EVENTS AND CONDITIONS THAT MADE THE AMERICAN CHURCHES READY FOR THE GREAT AWAKENING

Prayer
Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22
Hymn: 534 "When My Love to Christ Grows Weak"

In the first half of the eighteenth century in all the American colonies there was a growing concern for the churches and the state of religion. At its best a somewhat static condition prevailed. In most places and in most churches there was a growing fear that serious decline had set in. The struggle for survival on the wilderness frontier had resulted in a brutish roughness in manners. In the harbor cities the love of money and pleasure seemed to be crowding religion from the center to a more secondary role. In New England this growing concern for the future of the church became strong as the first generation died off and the second generation began taking over the control of affairs. The population and wealth had grown but piety was declining. There was special concern over the role the third generation would play in religion. As the first generation passed away it was clear that their dreams for a glorious commonwealth of God in the New World were falling short. The second generation showed signs of not having the same zeal for "The New England Way" that had been so dear to the leaders of the first generation.

THE HALF-WAY COVENANT

The New England Way was the Congregational way. The only full citizens were those who were fully members of the church. The members of the church were those within the covenant. Those within the covenant were those who had given a satisfactory evidence of a conversion experience. They could receive Communion and had a right to vote. Infant baptism was limited to the children of parents who owned the covenant and therefore were full citizens and full members of the church. The children of those with full membership in the church shared in the covenant taken by their parents. Whenever these children were able to give satisfactory proof of a conversion experience they became full members of the church and were admitted to Communion and had a right to vote. Upon their baptism the children were considered members of the church but they were not received into full membership until they could give the required conversion experience. A serious problem arose when a number of the second generation of Puritans failed to undergo the required conversion experience. They were usually professing Christians and members of the church but could not receive communion nor could they vote. They wanted to present their children for baptism. Should the church baptize the children of the unconverted who were only in the "external covenant"?

The problem was made more serious by the rise of the Baptists. The Baptists commended the Congregationalists for demanding a church of regenerated saints but condemned them for their infant baptism. The stricter Congregationalists refused to baptize the infants of the unconverted insisting that to do so would change and dilute the meaning of membership in the church and thus weaken the foundations of the New England Way. Refusing to baptize the infants of the unconverted second generation would so reduce the numbers of the Congregational Church that it would lose its control of the province. There was also the fear that those who were refused baptism might turn to the Baptists.
By 1643 only about eleven per cent of the people of Massachusetts held citizenship. The Bay Colony had some 15,000 people of whom only 1708 were citizens. Plymouth Colony did not require church membership as a requirement for citizenship but only 230 out of 3000 were citizens. Many of the non-citizens were wealthy and influential. They wanted the franchise broadened to include all sober, industrious and good-living men. As the Civil War in England drew to its close with the triumph of the Parliamentary forces, made up of Presbyterians and Independents, led by Cromwell, a group of influential non-citizens in Massachusetts presented to the General Court, on May 6, 1646, a petition for the franchise to be extended to all Englishmen who were quiet, sober, peaceable, righteous and godly men, and that they either be accepted into the church to enjoy all the liberties and ordinances Christ had purchased, or else that they be granted freedom to establish churches of their own. In Massachusetts they enjoyed less liberty than would have been theirs had they remained in England. The Remonstrants threatened in their petition that if their requests were not granted they would appeal to both houses of Parliament.

The leader of the Remonstrants was Dr. Robert Child, one of the best educated men in the colonies. He was a graduate of Cambridge University and had a Doctor of Medicine Degree from the University of Padua. He was a most sincere Presbyterian Puritan. Among the signers was Samuel Maverick, an Anglican, and David Yale, who later would be the father of the founder of Yale College.

The leaders of the Bay Colony saw in the petition a threat to the independence of the colony. They ordered a search of the belongings of Dr. Child. The search turned up another petition to Parliament asking for the recognition of Presbyterianism in Massachusetts, that a Governor-general be appointed by the crown for New England, that English liberties be guaranteed, and that an investigation be made of the Massachusetts government. The Massachusetts authorities accused Child and his associates of sedition and treason. They were guilty of violating a recent law of the General Court that anyone advocating change in church polity or government was to be subject to the death penalty. All the twenty-five signers of the petition were arrested and imprisoned. At their trial they were found guilty and assessed large fines. Upon being freed Child departed from America forever.


The General Court considered the situation serious enough that it thought it wise to call a synod of the churches to strengthen the defenses of the old system. Some of the ministers objected, denying the right of the court to call a synod. Thirty or forty of the ministers urged that representatives of the churches should meet without interference from the civil magistrates. The Court backed down, changing the summons to an invitation to hold a meeting. Invitations were sent to Plymouth, New Haven, Connecticut, and the churches of Boston. All sent representatives, although Boston at first held out for a time. The synod met in Cambridge in September, 1646, and worked out plans for procedure. John Cotton of Boston, Richard Mather of Dorchester and Ralph Partridge of Duxbury in the Plymouth Colony were asked to prepare a model of church government to be considered.
The next meeting was held in June, 1647. On account of an epidemic that resulted in the deaths of Thomas Hooker and the wife of Governor Bradford the next meeting was not held until August, 1648. The Cambridge Synod adopted the Westminster Confession that had been adopted in Scotland and in England (with minor modifications). The Cambridge Synod made a few modifications to fit conditions in Massachusetts, mainly in church polity as advocated by Henry Barrowe. The work of the synod came to be known as the "Cambridge Platform." It demonstrated the orthodoxy of Massachusetts but it did not deal with the question of church membership that had arisen with the second and third generations. Even before the synod had completed its work Nathaniel Ward in his The Simple Cobler of Aggawam in America (1647) set forth the conservative Congregational position: "...God doth no where in his word tolerate Christian States, to give Tolerations to such adversaries of his Truth, if they have power in their hands to prevent them....My Heart hath naturally detested...Tolerations of divers Religions, or of one Religion in segregant shapes...."

A number of able apologetic works were published defending the New England Way. John Cotton published his The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared, in Two Treatises. Thomas Hooker published his Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline and John Norton his Responsio. John Davenport and Thomas Shepard also produced defenses of the New England Way.

The controversy over church membership and the baptism of the children of the unconverted continued. In 1657 seventeen ministers from Massachusetts and Connecticut met in a ministerial council and worked out a plan called "The Half-Way Covenant." It provided that those who had been baptized but who had never had a conversion experience might submit their children for baptism. These children could not partake of the Communion nor could they vote. The proposed covenant touched off a storm of debate and met bitter opposition. Why limit baptism to one particular generation? Why not make it available to all who desired it?

The Massachusetts General Court summoned a formal synod in 1662 in an attempt to settle the matter. The Court's synod ruled that baptism was sufficiently constitutive of church membership to allow its recipients to bring their children also within the baptismal covenant; an experience of regeneration was still required for full church membership. Those who thus submitted their children for baptism had to give a public profession of willingness to be guided by Christian principles and to promise to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord.

Some churches had already been practising the "half-way" measures. The Halfway Covenant gained wide acceptance throughout New England. In some places it aroused strong opposition. A number of churches split over its adoption. In Connecticut the churches in Hartford, Windsor and Stratford split. Abraham Pierson of Branford, Connecticut, led the majority of his congregation to New Jersey where they founded New Ark to carry on the Old New Haven constitution. Later this church turned Presbyterian. The First Church in Boston split. Those favoring the Half-Way Covenant formed Old South Church. The remainder of First Church called the seventy year old John Davenport from his New Haven church to be their minister and to lead them in their bitter opposition to the Half-Way Covenant.
GOD'S WRATH ON MASSACHUSETTS

The opponents of the Half-Way Covenant considered it a lowering of the standards of church membership. The number of Church members in full communion declined rapidly with an increasing number of people satisfied with the half-way relationship. Signs of spiritual decay were growing. Thomas Prince in his Church History published in Boston in 1743 wrote of "A decay in religion" that set in in the 1660's and increased in the 1670's. It "grew very visible and threatening and was generally complained of and bewailed bitterly by the Pious."

A series of disasters hit Massachusetts that led many of the pious to believe that God was holding a controversy with the colony and as a result of the religious decline God was pouring out his wrath on the sinful people. It seems there was a noticeable increase in shipwrecks. Pestilence became more frequent and more severe.

King Philip's War raged between 1673 and 1676 with an enormous loss of life and property. The war against the colonists was led by Philip, second son of Massasoit who had been a friend to Plymouth. Philip resented the increasing English population. He formed an alliance with the Narragansetts, the Nipmucs and the Pocomtucks of central Massachusetts, tribes that had been his former enemies. They made sudden raids on Massachusetts' frontier settlements and even raided towns close to Boston. The colonists formed the New England Confederation to meet the Indian threat. With the help of the loyal friendly tribes (Mohegans, Pequots, Massachusetts, Naussets) the Indians were finally defeated. The colonists tended to look on all Indians as enemies. Many innocent Indians were slaughtered along with the guilty. Much of the work of Eliot and the Mayhews among the Indians was lost. Many Indians were shipped to the Bahamas where they were sold as slaves. Some were transported to Deer Island where they faced cold, hunger and disease. The Christian Indians were confined to five towns. Eliot tried to carry on as best he could but the mission work never fully recovered. The people tended to look on Indians as "pagan savages"--the only good Indians were dead Indians. The pulpits of Massachusetts rang with jeremiads that the Indian war was God's punishment on the people for their sins.

Some of the Indians were made slaves and tended to intermarry with the Negro slaves. The Massachusetts courts decided that slavery was a justified form of punishment for pagans. Judge Samuel Sewall published his The Selling of Joseph (1709), an early Puritan challenge to the institution of slavery that most of the Puritans assumed was the plan of God.

The Indian War was followed by a great fire (November 27, 1676) that destroyed North Church in Boston and some forty houses. Three years later (August 7-8, 1679) a worse fire destroyed much of Boston. Small pox raged throughout the colony. Criticisms of the government mounted and there were growing fears that England would revoke the charter of the colony. The king in 1676 threatened to revoke the charter. The pious considered these tragedies a clear sign of God's judgment and wrath. It was time for a return to God. The pulpits were filled with calls for repentance and reformation. There was no questioning that there were many sinners and much sin in the colony.

The General Court in 1679 called a Reforming Synod that met in Boston,
September 10, 1679 to find out "What are the evils that have provoked the Lord to bring his judgment on New England?" and to determine "What is to be done so that these evils may be reformed?"

After ten days the synod had completed a long list of sins with which the New England people had offended God: "spiritual and heart Apostacy from God"; "pride of spirit and in apparel, disobedience, contention, profaneness, sloth and sleepiness in public and family worship, Sabbath-breaking, gossiping, intemperance, lying, land-hunger, worldliness, lack of public spirit, 'sinful hearts and passions,' Covetousness, neglect of fellowship, and 'sin against the Gospel.'" The sins were listed in the Synod's The Necessity of Reformation.

To cure these ills the synod called for a "solemn and explicit Renewal of the Covenant", for strict adherence to church discipline, and strict enforcing of the laws. The synod appointed a committee of some of the most important second generation leaders to prepare a New England Confession of Faith. At the second session of the Synod on May 12, 1680, the committee recommended the reaffirmation of the Cambridge Platform and the adoption of the Savoy Confession that the English Congregationalists had adopted at the Savoy Palace in London in 1658. The synod thus demonstrated that the Massachusetts Congregationalists were still good Congregationalists in doctrine even if they had made changes in church government.

The leader of the Reforming Synod of 1679 was the leading churchman among the second generation in Massachusetts, Increase Mather. He was the youngest son of Richard Mather who had had a leading part in the formation of the Cambridge Platform. Increase Mather was educated in Harvard College (A.B. 1656) and at Trinity College, Dublin (M.A. 1658). He became the minister of Second Church in Boston in 1664, a post he retained to the end of his life. He had his son, Cotton Mather, as his associate after 1683. In 1685 Increase Mather was made president of Harvard College where he greatly encouraged the study of science.

THE CHARTER

The troubles of Massachusetts increased. In 1684 King Charles II cancelled the charter of the Bay Colony. A year later Charles died and was followed by the Roman Catholic James, Duke of York, who became James II. James announced the formation of the "Dominion of New England" that would include New England, New York, and New Jersey. Sir James Andros was sent to Boston to serve as royal governor. Increase Mather was sent to England to intercede with King James on behalf of the Congregational Churches. Andros ruled with a heavy hand. He abolished representative assemblies, popular taxation, and freedom of the press. He announced freedom of religion and tolerance for all. He used his influence and power to further the cause of Anglicanism in Massachusetts. On Good Friday, 1687, Andros required that South Church be used for Anglican worship and the Puritans had to wait outside until the long Anglican ritual was completed. He declared that the Anglicans would continue to use South Church until King's Chapel was completed—the first Anglican building in Massachusetts.

Increase Mather was still in England when the Revolution of 1688 overthrew James. When William and Mary came to the throne, Increase began
entreaties on behalf of Massachusetts. In 1690 the colonial government appointed him to be one of four agents to entreat the new rulers to restore the old charter. The charters of Connecticut and Rhode Island were renewed but to his great disappointment Massachusetts was given a new charter. He was successful in securing the guarantee of some of the old liberties, such as liberty of conscience and worship, and local government. The old elective Governor was replaced with a royal governor and church membership as a requirement for suffrage was abolished. Only the lower house of the legislature was to be elected by the people. The new charter greatly weakened the Congregational establishment and ended the rule of the saints. Increase Mather was given the privilege by King William of nominating the first Governor under the new charter and the other appointive officials.

When news reached Boston that King James had been deposed, Governor Andros and two other royal officials were arrested and thrown in prison. A provisional government was formed. The new charter under King William allowed the Anglicans to continue in King's Chapel--toleration was granted to all except Roman Catholics.

THE WITCH TRIALS

Increase Mather returned to Boston to find Massachusetts in the midst of the witch-hunting tragedy. The public mind was in a feverish state. The craze began in Salem in March, 1692, when some girls were thought to be bewitched because of their strange actions. They named three old women as the ones who had bewitched them. The women were brought to trial and condemned. The jails were soon filled with accused witches. The royal governor appointed a special court to try the cases. By January, 1693, twenty-two persons had been condemned, two of whom died in prison and the others were hanged. One of the victims was a minister. The number executed was small and the hysteria of much shorter duration than the witch-hunts in Europe. In England some three hundred were put to death and much larger numbers on the continent. In New England the trials were stopped by Governor Phips in October, 1692. When the delusion ended the popular mind tended to blame the clergy for the terrible injustices. In 1684 Increase Mather had written a book, An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences, in which he described several cases of witchcraft. The clergy's jeremiads against sin and proclamations of the wrath of God had done much to prepare the minds of the people for the searchings for supernatural signs. Samuel Sewall had been one of the judges on the special court. Some of the clergy had used their influence for caution and restraint. Increase and Cotton Mather had opposed the Judges' using "spectral evidence" and Increase Mather published his Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits in October, 1692. On the whole the Puritan clergy had done much to set the conditions for the compulsive searchings, the trials, and the great unrest and searchings of conscience that followed. In spite of Increase Mather's insistence that the judges should seek more solid evidences than "spectral evidence" the public would not forget his words that "a Daemon may, by God's permission, appear even to ill purposes, in the shape of an innocent, yea, a virtuous Man." The Mathers and the clergy in general suffered a great loss of confidence and respect. Five years later the Massachusetts Court publicly repented and set apart a day of prayer and fasting and special petitions were offered for forgiveness for "the late Tragedy raised amongst us by Satan." Twelve jurors published a declaration of sorrow for accepting insufficient evidence. Judge Sewall made a public confession of his sense
of guilt in South Church. The religious leaders suffered a great loss of respect in the eyes of the merchant class that was growing in social and political importance under the new charter.

THE BATTLE AGAINST LIBERALISM

The years between 1690 and 1710 were critical years in the intellectual and religious history of New England. The Great Migration from Europe was coming to an end in New England. There was a growing need for the expansion of trade with Europe and especially with England under the new charter. There were growing doubts about the Bible as interpreted by the clergy. Especially among the merchant class the limitations of ecclesiastical power under the new charter was most welcome.

In 1699 a group of Boston merchants led by three Harvard tutors, John Leverett and William and Thomas Brattle, issued a manifesto for the formation of a new church on "broad and Catholic" lines. They established the Brattle Street Church in which all professors of Christian belief were offered full communicant status and not merely "half-way" membership. The public relation of a conversion experience as a qualification for full membership was abolished. Baptism would be administered to all children who were presented by professing Christians who would promise to sponsor their religious training. All members and even all contributors would have a voice in the call of the minister. The Lord's Prayer was to be used in the ritual—a thing that was considered Anglican by conservative Puritans. Also "dumb reading" of Scripture without comment was introduced. The church called Benjamin Colman, a Harvard graduate who had obtained Presbyterian ordination in England, to be pastor. Increase Mather was removed from the presidency of Harvard in 1701 and was replaced in 1707 by John Leverett. The two Brattle brothers were given important posts in the college's affairs. The new church requested recognition from the other Boston churches and were able to force such recognition.

The Mathers who had suffered great loss in popularity and prestige became leaders in a movement to head off the growing liberalism that they saw destroying the ecclesiastical structure for which the Puritans had labored. It was especially hard to see it crumbling in Boston itself. To them the Brattle Street Church was violating everything for which New England Congregationalism had stood.

The Mathers sought to head off the drift to liberalism by a revival of the Ministerial Associations. The earlier ministerial associations had been gradually discontinued. When Charles Morton came from England to be pastor of the Charlestown Church in 1686 he had endeavored to revive the Association of the ministers. The one in Boston was revived in 1690. At least five Associations were formed in Massachusetts. Increase Mather, while in England, had been quite active in the formation of the Congregational and Presbyterian Union of London (1691), and in drawing up the Heads of Agreement for cooperation between Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Under the influence of the Mathers the Heads of Agreement gained in influence. The Mathers saw in them a way to check the dangerous trends in American Congregationalism. They led the Massachusetts Calvinists in the drawing up of the Massachusetts Proposals of September 13, 1705. The Proposals were a plan for stricter church government and new ecclesiastical controls to keep the Church and ministry in the narrow path of orthodoxy. The Proposals consisted of two parts. The first provided for associations of the ministers
to deal with all questions and cases of importance; to pass on all candidates for the ministry, and to recommend candidates to all churches seeking ministers. The associations would keep in close correspondence with each other. The second part provided for standing committees to serve as supervising authorities over the churches. Their acts would be conclusive and final. They would have power to expel churches that failed to abide by their decisions.

The Proposals met with great opposition. The first part providing for Ministerial Associations was accepted. The second part providing for councils with final authority was rejected by the majority of the churches. The royal governor and his council rejected the Proposals. Some leading ministers declared that the Proposals limited and infringed upon the liberties of the particular churches. John Wise of Ipswich became one of the chief opponents of the Mathers and defender of the Congregational Way. In 1710 he published his The Churches Quarrel Espoused and in 1717 his Vindication of the Government of New England Churches. He appealed to both Scripture and natural reason in defending democratic principles. His books were reprinted at the time of the American Revolution.

STODDARDISM

At Northampton Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) sought to heal the woes of the declining church by startling innovations. He was the son of a wealthy Boston merchant who preached his first sermon at Northampton in western Massachusetts in 1669. The next year he was called to be pastor of the church and married the widow of his predecessor, Eleazer Mather. He became an influential leader in the Connecticut River Valley. He organized the Hampshire Association. In 1687 he published his The Safety of Appearing at the Day of Judgment. Stoddard insisted that sinners should prepare themselves for conversion and should strive for the gift of grace. When the sinner would realize that there was nothing of goodness or righteousness in himself and any of his works, then God would put spiritual light in his soul. He denied there were any infallible external signs of election. The elect person would know his election only by intuition. There could be no real certainty as to who had received saving grace. Therefore no sincere seeker should be barred from the Lord's Supper. It was a converting ordinance to prepare and disclose God's grace to the penitent sinner. Stoddardism was put into practice at Northampton and neighboring churches and they experienced great seasons of harvest of souls. Stoddard received into the church those who professed belief in the main articles of faith and who lived moral lives. He defended his practice in his The Doctrine of Instituted Churches in 1700. It opened up a great controversy with Increase Mather, who saw in Stoddardism a great threat to the New England Puritan system.

The Mathers were greatly troubled by Arminianism, Deism and Enlightenment Reason in Massachusetts.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CONNECTICUT

The Massachusetts Proposals of 1705 that were rejected in Massachusetts found a welcome in Connecticut. The Connecticut ministers received encouragement from the Mathers. The ministers formed an association and made plans for an educational institution that would be "a nearer and less expensive seat of learning" and that would offset the liberal tendencies of Harvard. They
presented a petition to form such an institution to the Connecticut General Court and on October 9, 1701, a charter was granted. Ten ministers were made trustees. The new college was located at Saybrook. The Connecticut ministers did not have to face the opposition of the merchant class nor that of a royal governor. In 1707 the minister of New London, Gurdon Saltonstall, was elected governor. In 1708 the General Court called the meeting of a synod to be composed of representatives of the churches, both lay and clerical delegates, to consider religious reformation. The synod drew up the Saybrook Platform of 1708. In doctrine the Platform adopted the Savoy Declaration of the English Congregationalists putting the Connecticut Congregationalists in the Westminster tradition. In polity the synod instituted a semipresbyterian structure of county consociations to enforce discipline and doctrine in the churches. Ministerial Associations would regularize ordinations. A General Association would oversee church affairs of Connecticut. The Saybrook Platform turned Connecticut away from Massachusetts and towards the Presbyterians. The Fifteen Articles for the Administration of Church Discipline published by the synod closely resembled the Massachusetts Proposals.

Cotton Mather used his influence to persuade Elihu Yale, a Boston-born capitalist who had become wealthy in the service of the East India Company to make a generous gift to the Connecticut college. In 1716 the college had moved to New Haven. In 1718 it was named Yale. The school was to prove a disappointment to the founding fathers. It proved as susceptible to liberalism as Harvard. Soon Newtonian science, Berkeleyian philosophy, and Anglican theology were undermining Congregational orthodoxy. Some teachers turned Anglican and some Presbyterian. There was a growing fraternization between Congregationalists of Connecticut with Presbyterians.

THE GREAT AWAKENING

The spiritual and moral conditions in New England as in the rest of the colonies made ripe soil for the coming Great Awakening.