

## American Religion

Jim Pederson    Dyed-in-the-Wool History    January 20, 2025

### State Established Churches

The original colonists did not hold to a concept of freedom of religion but replicated the church state union from England. In New England the Congregational church replaced the Church of England and in Virginia and the southern colonies, the status and position of the Anglican Church was initially maintained much like the mother country. Both were state supported and, from a free market perspective, tended to operate like government institutions.

While Puritanism isn't a denomination or a sect it closely aligns with the Congregational Church. Congregationalism appeared in England in the late 1500's and is traceable to English church separatist Robert Browne. In England they were called separatists or Independents to distinguish themselves from Presbyterians and Reformed Churches. In addition to England, Congregationalists churches were established in Ireland, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand either by immigrants or missionaries (London Missionary Society).

In England, Congregationalists took control of the Parliament after the Second Civil War ending in 1649 with Pride's Purge, oversaw the trial and execution of Charles I, and established the British Commonwealth. In 1660 they lost power when the monarchy was restored.

In New England, Congregationalism was the state sanctioned and supported church. Using the church /sect comparison, it went from being a sect in tension with the society it was in to being in a position to define society. It produced prominent clergy and lay people who were instrumental in initiating the Revolutionary War, the Civil War or War Between the States, and the First World War along with social reform movements including abolitionism, temperance /prohibition, and women's suffrage. It also produced groups that most Christians see as being either cults or at least outside of Christian doctrines even when defined very loosely such as Unitarians, Universalists, and Transcendentalists. Yet their ranks in terms of percentages started to decline after the first couple of decades in the new world and they never had any strong appeal or membership from people outside of their ethno-religious group. Their churches were almost entirely within New England. (1 pp. 25-30)

In Congregational theology of the time period, church and state had separate role and responsibilities but worked together to ensure godly standards governed the society. This meant that everyone in the colony, whether a Congregationalist or Puritan or not, had to attend a (Congregationalist) church and follow the commonwealth laws that instituted prevailing religious practices amongst the leaders of the society. Religious dissenters were not allowed the same freedoms that the Puritans had sought. This by today's standards would seem hypocritical but the counter argument would be, as taken from Congressional library website; *"no one anywhere in Europe believed that religion should be a personal choice: the church was an arm of the government, and rulers always decided how their people would worship. The Puritan Commonwealth, the city on a hill, was also something more than a New World*

colony. It was a "holy experiment", a place where a dedicated band of believers would show the world what Jesus Christ really intended." (2) Those who were banished from there and did understand the concept of religious freedom would probably disagree with this argument.

Congregationalist's churches weren't structured as denominations at least in part because they were so closely integrated with the government and the broader society. The Cambridge Platform for the Massachusetts Bay colony was signed in 1648 which established standards for ordaining ministers, accepting church members, and cooperating between churches. In Connecticut in 1708 the Saybrook platform gave ministers the ability to meet together in associations and make binding decisions over individual churches which went considerably further towards central governance. (2)

Initially the process of joining a Congregationalist church was somewhat involved. Potential members had to testify to a religious conversion experience then be approved by the minister, elders, and the rest of the congregation. Within a generation these rules were reformulated to avoid erosion in membership. The half-way covenant of 1662 allowed for non-members to have their children baptized. (2)

Moving on to the Anglicans who were the established church of Virginia, the national Church of England was established under Henry VIII and remained very close to Catholic liturgy and tradition of the time. Under King Edward VI, it underwent an English Reformation that would establish a number of characteristics that would make it distinctly Anglican. The church attempted to define a middle ground between Catholicism and the Lutheran and Reformed traditions or "*via media*". In time, however, conflict between the Puritans and conservatives, that also aligned along political divisions as previously discussed, led to swings back and forth in control of the church. A revised "*Book of Common Prayer*" was published in 1662 that was acceptable to adherents to the "*high church*" along with some Puritans and is still in use today. (3 p. 89)

Most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were at least nominally Anglican (4) and this created a clear conflict in that Anglican doctrines as the prayer books specifically referenced the Royal Family. From this derived the Episcopal Church of America which differed in terms of authority or hierarchy but was Anglican in other respects. This, along with the Congregationalists, became the faiths of the ruling class but neither penetrated the remainder of society. The Torres who migrated to Canada remained Anglican but that church would eventually become independent in 1830.

## **The American Denominational System**

The American denominational system that developed was unique from other regions of the world where there would tend to be a dominant church linked to the government and possibly one or two minor groups that coexisted within the church state system. The American denominations were originally largely regional but grew to compete with each other so all areas became contested in terms of the religious marketplace.

In some areas, principally in the north, the denominational differences would come to be perceived as being relatively minor and people would eventually come to move fairly easily from one group to the other and joint activities or ventures were common. In others, the denominational separations were

quite strong with people having a great deal of loyalty to their respective groups. Denominations would continue to fragment slowly at first and then eventually by the 20<sup>th</sup> century very rapidly as the denominational structures have largely broken or are at least severely weakened. The following is a brief description of the major groups from which all of this developed:

Baptists: The Baptists emerged out of the Puritan Separatist movement as did the Congregationalists but gradually took a different path that separated church from state and promoted religious liberty. They practiced full immersion baptism of believers as opposed to infant baptism and the name was probably more descriptive than chosen. Baptist in England developed along two groups; General Baptists and Particular Baptists and their early history is fairly involved. (5)

Starting with the General Baptists, John Smyth was an Anglican minister who developed puritan or separatist views who left the church and joined a small separatist congregation in Gainsborough outside of London. One group led by John Robinson, William Brewster, and William Bradford, who became the nucleus of the Pilgrim founders and who all sailed on the Mayflower, moved to Scobby Manor. The remnant led by John Smyth and layman Thomas Helwys fled to Amsterdam where they came into contact with Dutch Mennonites, who were a branch of Anabaptists, and may have adapted some of their beliefs (arguable point). By 1609 Smyth had become convinced that the Separatist church wasn't valid because most of the members were baptized or dedicated as infants and were not baptized as adult believers. Smyth baptized himself and then the others and this baptism was by sprinkling or pouring. In 1611 Thomas Helwys led a portion of the Amsterdam congregation back to London where they established the initial Baptists church. By 1650 there were 47 churches around London. Their beliefs were generally Arminian as opposed to Calvinist which is reflected in the name "*general*" meaning they believed in general atonement as opposed only the elect. (5)

Smyth later became convinced that his self-baptism was invalid and applied for membership with the Mennonites. He died awaiting membership and several of his members also joined the Mennonite Church. Helwys died in prison under Charles I after putting forth the concept the church and state be kept separate in matters of the law which became a fundamental concept for Baptists. (5)

Particular Baptists followed the General Baptists by about one generation and were Calvinists believing that "*Christ died only for a particular group, the elect*". Their separation from the Church of England was more gradual (5). A small independent congregation formed in 1616 under Pastor Henry Jacob followed by John Lathrop and Henry Jessey with this church being referred to as the JIJ Church after the three pastors. Doctrinal disputes and discussions over Baptism resulted in church splits. The common conclusion on the first Particular Baptists church is that it was established not later than 1638 and possibly as early as 1633. By 1650 they had adopted full immersion baptism as opposed to sprinkling which was also adopted by the General Baptists.

Roger Williams with John Clarke, are considered the founders of the Baptist Church in America and the colony of Rhode Island along with the core concept of religious liberty and opposition to a state sponsored church. Williams established a Baptist Church in Providence and Clarke began a church in Newport. It is unclear which church was actually the first Baptist Church in North America. Both Williams

and Clarke led lives that would cross major political, social, and religious issues and movements of their day.

Williams was born in London and educated at Charterhouse School and Pembroke College in Cambridge which is where he drifted from the Anglican Church and became a Puritan. He didn't join the first wave of puritans leaving England for the new world but then decided he could not stay in England and left with his wife in December of 1630. He declined a post at the Boston Church in 1631 and had ongoing conflicts with the Puritan church and culture from that time forward. The three primary points that distinguished his teachings were separatism, liberty of conscience (objected to mandatory church participation or attendance), and separation of church and state.

A lot in his life happened relatively quickly ultimately leading to his exile. The Salem Church which like Williams tended toward the separatists side, invited Williams to become a teacher there but the offer was revoked after protests from Boston. He moved to the Plymouth colony in the summer of 1661 where he was an assistant minister and preached frequently. Governor William Bradford described his teaching as being "*well approved*". Williams eventually came to the belief that the Salem church wasn't adequately separated and the colonial charters didn't include or address purchase of Indian lands, in this case specifically from the Narragansett Indians. These positions along with a tract he wrote condemning the King's charter led to conflicts with Bradford and Williams moved back to Salem in the fall of 1633 where he became acting pastor of the Salem church. Over the next several months he became entangled in legal problems, left the church to begin a home church, was finally convicted of sedition and heresy in October 1635 and was sentenced to be banished. His sentence was stayed until the passing of winter so long as he wouldn't preach but he didn't comply with this order and wound up fleeing in the mid of winter where he found shelter with the Wampanoag Indians until spring. He eventually acquired lands from the Indians after boundary disputes with Massachusetts and obtained a Charter for the colony in 1644 after returning to England. Williams was baptized by Ezekiel Holliman in 1638 and, although he didn't affiliate himself with Baptists or any other group or label he seemed to be generally in agreement with and supportive of Baptist beliefs.

John Clarke was a physician and Baptist Minister and established the second (maybe first) Baptist Church in Newport Rhode Island. He was born in Suffolk, educated in Leiden Holland and immigrated to the Massachusetts where Baptists were considered heretics and banned from living there. This was during the Antinomian or Free Grace Controversy and he initially sought refuge on Aquidneck Island along with exiles from that conflict. Later he made a mission trip to Lynn Massachusetts where he was arrested and wound up paying a large fee to be released. Like Williams he returned to England for some time and helped Rhode Island obtain a royal charter protecting its territory against the surrounding Puritan colonies that were hostile towards it.

In looking at the Baptist's relation to government and the concept of separation of church and state, there is another very important and closely related idea and that is that the powers and role of the government should be limited. In a modern context one is emphasized while the other is largely swept away and ignored but both concepts were linked throughout history. The Catholics and Lutherans also shared this understanding but in these cases the churches developed before the centralized city states

so it more or less came about naturally. For the Baptists these were clearly contrary to the positions of the Congregationalists and Anglicans / Episcopalians.

**Presbyterians:** The Presbyterian Church derives from the Church of Scotland and came to the colonies with Scottish Immigrants. Theologically they were Calvinists or part of the Reformed School and were similar to the Puritans in that sense. John Knox, a former Catholic priest, studied under Calvin and brought Reformed teachings to Scotland in the 1560's. Ulster Scots then brought Presbyterianism to Ireland. The Presbyterians were the second most prevalent denomination in colonial America in 1776 and also had a strong presence in Puritan New England.

In 1706 the first presbytery in America was established in Philadelphia. Early congregations were largely in Middle colonies but the faith spread mainly with the Borderland migrants. The Church of Scotland and the Synod of Ulster required clergy to ascribe to the Westminster Confession. The newly formed Synod of Philadelphia originally had no confessional statement but in 1729 the synod passed the adopting act which required clergy to profess elements of the Westminster Confession that were considered to be critical elements of the faith. The church would undergo many conflicts and splits over time that represented changes and conflicts in American Christianity starting with the initial awakening movement.

**Methodists:** The Methodist Church gradually broke away from the Anglican Church under John Wesley although not during his life time. John Wesley was born in 1703, educated at Oxford, and ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Church in 1725. Wesley was ordained as a priest in 1728 and returned to Oxford in 1729. He and his brother Charles formed a study group that emphasized consistency and routine in spiritual discipline which led to them coming to be referred to as "*Methodists*" for their methodical practices.

John and Charles Wesley traveled to Georgia at the invitation of the founder of the colony, James Edward Oglethorpe, in 1735 to be pastors to the colonist and missionaries to the Indians. This was a failure in all respects and they returned to England questioning their faith and their salvation. Upon returning to England, they became associated with members of the Church of the Brethren, who were staying in England before joining Monrovia settlements in the American colonies. The Monroviaans were decidedly Evangelical promoting a specific conversion experience which translated to American Evangelicalism. On May 24, 1738 John Wesley underwent a conversion experience that he described as follows: "*My heart strangely warmed ... I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*" His brother Charles reported a similar experience a few days prior. A few months later Wesley joined George Whitefield, whose was also an Anglican clergyman who had underwent a conversion experience, in Bristol preaching in an open air setting which was the beginning of the Methodist revival meetings. Whitefield and Wesley eventually moved apart due to Whitefield's belief in predestination. (6) Wesley's helpers included only a small number of ordained clergy and his brother, who wrote a vast number of hymns to support the revivals. While not desiring for the "*Methodist Society*" to separate from the Church of England, relations were frequently strained.

After the Revolution, there was a shortage of Anglican clergy in America but the English church refused to ordain a Methodist to lead the American church. Feeling forced to and believing that a presbyter can ordain, Wesley ordained Thomas Coke as superintendent and two others as presbyters. In the same year he appointed by deed of declaration a Conference of 100 men to govern the Society of Methodists after his death. The final break with the Church of England came in 1795, four years after Wesley's death.

In addition to the larger groups that are demographically prominent, there were Lutherans, who came with small groups of Germanic and Nordic Immigrants during the colonial period, Quakers, who were significant during the colonial period but dwindled later, Monrovia Brethren, and others. The upstart Methodists and Baptists, however, were to become dominant. A table of congregations by denomination compiled from land records as of 1776 is shown as follows:

Congregations per Denomination in America - 1776 (1 p. 28)

Congregational (all in North East)	668
Baptist	497
Episcopal	495
Quakers	310
German Reformed	159
Lutheran	150
Dutch Reformed	120
Methodist	65
Catholic	56
Moravian	31

Beginning in the 1730's the revivalists, led by George Whitefield started to reshape the church in colonial America. Whitefield would speak without a church, pulpit, or denominational sponsor as need be and his meetings drew huge crowds commonly running into the thousands. A crowd estimated at 30,000 heard him speak on the Boston Commons. These meetings were outdoors because no indoor facility at the time could accommodate that number of people (1 pp. 50-51). His presentation was very similar to an Evangelical Crusade or Altar Call at a modern conservative Evangelical church which went something like this account from October 9, 1740; *"..when Whitefield thundered, "Are you saved?" – and then explained why the answer was "No!" Whitefield was not satisfied to indict only his crowd for their sins. He attacked the local clergy for the predicament of their flocks. "I'm persuaded the generality of preachers in New England talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reasons why congregations have been so dead, is because they have dead men preaching to them."* He was especially critical of Harvard and Yale that produced most of the Clergy. When Whitefield left, the fires of revival died down but he established the tremendous market for the Evangelical faith that was in due time to be re-ignited (1 pp. 52-53). It should be noted regarding Whitefield that he was in no way an abolitionist having advocated

the expansions of slavery in Georgia and was in every respect a Puritan advocating what would later become known as “blue laws” including the banning of theatre, dancing, drinking, and music outside of church.

While this could be seen as the birth of American Evangelicalism that then spread across the expanding country after the revolution it was certainly not without critics. Speaking in economic terms, existing churches saw them in most cases as competitors and the clergy in particular did not appreciate competition from lowly paid bi-vocational preachers that would become increasingly common. Some also saw the emotional aspects of the conversion experience, which is central to Evangelicalism, as being shallow and transient representing an over-simplified faith that, while marketable to the masses, lacked depth of commitment or understanding. Whitfield was particularly critical of the South and many southern preachers like Alexander Garden were equally critical of him and other similar Puritan evangelists that were inclined to use the force of the state to control individual behavior. The degree to which the new revivalism presented several characteristics of evolving protestant faith from England such as free grace and the revival meeting style was unmistakable. Another clear conclusion is that the simple, clear, and emotionally validating message of the revivalist was far more appealing to the unchurched and uncommitted than the theological lectures that were common in Congregational, Presbyterian, and Anglican churches. The Evangelical form of worship, however, was clearly derived from that of the Congregational Church.

## Bibliography

1. **Stark, Rodney Finke, Roger.** *The churching of America 1776-2005 winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy.* New Brunswick New Jersey : Rutgers University Press, 2005.
2. **Congregational Library and Archive.** Congregational Library and Archive - History Matters. [Online] 2013. [Cited: July 1, 2020.] <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/researchers/congregational-christian-tradition>.
3. **Edwards, David L.** *Christian England Volume - From the Reformation to the 18th Century.* London : Collins, 1983.
4. Religious Affiliation of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. [Online] 4 2010, July. [Cited: July 10, 2020.] <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/2546951/posts>.
5. **McBeth, Leon.** The Baptist History and Heritage Society - Baptist Beginnings. [Online] 1979. [Cited: April 20, 2020.] <http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/baptistbeginnings.html>.
6. **Davies, Rupert E.** Methodism. [Online] 1970-71. [Cited: June 15, 2020.] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism>.