

# The Separatist Papers

No. 8

*PROCLAIMING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTIAN SEPARATISM*

## THE SEPARATISM OF THE PILGRIM FATHERS

**As one small candle may light a thousand; so the light kindled here has shown unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation.**

– William Bradford of Plymouth

**But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.**

- 1 Corinthians 1:27

In these days of darkness, it is profitable to remind ourselves of the Pilgrim fathers who endured great hardship for the cause of Christ. It is an easy matter to eulogize them for their courage and faithfulness, and many have done so with eloquence. However, it was their idea of covenant that we find difficult to understand in our day. Speakers will describe with passion the ordeal of the sufferings at Plymouth; yet completely overlook the vision for America which gave the Pilgrims hope.

Much of what is happening today reflects rival opinions of national origin and destiny. The humanist sees a secular beginning to this nation and sees a vision for the future which rules out any divine dimension. The Christian, on the other hand, (if he is truly informed), believes in an America with a Biblical foundation, one which is badly eroded, yet worthy of restoration.

The movement toward Christian Separatism in America today is a return of the Pilgrims and witnesses to a desire to rebuild our culture upon the foundation laid by our Pilgrim forefathers. Some groups of American Patriots identify the Constitution as our national foundation. Others include the principles of the Declaration of Independence. But the Christian Separatist goes farther back to the Mayflower Compact and our covenant with God. He does not neglect the Constitution (our national charter) or the Declaration of Independence (our national manifesto), but also, he is careful not to overlook the Compact or the Articles of Federation (our national covenant). The Christian Patriot affirms that our national foundation was laid upon the rock, Jesus Christ.

I am one of those who believe that America has a God-ordained calling and destiny. I believe that in the acts of Divine Providence, the Almighty did cut a Covenant with the Pilgrim Fathers and elected America as His latest instrument in the mission of the Church. God ratified the American vision as it was conceived in the minds of the Pilgrims, namely, to establish a civilization governed according to a perfected understanding of the Holy Scriptures. From such a Holy Commonwealth would flow a witness to all the earth of the Dominion of Jesus Christ.

It was for the love of their Savior and the vindication of His honor that the Pilgrims hazarded their lives and toiled with the rocky soil of New England. They knew that He was promised by His Father the nations of the earth. These First Comers were determined to give Him the first: a new nation birthed in the

howling wilderness, unpolluted by the antichristian systems of Europe.

The Pilgrims had no grandiose dreams about building a world empire. They merely wanted to create a nation where God's Word governed society. A light, an example, to the nation was their objective. If they succeeded, they felt there was no greater teacher than a happy example which would be emulated, voluntarily, by other nations which God would call.

### THE ISSUE OF THEOCRACY

That the Pilgrims wanted a theocracy in the literal sense of the word is certain. They wanted God to rule over them. However, the mediator of that rule could not be king or pope. It could only be the Holy Bible.

Was this a call to anarchy? No. It was a call to self-government. It was a call to a republican form of government. For a republican form of government is the extension of self-government through ones representatives. Thus, it is one voluntarily submitted to. A king must rule with the sword. A pope must rule by the terrors of hell. But a republic rules by prior consent.

The error of some of the American Puritans was that a theocracy should be mediated by the ordained clergy. This is the form of theocracy that comes to the minds of most people when the idea of theocracy is mentioned. They fear that the acts of elected officials will be subject to review by the ministers of organized Christianity. This is not what the Pilgrims understood a theocracy to be. Ordained ministers are available for advice if the advice is requested. But, there is no institutional subordination of state to church.

Therefore, if we understand theocracy to mean the rule of Christ through His followers by the ballot box, yes, the Pilgrims did practice it. If by theocracy is meant the rule of Christ by any mediator other than the Holy Scriptures as taught by the Holy Ghost, then no, such was against Pilgrim doctrine.

### THEIR DOCTRINAL DISTINCTIVES

With little exception, the Pilgrims of the Mayflower were reformed in their theology. They were reformed Catholics: they were returning to the orthodoxy of the Old Catholic Church, before it was polluted by the dogma and superstition of Rome and Byzantium.

Although the work of John Calvin left its mark on Pilgrim theology, as it did in all of Europe, the Pilgrims were wise enough to see that the human mind is not capable of an infallible system of theology. They perceived the Reformation as just begun. And this pioneer spirit was to produce over the next two centuries the greatest development, of Christian theology in church history.

The Pilgrims knew that there were new frontiers in theology and Christian experience to explore. They sought to build upon the foundation of Luther and Calvin, but not to be limited by them. John Robinson, the large-hearted pastor of the Pilgrims, so much as said so in his farewell counsel. According to John Winslow's account:

**We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knoweth whether ever he should live to see our faces again. But whether the Lord had appointed it or not, he charged us before God and his blessed angels, to follow him no further than he followed Christ; and if God should reveal any thing to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it, as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry; for he was very confident the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. He took occasion also miserably to bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches who were come to a period in religion, and would go no further than the instruments of their reformation. As for example, the Lutherans, they could not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; for whatever part of God's will he had**

further imparted and revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the Calvinists, they stick where he left them, a misery much to be lamented . . . For saith he, it is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-christian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once. (emphasis added)

### THE LEGACY OF JOHN WYCLIFFE

The Pilgrims owed much of what they were to the ministry of a man that preceded them by two centuries - John Wycliffe.

John Wycliffe, who is commonly called the "morning star of the Reformation," succeeded in establishing foundations that to this day have yet to be shaken.

It was a tradition of dissent that was later known as "separatism."

Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, Wycliffe of Oxford exposed to the blinding illumination of the Holy Scriptures the corruption of the religious and civil rulers of his day. They rejected his message. So taking the first translation of the Bible in the English language, he and his Lollards (lay preachers) went to the common people and wrought such a reformation, that England and the world have never been the same since. Declaring that the Bible was for "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people," he challenged any man or institution which exalted itself to be above or coequal with God's inscriptured Word.

Heavy persecution seemed to end the movement, but the tradition of Dissent established by Wycliffe and sustained by the printed Bible survived in the multitude of private, and sometimes secret, conventicles which dotted the English countryside. The Separatists of Scrooby, from which would come the Pilgrims, belonged to one of those dissenting conventicles.

John Wycliffe, however, stands at the head of a different branch of the Protestant Reformation. And the Pilgrims provide a compelling illustration.

### SEPARATISM & THE COVENANT IDEA

The Plymouth Colony was a commonwealth, as close to a democracy that was scripturally and historically possible. And because of this Protestant covenantalism, they built the truest Christian community and civilization in human history. They believed the Christian receives no authority compelling the conscience except the Holy Bible and the vow. This belief required that all institutions be voluntary and made indispensable the covenant idea.

Since the use of force to sustain social institutions was eliminated by Separatist doctrine, a mechanism was needed to assure the peace and safety of society. The Pilgrims looked to Biblical teaching on the Christian vow of covenant.

(The use of force had its place in society, but only in a defensive posture, not in a coercive one. Here lies an important difference between the Separatists and Anabaptists. The latter saw a completely voluntary society that lacked the procedure for social change, except revolution. The Pilgrims believed authority established by prior consent, and open to change according to Biblical conditions, was sufficient to preserve liberty and deserving of obedience.)

Separatism was most obviously manifested in church polity, namely, Congregationalism. However, the logic behind it was not limited to church polity. It affected other areas of life, as we shall see.

The separatism of the Pilgrims consisted primarily in their rejection of hierarchical churches. They rejected state-run churches, as well as church-run states. Roman Catholics and European Calvinists tended toward church-run states, although they differed in method (Papists were episcopal and Calvinists were Presbyterian). Anglicans and Lutherans tended toward state-controlled churches. Again, the method differed. Anglicans were monarchial; Lutherans were oligarchic.

Protestant covenantalism (or separatism) provided a balance between the one and the many, an equilibrium between liberty and order.

The home was held together by the vow of the marriage covenant. The state functioned in terms of the citizen's oath of allegiance. Commerce was governed by contractual agreements. And the church was built through the sacraments, the acts of covenant renewal.

Keenly aware of the sovereignty of God and of His providential rule, the Pilgrims regarded any usurpation by any human institution of the Divine will as revealed in the Sacred Scriptures to be treason and apostasy against God. They were protestant in the proper sense of the word. "Sola Scriptura": only God's Word as contained in the Holy Bible was the Divine instrument upon the earth which bound the conscience. All institutions were held subordinate to God's authority.

The covenantal idea governed every Pilgrim decision. "Tota Scriptura": they saw a united scripture - one Testament (one expression of Divine will) containing two covenants (two economies of atonement). This covenantalism not only demonstrated itself in their willing obedience to all of God's Law (both Old & New Testaments), but also in their conduct socially. Operating on the basis of the reliability of a Christian's word of honor, the Pilgrims externalized their church polity into civil affairs.

With a vow of loyalty, the Pilgrims covenanted with each other to stand together for perpetuity. That covenant made them a people.

They were Christ's freedmen, united with each other by a common sovereign (Christ), a common law (the Bible), and a common ethnic bond (a church in covenant of mutual and perpetual union). They were equals in government, both in church and civil matters.

In its origin and its development in New England, Christian Separatism emphasized the primacy of Christian self-government. All human institutions and associations grew out of this concept of the godly man. The Christian, having covenanted with God, is then trusted to form governments in other spheres, whether they be civil, family, church, or commercial. All institutional hierarchies were voluntary: synods, confederacies, corporations, and so on.

Therefore, what happened can be described in this way: separatism manifested itself in "church polity as congregationalism. In civil government, it took sides with localism, and in commerce, it tended toward free enterprise.

## THE SEPARATISM OF THE AMERICAN PURITANS

The separatism of the Pilgrims made them unpopular with the Puritans. They were eagerly desirous not to be confused with their schismatic doctrines. Separatists were the ones who wanted "reform without tarrying for any." They were willing to leave the Church of England and form new congregations obedient to the Scriptures. Even if it required geographical relocation, Separatist were ready to pursue the quest for a purified Christian body.

The Pilgrims were an admirable sample of these "purest of the purifiers," and eventually won over American Puritans. This is an important fact; for in the "Great Migration" of the 17th century, the Puritans came to far outnumber the Pilgrims.

The truth of this is evidenced in the church polity adopted by the Puritans: "for it was not episcopal or presbyterian; it was congregational." And remember, Congregationalism is separatism embodied in church government.

In the words of the great Presbyterian divine, Charles Hodge:

How came Congregationalism to be generally established in New England? The answer is that the first settlers were Congregationalists. They belonged to that division of the Puritans . . . and thus the mould into which the additional settlers were cast, as they successively arrived, was fixed at the beginning.

Like the growth of a newly broken path into a highway, so New England and the nation followed the ways of the Pilgrims. Never perfectly, but sufficiently so, Americans followed a different path than other nations of the earth, a path made for liberty. By the power of their example, the Pilgrims became the cornerstone of American civilization.

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I am deeply indebted to Verna M. Hall as my primary source for quotes and general information used in this essay. See her monumental collections *The Christian History of the Constitution of the United States of America*, *Christian Self-Government*, *The Christian History of the Constitution of the United States of America, Christian Self-Government With Union*, and *The Christian History of the American Revolution*, published by the Foundation for American Christian Education, Box 27035, San Francisco, CA 94127.

# The Separatist Papers

No. 9

PROCLAIMING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTIAN  
SEPARATISM

## THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO SEPARATIST DOCTRINE

*Matthew 16:18*

There is no antagonism between separatism and covenantalism. Covenantalism is based upon our covenant relationship with God, which is followed by the horizontal, covenantal vows which create the institutions of society. It is separatism which calls for separation from the world to unite ourselves in covenant with God. God has vowed only to enter into covenant with those who have separated themselves unto Him (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). Covenantalism is predicated by separatism.

Church government is a matter of renewed concern in Christian circles today. Christian Reconstructionists, having focused on the school, the state, and the professions, are now turning their attention toward the church as an institution in the Bible.

Sometimes, I use the word Church (capitalized) as a proper name to refer to the "Church of Jesus Christ" in the universal sense, or to a specific local or denominational group (such as, the Church of Christ or the Church of the Living Way, etc.).

When I refer to the church as an institution in society or as a building where believers congregate for religious worship, I do not capitalize it. I mention this to illustrate the many different definitions that can be applied to the word "church". The purpose of this article is not to explore the many connotations which can be applied to the word, however. It is my desire to explain the Separatist's understanding of the place and government of the Church in God's Kingdom.

What is the Church? *First* of all, we find in the Bible that there is the Church (singular, as in the Scripture cited above), and there are Churches (plural, as in the Church at Ephesus, the Church of Corinth, and the Churches of Galatia, etc.). Imaging the ontological Trinity and the principle of the one *and* the many, the Church is both singular and plural. It is wrong for us to have an undue emphasis on the unity of the Church or on its diversity. Just as it is wrong for us to emphasize the unity of the Godhead to the neglect of their diversity, and to emphasize the diversity to the neglect of their unity, so also it is wrong for us to obscure the manifestation of this aspect of the Trinity in the Church.

Therefore, we say that the Roman Catholics have erred on the side of an all-absorbing unity. The Baptists have erred on the side of a disconnected diversity. A balanced and scriptural view will guard the equilibrium between the one and the many, both within the local congregation and without in its relations to other Christian bodies.

*Second*, properly speaking, Jesus Christ did not establish an organization or an institution when He created His Church. References to the Church as God's building or His temple or His body or His bride are not literal, but metaphorical. They serve as analogies to call attention to various aspects of the Church's relationship to God.

The Church is a race of people, the Christian race whose members are known only to God. The Church is a people called out (the ecclesia) from the fallen of Adam's race and are "born again" into the race of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. When we say "the Church," we are referring to all of God's people in heaven and on earth, assembled and unassembled: for our membership in the Church does not depend upon our relationship with

each other, but our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

*Third*, as to the place of the Fivefold ministry (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers), the Separatist would say that it is provisional until the spiritual maturity of the Church has been achieved. It is not designed to be the government of the Church, but to be the "Council of Wisdom" to guide the Eldership, which is the government of the Church.

The Separatist believes apostolic or spiritual authority has been codified in the Holy Scriptures, and that no man can speak a new revelation binding upon the conscience of another, except (and it is an important exception), when a person, by a sacred vow, voluntarily submits himself to the tutelage of another. Thus, a bride surrenders herself to the spiritual authority of her husband, a student to his mentor, a catechumen to the presbytery, bishop, or parson. Even the Church of Rome may be valid for those who choose to submit to it.

However, no vow can establish absolute authority. A vow to violate the Law of God is void. Therefore, an authority cannot reveal something purportedly God's will to a subordinate which is in conflict with the Word of God. Subordination grows from the need for unlearned Christians to be trained in proper Biblical interpretation. Some may choose to submit to a pope, others to councils, synods, or seminaries. But the goal is spiritual maturity where the believer is capable of finding the will of God on his own.

As to the matter of church government, that is, the regulation of religious worship and ministry in a local congregation, separatism espouses congregationalism. Since the time of the Pilgrims, congregationalism has taught that each congregation of Christians, organized on Biblical principles, was independent and equal in station to each other. They are governed internally by the male membership through and with an elected hierarchy. Externally, they were regarded as complete bodies, owing only "sisterly affections and activity" to each other.

By mutual covenant, a congregational body was segregated governmentally, but not to the exclusion of fellowship with other bodies, as

Anabaptists were prone to do. Fraternal, but not paternal, relations existed between congregational churches. Synods were for advice only.

Although a congregational church was externally independent, **internally**, it was presbyterian. There was a functional hierarchy representing the body of believers. It was not a pure democracy.

There were various shades of congregationalism, but the kind that prevailed in New England was Robinsonism or Broad-Church Barrowism: the Congregationalism of the Pilgrims. Its distinctiveness can be reduced to two principles.

First, it was similar to Ainsworthism: the church elders (or presbytery) acted with assent (silent or vocal) of the church (the presbytery proposes, the church disposes).

Second, there was the addition of a catholicizing element: the recognition of the reality, but not the regularity of other churches founded on different principles (a guarded communion).

Although not as strict as the Puritans, the Separatists of Plymouth did preserve the parish principle, which has been all but lost today. The parish was the territory of the colony. Spiritual responsibilities were divided among several parsons (elders) and not to a bishop. The elders governed the same parish collectively. An anarchistic introduction of other church bodies into the colony was not permitted. Informal fellowships were permitted to some groups, such as the Baptists (although, the Quakers were out; they were an agitating bunch in those days.) But serious effort was made to create a stable religious atmosphere, while being open to change through approved channels.

The people aboard the Mayflower were not an accidental collection of individualists with their own opinions and destinies. They were not a rabble of adventurers. It was a church body that transplanted itself into the American wilderness. It was a covenanted body, a united group of Christian families, an Ecclesia of Jesus Christ.

Even though the civil power was functionally

separated from the church, it was the same Christian body which chose the civil magistrates, as well as the church officials. As in church polity, so in civil polity, one man, one vote, governed the Plymouth Colony. And since the jurisdiction of that Christian body extended only to the freehold estates of its members, so likewise was the extent of the jurisdiction of the civil power. Thus, there was no opportunity for tyranny. While the civil and religious powers ran parallel with each other, there was no amalgamation. Church officers decided such questions as doctrine and liturgy, while the civil magistrates decided such matters as law enforcement and defense.

Here, we have the pattern of New England colonization. From this concept grew the principle of localism, as evidenced in our system of township and county governments. The townships were self-governing and became the building blocks of American government. As one historian explains:

*When the people from England first came to dwell in the wilderness of Massachusetts Bay, they settled in groups upon small irregular-shaped patches of land, which soon came to be known as townships. There were several reasons why they settled thus in small groups, instead of scattering about over the country and carving out broad estates for themselves. In the first place, their principal reason for coming to New England was their dissatisfaction with the way in which church affairs were managed in the old country. They wished to bring about a reform in the church, in such wise that the members of a congregation should have more voice than formerly in the church government, and that the minister of each congregation should be more independent than formerly of the bishop and of the civil government. . . Hence it was quite natural that they should come in congregations, led by the favourite ministers. . . This migration, therefore, was a movement not of individuals or of separate families, but of church congregations, and it continued to be so as the settlers made their way inland and westward. The first river towns of*

*Connecticut were founded by congregations coming from Dorchester, Cambridge, and Watertown. This kind of settlement was favoured by the government of Massachusetts, which made grants of land, not to individuals but to companies of people who wished to live together and attend the same church.*

Robinson's insistence on a trained clergy, and his prohibition of laymen to administer the sacraments kept Plymouth trapped to the clericalism of the past. Robinson's concerns were praiseworthy, but his attitude was unscriptural. Christ gave His Gospel to all believers and His royal powers to the "two or three that are gathered in [His] name."

Each freehold held by a family is a miniature kingdom of Jesus Christ: a little church and a little commonwealth. These family kingdoms together form a township. Townships unite to form a county, counties to form states, states to form nations. Beginning with the first, self-governing, building block, the edifice of Christ's empire grows until all the earth is His.

The hope for mankind does not rest upon man or upon human institutions. There, is no law, no divinely appointed king, no apostolic successor upon earth that can transform the human race. Only the procession of the Holy Ghost, who is the regenerating force in human history, can create the new order where Jesus is Lord. God works this redemption of history through His people, but it must never be forgotten: "it is God that worketh all in all."

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# The Separatist Papers

PROCLAIMING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF  
CHRISTIAN SEPARATISM  
No. 10

## SEPARATISM AND AMERICA'S CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS

It will come as some surprise to American reformers of our day when I say that the founders of American theology and culture could not have been the Puritans, or even the Calvinists. This is not to suggest that the Puritans or the Calvinists have made insignificant contributions to American religious and social life. Indeed, their contributions are many and enduring. But we are guilty of sectarian prejudice if we insist that their theory of social order and religious teaching were responsible for American civilization. Rather, their branch of Protestantism represents only a part, not the sum, of Colonial America.

We draw much comfort and

inspiration from the Puritans of New England and much valuable instruction from their theological heirs, notably the Hodge's of Princeton. Unquestionably, Puritans and Calvinists have had a constructive impact upon our civilization, and the richness of their traditions has blessed them with an influence which far exceeds their numbers. Nevertheless, there are other essential aspects of early American society which fall through our cultural grid if we choose to look through the lenses of sectarian bias.

There were the Dutch of New York (Reformed and Arminian), and there were the Quakers of Pennsylvania. There were the Lutherans and Roman Catholics of Delaware and Maryland, the Baptists of Rhode Island and Virginia, and later, the Methodists of Georgia and the Carolinas. There were also the Anglicans of the Southern and Middle Colonies, the Congregationalists of New England, and various Independents scattered throughout.

What kind of theological orthodoxy held the Colonies together as a Christian people? It could not have been Calvinism, for Calvinism was not so much a theology as it was a doctrine of social order. Calvinism of the European continent aspired for a theocracy, as it was mediated through an ordained clergy and an ordained magistracy. The

Presbyterians of Scotland and the Puritans of New England, with a franchise limited to church members and a single church parish, were probably the best models of the Calvinist system during the Colonial period.

However, this *aristocratic theocracy* is not what occurred in America. Outside of New England, and there for only a brief period, Puritanism was not a practical reality. *America was a land where a Christian pluralism prevailed.* Many theologies and many forms of Christian sub-culture existed. It was not a secular pluralism, as erroneously insisted on by humanists of our time; but it was a pluralism all the same. Neither Puritanism nor Calvinism could have been responsible for such a pluralism.

It is my thesis that the theological tradition which arrived with the Pilgrims of Plymouth and established itself throughout the Colonies, and which provided the basis for Christian diversity, yet retaining an essential unity, can only be found in a source completely different from that of the European continent (e.g. Lutheran, Calvinist, Arminian, Anabaptist, Humanist, etc.).

In a short-handed way, we can say that the separatism of Plymouth became the cornerstone of America's

Christian foundations by virtue of its translation and duplication into congregational polity and localism, which in essence are the distinctives of American church and civil governments. Yet oddly enough, our attempts to link this populist and provincial attitude with the Protestant Reformation of the European continent are clumsy at best. European Protestantism, in its attempt to reform the Roman system rather than discard it and start anew, carried over much of Rome's cosmopolitan and authoritarian sentiments into its theological tradition. Therefore, unless we are willing to believe that Americanism was created out of thin air, we must look elsewhere for that theological source.

Before identifying that source, we must first understand that what has come to be known as "Calvinism" in America is not really Calvinism at all, but Augustinianism mistaken for Calvinism (or perhaps more accurately, semi-Augustinianism). This was the orthodoxy of the old Catholic Church. What was central to Calvin was not the doctrine of predestination, but the doctrine of theocracy. It was the theocratic theme which gave Calvinism its tremendous fighting edge and its political significance. The theological quarrels of that era between Arminians and Calvinists dimly reflect the metaphysical and soteriological emphasis of those two camps today.

Questions of social order were central. Arminians were inclined toward the secular model of church/state relations, one which disestablished the church. The Calvinists, on the other hand, jealously guarded their state-favored status in the Netherlands.

Thus, we can fairly say that Calvin was a brilliant teacher of Augustinianism, but to be an Augustinian was nothing unique to that era. The entire Christian world was Augustinian. The old orthodoxy of the creeds was never forsaken by the major branches of the Reformation, or even professedly by the Church of Rome. With the exception of the minor sects, American society was also orthodox. It was theologically homogeneous. *Orthodox Christianity was the unifying factor in American society, not Calvinism.*

Although the above statement is true, it still does not provide a complete explanation for the American system. Orthodox Europe repeatedly drenched itself with blood over religious issues. What prevented the religious and ethnic diversity of America (the mirror of Europe) from devolving into the total warfare and the bitter persecutions of the European continent?

## THE FORGOTTEN BRANCH OF PROTESTANTISM

That question requires a completion of my statement of thesis: there was another major branch of the Protestant Reformation besides the Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and Anglican branches. It even antedates all of the others. It is this branch which prevailed in "Puritan" New England, and subsequently, in all of the American colonies. At the head of this branch stands the great "Evangelical doctor" and champion of the faith: **John Wycliffe**.

It is my position that John Wycliffe of fourteenth century England is responsible for the separatism of the Pilgrims and for the Christian pluralism of the American colonies. And it is his theological distinctives and philosophy of social order which are responsible for American evangelical tradition and American free society. When the historical record is re-evaluated, I believe we find no other religious tradition which could have resulted in what happened in America. The differing religious denominations and ethnic groups should have flung the Colonies into a thousand pieces. But Wycliffe articulated doctrines which prevailed among the English lower classes (the ones which early flocked to the New World) and made American unity, upon different foundations possible.

That Wycliffe could have had this much influence is probably difficult to believe, since he is largely ignored by church historians who look upon his work as that of a "premature Reformation". He did not found a religious denomination or theological system which bears his name. There is no university that claims him (his friends at Oxford forsook him). Even his many writings molded in the dust until the nineteenth century, so thoroughly did his persecutors erase his memory.

Yet it speaks to the greatness of this man, that although banished and stripped of his status, he still prevailed. Knowing that his time was short and his work barely begun, he confessed, "I believe that in the end the truth will conquer." This faith inspired his Lollard followers, who took his newly translated Bible and his doctrines and stamped his image upon the ethnic psyche of the Saxon people. Wycliffe established an ethnic tradition, a world view which transcended the generations of obscurity. He should not be thought of as merely a Reformer. More properly, he should be compared to St. Patrick, the Apostle of Ireland. John Wycliffe became the beloved Apostle to the oppressed Saxon race.

A very small portion of life finds its way into books. We do not know, and Wycliffe's enemies cared

not to tell us, how his message affected the boy at his plow or the mother in her kitchen. We do not know the family conversations at the evening meal or the theological discussions between men on their way to work. All we do know is that the religious thought of an entire people changed, it seems, in a night. That fact is all too often forgotten by church historians, who find it more convenient to discuss more published leaders.

### **WYCLIFFE'S DOCTRINES**

Some of his prominent teachings can be summarized as follows: [1] There is a direct relationship between God and man (no priestly mediator), [2] God's authoritative will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures alone (again, no priestly mediator or professional class of interpreters required), [3] Christian self-government was to be ordered after the Bible available in the native language (a clerical monopoly, he condemned), [4] The clergy should imitate evangelical poverty (e.g. Christ and his disciples), [5] He denounced a propertied church beyond the needs of worship and teaching. He condemned the clergy's claim to temporal power, and denounced as heathen superstitions the customs of (a) enforced confession, (b) pilgrimages, (c) priestly celibacy, (d) penances and indulgences, (e) the veneration of

images, (f) priestly power of absolution, and (g) the idea of holy crusades. And [6] He taught that the Eucharist was a covenant symbol and that the doctrine of transubstantiation (the elements become the body and blood of Christ) was idolatry.

Wycliffe's teachings are largely familiar to our ears, and are warmly welcomed to a generation blessed by a Protestant heritage. But in his day, they were shockingly new. Any one of his teachings above would have resulted in his death were it not for the high esteem held for him by the people and for his previous position at Oxford and service to the king. Indeed, his followers did not enjoy that immunity, but faced the stake soon after his death.

It is impossible to define Wycliffe in terms of the religious controversies which began almost two centuries after his time. He was an Augustinian, an orthodox theologian. His break was with Rome and its apostasy. Rome, in its quest to gain and secure temporal power, played upon the superstitious gullibility of the people. It locked the Bible away with the clergy and in a foreign language. The common man was in no position to contradict a priest when he misused the Scriptures. The result was a heavy burden of human tradition. Here the confessional, there the indulgences. Here the torments of purgatory, there the magical power of

the sacraments. It all added up to a thinly veiled paganism.

By his strict Biblicism, Wycliffe also broke with the logic of secular philosophy. Phillip Schaff, the 19th century, church historian, tells us that Wycliffe acknowledged his dependence on human philosophy in his youth but later became disenchanted when he realized its internal contradictions and its inability to arrive at any final conclusion. He rejected it and the quest for worldly fame to embrace God's Word.

The expression, "God's law", was much used by Wycliffe and his followers. This term he used in reference to the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and to the exclusion of canon law, tradition, pagan philosophy, and other human inventions. In the words of Schaff,

*In his treatises on the value and authority of the Scriptures, with 1000 printed pages, more is said about the Bible as the Church's appointed guidebook than was said by all the medieval theologians together. And none of the Schoolmen, from Anselm and Abelard to Thomas Aquinas and Dun Scotus, exalted it to such a position of preeminence, as did he. . . To give the briefest*

*outline of the Truth of Scripture will be to state in advance the positions of the Protestant Reformation in regard to the Bible as the rule of faith and morals. (History of the Christian Church, Vol. VI, p. 338)*

As to methods of Biblical interpretation, Wycliffe regarded the aid of professionals to be unnecessary, since it was the plain and literal interpretation which was the true one. By the aid of the Holy Spirit, all believers would be led, eventually, to correct doctrine. All topological, anagogical, and allegorical interpretations had to be based upon the literal, etymological meaning of the doctrinal passages. Such interpretations had their place to aid in understanding doctrine by explaining and developing it, but they could not establish doctrine. Therefore, there was no danger of error from people untrained in the obscure symbolism of Oriental literature; for it was not allowed to be the basis of doctrine. All the Scriptures taken together would interpret themselves to any mind being led by the Holy Spirit.

### **THE DISSENTING TRADITION**

Up to this point, however, we find in Wycliffe nothing startlingly different from the other Reformers who would come later. What then is

the distinctiveness of his branch of Protestantism? And how did it affect America?

I think we find the answer to such questions in this: that only in Wycliffe do we find an unequivocal right to dissent. And it is this tradition of Dissent which marks the heirs of Wycliffe, and which accounts for the fiercely independent spirit of the American people, making them unique among the peoples of the earth.

While European Protestants are willing to engage in protests and to seek reforms through established channels, Wycliffe's Dissenters are ready "for reform without tarrying for any." Dissenters are separatists, not traditionalists. While Europeans are restrained by their almost superstitious veneration of institution, Americans (who are the true heirs of Wycliffe) are ready to establish new ones since they see nothing sacred in the old ones.

For example, Wycliffe's elimination of a magical Eucharist and an esoteric system of hermeneutics made an ordained clergy obsolete. The church building ceased to be the temple housing the body and blood of Christ and the oracles of Divine revelation. It was reduced to a conventicle. Contrasted with the grand cathedrals of the Continent, such a view, undoubtedly,

could only be perceived as irreligious to the European mind.

Further contrasting the Dissenting mind with European Protestantism is the emphasis of Christian self-government under the direct guidance of the Holy Scriptures. Such a doctrine greatly diminishes the moral power of Ruler's Law over the people. While Europeans will look upon civil law as in some sense expressing the will of God, Dissenters see it in terms of expediency only, and lawful only to the extent of its conformity to the Scriptures.

Separatists of the Dissenting tradition differ from the sometimes revolutionary tendencies of the Continental Anabaptists because (a) Separatists do not seek a violent destruction of the old order, only the opportunity to be free to establish new institutions, and (b) they regard legitimate government to be based upon the prior consent of the governed, not by conquest. Separatists begin with persuasion and the process of redemption, not coercion and revolution (see *Separatist Papers* #6).

The right of Dissent, contrary to the expectations of pessimists, tends to defuse the revolutionary impulse, which is really the result of repressed dissent (as Europe has repeatedly and painfully experienced). The effect of separatism is that of a

*democratic theocracy*, rather than the aristocratic theocracy of the Calvinists.

With Wycliffe, we find the source of the demand for a *free Church in a free State*. In his writings on the government of Church and State (see, *Civil Lordship* and *Divine Lordship*}, he sets forth the distinction between sovereignty and stewardship. "Dominion as founded in grace", which includes all earthly power, is conferred by the *grace* of God and is consequently forfeited when the wielder of that authority, is guilty of mortal sin. The implications of this teaching on covenantal dominion was probably best stated by himself, when he claimed:

*There is no moral obligation to pay tax or tithe to bad rulers either in Church or state. It is permitted to punish or depose them...*

(Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VI, p. 321)

One cannot help but see in this the seed of the philosophy found in the American *Declaration of Independence*, which claims the right of the common people to alter or abolish their form of government when it becomes tyrannical.

Priests and magistrates are ordained by men, not by God. Although, religious worship and penal sanctions are required in the



Scriptures, and give occasion for the institution of specialists to carry out such requirements (clergy and magistrates), their forms and specific lines of succession are not dictated, but rather, are left to the people. The Dissenting tradition rejects any claim by church or state that it is, in its present form and hierarchy, the one validated and ordained by God. It is a heathen doctrine which claims that "that which is, is right". Such a belief makes nature normative rather than God's Word. Wycliffe insisted upon the supremacy of God's Law. If a magistrate failed to put God's Word into effect (Romans 13:4), then he was cursed (Deuteronomy 27:26) and no longer God's minister of justice. He subsequently forfeited his claim to authority unless he repented.

### **SEPARATIST DISTINCTIVES**

The assumption that Wycliffe's was an aborted Reformation cannot be sustained under closer examination. The evidence suggests that his movement was not destroyed; it only went underground during the fifteenth century in an organized sense, which is contrary to this spontaneous and decentralized movement) and re-emerged under various "separatistic" and "heretical" labels in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although having a powerful influence in England, it found a complete manifestation in America.

We have shown in previous papers how Separatism prevailed over Puritanism in New England". Puritanism was really never more than a theory in New England," for Puritanism was more of a party within the State Episcopal Church, than a movement in America, where Wycliffe's dissenting tradition was converted by Separatism into the Congregational Church (the "established" church in New England). This demonstrates how great his legacy in America is. An Americanized Christianity meant a congregationalized one. Throughout the Colonies, we find that it was a congregational polity without one-church parishes, even among the Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In civil government we find localism with non-church franchise. And in theology, we find the old orthodoxy with the evangelical emphasis.

(To digress briefly, I should point out that the right to vote was limited to Christians, although the requirement of church membership was soon dropped. Thus, we find here, at least, a minimal creedal validation of the electorate, as opposed to the lawless and humanistic validation of our day.)

Unaware of Wycliffe's branch of the Protestant Reformation, historians have rather clumsily tried to label early American leaders under other categories: Puritan, Anabaptist,

even Humanist. They fit better under the Separatist label.

Separatists are to be distinguished from Humanists and Anabaptists, who differ on certain fundamental points. Humanists see nature as normative and reason as the arbiter of truth. The Separatist's conscience is institutionally independent, but not autonomous of the Word of God. To him, nature is fallen and reason is subordinate to the Bible. Anabaptists see a strictly individualistic basis to the covenant and desire a mystic oneness with God. Separatists, if they can be said to be mystical, are concerned, not with an experiential participation in the Divine nature, but an epistemological and ethical union. The knowledge of God produces a perfected humanity, not a divinized humanity. As to the covenant, while not excluding the individualistic aspect, they agree that a Divinely-ordained, collective aspect is necessary for social order. That collective aspect is found institutionally in the family.

This familistic emphasis also distinguishes Separatists from the advocates of Presbyterian and Episcopal polity and even High Church Congregationalists. Here, American Baptists, whose roots are in Wycliffe rather than European Anabaptists, have demonstrated best a purely laymen's church. Absent is a professional and elevated clergy. Any

layman is competent to administer the sacraments and preach the Gospel.

Thus, in America, individualism and corporatism in society were balanced by a family-based social order, not a bi-modal, institutional order. Unlike European Protestantism, which saw that institutional order as a bi-modal structure between church and state, Americans have relied upon the extended family for structure to prevent anarchy and misrule. This is not to say that the family, or any other institution, is the agent of redemption on earth. Rather, the preached Word of God by the procession of the Holy Ghost is.

The bi-modal structure of social order during the medieval period provided a guard against absolutism. And its historical value is not here questioned. I am merely pointing out that that form of social order is not what occurred in America. It would have if Calvin was the father of America's foundations.

The fact that it did not prove that Wycliffe is the true father of America's Christian foundations. And it was successful, because the tribal traditions of ancient Anglo-Saxon lore and codified in the English Common Law provided a social framework analogous to the tribal republics of the ancient Hebrews. This familistic structure, explicitly acknowledged by

the Founders, provided a Biblically sanctioned order by default. Familism, though beleaguered by intermittent statist experiments, was nevertheless dominant in the United States until the Civil War. (See W. Cleon Skousen's, *The Miracle of America*, The National Center for Constitutional Studies, Washington D.C., 1985). Following the Civil War, the property rights of episcopal churches began to be recognized by the courts, and local governments came under the direct supervision of the federal government.

A couple of examples which give credence to this argument are [first] the fact that the limited-liability corporation did not exist in early America. Such a social arrangement is a statist concept. The other is the belief that the marriage bond does not need a priest to attain validity. From the Pilgrims to today, it is recognized as a civil contract. Although Separatists of today would take that power out of the hands of the state also and leave it to the jurisdiction of the parents of the respective parties, this practice demonstrates, that under Wycliffe/Separatist doctrine, the family becomes the central institution of society, at least by default.

## THE COVENANT

Wycliffe's teaching had two aspects which profoundly affected the idea of covenant. The first was his

individualism, or perhaps better put, his non-institutionalism. The institutions of church and state were not essential aspects of the Divine Covenant with men; rather, they were incidental and auxiliary aspects. It is not an institution which stands before God on Judgment Day, but the individual person. A person's access to the Word of God creates personal accountability.

According to Wycliffe's Protestantism, a person could not hide behind the cloak of a priest or magistrate with pleas of ignorance or inability. One is not compelled by their authority to sin. The head of the man is not the priest, nor the prince, but Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3). A king does not enter a saving covenant for his subjects. Nor does a priest provide absolution for his parish. The covenant is not mediated by man, but by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Wycliffe's appeal to the Bible as the sole depository of spiritual authority on earth removed the aspect of human coercion from the covenant.

*Absolute* authority has been *codified in the Bible*. No institution, whether church, state, or family, shares in that authority. The institutions of society are the recipients of *functional authority*. Functional authority is derivative and temporal; absolute authority is self-dependent and eternal.

Separatism emphasizes individual accountability and the individual's sacred vow as the basis for all human covenants. The oath is the basis for covenant agreements, which in turn, are the mechanisms creating the institutions of society. Oaths and vows are also acts of free choice: a man is free to enter them or not to enter them (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). But once they are made, they are binding with all the weight of moral obligation; for to break them is a violation of the Third Commandment, a mortal sin (Exodus 20:7).

This leads us to the second aspect of Wycliffe's teaching which affected the idea of covenant: his predestinarianism. Schaff attempts to explain his position in the following:

*He seems to have endeavored to shun the determinism of Bradwardine, and declared that the doctrine of necessity does not do away with the freedom of the will, which is so free that it cannot be compelled. Necessity compels the creature to will, that is, to exercise his freedom, but at that point he is left free to choose. (Ibid. , p. 326)*

God's predestination of all things creates the options which make free will for man possible. Predestination is the basis for free moral agency,

which in turn, is the basis for covenants. Covenants cannot exist without a free will. They are qualified by the principles of accountability and free choice. A slave and a child are considered incompetent to enter into contracts and covenants. This is because their moral agency is not free.

That God created all possibilities does not mean He *requires* all things that occur. What Wycliffe opposed was the assertion by human authorities that they could be validated by the doctrine of predestination, i.e., submission to them was required because they were the ordained channels of God's eternal decree.

The idea of a continuing revelation was at the very heart of Papal claims to apostolic authority (authority derived from supposedly being successors of Christ's apostles). "The divine right of kings" was its expression by proponents of state power. For Wycliffe and his followers, God's decree was worked out by the individual's response to the Scriptures. The Elect manifest themselves by righteousness, the Reprobate by wickedness. Wycliffe introduced the criteria of *ethical deportment* to identify the Elect (or at least, the non-Elect). He struck a mortal blow at this fatalistic and institutionally mediated form of predestination. His *institutional voluntarism* is the true expression of

## EVANGELICALISM

Although we find Wycliffe's writings to be wordy and scholastic at times, we sense his disinterest on metaphysical questions. Unlike Anselm on the Atonement or Luther on the will, or all the Reformers on the Mass, he seems to have his heart set on writing sermon outlines for his lay preachers and Scripture pamphlets for them to leave behind as they traveled from village to village. These "Poor Preachers" call to mind Wesley's "class leaders" of early Methodism, and "General" Booth's "officers" of the Salvation Army, and the preaching of revivalists, such as D. L. Moody.

This is evangelicalism or "gospelism". It is the attempt to save the world by preaching the story of Jesus. It appeals to the conscience of the individual with the Holy Scriptures and then lets the Holy Spirit do the work of transformation.

Such a phenomenon is unfamiliar to European Protestantism, which is more concerned with conquest by social units. In the Dissenting tradition, the pastor is subordinate to the informal office of the preacher as the primary church office. Oratory, persuasion, and moral influence become the instruments of social reconstruction rather than the

sword.

Theologically, Wycliffe's evangelical descendants have tried to stand aloof from the soteriological controversies between Calvinists and Arminians. Indeed, the attempt to pigeon-hole American theologians and preachers into either camp is nearly impossible. It is not because they were compromisers or inconsistent thinkers. They stood in a different theological tradition which antedated the Calvinist/Arminian controversy. Their irenic impulse grew from their perception that ethics was more important than doctrinal refinement on metaphysical questions. From Wycliffe's *The Reign of God* to Richard Baxter's *A Holy Commonwealth* to Nathaniel Taylor's *The Moral Government of God*, we find a common theological theme: "what doth the Lord require of thee". It was a call for the *people* to return to the covenant and to renew a personal relationship with God. It was a call to them to rebuild righteous relationships with their neighbors.

Here, we find the seminal idea for evangelical theology that recurred again and again among American theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the source of the revivalism from Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield to Charles Finney and D. L. Moody.

It is unfair to say that the

revivalists of that era are *in* some sense responsible for the general backsliding from Calvinism, for Americans were never Calvinist to begin with. To the contrary, the revivals broke the tyranny hyper-Calvinism had imposed upon "Puritan" New England at the close of the seventeenth century. The institutional tyranny of that era left the people in general apathy. And the doctrine of predestination was preached to reinforce submission to what was declared to be "God's ordained order." The revivals of Edwards and Whitefield struck a blow at that perversion of doctrine. They preached that God redeems societies by redeeming the people in those societies. There was no conflict between predestination and free will. Men are not only able to but are *required* to respond to God's grace.

The triumph of atheism and humanism would have occurred two centuries before their time were it not for the revival preachers of Edwards through Finney. They were the ones who held back the forces of secularism and apostasy by their prophetic ministries. The American Revolution would have been radically different, much more like the French Revolution, were it not for Whitefield and Edwards. We ought not judge the anemic revival preaching of our time, absent of a theonomic base, as typical of that era.

## CONCLUSION

Inordinate interest in metaphysical speculation by evangelical theologians and ministers during the last one hundred and fifty years has led to the neglect of the ethical and moral applications of God's Law, which must be made in every generation afresh. Examples of this misplacement of priorities are many, and include the free-will vs. predestination debate between Calvinists and Arminians, glossolalia as the evidence of the Holy Spirit's baptism between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals, and the timing of the *Parousia* debate between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists.

Most of those theologians were theonomists, but their failure to emphasize and explore the particular requirements of God's Law left a vacuum in the education of their students. This they did, contrary to God's express admonition through Moses, who said,

*The secret things belong to the Lord  
our God, but the things revealed  
belong to us and to our children  
forever,  
that we may follow all the words of  
this law. (Deuteronomy 29:29)*

*These commandments that I give you  
today are to be upon your hearts.  
Impress them on your children.*

*Talk about them when you sit at home  
and when you walk along the road,  
when you lie down and when you get  
up.  
(Deuteronomy 6:6-7)*

## **ADDENDUM**

The only historical work which attempts to prove a Wycliffe/Separatist origin to American culture (to my knowledge, anyway) is Thomas Cuming Hall's much maligned book *The Religious Background of American Culture*, (Little, Brown & Company, Boston, 1930). Although not agreeing with some of his modernist conclusions, his command of historical data is impressive. It is must reading for critics who intend to refute my thesis.

Photo-copies of this 350 page book can be obtained for \$25.00, postage paid. James Stivers, PO Box 31176, Spokane, WA 99223.

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# The Separatist Papers

No. 11

PROCLAIMING THE FUNDAMENTALS  
OF CHRISTIAN SEPARATISM

## *SEPARATISM AND THE AMERICAN NATION*

At the time of this writing, the United States have entered the Bicentennial Celebration of their Federal Constitution which was drafted in 1787 and ratified in 1789. It is said to be the longest standing document in history to successfully govern the succession of "power for a nation. This fact demonstrates not so much any remarkable ability of the American people for self-restraint, as it offers a sad commentary on mankind's attempts at civil government. Two hundred years are not that much for nations.

The purpose of this essay is to briefly account for what happened to separatism from the late Colonial period to our own. We have shown in previous papers the strong evidence which point to the roots of American culture being found in separatism. But what became of it when America took its place among the nations of the earth?

Creating a nation is no easy task, especially when you begin with a handful of social outcasts with no resources, your strength of will, and a howling wilderness where an occasional friendly savage is all you have for allies. Yet this is how the American nation began. The first step toward independence began with that special person who was willing to cross a dangerous ocean and pioneer a hostile continent. It began with people of deep commitment and with a people deeply alienated by the culture of their nativity.

Intertwined with the geographical and economic forces which led the Colonies to a separation from Great Britain, there was a world view, a collective sentiment, which made the Americans a distinct people upon the face of the earth. And in the end, it would require the creation of what was to be the first, independent nation in this hemisphere.

America began with a mental break with the traditions of Europe by



people who wanted to make a new start in the "New World". Immigrants, who arrived here early in our history, came already jealous of their new homeland. Neither emotionally nor ideologically could the average American's loyalty to Europe be described as anything other than shallow.

How can we account for this? I would venture to say that it was because America was not so much the creation of a new nation as it was the restoration of an old one. America was the restoration of national, self-determination for the Anglo-Saxon people. Not since the Norman invasion of England in 1066 A.D had the Anglo-Saxons been free to govern themselves according to their ancient traditions. Those traditions and that independence were enjoyed by them for five hundred years following their arrival to the British Isles and for a millennium prior to that. They were a very old nation. And ever since their subjugation by the Normans (who became the English upper classes and the wielders of institutional power), the Saxons pathetically struggled to restore their "rights as Englishmen."

We see glimmers of this struggle in the popularity of Thomas Beckett, who, as a churchman, withstood the Norman, throne. Later, it was Wycliffe who withstood the Normanized Church. There were frequent revolts by the peasants,

finally succeeding in Cromwell, but it was not until America's independence did the Saxon spirit find its liberty re-established. In America, "the ancient rights of Englishmen" which belonged to all freemen, became a reality.

### **INDEPENDENCE: THE TRIUMPH OF SEPARATISM**

It is a radical misreading of history to describe the War for Independence as a secular revolution. Most modern historians err in seeing the causes of the Revolution as economic and geographical only. While valid factors, they were not the sum. Canada, for instance, was isolated geographically also, yet remained loyal to the Crown. Economically, the Colonies were hurt more than helped by the war effort. The economic antagonisms between the Colonies and Britain were real but not central.

What was central was the issue of jurisdiction and religious liberty. Americans were a deeply religious people and intensely jealous of the religious independence which they had long enjoyed. The fear that Parliament would impose an episcopacy upon the Colonial churches was the bottom line that forced the issue. This religious aspect has not been entirely lost to secular historians, as Murray Rothbard says in passing:

*During the first half of the eighteenth century, there were sporadic schemes to impose Anglican bishops upon the American colonies. The schemes had been bitterly resented by all the non-Anglicans in America, and even opposed by most of the Anglicans themselves, who were generally Low Church and happy to be governing themselves free of English control.*

*[Rev.] Jonathan Mayhew's pamphlets in 1763 and 1764 on the Anglican question had a profound effect in rallying colonial opposition. John Adams, writing later of these events, testified to the importance of the controversy that began with Mayhew's pamphlets: "It spread an universal alarm against the authority of Parliament. It excited a general and a just apprehension, that bishops, and dioceses, and churches, and priests, and tithes, were to be imposed on us by Parliament. It was known that neither king, nor*

*ministry, nor archbishops, could appoint bishops in America, without an act of Parliament; and if Parliament could tax us, they could establish the Church of England, with all its creeds, articles, tests, ceremonies, and tithes, and prohibit all other churches. ..."*

*(Conceived In Liberty, Vol. III, Arlington, 1976, p. 72)*

American Separatism finds its roots in Wycliffe, as we have shown in previous Papers. Those roots are also found in the ethnic consciousness of the people of Anglo-Saxon descent. Wycliffe's success was due, in part, to his appeal to national solidarity in the face of foreign domination. Wycliffe's work was a religious revival, but also a racial one.

These religious and racial elements were never lost in the separatistic and dissenting movements which England experienced in the centuries subsequent to Wycliffe. However, they were not successful until the American Revolution. And we must not forget that the Founders of the national republic were keenly aware of their racial, as well as their religious, heritage. As it is noted of Jefferson, the principle author of the *Declaration of Independence*:

*Jefferson's great ambition at that time was to promote a renaissance of Anglo-Saxon primitive institutions on the new continent. Thus presented, the American Revolution was nothing but the reclamation of the Anglo-Saxon birthright of which the colonists had been deprived by "a long train of abuses". Nor does it appear that there was anything in this theory which surprised or shocked his contemporaries; Adams apparently did not disapprove of it, and it would be easy to bring in many similar expressions of the same idea in documents of the time.*

*(The Making of America, Skousan, National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1985, p. 32 - Professor Gilbert Chinard, biographer)*

The influence of separatism upon the American character was not finished until it had attained its political codification in that wondrous document, *The Declaration of Independence*. In that document we find the refined conclusions of many centuries of Christian reflection upon

liberty. Many have admired its beautiful simplicity and moral eloquence. All of its basic principles are contained in Wycliffe/Separatist theology.

The *Declaration* condemns absolutism and ungodly rule. It asserts the right and duty of dissent and even rebellion against tyrannical government. Valid civil power flows from God to magistrates *through the people*. Magistrates do not have an independent and original source of authority which by-passes the people they govern.

In regards to the supposed deism and infidelity of Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams, the illustrious members of that committee which wrote the *Declaration*, I can only say that men change. In 1776, they sounded like Christians. In 1786, they sound like deists. But this can be explained by our intimate connections with France during that period, to which both Franklin and Jefferson served as ambassadors. The infidelity of French intelligentsia had a deleterious influence upon America's leaders. The alliance was unnecessary and in retrospect, a mistake. Historians insist that the Battle of Yorktown could not have been won without the French fleet. And that the war could not have been won without a victory at Yorktown. This could only be true in the same sense that the atomic bomb ended World War II. It

shortened an already decided war. The turning point of the Revolutionary War was when the British made the mistake of attacking the Scotch-Irish dissenters in the Appalachian highlands. An entire army was annihilated. The British never recovered.

With independence, separatism became synonymous with Americanism and became identified with it. We became a Christian empire, a democracy of townships under one King, Jesus Christ. The yoke of the European Babylon was broken.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 did not give us a Christian Republic; rather, it was a measure designed to protect the Christian republics which already existed. In the true spirit of Wycliffe/Separatist Protestantism, the Founders did not believe that the Christian faith should be enforced by government coercion. The nation would remain Christian *if the people remained Christian*. According to Richard Spaight, the delegate from North Carolina to the Convention:

*I do not suppose an infidel or any such person will ever be chosen to any office unless the people themselves be of the same opinion.*  
(*The Making of America*, op cit., p. 668)

Although the new federal constitution did add another level of government which posed a threat to localism, its objective was worthy of separatism. The over-riding goal in creating a stronger central government, one which is woefully neglected by historians, was to create sufficient collective strength to maintain the independence of the United States. The danger was real and present that the new American Republic would soon become the plaything of the powers of Europe. This danger forced the Founders to create a national government capable of fielding a sufficient army to deter aggressors and prevent domestic disunity.

American Separatism embodied itself in two more doctrines of national policy before its decline. First was George Washington's neutralism enunciated in his *Farewell Address*. Here, he urged the avoidance of American entanglement in European wars and intrigues. European disputes centered on feudal issues and imperialistic ambitions, both which doomed that continent to perpetual conflict and both which are foreign to American philosophy of governance. [The wars of our century are no different than others except the mode of their technology.]

The second was the Monroe Doctrine which reaffirmed Washington's neutralism, but

extended its principles to include the entire Western Hemisphere. Its goal was to end colonialism in this hemisphere and create new allies which supported a republican form of government. [At that time the United States stood alone among the nations of the earth, which were all governed by kings, dictators, or tribal chiefs.]

These two doctrines regulated American foreign policy for over a century.

### **CONVERTING THE IMMIGRANTS: SEPARATISM IN RECONSTRUCTION**

In general, America maintained a door open to immigration. However, as is often the case, immigrants were the misfits of the nations from which they came. They were rootless sinners who brought many evil practices from their native country and needed conversion. With the gigantic immigrations of the nineteenth century, the need was pressing for an extensive effort at reconstruction. During any one of the waves of immigration that occurred, the character of American culture and government could have easily changed if the Europeans were not Americanized. Fortunately, there were many who met the challenge and prevailed. Through Christian schools and street missions, revival meetings and reforms, through tract distribution

and the subsidized publishing of the Scriptures, the typical immigrant was often transformed into a loyal and thoughtful American. As Rushdoony observes,

*A wide variety of societies were created to minister to the new problems: Sabbath Schools for immigrant children and Christian day schools as well were created; English was taught to adults; missions were started; orphanages, relief societies, Bible societies, societies to deal with various vices, these and hundreds of other organizations were established to cope with every kind of problem which arose. The future of America was shaped by this massive effort at Christian reconstruction. The "native American" movement failed; the Christian reconstruction was so extensive that it became the real government of American society.*

*(Revolt Against Maturity, Thoburn Press, 1977, p.220)*

Americanism was of necessity Separatist. It was a repudiation of the corrupt beliefs and practices of the Old World. If too many people from the Old World came to the New World while retaining too much of the Old World, then the New World would soon cease to be New. However, most immigrants were ready to receive what the New World had to teach them. And that accounts, in part, for the great success: ready listeners. But also, early Americans were diligently working-out the implications of Separatism in their respective vocations.

For instance, in literature, we owe much to the ardent separatism of Noah Webster who Americanized the English language, making it more readable to the common person. Armed with his distinctly Christian dictionary (popular in spite of Harvard's scorn), his readers, studies in American history and law, and other educational materials - all which were designed for self-teaching - many millions of Americans were successfully taught at home. This educational triumph created a popular culture which was also a literate and moral culture, far surpassing the empty and vulgar cultural tastes of Europe's upper classes.

American art forms took a different direction than the useless, state-sponsored forms of the Old World. Unlike Egypt's pyramids, the

tombs of ancient rulers and a senseless waste of human energy, or the grand, but empty, cathedrals of Europe, American art forms found their primary manifestation in inventions which greatly improved man's living and working conditions. Fairs and museums were not the places of oddities and curious relics of the past, but of exciting discoveries of the present and hopeful visions of the future. Who can deny that the light bulb has added a significant benefit to man's aesthetic pleasure? Or on a more basic level, who does not appreciate the recipe books which have grown out of the cooking contests at our local fairs? The American philosophy of art is that the practical can be done well and done beautifully.

In music, Americans have held in contempt forms of opera and classical music which are designed to be esoteric or sung in Latin, forms favored by high society. They have preferred folk music rooted in their uniquely American tradition of revival meetings. Even modern rock music betrays the influence of the Negro spirituals. In the area of economics, of course, America's uniqueness was most visible. Free enterprise and the entrepreneurial spirit were permitted free reign. Unbound by the guilds and statist regulations of feudalism, our prosperity was the marvel of the world.

And while the world marveled at the fruits of the American system, it failed to understand the source of those fruits. That source was in America's theological tradition, rooted in Wycliffe's evangelicalism. Perhaps no American theologian represents this tradition better than Jonathan Edwards, whose influence on American Protestantism is unrivaled. In Edwards, we find the continued individualism of Wycliffe, the emphasis upon evangelism, and a people's religion. Calvinists complain of his so-called emotionalism. But it was an emotionalism concerned with the practical realities of personal salvation resulting in ethical redemption. His writings on Christian experience were not intended to set forth the standards of election, but rather a witness to the goodness of the Lord. They served as a sort of theodicy toward those who were skeptical of the revivals and who preferred the barrenness of a state religion. His sermons were not lacking in highly ethical content.

However, it was Edwards' postmillennialism, the maturation of Wycliffe's optimism, which was his chiefest contribution to American theology. As John Whitehead quotes him and then comments:

*America has received the true religion of the old Continent. And*

*inasmuch as that Continent [Europe] has crucified Christ, they shall not have the honor of communicating religion in its most glorious state to us, but we to them . . . when God is about to turn the earth into a Paradise, He does not begin His work where there is some good growth already, but in a wilderness, where nothing grows . . . that the light may shine out of darkness, and the world be replenished from emptiness" Edwards died eighteen years before the War of Independence, 'but the confidence that Americans were God's wilderness people bound to lead the world into the millennium burned brightly for several generations.*

*(The Separation Illusion, Mott Media, 1977, p.176)*

And Rushdoony adds this conclusion following a brief summary of the postmillennialism of Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy, Edwards' immediate theological heirs:

*Postmillennial thinking was very important in the formation and devel-*

*opment of the United States between  
1765 and 1860.*

*It is impossible to understand the  
development of the United States  
apart from this eschatology.*

*(God's Plan for Victory, Thoburn  
Press, 1980, p. 25)*

## **INTERNATIONALISM AND THE APOSTASY**

No sooner had America's diplomatic successes secured the integrity of the struggling Latin republics did a subtle shift begin in American thought. Following the close of the Civil War, the United States emerged as a world power. And with that status there was an increasing favor for elitism and cosmopolitan society. The desire to preserve the foundations waned. Separatism began to lose its hold on America. Lifted up in pride over our economic and territorial greatness, we began to sport popularity among the nations. And a dark era closed in upon the nation.

It began in the colleges and seminaries. American education was not good enough, thought high society. The Sons of America were sent to Germany and to its Higher Critics, and to England with its Darwinism. George Washington saw this tendency with foreboding:

*It is with indescribable  
regret, that I have seen  
the youth of the United  
States migrating to  
foreign countries, in  
order to acquire the  
higher branches of  
erudition. . . Although it  
would be injustice to  
many to pronounce the  
certainty of their  
imbibing maxims not  
congenial with  
republicanism, it must  
nevertheless be admitted,  
that a serious danger is  
encountered by sending  
abroad among other  
political systems those  
who have not well  
learned the value of their  
own.*

*(The Christian History of the  
Constitution, Foundation for  
American Christian Education, San  
Francisco, p. 416)*

The Sons of America returned the Sons of Europe and began to proclaim Babylonish heresies. Heretical Harvard, long held in quarantine by evangelical Andover, found new allies for its blasphemous humanism. The next to fall was Yale, the home of great theologians and jurists. By the turn of the century, Oberlin, the mother of Midwestern evangelicalism and the largest of America's colleges during the last half



of the century, fell to the social gospel. The last bastion was Princeton, the home of great Christian statesmen. But it too succumbed early in the twentieth century.

With the fall of Princeton, Babylon had triumphed in American education. The increasingly statist schools became humanist. Separatism had lost its pulpits in the great denominations and the classrooms of the public schools. It also lost influence in the courts, where pragmatists, such as Oliver Holmes, judged by purely human standards.

American banks were increasingly bludgeoned to submit to the Federal Reserve System, a private banking cartel whose principal shareholders (only recently verified) are European banks. Corporate monopolism, foreign entanglements, and social Darwinism ruled the day. Even the United Nations was turned on its head to be the haunt of communists and the tyrants of the world. America's unwillingness to preserve and develop its unique heritage, but instead, like ancient Israel, to whore after the nations of the earth, brought her to slavery.

## **THE TRIAL OF AMERICAN SEPARATISM**

Separatism has become the minority opinion in our society, one

which is rarely heard in public dialogue. America is no longer an independent power. It is a captive nation, trapped by the invisible tentacles of Babylon. With cunning, its very Constitution, which was created to maintain her independence, has become the instrument of her bondage. The freedom of speech is now said to sanction pornography; and the freedom of religion is interpreted to mean freedom from religion in our schools.

Modern-day Puritans have been struggling to restore the American vision through incremental reforms in existing institutions. But there is emerging a growing body of new Separatists. Although still a tiny minority, the sentiment is increasing that "covenanting with hell" is not the source of institutional victory. While Puritans and Separatists are agreed that the objective is to restore the American vision, the point of difference is over how it can be done. Should we continue to rely upon reforming the public schools (Puritan), or should we establish independent, Christian schools (Separatist)? Should we seek a monetarist reform of the present banking system (Puritan), or return to the discipline of the precious metals (Separatist)? Should we take our stand against communism through NATO and related treaties (Puritan), or should we content ourselves with unilaterally policing this hemisphere

(Separatist)? Should we remain members of incorporated churches (Puritan), or should we establish new fellowships on congregational principles (Separatist)?

Finally, should we work within the present legal system, by invoking the principles of a perversely interpreted Constitution (Puritan), or should we establish new civil powers by invoking the principles of the *Declaration of Independence* (Separatist)? That is the trial which lies before American Separatism during the remainder of this century.

Destruction of the present social order will be the work of God, not the work of man. The challenge for Separatists is to anticipate the coming judgment, to survive it, and stand ready to build a new America in its aftermath.

**James Stivers**  
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