

The Christian Foundation of America's Original Thirteen Colonies

BY GLENN SWYGART

At a time when the Christian foundation of American character is under Satanic attack, Americans must be reminded that those who established the original colonies were Christians whose primary motivation was freedom to practice and propagate Biblical Christianity. History teachers in elementary and secondary schools should communicate this foundational truth to their students, who can then transmit it to future generations.

Post-Reformation Background

It was in the sovereign plan of God that the beginnings of what became the United States coincided with the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the spirit of Biblical truth, three major groups developed in the seventeenth century whose goals were to make that truth free in both belief and practice; thus all became champions of religious freedom.

The first of these groups were the English Baptists, who were the result of two separate Reformation movements. First, the Swiss Anabaptists, whose basis was Believer's Baptism and opposition to state churches. Second, the English Separatist Puritans, whose foundation was religious freedom.

The origin of the English Baptists came in 1609, when John Smyth, a Separatist Puritan pastor who had taken his Gainsborough Congregation to Holland, came under the influence of the Anabaptists. Smyth and his church adopted Believer's Baptism and strengthened their opposition to a state church. After Smyth died about 1612, part of his congregation returned to England and became the General Baptists. The English Particular Baptists began in 1638 with a stronger Calvinistic influence. Both groups impacted the early colonies for religious liberty.

The second post-Reformation group is the Society of Friends (Quakers). George Fox was raised in England after the fires of the Reformation had cooled. After a search for spiritual reality, Fox was converted to Christ about 1646. He formed the Society of Friends in 1652 to rekindle the Reformation fires; this quickly spread to America, fueled by a quest for religious freedom.

The final group is Pietism; a spiritual awakening that began in the Lutheran Church of Germany, which by the mid seventeenth century had settled into a dead orthodoxy with little of the zeal of Martin Luther. One pastor, Philipp Jacob Spener, wanted to re establish that zeal. Beginning about 1670, aided by August Hermann Francke, he was successful in many churches. The American impact of Pietism on

behalf of religious freedom was both in the original form and through the Moravians led by Count Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (Sweet, 1950).

The Puritan Colonies

The Puritan influence in America was through both Separatists and non-Separatists, but the most permanent impact came through the Separatists. This group took a courageous stand against any state church and for complete freedom of religion.

Massachusetts

The Scrooby Congregation in England had split from the Separatist Gainsborough Congregation of John Smyth in 1607. By 1608, both congregations had fled to Holland to escape the severe persecution of King James I. John Robinson, William Bradford, and William Brewster led the Scrooby Congregation, which unlike the Gainsborough group were not influenced by the Anabaptists. However, in 1620 problems caused them to return to England and seek passage to America. They secured the ship *Mayflower* and sailed from Plymouth, England on September 6, 1620. They established the Plymouth Colony on Cape Cod on December 21. On November 11, before disembarking from the ship, the colonists made sure of their political and religious foundation by signing the *Mayflower Compact*, which begins with the words "In ye name of God, Amen," and declares that what they were doing was ". . . for ye glorie of God and advancemente of ye Christian faith" (Ahlstrom, 1972). From this wording, Brauer declares, ". . . their religious beliefs de termined the basis of their political society" (Brauer, n.d.). All forty-one male passengers, including non-Puritans, signed the Compact. It remained the basis of government at Plymouth until the colony became part of the Massachusetts Colony in 1691.

Since the pastor, John Robinson, had remained in England due to lack of funds, the leading laymen, William Bradford and William Brewster, were responsible for maintaining the Separatist Puritan ideals. The most important of these was complete religious freedom.

In 1630, other Puritans, and non-Separatists, established a colony farther north at Massachusetts Bay. Not opposing a state church, they established the Congregational Church. Nonetheless, their love of God and desire to live according to His Word cannot be questioned. John Winthrop, the first governor, in his *City upon a Hill* in 1630, quoted the Prophet Micah's mandate that they should "do justly . . . love mercy, and . . . walk humbly with . . . God" (Micah 6:8).

The lack of tolerance for other religious groups that led to the hanging of four Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1659 and 1661 gradually broke down. By 1691, when the Plymouth Colony and the Bay Colony were united, other religious groups were free to worship in the colony.

Thomas Mayhew Jr. began the first serious Puritan attempt to evangelize Native Americans. He began in 1643 at Martha's Vineyard, and soon had about one hundred converts. After Mayhew died at sea on his way back to England to solicit funds, his work was continued by members of his family. The most successful Puritan missionary was John Eliot (Noll, 1983), who began his work from his church in Roxbury in 1646. By 1675, he had about four thousand converts living in fourteen "praying towns."

Native American evangelism continued in the eighteenth century during the Great Awakening. David Brainerd's zeal to reach distant tribes with the gospel of Christ led to his death from tuberculosis at the age of 29. The Christian foundation for the colonies was not intended for Europeans only, but for all under their influence.

Connecticut and New Hampshire

Two small colonies were united as Connecticut in 1664, and New Hampshire was separated from Massachusetts Bay in 1679. Since non-Separatist Puritans were dominant in both areas, each established the Congregational Church as a state church; but the Separatist influence in all of New England had produced a spirit of toleration in both colonies.

The Established Church of England Colonies

Although they had a variety of religious influences and experiences in their backgrounds, six of the original thirteen colonies eventually, at least partially, established the Church of England. The background experience of each was reflected in its evangelistic zeal and degree of religious toleration.

Virginia

The first Christian contact in the area that was to become Virginia was in 1526, when Spanish adventurer Lucas Vasquez, two Dominican Roman Catholic priests, and one other layman sailed from Spain to the Chesapeake River in America. Their major desire was to introduce their version of Christianity in America. They landed near the site of the future Jamestown Colony, and others from Spain soon joined them. The first official Christian service in what would become the United States was held in the same year. However, numerous problems led to failure of the settlement and the survivors returned to Spain. Jesuit missionaries returned to the area about 1560.

In 1606 the London Company of merchants received a charter for what became the Jamestown Colony. Although the primary purpose was obviously economic, the charter did specify that the Word of God and service to God were to be enforced, and that the Christian faith was to be preached to the colonists *and* to the Native Americans with whom they came into contact (Noll, 1983). Robert Hunt, an Anglican pastor, was among the first settlers at Jamestown in 1607.

With the gradual establishment of the Church of England came lack of religious toleration and some persecution of Puritans, Quakers, Baptists, and Roman Catholics who attempted to settle in the colony. The Great Awakening of the eighteenth century produced a spirit of religious freedom in most colonies. By the time of the American Revolution, only Virginia openly persecuted groups not in conformity to the state church.

Maryland

Cecil Calvert (Lord Baltimore) founded Maryland in 1634, as a refuge for Roman Catholics, but not enough Roman Catholics came for the colony to survive economically. Survival could be assured only if Protestants were allowed as settlers. As a result, Maryland became the first colony to officially announce a policy of religious toleration. Roman Catholics were in positions of leadership, but Protestants from the beginning were a numerical majority.

By 1676, about 75 percent of the population of Maryland were dissenters (mostly Puritans, Quakers, and Baptists), but the politically dominant group was rapidly becoming the Anglicans. With the backing of the English government, they began pushing for an establishment of the Church of England. Although this goal was accomplished in 1702, the numbers of dissenters and the principle of toleration meant that the Gospel could still be spread in the colony.

New York

The Dutch established their first colony at Fort Orange (Albany) in 1624, two years before Peter Minuit bought Manhattan Island from the Native Americans and named it New Netherlands. The primary goal of New Netherlands was the acquisition of wealth, but the strong secondary goal was the advancement of the Gospel through the established Dutch Reformed Church. Jonas Michaelius founded the first church in New Amsterdam (New York City) in 1628. Everardus Bogardus, who directed the spiritual life of the colony during its best years, followed Michaelius in 1633. The Dutch recognized the principle of religious toleration.

Johannes Megapolensis established a strong Dutch Reformed missionary work among the Mohawk tribe in 1642. It was the first work of any kind along the upper Hudson River. About the same time, Father Isaac Jorgues, a French Jesuit missionary, tried to establish a work among other tribes in the area. In 1643, he was captured and tortured, escaped with the aid of Megapolensis, then returned and was killed in 1646. Sporadic evangelism continued among the native tribes until the Great Awakening, when the preaching of Theodore Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed pastor who had been influenced by Pietism in Europe, began the Great Awakening.

In 1664, the English took over New Netherlands and renamed it New York. The Dutch Reformed Church was disestablished and replaced eventually by a partial establishment of the Church of England. Unlike in colonies where they were more

dominant, the Anglican leaders of New York allowed other groups, such as Quakers, Baptists, and Dutch Reformed, to freely operate in New York.

North Carolina

The charter given to the proprietors of “Carolina” in 1663 provided for religious toleration, but the majority of the early settlers were Anglicans. When large numbers of Quakers, Moravians, and others began to arrive, the Anglicans began pushing for the establishment of a state church. Several acts were passed by the Assembly, culminating in 1765, with a weak establishment of the Church of England, but resentment by the other groups produced a continuation of toleration.

South Carolina

North and South Carolina were separated in 1712. The population of early South Carolina was strongly Anglican, but eventually about ten percent of the colonists were French Huguenots who brought with them, because of persecution in France, a strong desire for religious freedom. This desire was supported by Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, and Baptists. The combined population of these groups eventually equaled that of the Anglicans. When establishment did come, it did not lead to open persecution of the other groups.

Georgia

James Oglethorpe founded Georgia in 1732, as a philanthropic venture. As a result, missionary work was strong from the earliest stages, and included missionaries John and Charles Wesley who were hired to evangelize the Native Americans around Savannah. Moravians also came and began working at Spring Place, in north Georgia, among the Native tribes. Although the Church of England was eventually established, the Anglican population was outnumbered by the combined numbers of the other groups. Also, a band of Jews escaping persecution in Portugal came to Georgia.

The Non-Established Colonies

Four of the original colonies were founded on the principle of complete religious freedom, not just toleration, and therefore had no established state church.

Rhode Island

Roger Williams was expelled from Massachusetts Bay in October 1635 because of his criticism of the state church. Williams had come to America in 1631 as a Separatist Puritan, but landed in Boston where non-Separatists were in control. After a short time, he went to Plymouth and stayed for two years before becoming an assistant pastor in Salem.

Williams' criticism of the non-Separatist government of the Bay colony is an excellent summary of the Separatist position. His main points were that government should not interfere in religious matters, the right to vote and to hold public office should not be restricted to members of the established church, there should be no law requiring church attendance, and there should be no tax support for members of the clergy (McBeth, 1987). In his tract, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, Williams attacked "the bloody, irreligious, and inhuman oppressions and destructions under the mask or veil of the name of Christ . . ." (Leonard, 1983).

After leaving Massachusetts, Williams went to Narragansett Bay and bought land from the natives of the same name. In 1636, he founded a settlement called Providence, because of "God's providence unto me in my distress." The settlement became the basis of Rhode Island. It was established on the principle of complete separation of church and state, which meant that the state would have no control over the church. It did not mean that the church should not influence the state. Rhode Island soon became a refuge for others with views similar to Williams. Ann Hutchinson was banished from Boston in 1637, and she moved to Rhode Island. John Clarke, a medical doctor and a Baptist preacher, established a church in Newport, Rhode Island in 1638. About the same time, Williams became a Baptist, and briefly pastor of a church in Providence. Williams and Clarke worked together as political leaders of Rhode Island, and each championed complete freedom of religion.

Delaware

Swedish settlers sailed into the Delaware River in 1638 and founded a trading post named Fort Christina (present site of Wilmington). Although the Lutheran Church was the established church in Sweden, the settlers failed to establish it in New Sweden. John Campanius, a missionary-minded pastor, came in 1639, began evangelizing the Delaware Tribe and translated Luther's *Small Catechism* into their language. Other preachers picked up the evangelistic spirit. The takeover of Delaware by the Dutch in 1655, and by the English in 1664, enhanced the climate for religious freedom in the colony.

Pennsylvania

William Penn, who founded this colony in 1681 as a refuge for Quakers, had written and continued to write essays that defined him as one of the great champions of religious freedom. His *Great Case for Liberty of Conscience* (1670) was based on Matthew 7:12, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," and on Mark 12:17, "Render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's." In *A Brief Examination of Liberty Spiritual* (1681), Penn defines true spiritual liberty by Romans 8:2: "For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Murphy, 2002).

With this strong emphasis of freedom, Pennsylvania welcomed all settlers, regardless of their religious backgrounds. Particularly those being persecuted in Europe for their beliefs, like the Mennonites, took advantage of the welcome to Pennsylvania.

New Jersey

Until 1702, New Jersey was part of New York. When it separated, there was no continuation of Anglican establishment. Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, and others in the colony had leading roles in the beginning of the Great Awakening in 1726.

The Present Imperative

Secular humanists are challenging the very fact that our nation was founded on Christian principles. The moral and ethical absolutes of the Judeo-Christian system, on which our nation was founded, are under constant attack. The present imperative of every Christian teacher is to strongly teach the Christian foundation of the United States of America and to pray that political leaders who acknowledge that foundation will be elected.

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