

AMERICAN CHURCH HISTORY

Introduction

\$ History asks, “What happened?”

\$ Historiography asks, “Why did it happen?”

I. Creative Forces in American Religion (per Wm. Sweet, *Story of Religion in America*)

A. Church History is one cloth: European and Reformation Roots

Providentially, the European Reformation began to reshape the face of the church and society just 25 years after Columbus came to the Americas. The new world was a laboratory for experimentation without cultural and institutional encumbrances.

B. Influence of religious dissidents

Puritans, Mennonites, Baptists, Quakers, Scotch-Irish

1. Politically: opposed divine right of kings and sought freedom of assembly
2. Ecclesiastically: opposed Erastianism and hierarchy of bishops. Held to the Reformation principle of the “individual priesthood of believers”
3. Socially: fled famine and wars for new individual opportunity

C. Westward expansion in the new world

Pioneer spirit; new churches and schools; principle of divide and multiply

D. Slavery Controversy

Regional denominational schisms; Afro-American churches

E. Revivalism

Led to proliferation of denominations, experimentation in religion, cults

F. Church's relation to the state and society

Nationalism, geographic sectionalism, centralization

II. Distinctives of American Church History (per Gaustad's Preface to his *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*)

A. Individualism

1. Frontier isolation and self-dependence
2. Individual priesthood of believers

B. Experimentation

C. Atavism: desire to return to primitive Christianity

D. Nativism: national identity of American pride and "can-do" spirit

E. Probablism: "manifest destiny" connected with the favor of God's providence

F. Denominationalism

III. Three strains in American Reformed tradition (per Marsden's *Reformed Theology in America*)

A. Doctrinalists

1. Groups

- a. Scotch-Irish
- b. Protestant Reformed (Dutch)
- c. Reformed Baptists

2. Essence: “Scottish Realism” philosophy; precision of epistemological categories with no gray areas

B. Culturalists

1. Groups

- a. Dutch: Christian Reformed Church (heirs of Kuyper) and Reformed Church in America
- b. Francis Schaefer’s influence

2. Essence: Emphasis on

- a. the corporate identity of the church
- b. impacting society

C. Pietists

1. Roots

- a. New School Theology: growing emphasis on the self-determination of man in the context of individual frontier responsibility
- b. Revivalism stressing individual holiness

2. Essence: personal devotionalism blended with doctrinal structure