HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

Part V – A City Set on a Hill:

Christianity in the New World (A.D. 1492 - 1770)

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Martin Luther was only nine years old when Christopher Columbus set sail for India and, in the process, stumbled onto a new hemisphere. Columbus, himself, saw his voyage as a religious mission, the launching of a new crusade which would restore the unity and splendor of medieval Christendom. He had a prophetic role to play, he thought, one foretold long ago by the prophet Isaiah (46:11): "I call a bird of prey from the east, a man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, says the Lord, and I will bring it to pass, I have a plan to carry out, and carry it out I will."

Although Columbus died a pauper, his dreams unfulfilled, the European discovery of the New World did indeed open a new chapter in the history of Christianity.

America was the land of new beginnings. Europe represented for Americans not only the past (which they were eager to forget), but a corrupt past, whose contamination they wished to escape. Here in America, they could build the Holy Commonwealth. Here they could carry out "a lively experiment," as Baptist pioneer John Clarke said. And here, in the famous words of Massachusetts Bay's Governor, John Winthrop, they could be "a city set on a hill," sending forth the light of the Gospel unto the uttermost ends of the earth.

William Blake, the poet, never came to the New World, but he seemed to understand the mystique of the American promise when he wrote:

> Tho' born on the cheating banks of Thames,
>
> Tho' his waters bathed my infant limbs,
>
> The Ohio shall wash his stains from me,
>
> I was born a slave, but I shall go free.

One constant theme permeates the history of Christianity in America - from the earliest settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth, through the revivals and great awakenings, through the trauma of civil war and reconstruction, to the explosion of the charismatic movement and seeker-friendly mega-churches in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is the mission of fulfilling God's purpose in the New World in a new way. In this study, we will examine this theme through three major episodes which were crucial in the shaping of Christianity in America:

- Puritan Foundations
- The Struggle for Religious Liberty
- The First Great Awakening

PURITAN FOUNDATIONS

The Puritan story began, not in New England, but in Old England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when a number of her subjects protested against the slow pace of reform within the established church. They objected to ministers wearing vestments, to kneeling at communion, to the lack of fervent preaching, and to the ritualism of the Book of Common Prayer. All these were vestiges of popery, they said, and should be replaced by a more biblical pattern of worship. Their enemies referred to these zealous reformers in uncomplimentary terms: the "hotter sort of Protestants," "hot gospelers," "precisians," or "Puritans."

The Puritan strategy was to work for change from within the Church of England, however slow or difficult that might be. Others, however, were less patient. They were "Puritans in a hurry," so to speak. They wanted *A Reformation Without Tarrying For Any*, as the title of a book by Robert Brown put it in 1583. They would separate from the manifestly false Church of England and restore what they called "the old, glorious face of primitive Christianity," by starting all over again.

When King James I came to the throne in 1603, he could barely tolerate the Puritans. The Separatists he could not abide. "I will make them conform," he said, "or else I will harry them out of the land!"

Indeed, many of the Separatists were driven into exile in Holland. But, after living there some 12 years, a band of these Separatists decided to transplant their community to the New World. In a tearful scene of farewell, their pastor John Robinson bade them adieu: "...The Lord knoweth whether ever we shall see your faces again," he said. "But I am confident that the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of His Holy Word."

Then on "the tide which stays for no man," as William Bradford wrote in his journal, they set sail into the unknown, leaving behind friends, families, and everything they had known.

"But they looked not much on such things," Bradford wrote, "but lifted their eyes to heaven, their dearest country, for they knew they were but strangers and pilgrims in this world."

Against all odds, the Pilgrim Fathers survived the treacherous ocean voyage to establish the first beachhead of Protestant Christianity in New England. There, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, "in the desert of dismal circumstances," as Cotton Mather described their situation, their faith was to be shaken but not destroyed. The Pilgrims established a Christian community of courage and faith which many others would emulate. William Bradford, after serving many years as governor of Plymouth, looked back on the experience of the Pilgrims: "As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shown to many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation."

But unlike the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth, the Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony were not Separatists.

"We do not say, 'Farewell, Babylon! Farewell, Rome!' But we say, 'Farewell, dear England! Farewell, the Church of God in England, and the Christian friends there!'. . .We go to practice the positive part of church reformation and propagate the Gospel in America," they said.

The Pilgrims had come to light a candle.

The Puritans aimed to build a city set on a hill.

The Puritans exerted an influence on American culture far out of proportion to their numbers. And yet the word "Puritan" has become a derogatory label. H.L. Mencken voiced the popular belief that a Puritan is a person who has "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time!" But nothing could be further from the truth! The Puritans were exuberant about life. They were painters and poets. They wore bright clothes and lived in beautifully decorated houses. They read great books and listened to great music. They drank rum at wedding parties. And far from being prudes, they reveled in the sensuality of married life.

It is ironic that some of the most revolutionary, forward-looking movements in history have taken their cues from the past. Puritanism was a "back to the future" movement which called the people of New England back to God, back to the Bible, and back to the Reformation.

Like Martin Luther and John Calvin before them, Puritans were Augustinian in theology. Salvation was the work of grace which resulted in the miracle of conversion — a turning from sin to trust the promise of forgiveness and justification through Christ's death on the cross. Conversion required the preparation of the heart, and many Puritans recorded the struggles of their soul in journals and personal diaries. In this way, the Puritans sought to bring every activity and relationship into conformity with the will of God as revealed in His Word, the Bible. William Ames said it beautifully when he defined theology as "the science of living in the presence of God."

THE STRUGGLE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

But the Puritans were not only interested in personal spiritual renewal. They also wanted to create an ordered and godly society, marked by the unity of faith and public life. For the Puritans, New England was, in effect, new Israel — God's elect people in covenant with their Creator. All of life was made up of interweaving covenantal relationships. The rule of Christ was intended to prevail in all of them — the family, the congregation, and the commonwealth. On every New England town square stood a school house, a church house, and a meeting house, representing the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King.

Many historians have seen the origins of democracy in these structures, as well as the kind of social vision and public theology which has undergirded reforming efforts in our own day, including the civil rights crusade and the prolife movement.

The Puritan vision dominated New England for a century and more. But from the first there were dissenters — nonconformists who challenged the close alliance between church and commonwealth. Like the Puritans, the dissenters would have a far greater influence on American Christianity than their slender numbers might warrant. Their story is a part of the ongoing struggle for religious liberty.

Someone has said that the Puritans came to New England to worship God intheir own way but not in anybody else's! This was somewhat accurate. Competing religious confessions, coexisting within the same political structure, was a radical thought in the seventeenth century. While the Puritans were settling Boston and Salem, the wars of religion were raging between Protestants and Catholics in Europe. The Puritans harked back to an earlier medieval ideal and insisted upon religious conformity within their colony.

One of the first to challenge this principle was Anne Hutchinson, midwife, nurse, and mother of 15 children. Anne was a devotee of the Reverend John Cotton, a Puritan minister who stressed God's initiative and sovereign grace in salvation. This was the common view of all Puritans. But Anne so stressed God's grace, that she left no room for the moral law in the life of the believer. Her position was called antinomianism, which means "against the law," and it seemed to undermine the moral basis of New England society itself. If the Ten Commandments had become obsolete, how could there be laws against adultery, theft, or even murder?

As "a woman of ready wit and a bold spirit," Anne began to hold meetings in her house. Puritan sermons were criticized, and she gave out teachings which she claimed were the result of direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. This was too much for the pastors and magistrates of Massachusetts Bay! Anne Hutchinson was excommunicated and banished from the colony in 1637. Driven to New Netherlands, she and five of her young children were killed in an Indian raid five years later. It was considered by some her "just dessert."

If Anne Hutchinson's theological ideas were unsettling to the Puritans, Roger Williams' doctrine of soul liberty was an outrage! Roger Williams was a brilliant thinker, a graduate of Cambridge University, and sometime minister in both Plymouth and Salem. As a strict Separatist, Williams criticized Puritan congregations for having fellowship with the Church of England. He also criticized the whole system of church/state relations in Massachusetts Bay.

In the Old Testament, he said, God had a national people, the Jews, but now, He has only a congregational people. The state is ordained of God to regulate the material affairs of life. But civil magistrates have no authority over the souls of their subjects. Williams summed up his ideas in his famous *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution.* God alone is the Lord of the conscience, he argued. The persecutor is a soul-murderer. Religious coercion is never justified.

"Having bought truth dear," he cried, "we must not sell it cheap — no, not the least grain of it for the whole world."

Like Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams was found guilty of spreading "diverse new and dangerous opinions" and was exiled from Massachusetts. Leaving behind his wife and small child, he walked southward "in the bitter winter season" of 1636. He wandered in the wilderness "sorely tossed, not knowing what bread or bed did mean." When he finally arrived in Narragansett Bay, he purchased a parcel of land from the Indians. There he established a new settlement, which he named "Providence," since God's providence had guided him through great distress.

Thus Roger Williams became the founder of Rhode Island, the first colony established on the principle of religious liberty. The Puritans of Boston called Rhode Island "the latrine of New England" because it permitted all sorts of religious beliefs and made no religious requirements for citizenship. But the Puritan viewpoint prevailed. Many others, however, would suffer greatly for their faith before religious freedom became the norm in the New World. For instance:

- In 1651, Baptist preacher Obadiah Holmes was publicly whipped for teaching that baptism should be administered by immersion for believers only.
- In 1654, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard, was pressured from office for objecting to infant baptism.
- In 1660, one of Anne Hutchinson's friends, Mary Dyer, who had become a Quaker, was banished three times. She was finally hanged to death on Boston Common when she would not promise never to return to bear witness to her faith. "Why don't you stay down in Rhode Island?" her accusers asked. "No," she replied, "the whole earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."

After the American Revolution, religious freedom was protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. But the continued existence of slavery posed a terrible dilemma for a people who believed that God alone was Lord of the conscience. Could there be religious liberty without basic human equality, especially when the Constitution itself considered slaves as only three-fourths of a human being?

On the other side of the bloody conflict (which answered that question by tearing a nation apart), Abraham Lincoln reached back to the original Puritan ideal of God's sovereign plan at work among men and nations: "The purposes of the Almighty are perfect and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance — the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous all together."

Christians in every age have struggled with the difficult task of passing on their faith intact to the rising generation. The Puritans were no exception. By the early eighteenth century, the original Puritan vision of America as "a city set on a hill" had grown dim with age. Could Puritanism survive its own success? While their errand in the wilderness increasingly prospered, their hearts' desire for God seemed to diminish. Cotton Mather observed, "Piety has begotten prosperity, and the daughter has devoured the mother."

A new form of sermon literature called the "jeremiad" appeared as Puritan preachers bemoaned the loss of fervor and zeal in their congregations. On the eve of the first great awakening, the Reverend Samuel Wigglesworth exclaimed: "We have a goodly exterior form of religion, yet this is but the remains of what we once might show, the shadow of past and vanished glory."

In this context, a series of religious revivals swept through the American colonies between 1739 and 1745. This "great and general awakening," as it was called, was to leave an indelible mark on the character of American Christianity.

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

The theologian of the Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, whom Perry Miller once aptly described as "the greatest theologian ever to grace the American scene." The precocious son of a congregationalist minister, Edwards was born in the same year as John Wesley, 1703. Ten years later, he was called to succeed his famous grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as pastor of the Church at Northampton, Massachusetts.

Edwards was an evangelical Calvinist. No one before or since has written so deeply, or with great clarity, on the themes of election, predestination, and justification by faith. The modern critical edition of his writings fill some 20 hefty volumes. But he was not a stuffy academic! He had a great love for, and an almost mystical devotion, to Jesus Christ.

Edwards told of an experience he had in 1737 when riding out into the woods for his health. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the sense of the glory of the Son of God.

"The person of Christ," he said, "appeared ineffably excellent in a flood of tears. Weeping aloud, I felt my soul to be emptied and annihilated; I desired to lie in the dust and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him, to serve Him and follow Him with a divine and heavenly purity."

Edwards was a complete stranger to that separation of "heart" and "head" that has so often plagued evangelical religion.

The Great Awakening came to Northampton in 1734 while Edwards was preaching a series of doctrinal sermons from the letters of St. Paul. Edwards later documented the awakening in his *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God:* "A great earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages. Each day the noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder."

In the course of one year, more than 300 persons were converted. Soon the revival spread to other towns in the Connecticut Valley, then throughout New England and the other colonies.

Jonathan Edwards was the "theologian" of the Great Awakening. But its most effective preacher and promoter was George Whitefield, a friend of John Wesley. It was Whitefield who carried the flame of revival from England to the New World, preaching up and down the eastern seacoast from Georgia to Maine. If Edwards was measured and restrained, Whitefield was exuberant and unpredictable. In Philadelphia, Whitefield preached with great passion to a crowd of more than 20,000. The skeptical Benjamin Franklin heard him and was deeply impressed with his sincerity and eloquence.

Not everyone, of course, was equally impressed. Charles Chauncey, of Boston, dismissed Whitefield as "a raving enthusiast," whose emotional preaching did far more damage than good. One day the two antagonists happened to meet on the street in Boston.

"I am sorry to see you return," said Chauncey to Whitefield, to which Whitefield replied, "So is the devil!"

When Whitefield died in 1770, an African American servant girl and poet, Phyllis Wheatley, wrote a famous eulogy about the Great Awakener:

> He leaves the earth for heaven's unmeasured height,
>
> And worlds unknown receive him from our sight;
>
> There Whitefield wings, with rapid course his way,
>
> And sails to Zion, through vast seas of day.

The effects of the first Great Awakening were momentous. The importance of a personal, experiential faith, "heart religion" (as it was called), became a defining characteristic of the evangelical tradition. The necessity of truly knowing God, not merely knowing about Him, would be stressed by later awakeners and evangelists such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and, in the twentieth century, Billy Sunday (who once said, "Going to church don't make a man a Christian any more than going to a stable makes a man a horse").

Revivalism became a major feature on the American religious landscape.

Jonathan Edwards would doubtless have frowned on some later evangelistic techniques, for they showed little appreciation for what he called "the surprising work of God." Education also benefitted from the Great Awakening. New colleges and schools were begun: Princeton by the Presbyterians in New Jersey, Brown by the Baptists in Rhode Island. Another result was the rise and growth of denominations: Baptists, Presbyterians, and, later, Methodists. In the numbers game, the Baptists became the biggest winners. In 1740, there were 96 Baptist churches in the American colonies. By 1780, there were 457.

The First Great Awakening also spawned a new kind of interdenominational evangelicalism as Christians joined efforts across denominational lines to support Bible societies, missionary movements, and benevolent works of all kinds. Speaking from the courthouse balcony at Philadelphia in 1740, George Whitefield sounded the call for Christian unity:

> "Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians?"
>
> "No!"
>
> "Any Presbyterians?"
>
> "No!"
>
> "Any Independents and Methodists?"
>
> "No, no, no!"
>
> "Whom have you there?"
>
> "We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians. . . ."
>
> "Oh, is this the case? Then God help us to forget party names and to become Christians in deed and in truth."