

Sunday, October 2, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 39 Westward Ho: The Old Religion in the New World

Introduction

- Much could be said about the efforts of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries during the 16th and 17th centuries. Time, however, will not allow us to consider everything. Consequently, I have been forced to choose those people and events that best fit with our overall goal of studying the loss and recovery of Pauline truth.
- Consequently, we will focus mostly upon religious trends in the settling of North America as well as the subsequent development of American denominationalism. Both of these subjects will factor heavily in our discussions moving forward.

Beyond Europe

- “Missiologist David Barrett has estimated that in 1500, something like 95 percent of the world’s Christian population was concentrated in Europe. Catholic reform of the mid-sixteenth century marks an extraordinarily important turning point in the history of Christianity because it inspired a wide range of active, practical steps that began to translate the worldwide potential of the Christian faith into reality.” (Noll *Turning Points*, 213)
- Mark A. Noll breaks the history of Christian missions into three time periods of five hundred years each.
 - 1-500AD—cross cultural evangelism as the teachings of Christianity were successfully translated into the Hellenistic and Roman cultures of the broader Mediterranean world.
 - 500-1,000AD—saw a series of breakthroughs when missionaries moved northward into barbarian Europe and began a centuries-long process of restating the Christian message in the cultural idiom of the northern tribes. During this time the reach of Christendom expanded from Ireland in the west (5th century) to Slavic Russians in Kyiv in the east.
 - 1,000-1,500AD—was marked more by efforts to evangelize the baptized within Christendom than by efforts at spreading Christianity into new, unchurched cultures. During the Middle Ages there were few significant missionary efforts beyond Christian Europe. (Noll *Turning Points*, 213-214)
- Currents of sixteenth-century Catholic reform drastically altered this focus of missionary activity and once again launched Christendom on an aggressive course extending to the whole world. New orders such as the Jesuits as well as revived old orders (Augustinians and Dominicans) spearheaded this move within the Catholic Church. (Noll, *Turning Points*, 214)
 - Augustinians—sent missionaries to Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Chile, India, China, Malacca, Philippines, Kenya, and Arabia

- Dominicans—formulated a strategy for evangelism among Native Americans and focused their efforts on the New World
- Jesuits—worked in Japan, China, New France, Huron Indians (Noll, *Turning Points*, 215-218)
- “The age of the Reformation was a time of social, intellectual, national, and economic expansion as well as religious change. Western Europe entered the sixteenth century stronger and more aggressive than it had been at any time in its history. . . England emerged as a European power. In Spain during the last years of the fifteenth century, the kingdom was united under Ferdinand and Isabella, the last strongholds of the Muslim Moors were overcome, and the nation took the lead in exploring the New World. One result of growing strength among these great nations, and also lesser ones such as Portugal and Holland, was competition in Europe. Another was competition for empire overseas.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 11)
- “The European nations wanted profit from their American explorations, but only Spain found it, and only for a brief period. Yet the drive for raw materials from the colonies, and then a more general pursuit of trade, became a permanent feature of European life. . . The spirit of the Renaissance also stimulated exploration across the Atlantic, for the virgin territory of America held out the promise of new knowledge, personal glory, and a liberation from stifling European traditions. Expansion to America, in other words, shared fully in the energies that drove Europe as a whole during the early modern period.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 11)
- “Also from the start, however, European believers took a religious interest in America. As the career of Christopher Columbus illustrates, it was an interest with both the fidelity and the tragedy that would characterize the whole history of Christianity in North America.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 11)

Catholic Enclaves in the New World

- “Columbus’s very first entry in the diary that recorded his journey to America in 1492 expressed the hope that he could make contact with the native peoples in order to find out ‘the manner in which may be undertaken their conversion to our Holy Faith.’ On his second journey in 1493 Columbus took with him Catholic friars whom he hoped could convert the Indians that he had seen on the first voyage. To the Spanish monarchs, Columbus insisted that profits from his voyages be used to restore Christian control over Jerusalem.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 12)
- A year after Columbus’s first voyage, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull aimed at settling the competing territorial aspirations of Spain and Portugal. The pope’s reasons for doing so were to ‘seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands remote and unknown and not hitherto discovered by others,’ so that explorers, ‘might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants.’” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 13)
- “The first well-established Christian institution in the New World came from the Catholics. Before the English settled permanently at Jamestown in 1607, thousands of Indians had become at least nominal believers under Catholic missionaries in the New

- Mexico territories. The first printed hymnbook in America was not the Puritans' *Bay Psalm Book* of 1640 but the *Ordinary of the Mass* in Mexico City in 1556." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 13-14)
- "Whereas Roman Catholics in significant numbers came relatively late to what would be the United States, they were present as the first permanent settlers of Canada and so provided a foundational contribution to later Canadian civilization." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 17-18)
 - "Like their counterparts in New Spain, the traders, trappers, and settlers of New France were accompanied by Catholic priests, nuns, and brothers. Missionary work among the Native Americans in Canada had been going on for two generations before the most famous French explorations of the United States took place." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 18)
 - In 1630, French explorer Jacques Cartier stated the following after contact with the Native Americans, "living without God and without religion like brute beasts, I thereupon concluded in my private judgment that I should be committing a great sin if I did not make it my business to devise some means of bringing them to the knowledge of God." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 18)
 - "When Louis Jolliet explored the upper Mississippi River Valley in 1673, a Jesuit, Fr. Jacques Marquette (1637-1675), was his companion. Jolliet was seeking trade and establishing French claims to the region. Marquette was seeking souls. He had long heard of the Illinois Indians, rumored to be a vast multitude inhabiting the midlands of the continent." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 19)
 - "Franciscan missionaries made a significant contribution to the colonization of New France. . . But most of the Canadian missionary work was carried on by the Jesuits. Jesuits, whose missionary service in the Far East had been marked by an effort to adapt the faith to Asian cultures, showed some of the same cultural sensitivity in North America." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 19)
 - "French colonial officials were considerably more enlightened than their Spanish counterparts. They encouraged mission work but also tried to make active religious life a part of the developing French colonies. . . While the Roman Catholic Church in France was caught up in the Enlightenment and in the French Revolution, Catholicism in Quebec remained spiritually and intellectually conservative. It continued to take its orders from the pope, it aspired to a nearly medieval control over the lives of French Canadians, and it promoted a piety based on traditional rather than modern Catholic practices." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 21, 24)
 - "In contrast to Quebec, where steady support from church and state led eventually to a deeply rooted Catholic culture, the beginnings of Catholic settlement in what would become the United States was more haphazard. George Calvert (1580-1632) and his son Cecil (1606-1675), the First and Second Lords Baltimore, were the founders of Maryland, the only one of the original thirteen colonies with a significant Roman Catholic population." (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 26)

- “Soon after the arrival of the first settlers in 1634, Catholic missionaries began work among the Native Americans in the colony, while most of the other settlers turned to the raising of tobacco. The mainstay of the missionary enterprise was the Jesuit Andrew White. White was a determined proponent of Thomas Aquinas’s theology and had labored as both a priest in England and a teacher in France before coming to aid the Calverts.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 26)

Protestantism in North America

- “The great Puritan migration to the New World took place when it appeared as if opportunities for reform were closed off in England. . . By the time the Puritans established Massachusetts, however, there were already other English colonial ventures that had secured a foothold in the New World.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 35)
- “England’s first permanent settlement was the Virginia colony, established at Jamestown in 1607. Historians have customarily contrasted the secular character of the founding of Virginia with the more overtly religious settlements of Puritans to the north in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. It is true that the Virginia Company of London was more interested in turning a profit than the Massachusetts Bay Company that later settled Boston. . .” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 36)
- “It is also true that the dispersed pattern of settlement in Virginia was not conducive to the close spiritual fellowship that was possible in the northern English colonies . . . As soon as the first settlers arrived in May 1607, for example, they were joined by Rev. Robert Hunt (“an honest, religious, and courageous Divine” according to Captain John Smith) in holding a service of communion . . . As part of Virginia’s incorporation, the Church of England was made the colony’s established church. This establishment would eventually lend a very different flavor to religion in the Chesapeake region than it had in New England.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 36-37)
- “England’s next permanent colony bore the stamp of Puritanism much more definitely. The settlers who arrived in 1620 at Plymouth in southeastern Massachusetts were in some senses even more consistent than those who came later to Boston. While other Puritans were still contending in England for the thorough reform of the church and the religious life of the nation, the Plymouth settlers had largely abandoned that effort in order to carve out a separate society for themselves.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 38)
- “Under its pastor John Robinson, this congregation chose first to go to Holland. But in that land they were disappointed. The Dutch allowed them to worship as they pleased, but the English immigrants found the Dutch culture unappealing. They were worried that their children were being led astray by alternative faiths and by opportunities for economic gain.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 38)
- “These pilgrims secured the sponsorship of English merchants in the Virginia Company and eventually surmounted an unremitting series of difficulties to board the Mayflower on September 6, 1620, for the New World. They sailed for Virginia but were blown off course to Cape Cod, where they arrived in early November. They decided to stay. But before leaving the ship, the male passengers signed an agreement . . .

- “having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first colony in the northern Parts of Virginia: Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and furtherance of the Ends aforesaid.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 38-39)
- Differences between those who settled in Virginia and Massachusetts help to explain some of the regional religious differences. “Immigrants to Massachusetts, for example, tended to be older than those to Virginia, and Massachusetts settlers more often arrived with their families . . . More important the Mass. Colonists were determined “localists,” offended by Charles I’s efforts to control the churches, economies, and militia of their English communities. Immigration offered an opportunity to preserve the values—religious, political, and social—of those local communities. (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 51-52)
 - Read Section on page 52 of Noll’s *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*.
- “The first Baptist congregation in America was formed in 1639 with the help of Roger Williams in Rhode Island. The English and Welsh individuals who made up this body agreed with Williams that the life of the church should not be governed by the state. Although Rhode Island continued to be a center for colonial Baptists, Williams himself remained a Baptist for only a few months.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 56)
- “Partially because of such opposition and partially because of more general conditions in the colonies, Baptist growth was slow. General Baptists from England did establish a few congregations in the South, and Rhode Island remained a haven for General Baptists in New England, but until the Great Awakening of the 1740s, Baptists achieved only a slight presence in the New World.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 58)
- “Outside of New England, the Church of England was the major religious presence in the Early British colonies. It was the established church in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Maryland after 1691, and part of New York City after 1693. Yet in the American environment, that establishment was often very thin. English experience provided no precedent for the vast New World parishes (average size 550 square miles). And it offered precious few resources for dealing with the rough, individualistic, honor-driven, slave-holding society of the southern colonies.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 63)
- “. . . the Church of England’s great importance in early America derived not primarily from its intrinsic strength or weakness but from the fact that it was still England’s established church. So long as the colonies remained English, the Church of England played a major role in its religious life . . .” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 65)
- “Quakers, or friends as they called themselves under their leader, George Fox, appeared in New England within a generation of the founding of Massachusetts. Ann Austin and Mary Fischer came to Boston with their message of the Inner Light of Christ and their criticism of formal, external religion. The Puritan authorities immediately sent these Quaker witnesses packing. . . in the period from 1659 to 1661, four Quakers were hanged

in Massachusetts for sedition, blasphemy, and persistent disturbance of the peace.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 65)

- “Rhode Island offered much more freedom for beliefs that the Puritans judged to be deviant, so it soon became the site of a considerable Quaker settlement. . . The colonial settlement that put the Quakers permanently on the American map was Pennsylvania, and the man who accomplished the deed was William Penn. . . In 1681 Penn acquired a huge tract of land from King Charles II in settlement of a debt owed to his father. Pennsylvania thereafter became the most secure home for religious toleration in the world.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 65-66)
- With emigration to America growing from Scotland and the north of Ireland, the colonies were soon home also to increasing numbers of Presbyterians. Francis Makemie, a Presbyterian, evangelized throughout the English-speaking New World: New England, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, as well as Barbados. Makemie established the first Presbyterian congregation in America at Snow Hill, Maryland, in 1684. (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 68)
- “The New World also made room very early on for religious groups from other places in Europe. The Dutch, who controlled New York until 1664, brought their hereditary Calvinistic, or Reformed, faith with them to that colony. . . Only after the colony was taken over by the British did vigorous Dutch churches emerge in New York and New Jersey.” (Noll, *History of Christianity*, 69)
- The Christianity brought to America between 1600-1900 by hundreds of thousands of Europeans was largely Protestant. It was built upon the *Geneva Bible* (a revision of Tyndale’s Bible), which the Pilgrim fathers brought over with them in 1620, and on the *King James Bible*, which was the first English Bible printed in the United States. . . Since the King James Bible was also a revision of the Tyndale (as was the Geneva Bible), America was off to a flying start; she became the first nation to be organized and established with a Bible translated by anti-Catholic Christians whom Catholics had burned at the stake. (Ruckman, X-XI)

American Denominational Tradition

- According to Sydney E. Ahlstrom, author of *Religious History of the American People*, there are five types of religious accommodation as the old religion was transferred to the new world.
 - First, nominal members of European state churches who, though perhaps joining lodges and other fraternal orders in the New World, used immigration as an occasion to abandon formal religion.
 - Second, were sectarians, illustrated by the various migrations of Mennonites, who found in the New World opportunities, denied in the old to pursue long-held visions of ecclesiastical purity.
 - Third, were incipient sectarians who pursued pietistic, perfectionist, or reformist goals within the European state church, but when they came to America joined

denominations of evangelical Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, or Congregationalists.

- Fourth, were members of European state churches who, upon arrival in America, founded parallel denominations to those with which they had been pleased at home, like the American Episcopal Church or the German and Dutch Reformed Churches.
- Fifth, were those who created new ecclesiastical bodies in the New World (like the Christian Reformed Church and several Lutheran denominations), but who did so in order simply to replicate churches they had left in the old. (Noll, *Old Religion*, 10)
- As the old religion adjusted to the new world some things changed while others remained the same as the Christian faith took root in the New World. Continuities and discontinuities differed substantially depending on when migrations took place, where they ended up, and what material conditions shaped them. Varied as the different movements of the old religion to North America were, they shared in common the need to adjust to a substantially new environment for religious practice. (Noll, *Old Religion*, 11)
- “The history of Christianity in North America is a distinct history because of the North American context. It is not unique in a religious or theological sense, but it does reflect distinctions arising from an “American difference.” Christian history in the United States, and to a somewhat lesser degree Canada, differs from its counterpart in Europe because geography matters, because race and ethnicity have shaped religion from the beginning of European settlement, because North America enjoys a singular degree of religious pluralism, and because European patterns of religious conservatism did not survive passage over the Atlantic.” (Noll, *Old Religion*, 26)
- “The religious diversity of the American colonies—though largely within the Puritan tradition—called for a new understanding of the church. We may call it the denominational theory of the church. The use of the word denomination to describe a religious group came into vogue about 1740 during the early years of the Evangelical Revival led by John Wesley and George Whitefield. But the theory itself was hammered out a century before by a group of radical Puritan leaders in England and America.” (Shelley, 306)
- “Denominationalism, as originally designed, is the opposite of sectarianism. A sect claims the authority of Christ for itself alone. It believes that it is the true body of Christ; all truth belongs to it and to no other religion. So by definition a sect is exclusive.” (Shelley, 306)
- “The word denomination by contrast was an inclusive term. It implied that the Christian group called or denominated by a particular name was but one member of a large group—the church—to which all denominations belong.” (Shelley, 306)
- “The denominational theory of the church, then, insists that the true church cannot be identified with any single ecclesiastical structure. No denomination claims to represent

the whole church of Christ. Each simply constitutes a different form—in worship and organization—of the larger life of the church.” (Shelley, 306)

- “The real architects of the denominational theory of the church were the seventeenth-century Independents (Congregationalists) who represented the minority voice at the Westminster Assembly (1642-1649). The majority at the Assembly held to Presbyterian principles and expressed these convictions classically in the Westminster Confession of Faith . . .” (Shelley, 307)
- “These Dissenting Brethren of Westminster articulated the denominational theory of the church in several fundamental truths:
 - First, considering man’s inability to always see the truth clearly, differences of opinion about the outward form of the church are inevitable.
 - Second, even though these differences do not involve the fundamentals of the faith, they are not matters of indifference. Every Christian is obligated to practice what he believes the Bible teaches.
 - Third, since, no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true Church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure.
 - Finally, the mere fact of separation does not itself constitute schism. It is possible to divide at many points but still be united in Christ.” (Shelley, 307)
- “Thus, the denominational theory of the church looked for Christian unity in some inward religious experience—and allowed diversity in the outward expression of that personal faith.” (Shelley, 307)
- It was in the English colonies of America that the denominational theory was embraced and accepted. It seemed to be God’s answer for the multiplicity of religious traditions in the New World. While these colonists could not have envisioned the hundreds of Christian groups in existence today, denominationalism provided a way to escape the traditional bigotry and religious bloodshed that had so often typified their religious experience in the Old World.

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