

Shift from puritanism to congregationalism in colonial new england



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The Shift from Puritanism to Congregationalism in Colonial New England

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Introduction:

The underlying factors that contributed to the Great Awakening and American Revolution, ultimately led to the shift from Puritanism to

Congregationalism in Colonial New England. During the period of Puritanism, and Jonathan Edwards, there was an undercurrent of revolt and revolution that seemed ready to breakout among the common people throughout the colonies. The Great Awakening had empowered the laity to rise up and, in many instances, accuse their parish pastors of being unconverted men, while the unfair treatment of the colonies by England and the Crown led to an uprising by the common people against perceived tyranny. It seems as if the current had shifted and the head waters were now pushing against the Puritan elites of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. This work intends to identify contributing factors that led to the demise of Puritanism and resulted in a less stringent Congregationalist church. Although numerous factors converged for the precipitation of events, this work will highlight a brief summary of Puritanism and Congregationalism and address the following factors that contributed to the shift from Puritanism to congregationalism in New England: the public infighting among the clergy of Puritanism over the support of the Great Awakening leading to a schism between the New Lights and the Old Lights; the negative impact of a free market and individualism on Puritanism; the competing denominations for the loyalty of the people of New England; the impact of the change of voting rights to be determined by wealth removing the power of the Puritan church for determining elections.

A Brief Summary of Puritanism:

When the Church of England separated from the Roman Catholic Church, in 1534, many theologians and clergy did not think the move went far enough to correct the identified fallacies in Rome. This resulted in two movements

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among those dissatisfied with the Church of England; Separatists and Puritans. The Separatists felt the church could not be reformed while the Puritans sought measures to purify the perceived errors within the Church of England. Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the Puritans were ridiculed and persecuted. These Puritans desired the Church of England to be purified of any liturgical or traditional practices which were not found in Scripture. Their creed was, like the Reformer's, " sola scriptura" meaning the Bible was their sole authority, and with these beliefs, they believed it applied to every area and level of life.

Among Puritans, the family was of highest importance and treated in the same authoritative structure as the church with the father leading his family spiritually and the wife submitting as the Church submits to Christ. Since the family was established by God before all other institutions, the family was considered the foundational basis for all cultures, societies, and churches. The Puritans felt that the family was the only institution ordained by God to order societies and cultures before the fall of man. In the morning and evening the family assembled together for worship, and on Sunday the family joined other families in worship.

A Brief Summary of Congregationalism:

The Congregational Church is a democratic church polity where the power of decision-making lies among the congregants. In some Presbyterian models of congregationalism local churches have elders, ordained by the congregation who then distributes authority to the elders, but there are not any outside governing boards.

“ At the same time, churches adhering to congregational polity often opt to associate in form of conventions and to cooperate with outside agencies, though these hold no authority over individual congregations. This cooperation enables churches to engage in strategic ministry, demonstrating in a visible way their belief in the oneness of the larger body of Christ”[1]

Among the various churches that practice congregational polity and governance are the Bible Churches, Baptists Churches, Churches of Christ, many non-denominational congregations and churches carrying the title “ Independent.”

In churches practicing congregational polity authority is vested in the church as a whole, although it is a matter of debate to what extent the church is able to delegate this authority to church leaders and whether or not church leaders’ authority is derived from the congregation or directly from Christ. Typically, in a congregational system the church does the following: (1) select, appoint, and, if necessary, remove church leaders; (2) (help) guard pure doctrine; (3) exercise church discipline and decide on church membership; (4) participate in major decisions affecting the entire congregation.[2]

Congregationalist generally function as a democracy through regular church business meetings where every member has equal rights and votes.

The congregational model is a delicate balancing between the authority of spiritual leadership of pastors and elders while continuing to remain “ representational” with respect to the voice of the congregation. In a true “

Representative” model, the authority lies with elders, not the congregation.
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The elders engage with the congregation to determine the general consensus on issues to better represent them in the decision-making process, but the final decision is made by the elders. Proponents of this type of church governance argue that the congregation's participation in electing and ordaining elders allows the congregation to be a part of the decision-making but does not place spiritual authority under control of the congregation. Further, representative polity ascribes to the view that the New Testament demonstrates congregational participation but not to the extent of congregational rule.

“ The two major models practiced in Congregationalism in a variety of permutations are: (1) single-elder or pastor; and (2) plural-elder leadership. In the single-elder model, the church votes into office one (senior) pastor who oversees the congregation.”[3]In this model of polity the congregation has the ability to delegate or keep all authority, but practically the pastor-elder has considerable power as a result of his teaching from the pulpit and other public engagements. In many of the congregationalist churches deacon boards are elected to have oversight of the pastor. This authority is granted to the deacons through the congregation and essentially takes on the function of a board of elders.

In the plural-elder model, several elders and/or pastors are chosen to oversee the congregation. Within this model, there is considerable variety as to the way in which the authority of the elders and/or pastors is construed. Some take the notion of the priesthood of all believers to imply that no one should have authority over individual believers (pure democratic model.

Others view the elders' authority as derived from Christ, not the
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congregation, and believe the church is called in Scripture to submit to those serving in this office.[4]

Public Infighting Among the Clergy of Puritanism:

The Puritan Clergy in Colonial New England always had disagreements, but they generally dealt with them privately and it never trumped the desire to create a Puritan Commonwealth in the New England Colonies. This ideal of a pure religious commonwealth through spiritual devotion to Christ, though tested often, proved to be unattainable as the Great Awakening began to increase in fervor and sensationalism. The schism began to take form as George Whitefield, the British itinerate pastor, traveling through New England preaching starting calling out clergy, professors and rectors as unconverted and encouraged laity to call out the unconverted clergy. George Tennant and James Davenport, on the heels of Whitefield's revival preaching, continued to encourage calling out the unconverted, while Davenport would go as far as burning the books of Puritan Theologians he deemed unconverted men. Jonathan Marsden, in his biography *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, discusses James Davenport, summarizing throughout one chapter that Davenport would go so far in his extremely controversial methods and labeling ministers as unconverted that it caused legal authorities to take measures against itinerant pastors. Due to the incitements caused by itinerant pastors in New England, many legislative assemblies passed laws that would only allow an itinerant pastor to preach at the invitation of the local parish minister. Davenport would be arrested twice and found to have an unsound mind and given leniency. The itinerant pastors were not the only controversies arising from the awakenings, untrained laity begin to

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preach and hold meetings and women were teaching men in many of these instances. These groups were making accusations against local ministers and encouraging church members to separate from their churches and form their own congregations. These separatist movements and the excesses encouraged by itinerant pastors needed to be addressed by the “New Light” clergy that supported the awakening. In March of 1743, Edwards led a council of prominent New England “New Lights” and they concluded the awakening should be defended but issue and urge that cautioned against the separatists and excess tendencies of itinerant pastors.[5] Many of the Puritan Clergy around Boston began to vehemently condemn the Awakening as harmful to true religion. These clergy would become known as the “Old Lights.” Those clergy, including Jonathan Edwards, who supported the revival even with its excesses became known as the “New Lights.” The rift between these Puritan Clergy from eastern and western Massachusetts would never be mended and the ideal of being the “City on a Hill” as a Puritan Commonwealth dissipated. Before this dispute over the genuineness of the awakening took place, the Puritan Clergy had common enemies, Arminianism and the Antichrist of Rome, now the enemies were within the Puritan movement. As the schism became more public, many itinerant pastors called for the laity to separate from their churches and begin new congregations; many times, under the preaching of untrained clergy.

(Discuss the debacle over the ordination bw western and eastern clergy from Marsden) Marsden uses this chapter to both show the ending of the revival and the division that would permanently separate the New England Puritan clergy. Marsden also points out the paradox of a revival the filled the meetinghouses with new converts and renewed members which led to the

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decline of the influence and authority of both religion and clergy in New England. This division among “ New Lights” and “ Old Lights” would be a schism too wide to bridge by shared goals of an Evangelical Puritan commonwealth.

This faction would publicly be displayed by the writing of Edwards, in defense of the awakening, and Charles Chauncy, a critic of the affections displayed during the awakenings. Chauncy, junior pastor of First Church of Boston, felt the excesses demonstrated by people during revival meetings was sensationalism and would do irreparable harm to true religion. Chauncy saw the emotionalism as chaotic and a total loss of order in the house of God; similar to the errors Paul addressed in the Corinthian church

Marsden spends a good deal of the chapter detailing Edwards support of the awakenings and his treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*, a 378-page work thoroughly explaining Edwards view of the revival. Later, Chauncy would produce his own 424-page rebuttal to the revival and Edwards work titled, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*. The biggest difference between Chauncy and Edwards was their views on the roles of affection in religion. Chauncy viewed affection as simply animalistic nature while Edwards viewed higher order affections an integral part of religion. With various other controversies popping up all over New England it was apparent the awakening was coming to an end. Edwards work on *Religious Affections* would be analyzed by Marsden throughout the rest of the chapter. Ultimately, the division between “ New” and “ Old” Lights had widened with many of the disputes played out in the public through Boston periodicals

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The Negative Impact of a Free Market and Individualism on Puritanism:

Free Market:

Puritanism held to the ideal of putting off the material things of this world in order to develop one's spiritual devotion to Christ. Early in Colonial New England, as settlers struggled to provide for their families, the Puritan ideal was without competition. However, with the developing free market system and the industrial revolution, people began to pursue financial and material gain in contrast to the humble way the Puritans had taught throughout colonization in America. As the clergy of the Puritan faith persisted to demand the abandonment of worldly gain for spiritual development the rift between the church and culture only became more divided. Culture began to develop a widening gulf between the wealthy and working-class people of New England. This resulted in a strain among the citizens of communities and congregants of churches.

Mark Valeri, Distinguished Professor at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, knows more about how the earliest generations of Colonial Americans thought about economics and how they changed their minds. Having spent ten years reading pamphlets, diaries, Church minutes, sermons, and even ledger books, Professor Valeri has produced the definitive account of the generations which led up to the founding of the United States, the greatest financial power in the history of the human race. What he found is that from the very beginning, Puritans had strong moralistic doubts about participation in capital markets, and were prone to scold and eventually excommunicate

merchants who used state of the art financial instruments and tended strongly towards price controls in the civil and moral spheres.[6]

Individualism:

The Puritans placed a heavy emphasis on individual responsibility and holiness, but the Puritans were very communal and clearly not individualists. They fled persecution and traveled to New England communally, not as individual settlers. Many English congregations, led by their pastor, immigrated in hopes of a Puritan Commonwealth. Their colonies were built with a sense of community and the church not only figuratively but literally was built in the center of each town. The church was the center of the community, and the community gave the Puritans a sense of purpose in their struggle to live out a pure faith.

The Puritans believed God and His worship were important enough to reserve at least one full day out of the week, and the original Puritan settlers joyfully devoted Sunday to the Lord. Sermons were central to the intellectual life of the Puritans, and they rarely were less than an hour in length. Times of prayer could also be as long. Hymns were not allowed in the earliest Puritan worship; only psalms or paraphrases of other Scriptures were sung. The first book printed in America was the Whole Book of Psalms (or Bay Psalm Book), a metrical version of David's psalms printed in 1640.[7]

A form of individualism began to breakout in the colonies that presently continues in America. Until this move to individualism, the Puritan colonies were definitely an example of communal tradition. The communal tradition held one only comes to self-realization in the context of community. John <https://assignbuster.com/shift-from-puritanism-to-congregationalism-in-colonial-new-england/>

Franke writes, “ Contrary to the views of individualism, the communal tradition emphasizes the social nature of human existence. It maintains that an understanding of the self is formed by connections with other people, institutions, and traditions.”[8]The individualism that dominated New England was utilitarian. This was the idea that as individuals intently pursued their individual goals it would result in good for the community. Franke alludes to this type of individualism developing in cultures that become capitalistic. “ Until the Enlightenment, the communal tradition was deeply embedded in the fabric of society. Indeed, the notion that humans are social creatures was generally assumed from the time of Socrates until the seventeenth century.”[9]This move of Colonial New England toward individualism contributed to weakening of Puritanism. Following the Great Awakening, Industrial and Political Revolution, “ under the impulse of individualism, the contractual view easily devalues the church, reducing the community of Christ’s disciples to little more than a lifestyle enclave, a society formed by persons who believe that membership in a Christian group will contribute to their individual good.”[10]

The Competing Denominations for the Loyalty of the People of New England:

The early settlers, church, and governing officials in Colonial New England were almost entirely sympathetic to the Puritan Movement. As America moved closer to revolutions on multiple fronts, more denominational diversity could be found in New England. Many of these denominations reflected the undertones of the emerging changes within the culture of the New England Colonies/States. The Puritan Movement would have to change to better reflect the culture, or accept its fate of continually decline.

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The Impact of the Enforcement of Voting Rights as Stated In Charter of 1628 MBC:

During the height of Puritanism in Colonial New England the church controlled the voting and almost literally appointed officials that were a part of the Puritan Church.

“ While everyone in the community was a member of a congregation and was expected to attend services and support the church, only those who went through the arduous process of demonstrating their spiritual regeneration could become full-covenant members, thus gaining a say in both ecclesiastical and secular government. The civil government had authority over everyone in the community, but was controlled by the minority of the population that had achieved full church membership.”[11]

The notion that the Puritans sought a place for religious freedom for all faiths is definitely an overstatement if not an outright false assumption. The Puritans were very intolerant of other religions and came to the Colonial New England not only to escape religious persecution but also with the hopes of developing a Puritan Commonwealth that would serve, as John Winthrop once anticipated, as a “ City on a Hill” for both America and England.

However, when voting rights were upheld as stated in the original Massachusetts Bay Colony Charter of 1628 and determined by wealth a huge power shift took place; exchanging the power of the church for the power of the purse. In 1684, The Massachusetts Bay Colony became very concerned over the news that its charter was going to be revoked because of continued violations in regards to religious freedom in the charter’s terms. These

violations were over the mistreatment of both Quakers and Anglicans and perceived as a breach to the terms that had been agreed upon in the original charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. “ In 1691, a compromise was made over the unpopular Dominion of New England and a new charter was issued. This new charter united the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Plymouth Colony and Maine Colony into one single colony, known as the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and called for a Royal Governor and elected assembly to be established.”[12]

The new charter prohibited any form of church membership as a requirement for determining voter eligibility, it provided a safeguard for the other Protestant denominations in Massachusetts, required oaths to be taken to the king and not the government of Massachusetts and brought increasing more stringent rule of the colony by the crown, while diminishing the power-control once enjoyed the puritans of New England. This caused much anxiety among the colonists. The Puritans of colonial New England developed a greater sense of fear and concern that these new steps would bring persecution, or at the very least restraints, on their way of life both at home and in the church.

Conclusion:

Although it is impossible to identify factors to fully account for the atmosphere in which Puritanism diminished and was swallowed up into Congregationalism, there are factors that can be discussed as having a debilitating effect on Puritanism in New England. The following factors essentially contributed to the shift from Puritanism to congregationalism in

New England: the public infighting among the clergy of Puritanism over the support of the Great Awakening leading to a schism between the New Lights and the Old Lights; the negative impact of a free market and individualism on Puritanism; the competing denominations for the loyalty of the people of New England; the impact of the change of voting rights to be determined by wealth removing the power of the Puritan church for determining elections.

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