



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Grant us, Lord we pray, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we who cannot do anything that is good without you, may in your strength be able to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 9

Commitment and Conversion in Early Modern Reformed Spirituality: From English Puritanism to the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*)

We have looked at how the late medieval worldview began to break up in the Reformation and post-Reformation period. Particularly remarkable in the post-Reformation period were

- 1) the demise of the Christian Aristotelian worldview, which was displaced by the emerging paradigm of a new experimental science based on mechanistic explanation and invariable laws of nature;
- 2) the related demise of Protestant scholastic theology;
- 3) the rise of rationalist philosophy, which
 - a) emphasized the primacy of reason (rather than revelation),
 - b) was strongly critical of tradition and received beliefs (including received religious beliefs), and
 - c) argued in favor of a toleration of religious diversity and freedom of enquiry.

Puritanism and Social Differentiation in Post-Reformation Religious Communities

One other trend that emerged from the breakup of the late medieval world order was an interest in forms of religious and social differentiation that were rooted in the concepts of

- individual commitment and
- intentionality.

Perhaps the easiest way to introduce this is to reflect upon how the late medieval and Reformation periods would have answered the following questions:

- (1) Who is a Christian?
- (2) Who is a church member?

The answer for the late medieval period was that **all the baptized** were to be regarded as Christians and members of the Church (excommunication being rare). The theologians, of course, might follow Augustine in positing a distinction between the invisible church composed of all the elect and the visible church as a mixed body. But since there was, for all practical purposes, no way of discerning who was elect and who was not (this being known to God alone), there was a presumption that all should be treated as a part of the body of Christians (*corpus Christianorum*).

This approach persisted to some extent into the Reformation period, although the Reformation churches stipulated that the body of Christians be defined in terms of **all the baptized members of that visible community which taught the pure doctrine**. For example, the twenty-ninth and twenty-seventh of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church England assert

The *visible Church* of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which [sic] the *pure Word of God is preached* and the Sacraments be duly ministered.

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but is also a *sign of Regeneration, or new Birth*, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are *grafted into the Church*; the promises of the forgiveness of sins, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost are visibly signed and sealed.

Note here the emphasis on

- the visible church and
- the sacraments as a means of grace,

rather than on attempts to locate or define a narrower community composed only of the elect.

- Even Article XVII, which affirms predestination and election, encourages one not to reflect upon the number and identity of the elect or even the doctrine of predestination itself: "So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall [sic], whereby the Devil doth thrust them into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation."

Now one might reasonably ask whether this (i.e. the Reformation's) adjustment of the answer to "Who is a Christian?" went far enough. For example, baptized church attendees who heard the true doctrine preached often led lives that seemed to have little in common with that doctrine.

Two responses (ways of effecting further reformation within the Church) seemed to suggest themselves. Both embraced the idea that *church membership should be restricted to individuals*

- *who experienced personal conversion as adults;*
- *covenanted to live a holy life* in opposition to (separation from) the mores of the popular culture;
- *intentionally placed themselves under the discipline of the church.*

(1) The Anabaptist way: Continue the Reformation's adjustment to the answer "Who is a Christian?" with additions concerning *public confession of faith in the event of adult (re)baptism*:

The body of Christians should be defined in terms of **all the baptized members of that visible community which taught the pure doctrine of the New Testament and (re)baptized adults upon confession of faith.**

(2) The Puritan way: Continue the Reformation's adjustment to the answer "Who is a Christian?" with additions concerning *the experience of conversion and assurance in response to the preaching of the Word.*

The body of Christians should be defined in terms of **all the baptized members of that visible community which taught the pure doctrine and, in response to the preaching of the Word, had personal experience of repentance, conversion and assurance of salvation.**

Note the way in which both (1) and (2) cause

- the old social order to become further fragmented and
- new voluntary social groupings to emerge that
 - institutionalize higher levels of religious commitment and
 - were supportive of an intentionally counter-cultural lifestyle.

Puritanism also had one further feature which accelerated the fragmentation of the old order and the attempt to institutionalize higher levels of religious commitment:

- Puritanism was a militantly anti-traditional movement, rejecting those traditional ecclesiastical usages which had allowed the visible church to have a certain continuity and uniformity over time in spite of its internal diversity.
 - In rejecting the old social and religious order, the Puritans attempted to create new forms of worship (to set over against the old) which could give institutional form to a higher level of inner religious commitment on the part of select individuals.
 - The result was a
 - further fragmentation and segmentation of the Christian community and
 - a much greater emphasis upon the individual's interior experience as a criterion for the authenticity of religious identity.

Furthering the Reformation of the Church Through the Attack on Extra-Biblical Tradition: The Regulative Principle of Worship

Against Tradition

The Puritans desired to

- cleanse the church of all superstition and all remnants of Catholic ritual and church government and
- to institute a simple and pure form of worship that
 - involved only what was explicitly required or prescribed in Scripture (e.g. the singing of Psalms) but

- scrupulously avoided the introduction of any practices that were not so required (the latter being *ethelothreskeia* "will worship"; cf. Nadab and Abihu being destroyed for offering strange fire).

Cf. Richard Cox: "I am of the opinion that all things in the church should be pure, simple and removed as far as possible from the elements and pomps of this world."

Richard Greenham: "the more ceremonies, the less truth"

John Bradford: the church's "beauty indeed is all inward....outwardly being but simple, " so that all images and traditional symbols should be removed from churches (also simplified church architecture and furnishings, e.g. high central pulpit with a winding stairway leading up to it)

John Cotton: "Our principal care and desire is to administer...the ordinances of Christ himself...in their native purity and simplicity, without any dressing or painting of human inventions."

John Bale: [Christ] never allowed their [traditional Catholic] ceremonies. He never went in procession with cope, cross and candlestick....He never said mass, matins, nor evensong...He never hallowed church nor chalice, ashes nor palms, candles nor bells. He never made holy water nor holy bread, with such like. But such dumb ceremonies not having express commandment of God he called leaven of the Pharisees and damnable hypocrisy."

William Ames: "The Scripture is not a partial, but a perfect rule of faith and manners: neither is there anything that is...to be observed in the Church of God, which depends either upon tradition, or upon any authority whatsoever, and is not contained in the Scriptures."

William Bradshaw: "the Word of God...be...the rule of all matters of religion , and the worship and service of God..."

The Delocalization of Worship and the Individual's Interior Experience as Essential to Religious Authenticity

Church=not a place, building, or institutional structure with its hierarchy:

- The church is fundamentally a spiritual reality, i.e. the assembly of those who "inwardly and effectively by the Spirit...believe in Christ" and who freely gather to hear God's Word and covenant with one another to obey it through holy living.
- Worship is delocalized (William Tyndale): "God is a spirit and will be worshipped in spirit; that is, though He is present everywhere, yet He dwelleth lively and gloriously in the minds...and hearts of men that love his laws and trust in His promises. And wheresoever God findeth such a heart, there He heareth prayer in all places indifferently. So that outward place neither helpeth or hindereth..."-->life as a continuous act of obedience and worship--> note the increased importance of relationships in this delocalized model

The invisible and visible church therefore should more nearly coincide in those admitted to membership in the local congregation (notice that the congregation is now being viewed as central) and this concern should affect and/or be evident in the preaching, administration of the sacraments and church discipline, and the lives of its members (prayer, family worship, giving alms to the poor, etc.)