

**A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY**  
**Thursday Morning Bible Study**  
**Week Seven: From 1720-1800**  
**May 18, 2017**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2*

**I. The First Great Awakening in England and America (1720-1749)**

- Conditions in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in England and America were ripe for a new experience of faith and devotion. Two generations after the Puritans in England saw their once vibrant faith reduced to a stale scholastic faith concerned more about right doctrine than real faith. Outside the church rationalism was beginning to critique Christianity which would give rise finally to Deism. Morality was lax and church attendance was low, maybe as little as 10% of the general population attended church. Finally the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution were taking place in England and it was a time of great change and turmoil. The stale Christian experience of many had no answers!
- In 1720 Theodore Frelinghuysen became pastor of four Dutch Reformed Churches in New Jersey. He began to preach about the need for a true conversion to Christ, a vibrant devotional life, and lay activity in the church. Revival began to break out in Frelinghuysen's churches.
- He in turn influenced a Presbyterian pastor in New Jersey named Gilbert Tenant who brought revival to his own church and began to teach young pastoral candidates in a log house he built and called the "Log College." This was in contrast to schools like Harvard, Yale and Princeton.
- Soon the church authorities began to question the revival. Two parties emerged in the Congregational, Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed Churches: The New School and the Old School.
- The revival began to spread. A Massachusetts preacher and scholar named Jonathan Edwards began to preach for conversion and revival broke out in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards' most famous evangelistic sermon was titled, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God!*" Supposedly he read the entire sermon from a manuscript rarely looking up at his congregation but the words were so powerful that weeping and wailing broke out as people were overpowered by their own sinfulness and their need for repentance!
- In 1740 George Whitfield, a friend and co-worker with the Wesleys came to America and began to hold outdoor meetings just like those he and Wesley had done in England. Thousands attended.

- Some estimates put the number of converts during the Awakening as high as 50,000 people. Church attendance and membership swelled as people responded to the power of God. The rationalist critics tried to explain away the conversions as emotional enthusiasm. Those who supported the revival had only one explanation: the power of God!
- The Awakening also spurred new expressions of worship. Chief among these were the new hymns based on poetry and the chief writer of those hymns was Charles Wesley. The Old School Calvinists objected to the new hymns because church singing should be based on the Psalter and the words of Scripture not free verse! He gave us some of the greatest of the classical hymns: "*And Can It Be That I Should Gain?*"; "*Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*"; "*Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*"; "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*"; "*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*"; "*O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*"; "*Rejoice, the Lord is King*"; and "*Ye Servants of God*".
- The Awakening stirred a new spirit of humanitarian efforts in America and a new interest in mission to the Native American peoples. It spread a new vital Christian faith all over the Thirteen Colonies and brought many people into the churches. It created divisions within the major denominations but paradoxically also spread a unity of faith and cooperation across those same denominational lines.

## II. Jonathan Edwards – America's greatest theologian (1703-1758)

- Edwards was a New England Presbyterian pastor in the Puritan mold. He graduated from Yale University in 1727 and had one of the keenest minds in the American church at the time. His most famous work is: *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* which defended the experiences of those in the Great Awakening. In it he tried to strike a balance between a reasonable faith and genuine spiritual experience as part of that faith.
- Edwards was a great supporter of the revival but also wanted to take the new rationalism and science of men like Isaac Newton and fuse it with the deep Christian experience of the revival. He saw the weeping and other evidences of the revival as testimony to the reality of God.
- He had deeply held Calvinist beliefs and was a life-long opponent of Arminianism. He was named President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1757 but only held the post for one year before he died of smallpox in 1758. Edwards influenced generations of Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational pastors and theologians in America.

## III. The Enlightenment in Europe

- Philosophy shifted with the works of Descartes, Locke and Newton who all stressed reason and experience as the foundation of knowledge rather than faith and revelation. It was a new quest to answer the question: how do we know? This viewpoint encouraged critical inquiry and questioning of long held beliefs. It led to science and the scientific method as the new foundations of truth and the

search for truth among the educated in Europe. The Enlightenment therefore was often called the Age of Reason.

- Descartes taught that all conceptions must be doubted until proved and that the proof must have the certainty of a mathematical formula. This idea brought into question all matters of faith, especially miracles.
- Locke taught that knowledge comes through experience and reason and that there are no innate ideas ala Plato. He also argued that government is a contract between the governor and the governed. If that contract is broken through tyranny then the governed have the right of revolution to overthrow the tyrant. Locke taught that Christianity is true because of its reasonableness. He rejected miracles and feelings in religious faith and so denied many widely held orthodox views like the Trinity, the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. He stripped down Christianity to what he thought was the bare bones of Jesus as Messiah and his teaching which focused on living a moral life.
- Newton gave the world a new model of the universe, governed by natural laws that could be expressed in the certainty of mathematical formulas. It provided a view of the physical universe that no longer appeared as arbitrary and mysterious but was ordered and governed by natural laws that could be known and interpreted by science. The earth was also no longer the center of the universe contrary to orthodox Roman Catholic teaching but a small speck in the vastness of space.
- The Enlightenment had its fullest expression in France with the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau. Voltaire especially was a scathing critic of Christianity as organized religion and ridiculed it mercilessly; calling into question anything to do with miracles, prophecy or the major dogmas of the church, including the Trinity.

#### **IV. Deism**

- One of the results of the Enlightenment was Deism, a system of theology that sought to boil down Christian truth to its essentials so that what was left was acceptable to human reason and science.
- Deism in Europe was a response to find a reasonable alternative to the brutalities of the religious wars that had plagued Europe since the Reformation.
- It emphasized natural religion and sought to return people to the unspoiled simple religion of nature and what could be observed in nature. Thus, there is a God who should be worshipped and he is also completely good and not judgmental. Living a moral life was the best way one could worship God. Deists were very concerned about ethics and improving society. They taught that reason is the foundation of ethics and that Jesus' teaching about morality was the best example. All religion based on revelation was suspect and bordered on superstition.
- In America the most prominent Deists were Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine.
- Anti-Christian Deism led eventually to a full blown skepticism of Christianity all together. Deism's rejection of revelation also led to value scholarly inquiry as an

aid to a more pure view of the Biblical text. This would lead to the higher criticism of the 1800's in Europe and especially Germany which had lasting impact on the church and our understanding of the Bible.

- In America Deism and its challenge to Biblical orthodoxy led to the formation of the Unitarians in New England and the concept of universalism.
- Deism and its positive view of humanity and human reason collapsed under the weight of the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution. It also could not respond to the critique that its God was too distant; the Prime Mover who wound up the universe and then let it go, leaving us reason and natural law but not much else. People wanted to know God! In the end Deism's view of God was every bit as much a matter of faith as the criticism it leveled against Biblical Christians.

## V. The Church and the American Revolution

- In all denominations there were people who were Tory's, who supported remaining part of England, and people who supported the Revolution. However, the majority of people in the churches favored breaking with England and becoming independent.
- The Anglican Church was the most divided denomination in America. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists were the most vehement in their opposition to the king. One famous loyalist remarked that opposition to Great Britain came from "*Congregationalists, Presbyterians and smugglers!*" One member of Parliament even called the Revolution the "Presbyterian Revolution" because so many pastors openly supported the Revolution from their pulpits and encouraged their men to enlist in Washington's army.
- Johnathan Witherspoon was one of the most noted clergy in support of the revolutionary cause. He was a Scottish Presbyterian pastor and President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). He was head of the New Jersey delegation to the Continental Congress and is the only pastor who signed the Declaration of Independence. He had a prize student named James Madison who would later be instrumental in writing the Constitution of the United States.
- For most American Christians the Revolution was a time when doctrinal disputes were set aside in the quest for independence from Britain and for religious liberty.
- Deists, Calvinists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Baptists and Quakers favored religious liberty in two ways. First, they did not favor the establishment of a particular church. Many of the colonies did establish one denomination as the state or colonial church, like the Anglicans in Virginia or Congregationalists in Massachusetts. However, many had seen the abuses in Europe and even in America and now desired that there be no state church supported by tax dollars. Second, they favored religious liberty, meaning people should be free to follow their conscience in matters of faith. The state should not be involved. Many of the ancestors of the current colonists had fled Europe to avoid religious persecution. Plus colonies like Rhode Island and Pennsylvania had demonstrated

the principle that people of good faith could live together without an established church and respecting each other's freedom of conscience.

## **VI. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States (1791)**

- *"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."*
- It made the churches entirely voluntary, something that had never been tried before on a wide basis. This included financial support.
- Article VI of the Constitution read: *"No religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."*
- Taken with the First Amendment the two statements prohibited the establishment of any denomination as the state religion and guaranteed freedom of conscience in matters of religion. Basically they said the state has no business in telling people what to believe in matters of faith. This was wholly unique in Christian history.
- The most glaring religious and moral issue the framers of the Constitution avoided dealing with was slavery. Its final solution would cast the United States into the greatest and most bloody conflict in its history: the Civil War.

## **VII. The French Revolution (1789-1801)**

- The French Revolution initially began with attacks on church corruption and the wealth of the bishops, an action with which many Christians approved, since the Roman Catholic Church held a dominant role in pre-revolutionary France.
- During a two-year period known as the Reign of Terror, the episodes of anti-clericalism grew more violent than any in modern European history. The new revolutionary authorities suppressed the church; abolished the Catholic monarchy; nationalized church property; exiled 30,000 priests and killed hundreds more.
- In October 1793 the Christian calendar was replaced with one reckoning from the date of the Revolution, and Festivals of Liberty, Reason and the Supreme Being were scheduled. New forms of moral religion emerged, including the deistic Cult of the Supreme Being and the atheistic Cult of Reason, with the government briefly mandating observance of the former in April 1794.
- The Revolution was championed by Voltaire and his vehement attacks on the Roman Catholic faith.
- Between June 1793 and the end of July 1794, there were 16,594 official death sentences in France, of which 2,639 were in Paris. However, the total number of deaths in France was much higher, owing to death in imprisonment, suicide and casualties in foreign and civil war.
- The political result of the Reign of Terror and the Revolution was the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte beginning in 1804 and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars in Europe. The religious result was the complete collapse of Enlightenment religion and Deism which underpinned much of the Revolution. The worship of reason

had led to the Reign of Terror. Human sin could not be overcome by human reason!

**VIII. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) publishes his first book in Germany (1799); the beginnings of Liberal Christianity**

- He was the son of a Prussian army chaplain and in 1794 was appointed as chaplain of a hospital in Berlin.
- Schleiermacher argued that religion is based on intuition and feeling; the feeling of self-consciousness. In that self-consciousness human beings feel absolutely dependent upon religion to give them value. All religious language, doctrines, etc. are merely expressions of this religious self-consciousness. He rejected both the rational religion of the Enlightenment and orthodoxy with its assent to certain key religious doctrines and obedience to the revealed will of God. Schleiermacher instead emphasized religious feeling related to our self-consciousness. Religion is neither a body of doctrines nor a system of conduct though both flow from religious feelings.
- The feeling of religious self-consciousness and dependence upon God is found in many cultures and civilizations and is the reason for the diversity of religious expression and belief across the world. Christianity therefore is the highest expression of this religious self-consciousness but not necessarily the truest. All religions should be judged by their ability to bridge the gap between finite humans and the infinite God, to bring people into harmony with God. That is their primary aim. Hence religions are not to be divided between true and false but into degrees of how successful they are at bringing people into harmony with God.
- This viewpoint forms one of the fundamental tenets of liberal Christianity: The Christian faith is but one expression of humanity's search for God. Religious truth then becomes introspective and subjective rather than objective historical truth.