

CHAPTER FOUR
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IMMIGRATION,
DEVELOPMENT AND INDEPENDENCE
(1691-1793)

When the “silent revolution” (1688-89) brought religious toleration to England, New England’s original mission – to demonstrate to England the feasibility of a Puritan establishment – became passé. No longer a “city set on a hill,” New England settled down to refining its Congregational institutions. Meanwhile, England had established more colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America where other Puritans, some Congregational and some Presbyterian, settled. All related in some way to New England Congregationalists. Yet another migration occurred in the eighteenth century: Germans came to Pennsylvania, bringing the German Reformed Church to America.

The churches participated actively in America’s war for independence (1775-1783). However, political independence led to change in the churches. The German Reformed Church issued its own declaration of independence from the church in the Netherlands. But would the Reformed Church become “American” in language? Political independence and religious freedom went together in the minds of most people, but New England Congregationalists resisted full disestablishment into the Nineteenth Century. The War of Independence, endorsed enthusiastically by the churches, produced tensions and changes they had not anticipated.

PART A:
BEGINNING OF THE GERMAN REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

German Settlement

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) brought temporary relief to the Palatinate.¹ France occupied the area 1673-80 and again in 1688. They tore up vine stalks and cut down fruit trees, burned villages and cities, and prohibited Reformed worship. Pastors were imprisoned. Reformed people were fined for

¹Earlier material on the Reformed Church in the Palatinate is found at Chapter 2, Part A: Reformation on the Continent .

not attending the Roman mass; in some places the people were driven to church, where a wafer (representing the bread of communion) was forced into their throat.

The French withdrew in 1697 and religious toleration was granted to all in the Palatinate. However the Roman Catholics retained all church property and assets. The following years saw constant conflict over property and the children of mixed marriages. In 1719 the ruler forbade use of the *Heidelberg Catechism*; Bibles, Psalm books and *Catechisms* were confiscated. Those who refused were fined or imprisoned. During the reign of Charles Philip (1661-1742), who ruled the Palatinate 1716-1742, one fourth of the population of the Palatinate emigrated. Many Reformed people went to Pennsylvania.

William Penn (1644-1718), a Friend, in 1682 founded the English colony of Pennsylvania with full religious toleration, and actively recruited immigrants from Germany. Reformed people joined Anabaptists and Lutherans in a flood of German migration to Pennsylvania, New York and Carolina. Without pastors and churches of their own, many German Reformed people became Dutch Reformed, Anglican or Presbyterian.

German Reformed people reached Pennsylvania by the 1690s. Motivated by desires for peace, religious freedom, and material security, they brought with them their Bibles, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and Psalm Books. In a land without a religious establishment, the people had to develop new ways of being the church, relying more on the initiative of the laity. From the very beginning, Reformed and Lutheran folks built union churches (*Gemeinschaftliche Kirche*), used alternately by both congregations.

Before the Coetus

Samuel Guldin (1664-1745), the first German Reformed pastor in Pennsylvania, had been dismissed from his pastorate in Switzerland because of his pietism. Guldin was “born again” on 4 August 1693 between 9 and 10 a.m. Arriving in Pennsylvania in 1710, Guldin preached widely, wherever he could find listeners. Not an organizer, Guldin remained independent of any ecclesiastical organization. Beginning in 1719 he preached to a Reformed congregation in Germantown.

John Philip Boehm (1683-1749), son of a Reformed Church minister, came to America in 1720. In Germany as a teacher in Reformed churches his duties included teaching school, church sexton, song leader, “reader” in the service, and preparing the bread for communion.

In Pennsylvania, Boehm taught school, and read the service on Sunday. The people insisted Boehm become their minister, although not ordained. He first served communion at Falkner's Swamp on 15 October 1725. Boehm prepared a constitution for local Reformed churches which established the local church governing board (the consistory), provided for church discipline, and accepted for doctrine the *Canons of Dort*² and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. By 1736 Boehm served seven widely scattered congregations, helped by other committed lay persons.

The consistory in the Palatinate sent George Michael Weiss (1700-1762) to Pennsylvania in 1727. The newly ordained Weiss criticized Boehm for serving communion while not regularly ordained. Boehm and his congregations contacted Dutch Reformed ministers in New York, who ordained Boehm on 23 November 1729.

In 1730 the poor and persecuted Reformed Church of the Palatinate asked the South Holland Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to take oversight of the German Reformed churches in America, which they did. The Synod in the Netherlands sent ministers and financial aid to the churches in America.

Schlatter and the Coetus

The Dutch synod sent Swiss Reformed pastor Michael Schlatter (1716-1790) to Pennsylvania in 1746. The Dutch church commissioned Schlatter "visitor extraordinary" to organize the German Reformed churches in Pennsylvania into a coetus (pronounced *seetus*). Schlatter visited the 46 scattered Reformed congregations and their pastors and teachers.

On 29 September 1747, Schlatter organized four clergy and 28 elders from 19 churches into the Coetus of the German Reformed Congregation in Pennsylvania. The coetus adopted the *Canons of Dort* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* as its doctrinal standards. This representative body of pastors and elders met annually, and reported to the Synod of South Holland. The coetus determined the pastoral charges – the group of churches to be served by one pastor. The assignment of pastors required the approval of both coetus and congregations. The coetus handled the always contentious issue of ministerial standing. Some ministers came from Europe, others were raised up locally. The coetus provided for the training of the latter, and often received ministers on

²The *Canons of Dort* was a theological statement adopted by an international Reformed synod at Dort, Netherlands, 1618-19. Considered an important doctrinal standard by the Dutch Reformed Church, it defined predestination in the strongest possible terms.

“probation” for a year before ordaining or giving them full membership in the coetus. The coetus quickly brought a sense of unity and identity to the German Reformed in Pennsylvania, and provided the Synod of South Holland with a body for correspondence, to which it could assign ministers. However, many Reformed congregations remained independent.

Having known superintendents in the Palatinate, the Reformed in Pennsylvania understood Schlatter’s position as “visitor extraordinary.” Schlatter’s commission from the Synod in the Netherlands was for six months, but he acted as if it were indefinite. The coetus split over Schlatter’s leadership in 1752; Schlatter resigned, and the coetus reunited the following year.

German Reformed Piety and Worship

The *Palatine Liturgy* guided some Reformed pastors. Other pastors brought liturgies from other Reformed states in Germany. All exercised much freedom in worship. Worship with Lutherans in union churches exposed Reformed people to hymns other than Psalms. The Lutheran pastors were almost as free as the Reformed in their worship.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* was the heart of the Reformed faith. Young people memorized it, preachers preached on it, and adults remembered its teachings throughout their lives.

Reformed churches provided schools where their children could learn reading, writing and the *Catechism*. The Teacher, hired by the church, often served the church as Reader in the absence of a pastor.

PART B: EVOLUTION OF CONGREGATIONALISM IN NEW ENGLAND

After the Revolution of 1688-89, Britain reorganized its colonies in New England. Connecticut returned to its colonial charter. The Province of New Hampshire, separated from Massachusetts 1679-84, was restored as a royal colony. To Massachusetts Bay, which had included Maine, the new monarchs now added Plymouth Colony and Martha’s Vineyard, and sent a new charter. In 1692 the Province of Massachusetts Bay became a royal colony, with a royal governor and locally elected legislature. The new Province could not place a religious restriction on the franchise. In the Eighteenth Century, Congregationalists predominated in three New England colonies, but the church increasingly evolved independent of the civil government.

The Salem Tragedy

On the evening of 24 December 1696, Massachusetts magistrate Samuel Sewall (1652-1730) listened to his son read the Bible: "But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). On hearing these words the elder Sewall could think of only one thing – the Salem Tragedy and the role he played in it.

In 1692 in Salem Village (modern Danvers), a group of teenage and pre-teen girls had exhibited abnormal, hysterical behavior. The community perceived them to be the victims of witchcraft, and conducted trials to prosecute those accused as responsible for the girls' affliction. In an indecorous courtroom these girls barked and screamed and claimed to see things no one else could see, that "proved" the guilt of those against whom they "cried out." Overwhelmed by this unearthly bedlam, the political and religious leadership of Massachusetts became instruments of destruction. Over a hundred were "cried out" against. On the basis of "spectral evidence" twenty lives were brought to an end.

Europeans of the Seventeenth Century took it for granted that witches existed. Tens of thousands had been executed in Europe. Popular beliefs in witchcraft had little to do with Satanism or Paganism (between which the people did not distinguish) and much to do with medieval superstition. Before 1692 New England courts had tried 58 persons for witchcraft, and executed sixteen. In many cases, when an accusation arose, the pastor met privately with accuser and accused, and charges were dropped. But in 1692 cooler heads did not prevail; the Salem courtrooms were out of control.

As a judge in those trials, Samuel Sewall *had* "condemned the guiltless." Rebecca Towne Nurse (1622-1692), devout member of the Congregational Church of Salem, searched her soul to discern what she could have done to deserve the gallows, but could find nothing. George Burroughs (1650-1692), former pastor of Salem Village, called back for trial as the chief wizard of New England, brazenly declared before he was hung, that he did not believe that such a thing as witchcraft existed. Opposition increased as the numbers cried out against grew, and the new royal governor terminated the trials.

On 15 January 1697, a Day of Repentance for what was done in Salem, Samuel Sewall stood in Old South Church as the pastor read Sewall's confession for his sins in the tragedy.

Massachusetts conducted no more witch trials. Congregationalists afterward relied more on reason and on the evidence of the visible world. More

important was the conviction of Sewall and others that *mercy* (call it *compassion* or *love*) could never again take a back seat to other concerns.

A Broadening Church

New England Congregationalism became more diverse and less rigid in this period due to three influences: (1) Solomon Stoddard, (2) Brattle Street Church, and (3) the Enlightenment.

Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts for over fifty years, moved beyond the more inclusive covenants of the Synod of 1662. Beginning in 1677 he baptized all morally sincere adults, and welcomed to communion any baptized adults living without scandal. Religious experience was important, Stoddard believed, but no one could judge another's experience. He used communion as a "converting ordinance." The Northampton church experienced several "harvests" during which religious interest intensified and many persons became experiential Christians.

Boston's fourth Congregational Church, Brattle Street Church, organized itself in 1699 amidst controversy. Before the church organized, its pastor, Benjamin Colman (1673-1747), was ordained by a presbytery in England, therefore without a call from a church, and without examination by an ecclesiastical council of neighboring ministers. Brattle Street introduced innovations in both worship and polity. Brattle Street Church did not require a public testimony of religious experience for admission to membership. Instead, after a private interview with the pastor, the pastor presented the person's name to the congregation, and if no one objected, the person was received. Baptism was also offered more liberally. Church members could act as "sponsors" to a child brought by non-members for baptism. (Puritans had long rejected the Catholic custom of "godparents"). Also, all baptized persons, *including women*, were allowed to vote on the call to a pastor. Innovations in worship included listening to the scripture reading without commentary, and reciting the prayer commonly called the Lord's Prayer. In a *Manifesto*, the Brattle Street church³ professed its adherence to the historic faith of Congregationalism, and desire for fellowship, which was eventually grudgingly granted.

Enlightenment, an intellectual movement in Europe affected New England. Enlightenment used *Reason* to discover a God who was ethically acceptable to humans, for whom religion consisted of doing good. With Reason moderates like Samuel Willard (1640-1707) of Old South Church and Benjamin Colman of

³The Brattle Street Church became Unitarian at the time of the Unitarian schism and later closed.

Brattle Street described a less severe God than their Puritan ancestors had known.

Saybrook

Could Congregationalism hold together in the midst of increasing diversity? Without the support of a friendly government, the *Cambridge Platform* was not enough. In 1705 a representative group of Massachusetts clergy recommended to the churches a system of standing regional bodies.

John Wise (1652-1725), pastor at Chebacco (modern Essex, Massachusetts), articulated the opposition to this proposal in a satirical tract in 1710, and the more serious *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* in 1717. Wise praised the old congregational system for its democracy and local autonomy. He was the first to describe Congregationalism as a purely democratic system.

While Massachusetts Congregationalists rejected the proposal, Connecticut accepted a similar plan. At the Saybrook Synod in 1708 Connecticut Congregationalists approved three documents: (1) The Savoy version of the Westminster Confession (endorsed in 1680 by a Massachusetts Synod); (2) The "Heads of Agreement" of Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in London in 1691, which provided a foundation for interchange of pastors and people with Presbyterians; (3) The *Saybrook Platform* (LTH 3:8). This platform provided for:

- Standing "Associations" of ministers with defined boundaries and regular meetings.
- Standing "Consociations" of churches, consisting of the ministers and two lay delegates from each church, with defined boundaries and regular meetings.
- A "General Association" representative of all the regional Associations in the state, meeting once a year.
- The Consociations to take the place of vicinage councils in hearing any cases of controversy in member churches.
- The Associations to examine candidates for ministry and grant them a license to preach before they could be considered candidates for a church.
- The Associations to assist vacant churches in finding a pastor, providing them with recommendations.
- The Associations to examine any accusations of scandal or heresy against any of their ministers. The Association could then call a Consociation meeting to take disciplinary action.

After the Connecticut legislature adopted the *Saybrook Platform* in 1708, New England had two kinds of Congregationalism. Massachusetts and New Hampshire adhered to the less structured *Cambridge Platform*, while Connecticut followed the more connectional *Saybrook Platform*. The Hampshire Association, covering the Connecticut Valley portion of Massachusetts, followed the Connecticut pattern, as would Vermont. So the division was between eastern and western New England. Connecticut Congregationalism outwardly resembled Presbyterianism, which facilitated cooperation with the latter. Connecticut churches of the Reformed family took to using the words “Congregational” and “Presbyterian” as synonyms, using both to describe themselves.

PART C: ENGLISH-SPEAKING SETTLEMENT OUTSIDE NEW ENGLAND

Puritans settled in colonies outside New England throughout the Seventeenth century. As in New England, persons of Congregational and Presbyterian views cooperated in Puritan churches.

Colonists from New England founded the first Puritan Churches on Long Island in 1640. By the end of the seventeenth century there were ten Puritan churches on Long Island, at least seven of which had Congregational organization. New Englanders also organized another three churches in Westchester County, New York, and at least four congregations in New Jersey.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland sent Francis Makemie (1658-1708) to America. In 1707 he organized the first Presbytery, with churches in Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. Three of the Presbytery’s seven ministers were New Englanders. When the Long Island Presbytery joined in 1717, and the first Presbyterian Synod was organized, the New England presence was stronger. Eventually, almost all of the churches of New England origin in New York and New Jersey joined the Presbyterian Church. Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747), an important leader in the Presbyterian Church, and first President of Princeton College, was born, educated and ordained in New England Congregationalism.

Most Congregationalists and Presbyterians believed that what they shared in common was much more important than their differences. Presbyterian Scotland financed much of Congregational New England’s Indian Mission, and Congregational New England in turn supported Makemie and practically every other significant early Presbyterian endeavor. Thanks to the actions of the Saybrook Synod, clergy and members could pass freely from one group to the other.

Puritans founded an Independent church in Charleston, South Carolina⁴ about 1681, and colonists from Dorchester, Massachusetts, founded Dorchester, South Carolina in 1696. These churches formed the nucleus of a loose Association of Independent Churches in South Carolina and Georgia which was only very slowly absorbed by the Presbyterians.

PART D: THE REVOLUTION AND THE CHURCHES

Congregational preachers promoted the French and Indian War (1756-1763) as a struggle of constitutional government against despotism, Protestant freedom versus Catholic servitude. After the war, Congregationalists denounced British taxes and other restrictive measures as unconstitutional and despotic. When war broke out against England, Congregational preachers preached revolution (see *LTH* 3:11).

The German Reformed Church also supported the revolution. The Reformed and Lutheran congregations in Philadelphia in August 1775 issued a circular appealing for liberty. The British imprisoned Philadelphia Reformed pastor Casper Diedrich Weyberg (d. 1790), suspected of encouraging Hessian mercenaries to desert. Patriots hid the Liberty Bell in Zion Reformed Church, Allentown, 1777-78.

War produced a decline in religion and morals. Pastors and people became political refugees. Church buildings were used as hospitals, barracks and stables. Regular worship became irregular at best in war zones. Young men raised with Christian morality were compelled to break the commandments: to kill and destroy. Vice became virtue. Popular interest turned away from matters of religion to war and politics. Deists like Thomas Jefferson and the irreligious Thomas Paine promulgated an ideology of independence far different from the Calvinist clergy. Following the Revolution the churches had before them the difficult task of rebuilding and of adjusting to new situations.

PART E: AMERICANIZATION AND THE REFORMED CHURCH

An American Synod

The German Reformed churches in America appreciated the help given them by the synod in the Netherlands, and respected its authority. But the

⁴Circular Congregational Church in Charleston is a member of the UCC.

relationship had problems: (1) The difference in language between German and Dutch often led to misunderstandings. (2) The churches were an ocean apart. Messages sometimes were lost. A reply might not come until a year later. (3) The coetus needed competent ordained clergy. Some of the clergy sent from Europe did not adjust to American conditions. (4) When the coetus wanted to establish a school to train ministers in America, the Synod in the Netherlands rejected the proposal as financially impractical.

The Synod in the Netherlands did not give authority to ordain to the coetus. The coetus examined candidates for ordination, reported to the synod in the Netherlands, and then waited for permission to ordain. Sometimes the Synod did not act on these requests. After waiting a year for authorization that never came, the coetus in 1772 ordained five persons.

The German Reformed coetus moved toward independence. In 1791 the coetus declared that it had the right to examine and ordain ministers without asking the synod in the Netherlands for permission. In 1792 the coetus named a committee to write a constitution, which was adopted in 1793. The German Reformed Church in the United States convened as a synod for the first time on 27 April 1793 in Lancaster.⁵

The Constitution of the newly independent synod dropped the Dutch *Canons of Dort* as a doctrinal statement and used only the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Synod meetings were composed of all the clergy and one elder from each congregation. The Synod examined all candidates for ordination. Ordained ministers served for a year on probation before being seated at Synod.

The Language Question

One of the most deeply divisive controversies in the life of many congregations has been the fight over language. Many German Reformed congregations experienced this struggle in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. German Reformed people were participating fully in the civic life of the new republic. In many communities, particularly in the cities and west of the Susquehanna, German Reformed people were surrounded by English speakers, and had become bilingual. The younger generation wished to be more “American” and many left to join English-speaking denominations. But for many in the older generation, German was the language of the *Catechism*, and their prayers; worship in any other language would not be the same.

⁵It consisted of 22 ministers, 178 congregations, 15,000 communicant members and 40,000 adherents.

Some congregations held separate services in each language. Some congregations called a second pastor in order to have preaching in both languages. Some congregations divided peacefully, others not so peacefully. In Philadelphia, those favoring English left First Reformed in 1806. Six years later the First Church had adopted English, and the German-speakers withdrew to organize another church. Lancaster experienced a similar three-fold division much later. Other congregations hung together with considerable tension.

PART F: DISESTABLISHMENT IN NEW ENGLAND (1692-1833)

New England traveled a long and difficult journey from Toleration to Disestablishment. England's Toleration Act of 1689 was reflected in the new Massachusetts Bay charter, which in 1691 declared, "there shall be a liberty of conscience allowed in the worship of God to all Christians (except Papists)." Connecticut adopted a Toleration Act in 1708.

However, toleration did not mean disestablishment. As in England, so in New England, freedom of worship was granted to dissenters, while the government continued to support a particular church. The three Congregational colonies, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire, continued to authorize taxation for the support of Congregational ministers.

Massachusetts Bay in 1692 adopted an Act for Settlement and support of Ministers and Schoolmasters. Each Town, as a parish, was required to employ and support an orthodox (that is, Congregational) minister. The new charter had also placed Plymouth Colony within Massachusetts. The Baptists and Friends of several Plymouth Colony towns practiced passive resistance. Local tax assessors preferred to sit in jail rather than to assess the minister's tax. The dissenters kept provincial courts occupied with legal protests, and corresponded with coreligionists in England, who petitioned the Crown to pressure the Province to change. Finally, in 1727-1729 Massachusetts passed a series of laws exempting Anglicans, Baptists and Friends from the minister's tax. To be exempt one had to be registered as a member of a dissenting congregation, and live within five miles of their meetinghouse. Also, the laws were only effective for a limited period of time, after which they had to be renewed. Everyone else was considered part of the Congregational parish, required to support it, and granted a vote in approving the congregation's selection of a pastor.

Connecticut had fewer dissenters. In 1729 they adopted Certificate Laws granting exemption from the ministers tax to persons who could certify that they

were members of Anglican, Friends or Baptist churches.

The ideology of the American Revolution included complete religious freedom. By 1786 ten of the thirteen states had totally disestablished the church. Only Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire maintained an establishment in the form of tax support for the Congregational clergy. Disestablishment became a political issue in the new state legislatures. This last vestige of establishment was removed in Connecticut in 1818 with the adoption of a new constitution. New Hampshire abolished the ministers tax in 1819. In Massachusetts, after the Unitarian schism had placed many Trinitarian Congregationalists in the position of dissenters, the ministers tax was eliminated in 1833. Congregational leaders like Lyman Beecher had at first strongly opposed disestablishment, but afterwards came to see it as, "the best thing that ever happened to the state of Connecticut" (*LTH* 4:70).

Through the Eighteenth Century Congregational and Reformed churches developed their distinct identities, while maintaining intimate relations with Presbyterians and Lutherans, respectively. Both Congregational and Reformed embraced the American Revolution. They gradually applied its principles of liberty in the independence of the Reformed Church and disestablishment in New England. Both groups were profoundly shaped by pietism, described in the next chapter.