Chapter 2
Pre-awakened Colonial North America

Church Membership

In order to understand how and why this eighteenth century revival resonated with so many colonial era Protestants (particularly in the Southern Backcountry, one must first understand the pre-awakened sociocultural, political, economic, and religious milieu in existence existed before the Awakening began.

First of all, for many colonial pre-awakened establishment Protestants, church affiliation was by invitation only. That is to say, only those who were considered to be "proven saints" were permitted to join a congregation (Bonomi 1986; Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976; Leigh Heyrman 2000). Most significantly, establishment Protestant clergyman reserved the exclusive right to administer or to withhold grace bestowing sacraments from recalcitrant congregants (Balmer 2006; Stout 1986).[1]

In New England, candidates wishing to be accepted into an establishment Protestant congregation often first had to subject their personal lives to the scrutiny of a panel comprised of church elders along with members of the clergy. Then, the applicant would be required to render an account of his/her religious life in front of the entire body of believers. The church panel would then proceed to conduct an investigation of the candidate's character that would sometimes include questioning townspeople at large about the applicant's life and morals. Finally, the candidate would be subjected to a probationary period where church elders would carefully monitor the neophyte's spiritual progress. It was only after having successfully navigated these requirements were candidates received into the covenant, at which they pledged loyalty to the congregation for life (Bonomi 1986).

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[1] Additionally, some ministers were known to deny communion to believers "unless they could provide evidence of a work of grace in their lives" (Stein 2005, p. 2698).

Establishment Protestant Ministers

"As social guardians or 'watchmen' [establishment Protestant] ministers were responsible for being on the lookout for divine warnings and, when they appeared, for bringing the people together for a diagnosis of their spiritual ills and for corrective action. No matter what the particular calamity, …sermons dwelt on the underlying truth that the sin of a people is the cause…of [God's] wrath against that people" (Stout 1986, p. 28). Moreover, establishment ministers often claimed special prophetic powers as indicted by Increase Mather's comment.

> Hearken to the voice of God in the Ministry of his word, mind what the Messengers of God speak in his name, for surely the Lord will do nothing, but he revealeth his secrets to his Servants the Prophets…believe his Prophets so shall you prosper…therefore, you may expect that God will communicate Light to you by them… (Mather cited in Stout 1986, pp. 81–82).

> In 1714, Samuel Danforth Jr. proclaimed the following:

> The success of the laborers in God's vineyard consists in the upholding of religion where it is set up and in planting and propagating of it to other places. It is the good hand of God working for his people which provides pastors after his own heart for his church successively from age to age… (Danforth Jr. cited in Stout 1986, p. 142).

Additionally, establishment Protestant clergymen attempted to foster loyalty among their congregations by exhorting them to treat ordained establishment ministers with deference by telling them to "love God, love your neighbor, [and] obey them that have rule over you" (cited in Bonomi 1986, p. 153). One establishment cleric stated that "God does not chuse to speak immediately from heaven himself, nor to speak by Angles, but he raises up instruments of the sons of men whom he fits and qualifies by furnishing them with a suitable measure of the gifts and graces of his Spirit and by them he finds and speaks his mind to other men [*sic*]" (cited in Stout 1986, pp. 91–92).

Many preawakening establishment Protestant ministers were anything but demure with regards to the public's consideration of their mission. Evidence of this sentiment can be seen in Puritan Cotton Mather's belief that of all of mankind's vocations, the Christian ministry certainly was "the Highest Dignity, if not the Greatest Happiness, that Human Nature is capable of, here in this Vale below" (Mather cited in Schmotter 1979, p. 153). Nathaniel Eells even went so far as to assert that establishment ministers "officially stand nearer to God than others do" (Eells cited in Stout 1986, p. 162). In 1725, Azariah Mather echoed this view when he declared that establishment Protestant ministers were "to be looked upon as Sacred Persons, Men representing the King of Glory" (Mather cited in Stout 1986, p. 162).[2]

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[2] Puritans or Congregationalists were Protestants who advocated strict religious discipline along with the simplification of the Church of England's creeds and rituals (Tudor 1962).

Increased Emphasis on Formal Education

In the early days of the colonies, an individual's personal piety was of paramount importance in determining whether or not he was fit for the ministry. However, the Enlightenment's emphasis on knowledge affected establishment Protestant denominational ordination committees. As such, formal training (i.e., college education) increasingly became a requirement for being appointed to positions of leadership in establishment Protestant denominations. Indeed, historical records show that establishment Protestant leadership in the Colonies felt that college educated individuals were best qualified for the august task of shepherding souls. Evidence of this clerical insistence on higher education can be seen in the following. In 1700, 12 % of ordained Congregational ministers had not attended Harvard College however by 1740, only 3 % of ordained Congregational ministers were nongraduates (Schmotter 1979, p. 157). Naturally, college educated ministers insisted on receiving higher salaries than individuals without higher education (Schmotter 1979) and Peter Clark unapologetically justified this attitude in 1728, when he reminded his congregation that "it is certainly and undeniably your Duty by the Law of CHRIST JESUS the Lord…to afford those that labor in Word and Doctrine a comfortable and honorable Maintenance" (Clark cited in Schmotter 1979, p. 156).

As previously mentioned, in the early days of the colonies among establishment Protestants, an individual's personal piety was an important factor when considering the qualifications for the preaching office. However, by the eighteenth century, it not only became increasingly important for establishment clerics to meet certain educational requirements but to also meet various social qualifications as well.

> …ministers are, or ought to be, Persons of an elevated Education and Accomplishments…Our Lord saw cause by immediate Inspiration to confer ministerial Gifts on Persons wholly illiterate; yet none may now reasonably expect, that unsought Accomplishments will be infused into him. Education, Study and Prayer are now the Method, whereby the Candidates of the Evangelical Ministry must be fitted for their charge (Wigglesworth cited in Stout 1986, p. 164).

Additionally, the establishment pre-awakened church was a part of a colonist's life from birth, through baptism, marriage and finally to death. Moreover, worship gatherings provided a mechanism for socializing. Significantly, one of the tenets of colonial era establishment Protestantism before the Awakening was the belief in the validity of grace bestowing sacraments which included the baptizing of infants (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976).[3]

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[3] As previously stated, colonial era Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists believed in the validity of sacraments. However, on the issue of church governance, Puritans parted company with their fellow establishment Protestants in that Congregationalist churches "were nothing more than local covenants whereby people voluntarily 'joined' themselves to one another and God in a visible assembly; there was no need for some higher agency or authority beyond local

The Age of Enlightenment's Influence

The eighteenth century European intellectual movement known as the Age of Enlightenment was associated with a rise of the bourgeoisie and the influence of scientific discoveries that "…promoted the values of intellectual and material progress, toleration, and critical reason as opposed to authority and tradition in matters of politics and religion" (Woods 2005, p. 2795). The Enlightenment touted the natural goodness and rationality of humankind along with the perfectibility of society. "It was believed that social institutions could be improved by conscious and intelligent effort; if people tried, they could bring about progress through political action" Hatch (1973, p. 40). In short, the Enlightenment posited faith in the innate goodness of humanity along with the belief in the power of human rationality (Hatch 1973). Moreover, Enlightenment thinkers such as Newton and Locke believed that the universe was rationally ordered and therefore, laws could be discovered that explained the motions of the planets as well as the behavior of people (Garbarino 1977).[4] "No well-read provincial [colonist] could escape the excitement these [Enlightenment] luminaries were generating in science, literature, epistemology, and ethics…" (Stout 1986, p. 128) and establishment Protestant ministers were no exception.

Increasingly, Enlightenment inspired notions were incorporated into sermons and this would not be to the liking of many colonials. In fact, one of the factors that played a major role in the success of the Awakening was that many congregants felt that much of the leadership of establishment denominations had lost its vitality due to being sidetracked by the Enlightenment's influence. Critics argued that sermons from establishment Protestant ministers often focused on scholarly matters that reportedly did not touch the hearts of common folk (Leigh Heyrman 2000).

Growing Class Conflict

Since the middle 1600s, the Colonies were rife with class antagonism as the ranks of the well educated in addition to the number of mercantile elites grew, particularly within coastal cities (Stout 1986). This situation was exacerbated by the fact

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(Footnote 3 continued)

church officers" (Stout 1986, p. 18). That is to say, Puritans were not subject to external ecclesiastical authorities as Anglicans and Presbyterians were (Stout 1986). However, Congregationalist ministers were only allowed to preach after being properly ordained by local Congregationalist authorities (Dr. Charles Foss, personal communication to Chacon, 2008).

[4] Locke's emphasis on rationality is made apparent in the following quotes: "…faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind; which, if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposed to it" (Locke 1959, p. 413). "Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything" (Locke 1959, p. 438).

that many establishment Protestant clerics were relatively affluent vis-à-vis a large number of colonials (many of whom were deeply indebted).[5] Intermarriage between clerics and wealthy merchant families was not uncommon and this fostered a general alliance (at least in some regions) between a professional establishment Protestant clergy and the upper echelons of colonial society (Balmer 2006).

It is important to note that not all establishment Protestant clerics married into rich merchant families. In fact, by mid-seventeenth century, some establishment ministers actually felt threatened by the growing number of wealthy entrepreneurs. The reason why a number of clerics felt this way was because many successful businessmen did not treat ministers with the deference that establishment clerics believed was properly due them. Colonial "merchants, magistrates, and ordinary townspeople all seemed less disposed to honor their [establishment ministers'] social position" (Stout 1986, p. 76). In 1682, establishment Protestant minister Urian Oakes observed that the chief culprits were the parishioners whose "miscarriages were most grievously displayed in their lack of deference toward superiors in church and state" (cited in Stout 1986, p. 105). Many establishment "ministers perceived themselves as an embattled remnant whose misfortune it was to labor at a time when popular respect for God's ministers had sadly declined…" (cited in Stout 1986, p. 159).

Moreover, the historical evidence shows that the smoldering class antagonism existing between the well-educated establishment Protestant clergy and the generally less educated churchgoing population heightened in the eighteenth century as "[c]lerical demands for deference to the pulpit seemed to have no impact on parishioners, for provincial New Englanders did not hesitate to take cut off their pastor's salaries, take them to court, or publicly insult them" (Schmotter 1979, p. 159). In short, popular insubordination was becoming an increasing problem for establishment ministers even before the Great Awakening began (Stout 1986).

Further Signs of Alienation

As many colonial Protestants became dissatisfied with their spiritual leaders, even as far back as the 1670s, salary disputes had "become so common that incoming ministers routinely demanded written contracts with fixed salaries as a precondition to the 'peace and comfort' of their settlement" (Stout 1986, p. 107). In the late 1600s, some establishment Protestant ministers report being "treated with scorn, and paid in insults, and deprived of what is justly our dues, receiving no salary worth mentioning" (cited in Balmer 2006, p. 191). "As social superiors,

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[5] In 1706, an Anglican missionary in New Jersey named John Brooke referred to "my parishioners of Amboy, who are generally poor," a description that applied to many North American colonists and that also likely accounted for much of their resentment toward the upper classes (cited in Balmer 2006, p. 196).

[establishment] ministers believed they were entitled to superior salaries" (Stout 1986, p. 107). Contrastingly, "[t]ight-fisted parishioners continued to argue that low salaries were good for clerical humility…" (Stout 1986, p. 159).

By the eighteenth century, parishioner dissatisfaction appears to have grown dramatically. Evidence of the increasing alienation of professional establishment clergy from congregants can be found in the numerous communiqués from salaried ministers complaining about the difficulty of collecting from congregants the money due them (Balmer 2006). Additionally, the more establishment Protestant ministers "argued for salary, the more worldly they appeared, and the more indifferent parishioners became to their demands" (Schmotter 1979, p. 161).

Spiritual Declension

Not only did many churchgoers feel that the establishment Protestant clerics were out of touch with their flocks, but communiqués describing a general spiritual malaise among many establishment congregations were not uncommon beginning in the latter half of the seventeenth century. By the 1650s, the signs of spiritual apathy were evident in the dropping of the Congregationalist church attendance rate to only one out of every two inhabitants of settled communities such as Dedham; rates in Boston were even lower (Stout 1986). Significantly, establishment clerics were not ones to mince words when it came to ascribing blame for the perceived lukewarm faith of pre-awakened colonial North American Protestants. Establishment ministers unhesitatingly pointed accusatory fingers at the laypeople for the spiritual failure and declension of the day (Stout 1986). Puritan Eleazar Mather, in 1656, delivered the following indictment of the state of New England colonial Congregationalist parishioners.

> The dayes wherein you live are backsliding times, evil dayes, times of great degeneracy, and Apostasy. Alas! little humble walking now, little self-denial, little holiness; Oh how weighty and difficult is their work, that are now called out to stand up for Christ…How hard it is to keep up an House when it is falling down, to keep the Ship from sinking, when it the leak that is sprung hath almost filled it with water [*sic*] (Mather cited in Stout 1986, p. 68).

In 1695, an Anglican minister named John Miller reported on the "wickedness & irreligion of the inhabitants" and of "the great negligence of divine things that is generally found in most people" (Miller cited in Balmer 2006, p. 194). Moreover, Miller also stated that some churchgoers indeed do attend services "out of curiosity to and to find out faults in him that preacheth" (Miller cited in Balmer 2006, p. 194). Some commentators from the first half of the eighteenth century felt that the population's state of morality had generally sunk to a lamentable degree (Valkenburgh 1994).

Underserved Regions

The religious situation was made worse by the lack of ordained clergy, as there were simply not enough seminary-trained ministers to serve the needs of remotely located and widely dispersed eighteenth century colonial era inhabitants (Divine et al. 1984). One frontier parish measured 80 by 130 miles, and one 1730s Pennsylvania minister's parishioners were so widely scattered that he traveled 1,632 miles in a single year to tend his flock (Bonomi 1986). Similarly scattered parishes existed throughout the Southern Backcountry. The most frequently employed metaphor for describing religious life in the Colonies at this time was that of scattered sheep without a shepherd (Bonomi 1986).

Roots of the Awakening: Old World Pietism

The Great Awaking did not arise in a vacuum; rather, it emerged in the wake of seventeenth century religious movements originating in Europe (Kraus 1928). The writings of individuals such as the Calvin-influenced English Puritan William Ames (1576–1633) and pietist Frenchman Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) would have profound effects on subsequent forms of Christianity originating in North America. A nonconformist Ames argued that "any number of individual Christian believers can constitute themselves by voluntary agreement into a church which is conceived to be essentially a congregation of believers under a special bond or covenant with God and with each other" (Gibbs 1971, p. 53).[6] Spener perceived Protestant denominations as being legalistic and filled with complacency; therefore, he advocated the necessity of religious renewal through the sanctification of daily life and personal daily piety with a "new birth" for salvation (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976; Kraus 1928; Lauchert 2006; Stoeffler 2005a).[7]

   Another pietist, August Herman Francke (1663–1727) from Germany, eschewed the need for rationality and formalism, calling for an "experiential religion" instead (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976, p. 31). Francke was one of Spener's followers who became a major advocate of Lutheran pietism (Stoeffler 2005b). In 1729, an English pietist named William Law (1686–1761) stressed the need for believers to undergo self-denial and meditation, and he strove to implement Christian doctrine into practical affairs. Law also called for the creation of a Christian religion based on the heart and argued against a rationalist approach to God. The prevailing message of the pietist movement was to seek God through a

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[6] Ames' argumentation facilitated the eventual formation of acephelous and highly divisive types of Protestantism in eighteenth century colonial North America.

[7] It is important to note that Spener did not question the validity of infant baptism.

personal experience (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976; Rudolph 2005). These proto-revivalists emphasized the importance of a faith based on emotions over one founded on reason.[8]

Frelinghuysen's Pietism

Evidence that pietism had made it to colonial North America can be found in the preaching of a German-born Dutch Reformed theologian and minister named Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691–1748), who zealously emphasized repentance and strict moral standards while also professing that mere participation in religious rituals without true conversion was an abomination. In 1720, he appeared on a colonial landscape which had been furrowed by class antagonisms, political stress, sectarianism, disease, and the rumblings of war (Balmer 2006). In his efforts against what he perceived as establishment Protestantism's formalism and indifference, Frelinghuysen instituted individual and emotional experiences as prerequisites for church membership, and he called upon all who were listening for a 'new heart' (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976, p. 648). His message regarding salvation was a profoundly personal one, as he required prospective church members to undergo a thorough self-examination of their standing in relation to God (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976). Demanding greater attention to one's religious state than had been asked in the past, Frelinghuysen warned that those who had not been saved but who acted complacently in their church lives were in the greatest danger of damnation. Most startlingly, he denied communion to many (even members of the church consistory) that were believed to be unregenerate (Balmer 2006; Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976).

Many of Frelinghuysen's detractors were establishment Protestants from the upper classes who criticized the proto-revivalist's emphasis on tangible religious personal experiences, his emotionalism, and his use of various other unauthorized and unorthodox religious practices, such as ordaining individuals without ecclesiastical permission. Moreover, Frelinghuysen's followers were described by his establishment critics as being "stupid farmers" and "wholly illiterate" (Balmer 2006, p. 199).

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[8] Some scholars cite even earlier influences playing a role in the development of Christian revivalism such as the writings of John Duns Scotus (1266–1308), who emphasized aspects of God's power and glory over that of his divine love. This approach exerted a strong influence on John Calvin (1509–1564), who arrived at the conclusion that human beings were utterly depraved, and therefore, were powerless to do anything to save themselves except to first admit to being helplessly lost in this state. They could then look to God for a salvation which had been predestined for them from the very beginning of time. In short, for Calvin, all human efforts at attaining sanctification were futile (Dr. Charles Foss, personal communication to Chacon 2006; Dr. William Kiblinger, personal communication to Chacon 2006; Kidd 2010).

Frelinghuysen explained his great success in attracting converts from among the lower ranks of society by saying that "riches are, frequently, a hindrance in following Jesus" (Frelinghuysen cited in Balmer 2006, p. 198). "Before long, Frelinghuysen had split his church and initiated one of the longest and most bitter ecclesiastical disputes in colonial history" (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976, p. 48).

Another portent of the coming revival emanated from Northampton in the Connecticut River Valley in 1734, when a preacher named Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) delivered a series of "conversion sermons that brought over three hundred new converts into full church membership in one year. Edwards rejoiced at how the revival saved sinners and immediately put an end to differences between ministers and people…All seemed to be seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation" (Stout 1986, p. 188). While his efforts to spur religious fervor in the Colonies were insufficient to incite revivalism on a grand scale, Edwards would soon obtain support from two dynamic individuals possessing impressive oratorical skills (i.e., William Tennent and George Whitefield) who would help usher in the Great Awakening. In a few short years, these pietist-inspired individuals would ignite a powerful religious conflagration that would forever transform North America's religious and political landscape.

Summary

Perhaps, one of the best descriptions of colonial establishment Protestant life on the eve of the Great Awakening is recorded by Stout (1986), p. 176. "For the most part, young people in these [Congregationalist] communities had grown up in churches where they knew one another's families and where they had been indoctrinated since youth in the importance of local covenant keeping. They understood salvation less as a sudden conversion experience than as a gradual process that coincided with their coming-of-age as parents and landowners. And they were prepared to think of their local church in corporate rather than individual terms."

However, it is important to note that colonial religious life before the Awakening was also characterized by high levels of volatile sectarianism. Unlike Europe, with its established formal church and state relationships, English-held North America was a place where establishment Protestant denominations often jealously competed with each other for adherents (Bonomi 1986; Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976; Divine et al. 1984; Valkenburgh 1994). Additionally, many colonial Protestants prior to the Awakening felt alienated from their establishment ministers, whom they perceived as being out of touch with commoners (Bumsted and Van De Wetering 1976; Stout 1986).

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