

The Church in America
From the Revolutionary Period Forward
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Prelude

We begin our study of the *Church In America, From The Time Of The American Revolution*, by quoting the slightly edited summary with which we closed our previous study, describing the situation of the Church in America just prior to the American Revolutionary Period.

- In the south (the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia), the Anglican Church had its base. With the revolution, many Anglicans left the colonies and returned to England. Those who remained formed the American Episcopal Church.
- The Methodists, were a minor presence at the time of the revolution. Most were in the south. When Frances Asbury arrived in 1771, they began to gain strength, but their major growth occurred after the revolution.
- Baptists had yet to gain significant numbers – which were immense in the decades after the revolution.
- The Roman Catholic Church, although a strong presence in Maryland, was not a religious force with great influence during the revolution.
- Quakers were ensconced in Pennsylvania and from that base touched other colonies.
- Pennsylvania also was home to various Anabaptist groups, but the influence of these groups, as well as the several Germanic sects that inhabited Pennsylvania were of little influence in the development of the religious life of the nation.
- Although the Unitarians (non-Trinitarians) had a flickering presence in Boston, their influence on the Church in America was quite small until the 19th Century.
- Congregationalists and Presbyterians were the most dominant and influential the Middle Colonies and New England.

In order to understand the religious climate of the Revolutionary Period, we must flash back to the earlier decades of the 18th Century and note the influence of what has come to be known as the First Great Awakening in America. The historian, Beker Baerwald, in his influential book

The Great Awakening, published in 1840, is the one who first coined that name for the series of revivals that began in 1720 and continued well into the last half of the 18th Century. Although the dates cannot be set precisely, the dates generally assigned to the Awakening are 1720 – 1740’s. The problem with assigning the terminal date to sometime in the 1740’s does not allow for the full ministry of George Whitefield, which extended to just a few years before the Revolution. For that reason, we are going to enlarge the period of the Great Awakening to the time of Whitefield’s death in 1770.

Colleges and Universities

Before launching into our study, we need to pause and take note of the three major educational institutions of the period, because these were very influential in the development of American Church leadership, then and now. The concern of the churches was that a thoroughly educated clergy be available to lead the churches. The Puritans believed that education was central to the Christian life. Harvard was formed while people were digging out the first settlements. The first classes at Harvard took place with bears running through the campus, yet classes were in Latin. The Puritan colleges were steeped in the Western Christian, classical tradition. In fact, Harvard and Yale were the only colleges in the Western world that required Hebrew.

For the first two centuries of their existence, Harvard and Yale were emulated widely—until the Twentieth century, when the university became secularized.

Harvard

The following is a quote from last year’s Sunday Night Seminar, *The Church in America from 1492 to the Time of the American Revolution*, page 75.

The colonists did not want “dumb preachers” in their pulpits and so early-on steps were taken to insure a learned ministry. A document from 1640, *New England’s First Fruits*, describes the founding of Harvard.

“After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had built our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God’s worship, and led the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance

learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”¹

To this end, the General Court in 1636 voted to give 400 pounds toward a school or college for the education of future ministers. They chose a plot in Newton (later Cambridge) where Thomas Shephard was minister and appointed Nathaniel Eaton (brother of the founder of New Haven) as headmaster. The first classes were held in 1638 and in that same year, John Harvard, a young minister and graduate of Cambridge in England, died, leaving his property and library to the new college. The decision was made to name the school after John Harvard. Eaton was unsatisfactory in the role and he was replaced by Henry Dunster, who brought many improvements and placed the college on a firm footing. Before Dunster was required to resign in 1654 because he had come to accept Baptist views, the college had received a new charter (which still is in effect), was granting degrees, and had self-consciously committed itself to education in the old university of tradition. In 1674 the college was able to publish the names of 200 Harvard graduates.

One of the challenges faced at Harvard was the presence of a strong merchant class that often thwarted efforts of ecclesiastics to impose a stricter discipline and theological conformity.

Yale

John Davenport, the venerable pastor of the First Congregational Church in New Haven bitterly opposed both the adoption of the Half-way Covenant, on the one hand, and the colony of New Haven’s being absorbed into the colony of Connecticut. He had a dream of beginning an educational institution in New Haven that would be dedicated to the traditional Congregational Puritan theologies. The vision did not come to pass in his lifetime, but the idea did linger on in the minds of younger men.

Several things contributed to the growing parting of the ways between eastern Massachusetts and the rest of New England and theology was a major issue. Many came to

¹ For the entire text of the document, see ADDENDUM C

see eastern Massachusetts as a place of theological compromise. Disturbed by the declining state of the Connecticut colony, and its inadequate opportunities for education, three ministers from the old New Haven colony began to revive John Davenport's dream. They began to recruit other ministers to their cause. In consultation with the Mathers, they presented their proposed charter to the Connecticut General Court and it was favorably received. The school was named the Collegiate School and was chartered October 9, 1701, with ten Connecticut ministers as its trustees. After fifteen years of moving from one parsonage to another, the school settled in New Haven. In 1718, Elihu Yale donated the proceeds from the sale of nine bales of goods, 417 books, and a portrait of King George I. The trustees decided to honor this donation, which gave a degree of permanence to the school, by naming the school, Yale College. Although the school, like Harvard, would come to have international significance in a host of fields, its first fruits were strictly ecclesiastical and limited for the most part to the colony of Connecticut and the upper Connecticut Valley.

The Mathers believed that the answer to the ills of both church and colony lay in the enactment of a strict ecclesiastical constitution. The trustees of Yale agreed. They did not have the hindrance of the presence of a merchant class, which posed problems for Harvard. Neither did they have a royal appointee as governor, but rather had one of their own, Reverend Gurdon Saltonstall, of New London, elected to that office in 1707.

For a century and a half Connecticut was stronghold of orthodox Puritanism with Yale College as its intellectual center.

Princeton

In the following pages we will discuss the Log College, which was a rural unofficial seminary established in the parsonage of William Tennent. Presbyterians were divided between the New Side (a revival party) and the Old Side (opposed to the revivalists). The Log College men were aligned with the New Side. The New Side's sense of responsibility for the future of the Presbyterian Church in America motivated them to begin a college for the training of Presbyterian ministers (Harvard and Yale were related to Congregational Puritans). Jonathan

Dickinson, who was the leader of the New Side group took the leadership in the endeavor. He and his associates were able to overcome Anglican opposition to another school in the colonies and a charter was granted in 1746. It was a foregone conclusion that Dickinson would be the president of the new school. In May, 1747, he began to conduct classes in his parsonage at Elizabethtown. The Reverend Caleb Smith served as tutor.

Within five months, Dickinson was dead. He was succeeded by another New Englander, Aaron Burr, who had just married Jonathan Edwards' daughter. The students moved to his parsonage at Newark. The new governor of New Jersey had been a convert under Whitefield and was favorable to the agenda of the new school – he issued a new charter that was less restrictive than the original one.

Burr, in the eyes of many, was the veritable founder of the school. He moved it to Princeton, broadened the base of its financial support, and succeeded in erecting the spacious and beautiful Nassau Hall – at that time the finest college building in America. Burr's presidency was cut short by an untimely death in 1757.

Burr was succeeded by his father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards, who died shortly thereafter from a smallpox inoculation in 1758.

The next president, Samuel Davies, also died after two years as president.

In 1766, Samuel Finley, one of the seasoned leaders of the Log College group, was made president and he died shortly thereafter. In two decades, the College of New Jersey had devoured the best leadership of both the New England party and the Log College men.

By this time, the college was secure, with 120 students matriculating. It had become the educational mainstay for the entire region.

All though the first five presidents of the College of New Jersey had been men of New Side sympathies, by 1768, with the increased influx of Scot-Irish immigrants who tended to align with

the Old Side, it became apparent that the school needed a president who could hold together all sides. The trustees finally chose John Witherspoon, a notable leader in Scotland. Witherspoon was a very impressive man. He had become a recognized leader of the Kirk of Scotland, a man of great intellectual stature, conversant with the “new science” and the philosophic developments of the “Scottish renaissance. In time it became apparent that his political ideals were suited to a country hurrying toward its independence – he was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. His temperament also made him an ideal man to bring reconciliation to the various divisions among Presbyterians. Of great significance is the fact that he was a Scot and understood many of the ethnic conflicts within the churches. By the time of his death, a quarter of a century later, Princeton had assumed a prominent place in America.

The Religious Climate in America Prior to the Great Awakening

Church membership and religious fervor were in a definite decline in America by 1720 – at least in comparison to what it had been in the early years of the New England colonies. Several things contributed to this state of affairs: increased immigration, prosperity, and the influence of the European Enlightenment. Both New England Presbyterian Churches and Congregational Churches were impacted by these influences and responded to them separately.

The Impact of the Half-way Covenant

When the various reformers left the Roman Catholic Church (or were expelled), they took with them many Roman Catholic traditions and practices. One of these was infant baptism. The practice of Infant baptism was based on three doctrinal suppositions:

1. Catholics and most Protestants held the view that when Adam sinned, as the Federal Head of the human race, all of the human race sinned. Thus, not only does every human experience the consequence of Adam’s sin (physical death), but also the guilt of that sin. Every baby born was born with that guilt upon his soul.
2. Baptism is a sacrament. Baptism, in and of itself, totally apart from the faith of the recipient, supernaturally removes the guilt for that sin.

As circumcision was the act that made a Jew a participant in the Abrahamic Covenant, baptism is the act that makes one a participant in the New Covenant. Since boys were circumcised on the

eighth day of their lives in order to make them participants in the Abrahamic/Mosaic Covenant, so infants should be baptized in order to make them participants in the New Covenant.²

² In the passing of decades, the role of infant baptism has been seen differently by different groups. See ADDENDA E for the Presbyterian Church USA explanation of the rite.