

CHURCH HISTORY
Reactions to Historic Protestantism
During the Modern Era in Europe, part 2:
The Age of Rationalism (1700-1800)

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The Modern Church, part 6

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Reformation brought freedom of conscience in spiritual matters, but it also opened the gate for an open denial of the Faith by those who were rejected it. Each step away from the Reformation meant more blatant denials of historic Protestantism and ultimately of historic Christianity.
- B. Philosophy was the cry of the hour. During the Middle Ages philosophy and theology had been wed in the system called Scholasticism. With the decline of Scholasticism and the church, the two were divorced, with the result that philosophy became an enemy of theology.

II. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (1700-1800): The Age Of Rationalism

- A. *Unitarianism:* Unitarianism was nothing but a continuation of Socinianism in eighteenth century England. Theophilus Lindsey was a Socinian clergyman in the Church of England who could not sign the Thirty-Nine Articles. Lindsey then did the honest thing: he withdrew from the Anglican church and in 1774 organized a Unitarian church in London. Unitarians denied the Trinity and the substitutionary atonement of Christ for sins; they were rank heretics.

Unitarianism made heavy inroads among the Presbyterians and the General Baptists. It was a blight upon their religious life, and their churches declined greatly. On the other hand the Congregationalists and the Particular Baptists were influenced only a little; their numbers increased and their churches flourished.

B. *Latitudinarianism*: These were Unitarians who stayed in the Church of England. The full deity of our Lord was widely denied and spiritual darkness invaded congregations all through England.

C. *Rationalism*

1. *Introduction*: Rationalism completely denied historic Christianity. It substituted reason for revelation. Rationalism (reason as the ultimate authority) was an outgrowth of humanism in the Renaissance, and a reaction to Protestant Scholasticism. It was also a reaction to groups which stressed experience in the seventeenth century and did not try to meet the intellectual needs of their constituency, neglecting a doctrinal basis for their Christianity. Rationalism was also the product of the scientific age, which stated truth was only what the five senses could discover. Revelation tended to take the back seat to reason and knowledge gained by sense perception. In England it was called Rationalism, and on the continent it went by the title “The Enlightenment.”
2. *Fatalistic Rationalism*: Rationalism took the form of atheism in some such as Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot. While they saw little or no place for God, they believed that men had certain rights. These social philosophers or Philosophes, as they were called, thought that just as man could discover the laws of nature and bend it to the service of man, so man could discover the laws of society and remake it into a more equitable and reasonable structure. In doing so, they held that the “rubbish” of the past which impeded man’s progress had to be abandoned. One important part of this debris was the church. This atheistic philosophy was carried to its logical conclusion in France and the goddess of reason was enthroned in Paris. The French Revolution was a product of fatalistic rationalism.
3. *Deistic Rationalism*: Deists did not deny the existence of God, but stressed natural theology rather than revealed theology (the Bible). The religious philosophy of Deism won the minds of many of the upper classes in Europe and America. This was the view that God was an impersonal creator who made the solar system and then sent it whirling off into space under the control of natural law, ceasing to interfere in the affairs of the universe. So, revelation contained in the Bible, Christ, providence, or prayer have no place in one’s religious system. The

Bible does, however, contain ethical laws which serve as guideposts for a moral life glorifying to God.

Deism had its beginning with Lord Herbert of Cherbury in 1624. Some of the noted leaders in this movement were John Tillotson, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, Charles Blount, Matthew Tindal and Tom Paine.

D. *Methodism*

1. *Introduction:* Methodism was a healthy Christian reaction to the cold orthodoxy of the Church of England and the deadening effects of Rationalism. The Industrial Revolution had brought many Englishmen from the country to the cities, and the religious condition of the nation was deplorable. Morality was low among the common folk and the clergy alike. Clergymen neglected their duties and hobnobbed with the rich. The nation was shot through with Socinianism and Arminianism. England was expanding her empire and the people were becoming increasingly materialistic.

It was in this England, growing in wealth and power but religiously stagnant and morally corrupt, lighted by only a few stray and feeble gleams, that John Wesley, with the help of his brother Charles and their friend George Whitefield, began their mighty work.

2. *The Holy Club* (1728): “Methodist” was the name given to the “holy club” at Oxford to which the Wesleys and George Whitefield belonged. They met to study the Bible and other Christian works which would help them have a more consecrated life. Other students mocked this group and named it the “holy club,” or called the fellows who met “Methodists” because of their strange methods. It is interesting to note that none of the three claimed to be converted at the time they were meeting at the “holy club.”
3. *George Whitefield:* It was not until 1735 that Whitefield, overwhelmed by the dreadful burden of his sins, found what he called “inexpressible” through a living faith in Christ. As a minister of the Anglican Church, he began to preach on sin, the new birth, the necessity of holiness, and the error of baptismal regeneration (a common teaching in the Church of England). He had much success, but his preaching also caused much opposition. He was shut out from many pulpits and severely censured

in the newspapers, yet he drew immense crowds and many professed conversion. He preached to vast gatherings of miners in the open air — men who were alienated from the organized churches — and the Spirit of God worked mightily among them. Thousands of them became earnest followers of Christ. Whitefield visited America for the first time in 1738 and became a lifelong friend of Jonathan Edwards. Whitefield had a great ministry in America. He was a strong Calvinist whereas the Wesleys, later in their ministry, declared themselves to be Arminian in theology.

Whitefield was more magnetic than John Wesley, but he was not the organizer. Consequently, he left no church behind him, as did Wesley. Whitefield did not himself found a denomination, and his converts remained in the Anglican Church. There they formed the Low Church or Evangelical Party. The Anglican Church received no small evangelical impetus through his work. In Wales, his followers founded the Calvinistic Methodist Church, now known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales. Through his efforts a great revival occurred in England. In their views these Evangelicals or Low Church people were moderate Calvinists. They were opposed to elaborate ritual in church services. They were filled with religious zeal, and they lived lives of strict piety. If Whitefield had possessed the organizing genius of Wesley, Calvinism might have been today a far greater power in England than it is. Some notable quotes about Whitefield are as follows:

“We speak of the Methodist Church beginning in revival. And so it did. But the first and chief actor in that revival was not Wesley, but Whitefield (an uncompromising Calvinist). Though a younger man than Wesley, it was he who first went forth preaching in the fields and gathering multitudes of followers, and raising money and building chapels. It was Whitefield who invoked the two Wesleys to his aid. And he had to employ much argument and persuasion to overcome their prejudices against the movement. Whitefield began the great work at Bristol and Kingswood, and had found thousands flocking to his side, ready to be organized into churches, when he appealed to Wesley for assistance. Wesley, with all his zeal was quite a High-Churchman in many of his views . . . He could not think of preaching in any place but in

a church. ‘He should have thought,’ as he said, ‘the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.’ Hence when Whitefield called on John Wesley to engage with him in the popular movement, he shrank back. Finally, he yielded to Whitefield’s persuasions” (Boettner, The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, p. 425).

“In the polite language of the day “Calvinism” and “Methodism” were synonymous terms, and the Methodist were called “another sect of Presbyterians” (Boettner, p. 426).

4. *John Wesley*

- a. John Wesley was the product of a Christian home. His father was a minister of the Church of England and his mother was a godly woman. Upon hearing that John and Charles would go to be missionaries in America, she said, “Had I twenty sons I should rejoice that they were all so employed, though I should never see them more.” Although the product of a Christian home, John was not converted until after he had entered the ministry of the Anglican Church.
- b. In 1735 John and his brother Charles sailed for America to be missionaries (yet unconverted) in Georgia. On the trip over John met a group of twenty Moravian Brethren and felt that they had a quiet trust in God that he did not have. Soon after his arrival in Georgia he met August Spangenberg, of the Moravian Brethren, who asked him, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley answered: “I know He is the Saviour of the world.” Said Spangenberg, “True, but do you know he has saved you?” For three years Spangenberg’s question preyed on John Wesley’s mind. He was not sure of the answer.
- c. In Georgia, Charles fell ill, and the year later he left the colony and returned home. On February 1, 1738, John too was back in England. The trip to America was for the Wesleys a failure as far as mission work was concerned.

- d. On May 21, 1738, Charles, then suffering from a serious illness, experienced conversion. Three days later that same experience came to John. Unwillingly, he had gone to a meeting of an Anglican society in Aldersgate Street. The preface to Luther's Commentary on Romans was being read. Wesley said this about his conversion:

“About a quarter before nine, while I was listening to Luther's description of the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

- e. After his conversion, Wesley embarked on that great work of evangelism with which his name will ever be associated. Because of his preaching on sin, the new birth, and salvation through the blood of Christ, he found like Whitefield that many pulpits were closed to him. There was much ecclesiastical opposition, as well as the opposition of ungodly mobs. In fifty years he traveled 250,000 miles, mostly on horseback, during his evangelistic tours.

John Wesley was an Arminian in theology and late in his ministry declared it openly, but was loved by most Calvinists because of his passionate proclamation of salvation to sinners. One of the sad days in Christian history is when Whitefield felt compelled to break away from his friends the Wesleys because they had left the orthodox faith for freewill theology. Despite their divergent ministries, they were always lifelong friends.

- f. John Wesley was not only a great preacher, he was also a great organizer. Wesley had no desire or intention to separate from the established Church in England. He did not found a new church or denomination until the end of his long life. The break came as a result of the masses that were turning to Christ who needed men to preach to them. There simply were not enough ordained men to do the job. Thus, he ordained lay preachers, who, because they were not intellectually equipped for

prolonged pastorates, labored only six or eight weeks in one place. Thus began his system of itinerant (traveling) preachers. It was over the issue of lay preachers that Wesley broke from the Church of England. The Methodist Episcopal Church was established in America in 1784. In England, Methodism separated from the Anglican Church around 1800. Today, the Methodist Church has moved a long way from the fundamental Christianity of the Wesleys.

- g. *Conclusion:* Methodism was the answer to Deism in England, especially among the lower and middle classes. It met the needs of the new laboring classes in the cities for whom the Anglican Church did not assume much responsibility. It provided relief for the poor, medical dispensaries and orphanages. It was at the front of the movement for prison reform and the abolition of slavery, and in large measure it retarded the same forces that led to the Revolution in France.
5. *Charles Wesley:* Charles was also a remarkable preacher, but not as dynamic as John. However, Charles was an excellent song writer and has left his spiritual heritage in almost all modern-day Christian hymn books.