

AMERICA AT A CROSSROADS, by Chris J Fenner, Nov 2020

Part 2 of 4 – The New Colonies and the First Great Awakening (1630 to 1776 AD)

SUMMARY FROM PART 1

First, God is sovereign over world history.

Second, God has a Master Plan that we see unfolding as we look at God's Word alongside world history.

Third, man's sin and rebellion always rise up against God's will, resulting in cycles of blessings and curses.

- When people are faithful, God blesses the people and the nation, and His kingdom is advanced;
- when evil enters a nation's culture through man's sinfulness and rebellion, God withdraws His Presence and blessings.

I believe we are in such a time as this in America today.

In part 1 we looked at the significance of the PILGRIMS who established the Plymouth Colony in 1620 and the PURITANS who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.

The leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was John Winthrop who said...

“For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill.

“The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.”

These words can be compared to Jeremiah 18:9 &10,

“If I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

Immigrants poured into America over THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS up to 1730 with the immigrant population growing to over 600,000. An extract from “The Light and the Glory” by Peter Marshall describes how things had changed from the early days of the colonies.

“The nation was prospering in every way—the hard times were behind them. There was plenty of good land and plenty to eat. Everyone who had been there for any

length of time had a roof over their heads, and some of the homes were quite spacious.

“Spiritually, most were deeply committed and were fulfilling the terms of the covenant, and God was blessing them beyond all measure. But all the while, like a fire dying down, the spiritual light was growing dimmer.

“It happened so gradually that no one seemed to notice it—until by the beginning of the eighteenth century, what had been a blazing white Light of the Gospel of Christ had become only a faint red glow from smoldering embers.”²

SO WHAT HAD GONE WRONG?

The settlers in New England believed in what they called the Covenant Way based on Luke 22:20 which reads...

In the same way, after the supper Jesus took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

To the New Englanders this new covenant meant living a life where the Holy Spirit's Presence was evident by:

- their born again experience,
- the fruit and gifts of the Spirit,
- God's amazing grace at work in their lives.

Exodus 33:15-16 speaks of God's Presence with his people in the Old Testament era.

Moses said to the Lord, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

For the New Englanders – and as it is for us today – God's Presence was the Holy Spirit, and this distinguished them from all the other people on the face of the earth. This is important – REPEAT

However, as the basic necessities of life (food, shelter and security) became available for most people, they started relying on themselves rather on God, and developed a rugged individualism that is an American characteristic that is admired by many today. One marker of this turning away from God and the Covenant Way happened in 1660 when the Congregational church relaxed the requirements of a personal Holy Spirit experience for

full church membership and instituted what became known as the Half-Way Covenant, or what we would call nominal Christians.

This decline in the reliance on GOD'S WAY with a proportional rise in reliance on MAN'S WAY led to a decline moral standards and church attendance that has been compared to what we see in America today. Also many devout believers saw evidence of God removing His hand of protection on the New Englanders with times of drought, plagues of destructive insects, and a small pox epidemic that bring to mind...

- the struggles the Israelites had as described throughout the Old Testament,
- and the struggles we have experienced in 2020 with the record number of hurricanes, forest fires and COVID-19.

But is this comparison of Christians in America with the ancient Israelites valid?

Before answering that question we need to look again at the UNIQUE POSITION OF AMERICA IN WORLD HISTORY.

America can be considered unique or "exceptional" for one reason only: it is the place where God's plan for mankind to "fill the earth" came to fulfillment as the people who came from the three sons of Noah met in America. Although there is not a full understanding of their migration, it is most often presented that...

- the offspring of Japheth moved north and west to Europe, to become the European settlers of the America we know today.
- the offspring of Shem partly stayed in the Middle East, and partly moved east to Asia and onto America via the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, to become the American Indians.
- the offspring of Ham moved south to Africa to become the focus of the slave trade that brought some 400,000 Africans to America as slaves – not that slavery was God's plan.

On the basis of this unique aspect of America in God's plan for the world and mankind, some Old Testament passages of scripture can reasonably be applied to our nation. One such passage is from Deuteronomy 8:11-14 and 17-18 where God warned the Israelites that if they turned from Him, He would remove His Presence from them.

"Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

“You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.”

God was not about to give up on the new colonies, however, and early in the 18th century a GREAT AWAKENING burst onto the scene.

In response to fervent prayer of many believers, God came down in the power of the Holy Spirit on July 8th, 1741 in the sermon preached by Jonathan Edwards to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts.

The sermon was titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, and here are extracts from that sermon.

“And now you have an extraordinary Opportunity, a Day wherein Christ has flung the Door of Mercy wide open, and stands in the Door calling and crying with a loud Voice to poor Sinners;

a Day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the Kingdom of God; many that were very lately in the same miserable Condition that you are in, are in now an happy State, with their Hearts filled with Love to Him that has loved them and washed them for their Sins in his own Blood, and rejoicing in Hope of the Glory of God.

“How awful is it to be left behind at such a Day!

“Are there not many here that have lived long in the World that are not to this Day born again, and have done nothing ever since they have lived but treasure up Wrath against the Day of Wrath? Oh Sirs, your Case in an especial Manner is extremely dangerous; your Guilt and Hardness of Heart is extremely great. You had need to consider your selves, and wake thoroughly out of Sleep; you cannot bear the Fierceness and Wrath of the infinite GOD.

“And let everyone that is yet out of Christ, and hanging over the Pit of Hell, whether they be old Men and Women, or middle Aged, or young People, or little Children, now hearken to the loud Calls of God’s Word and Providence. This acceptable Year of the Lord, that is a Day of such great Favor to some, will doubtless be a Day of as remarkable Vengeance to others.

“The Wrath of almighty GOD is now undoubtedly hanging over great Part of this Congregation: Let everyone fly out of Sodom: Haste and escape for your Lives, look not behind you, escape to the Mountain, lest you be consumed. Amen.”³

This sermon was a catalyst for The Great Awakening as surely as the 95 Theses posted on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany posted by Martin Luther on October 31st 1571 were a catalyst for the Reformation.

The Holy Spirit also came in power on a young evangelist in England, George Whitefield, in this same period. He travelled to America 13 times, and it is estimated that he preached 81,000 sermons in England and America in his lifetime.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I have a special affinity for George Whitefield. He was born in Gloucester, England – my home town – and his parents owned the Old Bell Inn on Southgate Street.

During my college years, my parents had a mom and pop grocery store on the same street and they lived above the store. When I was home from college, I would often pass the Old Bell Inn as I walked to the town center, not knowing the significance it had to the Great Awakening.

IN SUMMARY, the power of the Great Awakening brought unity and renewed faith in God throughout the thirteen colonies, so necessary for the coming War of Independence and the establishment of the American form of government – which we will talk about in the next part.

The words of Isaiah 61:1-3 captures the new optimism brought about by the Great Awakening.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,

³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.”

Amen

END NOTES

2. Peter Marshall, *The light and the Glory* (Grand Rapids MI, Fleming H. Revell, 1977), 209.
3. Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Boston, MI, S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1741).