**

#### *Separatists*

The English colonies came on America on May 2, 1607 at James River. The first English settlers were Separatists, rejecting the Church of England. John Robinson was their first pastor.

#### *Non-Separating Congregationalists*

In 1623 another English colony came and in 1629 they received a royal charter as the "Massachusetts Bay Company." By 1630, there were 1000 Puritans under their governor, John Winthrop; by 1641 the colony, now called, "New England," had reached some 20,000 inhabitants. They spread out in the New England area, practicing the congregational way of life. The reasons for coming to America were varied, but religion was foundational. By 1776, approximately 75% held to the Puritan-Calvinistic world view (the percentage is actually 85-90% if you add non-English speakers who trace their roots back to Geneva). These people were Non-Conforming, Non-Separating Congregationalists, that is, they were members of the Church of England who rejected the church hierarchy and imposition of things such as vestments and a specific liturgy. They also lived in the congregational way, meaning, that they made every effort to make each congregation a complete unit only responsible to Christ.

*\*\*It is interesting to note that at this time every household had three basic texts: the Bible, the Psalter, and the Heidelberg Catechism.*

### **Deformation of the Reformation: Case Study #1**

One essential element of the congregational way was the stress on the church as a community of "visible saints." This means they wanted a truly disciplined and pious Christian community and they felt that only discipline could only maintain that piety.

Thus, the question of "what is necessary for church membership" became a hot topic in colonial America. There developed two tendencies:

#### 1) Emphasis on Evidence

Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepherd said that the church had to look for a changed life for one to join the church. One had to undergo a period of "law-work and preparation," then coming to Christ in a conversion experience, and seeing evidences of a changed life – with an emphasis on the latter.

#### 2) Emphasis on Experience

For others among the Puritans, this sounded moralistic. For ministers like John Cotton what was important was one's conversion narrative, their experience of conversion itself and looking to the internal regeneration of God.

But this question of what qualifies one for membership in the church devolved into "what is the nature of one's conversion testimony?" The "Antinomian Controversy" ensued. In 1637 Anne Hutchenson was put on trial for criticizing the movement in New England as too moralistic by saying the stress on sanctification as a sign of grace was false. John Cotton initially defended her, but then made peace with other ministers. Her case was seriously weakened because she tried to support her position by an appeal to special revelation, i.e., the word of her testimony. After being convicted she fled to Rhode Island.

Because of these un-Reformed emphases, in the late 1650's there were problems about what to do with the young people in the church who got married, had not yet professed faith, had children, and presented their children for baptism. Could non-communicant members present their children for baptism? The classic Reformed position had been that only communicant members can present their children for baptism. But in New England other than religious factors came into play. In order to be a voting member of the Commonwealth, you had to be a voting member of the church. The "Half-Way Covenant" doctrine was developed, which said that baptized members may present their children for baptism. For religious and civil reasons this Half-Way covenant was approved by the Massachusetts general court.

This led to a general synod of the churches "to make a full inquiry into the causes and state of God's controversy with us." They thought that the decline in piety was because God was not blessing them; and since piety was a result of God's sovereign grace, then if there was no piety that meant God was not being gracious to them.

One of the results of all this was the development of a Puritan sermonic style called the "Jeremiad," a sermon preached in the style of Jeremiah the prophet, denouncing the people for their sin, in a specific manner, and calling for repentance and the warnings of judgment. The first generation colonists thought of themselves as a New Jerusalem, a light on a hill, and therefore kept asking, "What has gone wrong?" "How can we fix it?" It is not surprising that in 1692 with the Salem Witch Trials that the witchcraft hysteria was a product of the apocalyptic sense of destruction of the colonialists holy experiment in America. There was wide-spread belief that demonic attack was at the very heart of decline.

### **Deformation of the Reformation: Case Study #2**

With all the hysteria of God's judgment on the churches in America and the perceived increase of "liberalism" in the churches, the Great Awakening ensued. The period that is known as the Great Awakening began with small stirrings in New Hampshire and New Jersey under Jonathan Edwards. In 1727 he was ordained and worked with his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in a church in North Hampton. In 1729, Solomon Stoddard died and he became the pastor there. It was while he was preaching on justification that a small revival broke out there. From 1734-38 he began to note an unusual amount of conversions, prompting him to write, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work Of God*; the key word being "surprising" as he believed, as a Calvinist, that you could not plan revival since God is sovereign.

The preaching of George Whitfield, who came from England and preached in Georgia in 1739-40, before moving north to New England, is also seen as part of the beginning of the Awakening.

The Tennent brothers were also active at this time. Gilbert Tennent preached a sermon, "The Danger of the Unconverted Clergy," in which he complained that the clergy were like grass hoppers, hopping on any green thing and devouring it. He suggested that half of the ministers were unconverted. This caused quite a stir among the clergy, not because he suggested that there

were ministers who were unconverted because he didn't say that all of the ministers were unconverted. But what was really controversial in his sermon was that if your church is not meeting your spiritual needs, then you should leave that church and find a better one. This was a huge bomb at this time. This is seen as a great problem to the clergy at the time since New England was built around a parish system, geographically. It was shocking to think that one could leave the local church and find another one. Historian Merrill Westercamp, in *The Triumph of the Laity*, has caught the spirit of this idea. What was happening was a massive shift in people's outlook on their connection with the church. For over 1000 years of Western history the church had been entirely in the hands of the civil government, the clergy, or both. For example, when Calvin wanted to change something in Geneva, he did not have to convince the people, he only had to convince the city council or the ministers. The church was maintained through taxes and church attendance was sustained by the law. That long-standing tradition begins to crumble with the Great Awakening. There is a huge shift taking place. The parish system said, "Your clergyman knows what you need spiritually." So you go to your neighboring church to hear the word of God and you listen to him. What Tennent's sermon is saying is that "You as a laymen have to judge what clergyman is better; you have a responsibility for your soul to decide what is the church you ought to be in." This is an example of democratic thinking catching up with the church, the people deciding for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

Some of the "evidences" of revival were fainting (especially women at Whitefield's pronunciation of "Mesopotamia"), weeping, and shrieking, among other things. Many, not surprisingly, were concerned that this was just emotionalism and that announcing conversions too quickly was dangerous. The pendulum had swung from seeing conversion as the result of a period of preparation to seeing it as an instantaneous, emotional experience.

There were, however, two groups in response to the Great Awakening: 1) The Old Lights and 2) The New Lights. The Old Lights were anti-revival and the New Lights were for it. The most famous Old Light was Charles Chauncy. He attacked the Great Awakening in his *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, accusing the Great Awakenings as reviving antinomianism, and that the strange behavior that took place at the revival meetings was due to an undue influence of the emotions. The most famous New Light was, of course, Jonathan Edwards, who in his *Religious Affections* responded to Chauncy. After Chauncy read this he wrote that Edwards was a visionary enthusiast, not to be listened to in anything he said.

Three of the problems with this treatise are the following:

- 1) He attacks those who preach justification by faith alone as antinomian, and says that we are justified by love;
- 2) He says that the only way that one knows that he has faith is by looking at the consequences of faith, that is, its fruits. But a classic Reformed piety, following Calvin, asks, "Are you first and foremost looking to the promises of Christ and resting in him by faith?" Secondly we take a look to see how our life is doing. But if you look in the first place at your life, you're likely to be driven to despair.
- 3) Christ is missing from the treatise. To be fair, it is not a treatise on Christ or his work for us; nevertheless, because of his absence it is not a balanced treatise.

### **The Impact of the American Revolution Upon the Reformed Faith**

#### *Individualism and Capitalism*

Weakened religion in America; by 1800, only 5% of the population were church members. This was a period where a Christian and a non-Christian could come to a common conclusion, even make a reference to God and even pray, without a sincere relationship with Jesus Christ.

*Denominationalism*

There is no one true church and professing Christians began to tolerate one another.

*Patriotism*

People connected the prosperity of America with their Christian belief.

*Voluntarism*

Churches were supported by the members of the church, voluntarily, without the support of the state. This gave the laity a sense of their crucial role in the life of the church. The negative aspect was the limitation on the clergy, he was made dependent on the laity. This is the dis-establishment of the church in America. This directs the church to be come more pragmatic, to make the church work, in order to stay alive. The sad part is that the clergy are dependent upon the laity who are generally untrained in Scripture and this leads to the clergy just tickling the ears of the congregation, sometimes done at the expense of Biblical principles.