

CHURCH HISTORY

American Christianity: 18th Century

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

The Modern Church, part 10

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Great Awakening, coupled with political and economic problems, drew the Colonialists closer together. There was a common bond against the British Crown. America was “feeling her oats,” and the world situation favored the American cause, for the British were at war with the French. The result was the American Revolution.

- B. It should be noted at this point that the American Revolution was unique and different from all revolutions in history, for it did not result in a break down of all law and order — political, social and economic order were maintained. In fact, the first meeting of the Continental Congress in 1774 had no thoughts of revolution and tried for two years by lawful means to get the King to give them equal representation. Early in the nineteenth century the German writer Frederick von Gentz said,

The revolution of America was, therefore, in every sense of the word a revolution of necessity: England, alone, had by violence effected it: America had contended for ten long years, not against England, but against the revolution; America sought not a revolution; she yielded to it, compelled by necessity, not because she wished to extort a better condition than she had before enjoyed, but because she wished to avert a worse one, prepared for her.

The Continental Congress of Philadelphia, after much prayer, set forth the Declaration of Independence (1776).

II. THE CHURCH AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

- A. Americans were impressed with the political philosophy of John Locke, who advocated government by a sovereign people based upon fundamental rights, which rights were part of the law of nature, apprehensible by reason, and also to be found in the divine revelation of the Bible. Because the minister usually had the best education, the pulpit helped to mold public opinion before and during the Revolution.
- B. The Church in America played a big part in the Revolution, and without the involvement of various Christian groups, the effort against Britain would have been a colossal failure. Paul Revere was a Huguenot, a French Calvinist. At the time of the Revolution, the Anglican Church dominated the southern colonies, the Congregational Church the northern colonies, while the middle colonies had diversity of religion. The Congregationalists were the most staunch supporters of the Colonial cause, for they feared the political tyranny of the Crown and did not want their colonies to be dominated by the Anglican Church. The Presbyterians, particularly the Scotch-Irish, who numbered about one million, supported the Revolution because they remembered how the British had treated the Scotch and the Irish politically and religiously in their fatherlands. The Lutherans served only as individuals on the side of the patriots. The Baptists, because of their beliefs on separation of church and state, were ardent supporters of the Revolution. The Dutch Reformed Church suffered greatly for its loyalty by destruction of church property and the scattering of its people, since its churches were mainly located in the early theater of war in New York. The Roman Catholics were for the Revolution because it meant more freedom for Catholics in a Protestant land. Many ministers recruited soldiers and/or became soldiers or chaplains for the Revolutionary army. James Caldwell, a Presbyterian pastor and chaplain, actually secured hymnals from a nearby church to make wads for the guns.

Much of the American Revolution was carried on by men who were convinced of the total sovereignty of God, especially those of the Calvinistic persuasion. In England and America the great struggles for civil and religious liberty were nursed in Calvinism, inspired by Calvinism, and carried out largely by men who were Calvinists. The majority of historians have never made a serious study of Calvinism, so they have not been able to give us a truthful and complete account of what it has done in these countries. Only the light of historical investigation is needed to show us how our forefathers believed in it and were controlled by it. We live in a day when the services of the

Calvinists in the founding of this country have been largely forgotten (Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*).

- C. The main problem in the Revolution was for the Anglicans or the Church of England. The Anglican church was divided both by class and area in its loyalty. The clergy was generally Tory in outlook (for the Crown), as was much of the laity in New England. Elsewhere, however, many Anglican laymen supported the Revolution. In fact, about two-thirds of those who signed the Declaration of Independence were from the Church of England.

There were practically no Methodists (an offshoot of the Church of England) in America at the time of the Revolution. John Wesley, great and good man though he was, was a Tory and a believer in political non-resistance. He wrote against the American “rebellion,” but accepted the providential result. He did not foresee that independent America was to be the field on which the church he founded was to reap her largest harvests, or that in that Declaration which he so earnestly opposed lay the security of the liberties of his followers.

- D. Some of the churches took no part in the Revolution because of their pacifism, such as the Quakers, Mennonites and Moravians. Some of these groups did carry out acts of mercy, such as running hospitals for the wounded, etc.

III. THE EFFECT OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

- A. *Independent Denominations*: The Revolution brought about the dissolution of ties between many religious bodies in America and Europe, necessitating separate organization in America. The Methodists formed in 1784, the Anglicans in 1789 (Protestant Episcopal Church), the Baptists in 1784, the Presbyterians in 1785, The Dutch Reformed in 1792, and the Lutherans in 1795. Because of the democratic local government of the New England Congregational churches and the growing schism between the unitarian and trinitarian groups, they formed no national organization.
- B. *Separation of Church and State*: Separation of church and state in the states influenced the adoption of the principles of separation of church and state in the federal system and the provision of religious freedom in the Constitution.
- C. *Decline in Religion and Morals*: No one every really wins in war, for war always brings corruption. After the Revolution, America began to decline

rapidly in religion and morals. Nowhere was this more obvious than on the college campuses, such as at Yale and Harvard.

IV. THE CHURCH AND THE FRONTIER

- A. After the Revolution, people flocked westward. The church faced the challenge of meeting the spiritual needs of these migrants on a mobile frontier. In the beginning, the Presbyterians had the advantage because many of the Scotch-Irish were strategically located, but the Presbyterian formality and Calvinistic emphasis did not fare too well with the keen but uneducated frontiersman. It was the Baptists and especially the Methodists, with their circuit riders, who really reached the West with the gospel. The free will and free grace of Arminian Methodism made a greater appeal than predestination to the individualistic frontiersman.
- B. The western migration stimulated the church to the challenge of home missions. One main problem was that there were not enough trained clergymen to do the job, so many a lay preacher picked up the task.

V. THE SECOND AWAKENING

- A. *Religious Decline:* Just twenty years after the Revolution, America found herself in religious and moral chaos.
 - 1. The Revolution brought a decline in morals and disrupted church life for many.
 - 2. The difficult life of the frontier, with the problems of hostile Indians, homemade whiskey, disease and the lack of stabilizing influences such as schools and churches, provided no spiritual aid to frontiersmen.
 - 3. The rise of Deism had reached astronomical proportions in such men as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The great leader of the Deists was Thomas Paine who wrote *Age of Reason*, opposing all biblical Christianity. Although Deists were humanitarian and promoted social reform, Deism's popularity led to a drop in attendance at church services, to drunkenness and swearing in some cases, and to lack of ethical integrity. Especially when it spread to the frontier it led to an irreligious, careless life.

4. Deism took its toll on the college campuses such as Yale and Harvard, which were founded to produce Christian ministers. So ungodly were most men at Yale that they delighted in giving themselves names of great French Deists, who were rank infidels.
- B. *The Awakening*: The Second Awakening began around 1790 and continued until 1820. This revival was another working of God.
1. *New England*: The revival began at Yale under Timothy Dwight, who was president of the college. Awakening came in 1802 when, of the two hundred thirty students in Yale, about one-third were converted. Similar revivals spread to the campuses of Amherst, Dartmouth and Williams. The theological emphasis from New England was that of a modified Calvinism.
 2. *Eastern Seaboard*: Students at Hampden-Sydney College (Presbyterian) began to read religious books and to hold prayer meetings in approximately 1787. Many students were converted, and the revival spread to Washington and Lee, another Presbyterian school.
 3. *Frontier*: These revivals were very emotional and were definitely Arminian in character. This was the beginning of the camp meeting.

This technique (camp meeting), which had been pioneered by the Presbyterians, brought together people of all denominations from distances of 30 to 100 miles in their wagons, for a period from Thursday to Tuesday, for preaching and for the celebration of communion on Sunday. The interdenominational meeting at Cane Ridge was marked by great emotional display and physical manifestations, such as falling, rapid jerking of the body or head backward and forward or sideways, dancing, rolling on the ground, running, and even barking like a dog. Many however, seem to have been genuinely converted to a new life that left its mark for good on the frontier (Cairns, *Christianity in the United States*).

Because of the emotional and physical extravagances, the Presbyterians ceased to use the camp meeting; but the Baptists and especially the Methodists made much use of it. Interestingly, the ministers at these camp meetings were generally not educated, and the revivals were not

attended too well by church people. The pioneers did not want a stiff-shirt preacher from the East filled with education telling them what to do. They wanted to “feel” their religion, and preachers became exhorters. The preachers preached against drunkenness but not against drinking, for many of the preachers were paid for their services in liquor. They did talk about conversion and escape from hellfire but, they gave little detail about salvation. They also emphasized that salvation depended upon man’s freewill acceptance of the gospel.

C. *The Effects of Revival*

1. *Increased Morality*: Revival brought morality, especially in the West. Of course, not all were saved, but many were touched indirectly by religion.
2. *New Colleges*: Andover Seminary was founded (1807) to provide a conservative alternative to liberal institutions. Harvard had already become liberal, for in 1805 president Henry Ware was an outright Unitarian. Andover was founded with a five page doctrinal statement with 35 articles. It became one of the most, if not the most, influential seminaries in the nineteenth century. Andover was founded by Calvinists, was strictly Reformed in doctrine, and was Congregationalist in outlook. Andover went liberal in 1920.
3. *New Seminary*: Lane Seminary, founded in 1823, soon became a center for anti—slavery agitation.
4. *Schism*: The Cumberland Presbyterian Church began in 1810. The Disciples of Christ under the leadership of Alexander Campbell, and the Christians under Barton Stone were other groups which emerged in the disputes over revival and by schism from existing bodies.
5. *Increased Church Membership*: The Baptist and Methodist churches flourished but the Presbyterians did not fare too well.
6. *Missions*: Missionary endeavor was spurred. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions came into being in 1810. One of its first missionaries was Adoniram Judson.
7. *Literature*: The American Bible Society was founded in 1816, the American Tract Society in 1825.

8. *Church Organization*: The midweek prayer meeting and Sunday schools became common features of church life.

VI. CONCLUSION

- A. Again God reached down to lift America up in the Second Awakening. Revival has played such a significant role in American history.
- B. God is the author of true revival, and we must pray that revival shall come once again to our beloved land.