

The Condition of the Colonial Churches, 1740-1745

“That there had been a lamentable declension in religion, both in Great Britain and in this country, is universally acknowledged by the writers of this period. The Rev. Samuel Blair, speaking of the state of religion in Pennsylvania at that time, says: ‘I doubt not but there were some sincerely religious persons up and down; and there were, I believe, a considerable number in several congregations pretty exact, according to their education, in the observance of the external forms of religion, not only as to attendance upon public ordinances on the Sabbath, but also as to the practice of family worship, and perhaps secret prayer too;...the most part seemed...to rest contented, and to satisfy their conscience with a dead formality in religion. A very lamentable ignorance of the essentials of true practical religion, and of the doctrines relating thereto, very generally prevailed. The nature and necessity of the new-birth were little known or thought of; the necessity of a conviction of sin and misery, by the Holy Spirit opening and applying the law to the conscience, in order to a saving closure with Christ, was hardly known at all to most...the common notion seemed to be that if people were aiming to be in the way of duty as well as they could, as they imagined, there was no reason to be much afraid.’...[there was] great carelessness and indifference about the things of eternity; great coldness and unconcern in public worship, a disregard of the Sabbath, and prevalence of worldly amusements and follies.”

Revs. Blair and Gilbert Tennant complained of “many defects in our ministry,” one being “the want of fidelity and zeal in preaching the Gospel.” According to other sources, the problems among the churches were not doctrinal. “It was rather a coldness, and sluggishness with regard to religion...a general indifference and lukewarmness among the clergy and people...there was too generally a great decay as to the life and power of godliness. There was a general ease and security in sin.”

Quoting Rev. Crocker regarding the state of religion in 1740, “The church was but small considering the number of inhabitants; and deadness, dullness, formality, and security prevailed among them...sinners appeared to be at ease in Zion. In a word, it is to be feared there was but little of the life or power of godliness among them, and irreligion and immorality of one kind or another seemed awfully to increase.”

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