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*Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691-1747):  
Precursor of The Great Awakening*



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*Cornelis Pronk*

Major historical movements, whether religious, political, or social, are the product of a period of fermentation. Spokesmen for these movements often seem to appear suddenly on the scene, but in most cases lesser-known individuals pave the way for great leaders. Thus Martin Luther and the Reformation cannot be understood apart from forerunners like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. Similarly the Great Awakening, while associated with such great leaders as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, had its precursors. One was Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, whom Whitefield referred to as “the beginner of the great work.” Who was this relatively unknown harbinger whose ministry made such an impact that many church historians trace the seeds of the revivals of the 1740s to him? Why did Frelinghuysen create so much controversy? What can we learn from him today?

**FAMILY AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The Frelinghuysen family supported the Reformation from the sixteenth century. Theodorus’s great-grandfather pioneered the Lutheran Reformation in the German village of Ergste. His grandfather introduced the family to the Reformed tradition in 1669; they joined a small Reformed church in nearby Schwerte. His father, Johan Henrich, became pastor of

a newly established German Reformed church in 1683 at Hagen, Westphalia, an area adjacent to the eastern part of the Netherlands. Shortly after Johan was ordained, he married Anna Margaretha Bruggemann, daughter of a Reformed pastor. He baptized their fifth child, Theodorus Jacobus, on November 6, 1692.

God blessed the solid Reformed education Theodorus received at home and school and brought him to conversion. After Theodorus became a communicant member of his father's congregation at age seventeen, he attended the Reformed *gymnasium* at Hamm for two years to study philosophy and theology. The faculty at Hamm imbibed the teachings of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), a Bremen-born linguist and biblical theologian who taught at Franeker and Leiden, and whose covenant theology emphasized the historical and contextual character of specific ages. Upon completion of his pre-seminary education at Hamm, Theodorus enrolled at the University of Lingen for theological study. The faculty there adhered to the theology of Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), a professor at Utrecht who promoted a Reformed blend of knowledge and piety. Voetius represents the mature fruit of the so-called *Nadere Reformatie* (usually translated as the Dutch Second Reformation)—a primarily seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century movement that paralleled English Puritanism in time and substance. At Lingen, Theodorus became thoroughly committed to Reformed piety and the experimental divinity of the Voetian rather than Cocceian mode. There, too, he mastered the Dutch language and learned to preach in Dutch.

#### ORDINATION AND LAST YEARS IN THE OLD WORLD

After his classical examination, Frelinghuysen was ordained to the ministry in 1717 at Loegumer Voorwerk in East Friesland, near Emden. By that time the *Nadere Reformatie* had taken a firm hold on the Reformed community in East Friesland through the preaching and writing of Jacobus Koelman, Eduard Meiners, and Johan Verschuur. Those Reformed pietists emphasized the necessity of the new birth and holy

living or the practice of piety as its inevitable fruit. That experiential theology had a profound, abiding impact on Frelinghuysen.

Frelinghuysen's pastorate in Loegumer Voorwerk lasted only fourteen months. A flood on Christmas Eve swept over the area and devastated much of East Friesland. It reduced his parishioners to such poverty that they no longer could support a minister. The young pastor accepted a position at Enkhuizen, North Holland, as co-regent of the Latin school. But only a few months after taking that position, he was approached by Classis Amsterdam of the Reformed Church and asked if he was willing to accept a pastorate in Rarethans. He responded affirmatively, but thought that Rarethans (Raritan) was in one of the adjoining Dutch provinces rather than in America. When he realized he was actually being called by four, small, Dutch Reformed congregations in New Jersey's Raritan Valley (Raritan, Six Mile Run, Three Mile Run, and North Branch), Frelinghuysen felt convicted by Psalm 15:4 to keep his word of acceptance: "[God] honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not." He was also influenced by what he felt was a providential meeting with Sicco Tjadde (1693-1736), a pietist minister who was searching for young ministers adhering to Reformed experimental theology to recommend for service in America. Being deeply impressed with Frelinghuysen's orthodoxy and godliness, Tjadde encouraged him "to give up the prospect of a successful career in the Old World in order to spread vital religion in the New." After bidding farewell to relatives and friends, Frelinghuysen sailed to New York and the New World in September 1719.

#### THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Unlike the English Pilgrims and Puritans who came to the New World primarily for religious reasons, the Dutch who settled in North America were largely motivated by economic factors. Early in the seventeenth century, the Dutch West India Company had established trading posts on Manhattan Island and at other strategic locations near the Hudson and

Delaware rivers. The population of the Dutch colony grew steadily, but little was done to promote its religious life. In 1623, when the settlement of Manhattan had grown to 200, two *ziekentroosters* (comforters of the sick) arrived, who undertook some pastoral duties. Two years later the colony received its own pastor, Jonas Michaelius, who organized the first Dutch-speaking Reformed church in the New World. In 1633 a second pastor, Everard Bogardus, arrived from Holland.

The chronic shortage of ministers posed a problem for the new Dutch churches in North America. The shortage reflected the short-sightedness of the mother church, which insisted that ministers for the New World be educated and ordained in the Netherlands under the auspices of Classis Amsterdam. Consequently, the spiritual life and moral tone of the colony was adversely affected.

Doctrinally these American churches were consistent with their mother church in the Netherlands. Their standards were the Three Forms of Unity adopted by the Synod of Dort: the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618-19). Practically, however, most members lived on a low spiritual plane. Dead orthodoxy had been a serious problem from the beginning and had only grown worse by the eighteenth century. Abraham Messler, who translated several of Frelinghuysen's sermons and eventually became one of his successors, noted: "The necessity of a new heart had almost entirely been lost sight of . . . formalism and self-righteousness almost universally prevailed. Christians were not ashamed to ridicule Christian experience, and many had become very resolute in opposing it."

The time was ripe for the waves of revival that would sweep over the Dutch and British colonies. And the minister who played a key role in initiating those revivals was Theodorus Frelinghuysen.

#### ARRIVAL IN NEW YORK

When the 28-year-old Dominie Frelinghuysen arrived in New York in January 1720, his honeymoon of adjustment in

America was short-lived. He and a young helper, Jacobus Schureman, who had come to serve as schoolmaster and *voorlezer* (lay reader) in the church, were welcomed by two prominent ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church in New York City, Gualtherus DuBois (1671-1751) and Henricus Boel (1692-1754). They invited the new minister to conduct worship on the following Sunday. The reaction of the parishioners, who were accustomed to long, unemotional, and impersonal sermons, was discouraging. Many objected to Frelinghuysen's stress on regeneration, his experiential style of preaching, and what some called his "howling prayers." Moreover, when Boel asked Frelinghuysen why he omitted the Lord's Prayer in worship, Frelinghuysen replied that he was willing to follow the practice of the Reformed Church but he did not care for using form prayers in corporate worship. Right from the beginning of his ministry in the New World, Frelinghuysen's preaching style and his preference for free prayers over form prayers became sore points that would later develop into major issues.

Nor did Frelinghuysen endear himself to Dominie Dubois when he was invited to the senior pastor's home. Upon entering, Frelinghuysen asked his colleague why he had such a large wall mirror, and remarked that it was not justified "by the most far-stretched necessity." This ascetic tendency would also cause considerable friction between Frelinghuysen and others in the church.

#### SETTLEMENT IN THE RARITAN VALLEY

The Raritan Valley area in New Jersey was settled mostly by Dutch Reformed farmers, who were attracted to its rich soil. Though most of them showed more interest in improving their economic condition than in pursuing spiritual growth, the farmers still looked forward to the arrival of their new dominie. But they soon perceived that they had received no ordinary Reformed preacher. Frelinghuysen preached his inaugural sermon on January 31, 1720, from 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be

ye reconciled to God." The sermon caused quite a stir as the new minister made it abundantly clear that he intended to labor among them "in Christ's stead"—that is, with earnestness and personal examination as if Christ himself stood among them.

If the Dutch Reformed parishioners of New Jersey's Raritan Valley were surprised by their minister's probing sermons and intense pastoral work, Frelinghuysen was no less surprised by his placid parishioners. Though he had anticipated their low level of spirituality because of the rumors he had heard in the Netherlands, he soon discovered that the situation was far worse than he had thought. Messler noted:

He found that great laxity of manners prevailed throughout his charge . . . that while horse-racing, gambling, dissipation, and rudeness of various kinds were common, the [church] was attended at convenience, and religion consisted of the mere formal pursuit of the routine of duty.

Bluntly put, Frelinghuysen realized that many of his parishioners showed no fruits of conversion. Practical spirituality—"the life of God in the soul of man"—was largely absent. General ignorance and blatant godlessness abounded. William Tennent, Jr., later wrote of the sad condition of the people at Raritan Valley during Frelinghuysen's early years of ministry there:

Family prayer was unpractis'd by all, a very few except'd; ignorance so overshadowed their minds, that the doctrine of the New Birth when clearly explained, and powerfully press'd upon them, as absolutely necessary to salvation, by that faithful preacher of God's Word, Mr. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghousa. . . . [The new birth] was made a common game of; so that not only the preachers but professors of that truth were called in derision "new-born" and look'd upon as holders forth of some new and false doctrine. And indeed their practice was as bad as their principles, viz. loose and prophane.

Consequently, Frelinghuysen's preaching focused on the conversion of sinners rather than on the nurture of believers. He taught that an outward confession and upright life are not sufficient for salvation. The Holy Spirit must reveal to a sinner his sinful state and lost condition before God, which in turn drives the convicted sinner to Christ for mercy and salvation. In a sermon on Isaiah 66:2, "The Poor and Contrite Are God's Temple," he said:

In a contrite spirit are found: a deep sense and clear perception of sin. . . . Heart-felt disquietude and sadness. . . . An open and free confession of sin. By reason of a sense of the greatness of his sins, he knows not whither to look or turn: but, notwithstanding, places his dependence upon the grace which God can exercise through his Son. Hence, the contrite in spirit flees from the curse of the law to the Gospel. . . . Thus he is driven out of himself, to the sovereign grace of God in Christ, for reconciliation, pardon, sanctification, and salvation.

Frelinghuysen taught that only those are truly saved who have *experienced* conversion, which includes, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, not only the knowledge of sin and misery, but also the experience of deliverance in Christ, resulting in a lifestyle of gratitude to God. In his sermon "The Way of God with His People in the Sanctuary," Frelinghuysen invited sinners to come to Christ as strongly as he warned them against sin: "If thou be but weary of sin, if thou be sincerely desirous of drawing near to God in the right way, which is only through Christ, then come." Later in the same sermon he presented God as running to meet those who have repented, just as the father of the prodigal ran to meet his returning son. In another sermon he said, "Jesus still stands with extended arms to gather you." He urged listeners "to be willing, and to arise and come to Jesus." He said a true experience of joyous salvation in Christ, however, will necessarily reap a Christian life of gratitude, a life of total submission to God's Word, "marked by a new and hearty service." Progress in grateful sanctification is only possible when the believer

continually flees to Christ for strength in his war against indwelling sin and in striving to regulate his life by God's Word. The Voetian themes of the narrow gate and the hard way, the life of precision and the scarcity of salvation, the priority of internal motives which effect external observance—all this and more consistently reappear in Frelinghuysen's sermons as inevitable fruits of the life of Christian gratitude.

Though members in Frelinghuysen's church did not object to such scriptural and Reformed doctrines in themselves, many resented the forceful manner in which the pastor applied this experiential theology. Had he referred to people outside of the church as unregenerate, self-righteous hypocrites, church members might have concurred. But Frelinghuysen made it clear that he was speaking to his own parishioners. In one sermon, he applied the lesson of an earthquake in no uncertain terms:

Come hither, ye careless, at ease in sin, ye carnal and earthly minded, ye unchaste whoremongers, adulterers, ye proud, haughty men and women, ye devotees of pleasure, drunkards, gamblers, ye disobedient, ye wicked rejectors of the Gospel, ye hypocrites and dissemblers, how suppose ye it will go with you? . . . Be filled with terror, ye impure swine, adulterers, and whoremongers, and consider that without true repentance ye shall soon be with the impure devils; for I announce a fire better than that of Sodom and Gomorrah to all that burn in their lusts.

He addressed the wealthy with extra admonitions, based on James 5:1-6:

Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth and been wanton. Ye have nourished your hearts as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just, and he doth not resist you. Know then, that ye unrighteous and covetous, who are idolaters, shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Frelinghuysen clearly viewed most of his members as unregenerate and hell-bound. This was a bitter pill for them

to swallow, especially when he warned against their casual attendance at the Lord's Supper. In his sermon, "The Acceptable Communicant," he said:

Much loved hearers, who have so often been at the Lord's table, do you know that the unconverted may not approach? Have you then, with the utmost care examined, whether you be born again? . . . Reflect, therefore, upon, and bear in mind this truth; and remember, that though morally and outwardly religious, if you still be unregenerate and destitute of spiritual life, you have no warrant for an approach to the table of grace.

For Frelinghuysen, the evidences of a true, personal conversion—which are repentance, faith, and holiness—are tests for admission to the Lord's Supper. Since, in his judgment, lack of the fruits of godliness revealed that most of his members were unregenerate, he felt obliged to warn them against coming to the communion table. In a few cases, he even forbade them to do so. For Frelinghuysen, this was in keeping with the calling of the minister and elders to faithfully and solemnly examine church members prior to each celebration of the Lord's Supper. If such members have departed from the faith or behaved unworthily, they "may be rebuked or admonished, and if necessary [be] suspended from the privilege of the Lord's Table" (*The Constitution of the Reformed Church in America*, section 70).

There were good reasons to maintain such examination, Frelinghuysen believed. Unworthy participants dishonored the Head of the Church, profaned God's covenant, kindled God's wrath against the entire congregation, and rendered themselves liable to a severe doom. Consequently, during one communion service, when Frelinghuysen saw some approach the table whom he had admonished not to partake, he exclaimed, "See! See! even the people of the world and the impenitent are coming, that they may eat and drink judgment to themselves!" Several people who were approaching thought the minister meant them and returned to their seats.

Predictably, the disciplinary actions of Frelinghuysen and

his consistory upset many in the congregation, particularly the wealthy. They complained to influential Reformed ministers in New York whose views differed from those of Frelinghuysen. Some of the ministers sided with the complainants—most notably, DuBois and Boel—who had had negative impressions of Frelinghuysen from the outset. They levied serious accusations at Frelinghuysen, who responded in kind. Matters became extremely tense when Frelinghuysen openly referred to colleagues who opposed him, including DuBois and Boel, as “unconverted ministers.”

#### SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES AND FAMILY

Other pastors supported Frelinghuysen, although they cautioned him not to be too harsh in judging the spiritual lives of his people. Among those who supported Frelinghuysen was Guiliam Bartholf (1656-1726), an itinerant, pioneer pastor who was responsible for organizing all but two of the New Jersey churches north of the Raritan before 1702, including the four congregations to which Frelinghuysen was called. Bartholf had grown up in the Dutch village of Sluis, near Middelburg in the Province of Zeeland, and had been greatly influenced by his childhood minister, Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695), who is now considered by historians of the *Nadere Reformatie* to be one of the premier representatives of that movement. After Bartholf came to the New World, he so promoted his mentor’s views that by the time Frelinghuysen arrived the roots of Dutch experiential Calvinism had been planted. As Frelinghuysen had also been influenced by Koelman’s writings, the preparatory work done by Bartholf proved to be most helpful. Both men stood in the tradition of the *Nadere Reformatie* and shared its emphases, but Bartholf had a more irenic and tactful disposition than Frelinghuysen.

Two New York ministers who also held Reformed experiential views and would eventually publish booklets in Frelinghuysen’s defense were Bernardus Freeman (1660-1743) of Long Island and Cornelius Van Santvoord (1687-1752) of Staten Island. Frelinghuysen developed a warm friendship with Freeman, a German pietist, who shared his evangelistic

convictions and carried on an effective ministry among the Mohawk Indians while ministering to Dutch Reformed churches. Van Santvoord had been a favorite student of Johannes à Marck (1656-1731), an able Voetian theologian at Leiden, and remained friends with him in the New World.

Shortly after his arrival in the New World, Frelinghuysen married Eva Terhune. An orphan daughter of a well-to-do Long Island farmer, Eva had been cared for by Freeman after her parents’ death. Their union was a happy one and was blessed with five sons and two daughters. All five sons became ministers, and both daughters married ministers.

#### THE OPPOSITION GROWS

The majority of the Reformed pastors in the Middle Colonies held decidedly anti-pietist views. They viewed the members of their congregations as regenerate and rejected the experiential emphases of the Dutch Second Reformation as being too subjective and introspective.

By the end of the first spring, the situation in the Raritan Valley had become so tense that even Freeman, though basically supportive of Frelinghuysen, became alarmed and started to question his colleague’s actions. When, for instance, Frelinghuysen turned the wife of a prominent member away from the Lord’s Supper, Freeman became alarmed. He believed that she was a God-fearing member of the church. Soon other issues arose that confirmed Freeman and others in their opinions that Frelinghuysen was tactless and too unrealistic about his standards for admission to the Lord’s Supper.

As attacks upon his ministry increased, Frelinghuysen took steps to defend himself. In a gesture of defiance, he had the following poem written on the back of his sleigh:

*No one’s tongue, and no one’s pen  
Can make me other than I am.  
Speak slanderers! Speak without end;  
In vain you all your slanders send.*

He published three sermons that counteracted reports that he was "a maker of divisions and a teacher of false doctrines." In one sermon he wrote: "Men chatter a lot about my way of serving the Lord's Supper, but that I teach nothing different here than has always been taught by the Reformed Church can easily be seen by any unprejudiced person." It is important to note that these sermons were published with the approval of Frelinghuysen's friends, Bartholf and Freeman, who considered them to be soul-searching sermons in full harmony with Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Frelinghuysen's sermons only intensified the conflict that swirled around his ministry. Boel and his supporters viewed the sermons as an attack rather than a defense and took sharp issue with Bartholf and Freeman for endorsing them.

Another source of contention was Frelinghuysen's use of the Frisian Catechism written by followers of Koelman as a supplement to the Heidelberg Catechism. Koelman had been deposed from his congregation at Sluis, partly for his opposition to Christian feast days and the use of prescribed liturgical forms, but also for his scathing criticism of colleagues whom he viewed as unconverted. Frelinghuysen's opponents, who suffered similar aspersions from the Raritan Valley pastor, viewed Koelman as the real instigator and referred to him as "the arch heretic."

What was there about this little book that so upset Frelinghuysen's opponents? Basically, they took issue with Frelinghuysen's emphasis on the need for vital Christian experience. In their view, the Heidelberg Catechism addresses this need in a more balanced way. For the composers of the Frisian catechism, however, personal experience of what was taught doctrinally was critical, and any writing that enhanced this emphasis was welcome. For Frelinghuysen and his supporters, opposition to the Frisian Catechism only augmented their suspicions that most of their opponents had no vital Christian experience.

#### THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN

On March 12, 1723, several disgruntled members of

Frelinghuysen's congregation asked Freeman for support against their pastor. They charged Frelinghuysen with preaching false doctrines. Freeman refused to take their side. Although he agreed that Frelinghuysen had his faults, this did not make him a preacher of false doctrines. After listening to their complaints, he responded, "I perceive that you are all affected by the spirit of hatred and revenge. Because he sharply exposes sin, you try to help the devil and to cause him to trample upon the Church of Christ." He advised them to draw up a list of complaints and present them to their consistory, warning them that if they took their complaints elsewhere they would be regarded as schismatics.

The *Klagers* (Complainants), as they came to be called, ignored Freeman's advice and turned to Dominie Boel and his brother Tobias, an attorney, for aid and advice. Instead of advising the *Klagers* to follow the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 and the Church Order in dealing with their grievances, the Boel brothers showed sympathy, which evoked the anger of Frelinghuysen's consistories. The consistories drew up a summons (*daagbrief*), which they sent to the *Klagers*. In this summons the *Dagers* (Summoners), as they became known, listed the errors of their opponents and warned that if they did not withdraw their accusations they would be excommunicated. Later in the spring of 1723, Frelinghuysen's consistories issued two additional summons to the agitators. Each summons threatened to excommunicate those who did not repent and return to the church. When no replies were received by September, the consistories controlled by the *Dagers* unanimously excommunicated four ringleaders of the opposition: Peter DuMont, Simon Wyckoff, Hendrick Vroom, and Daniel Sebring. This action sent shock waves throughout the entire Dutch Reformed community. Classis Amsterdam, which had to tread cautiously as arbitrator, was thousands of miles away. Classis forwarded a careful letter of caution to Frelinghuysen, to which he responded in detail. Classis wrote back:

We have already referred to the harsh expressions which you have used in your reply. . . . Also in your manner of exercising

discipline, even excommunication, on certain guilty persons, did you act as prudently as is becoming to a minister in such an important matter? . . . Would it not have been safer not to take such an important step without first consulting the Classis?

In 1725 the *Klagers* finally responded to the summons in a *Klagte* (Complaint)—a document of 146 pages addressed to Classis Amsterdam. The *Klagte* was presumably written by the Boel brothers and signed by sixty-four heads of households, which represented close to one quarter of Frelinghuysen's four congregations. The *Klagte* details every conceivable criticism of Frelinghuysen that might rouse the disaffection of classis and lead to his dismissal. Many of the charges are petty or based on false rumor and reveal the bitter mindset of the *Klagers*. Frelinghuysen is presented as a tyrant with homosexual tendencies. The *Klagers* state that Frelinghuysen would not admit to the Lord's Supper those who could not give a satisfactory account of their conversion, that he insisted strenuously on a change of heart experienced as a result of conviction of sin, that he violated the Church Order by reserving the right of nominating elders and deacons to the consistory rather than to the congregation and by excommunicating members without the advice of Classis, and that he preached pietistic doctrines that were contrary to the Three Forms of Unity. The *Klagte* charges Frelinghuysen with "straying from the pure doctrine and discipline, not wholly unlike those of Labadie, Koelman, and other Schismatics."

To add fuel to the fire, the *Klagers* decided to frustrate Frelinghuysen's efforts by locking him out of two churches. He responded by calling the *Klagers* "impious" and "the scum of these four congregations." He and his supporters maintained that they were only trying to keep the church pure by exercising the keys of discipline—both the key of preaching and the key of excommunication—as Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism directed them to do. They said that more than half of the signatories of the *Klagte* had never made a profession of faith and warned them, "the wrath of God and eternal damnation abide on them." Consequently, even though

Article 76 of the Church Order states that "no person shall be excommunicated without the previous advice of Classis," Frelinghuysen defended his actions by appealing to Article 86, which declares that changes could be made in the Church Order if the well-being of the church required it.

The fierce opposition took its toll on Frelinghuysen's mental health. He suffered from what his major biographer, James Tanis, describes as "mild psychoses." In a sermon on Paul's "thorn in the flesh," Frelinghuysen suggested that the apostle's affliction may have been *morbus hypochondriacus*, a mental breakdown brought on by emotional stress, which Frelinghuysen felt had also afflicted him periodically for several years. The breakdowns, which occurred most frequently in the early 1730s, often left him incapacitated for several months.

Between breakdowns, Frelinghuysen continued to spread his experiential and controversial teachings by the printed and spoken word. One booklet that caused quite a stir was *Een Spiegel die niet vleyt* (A Mirror That Does Not Flatter), based on Proverbs 14:12: "There is a way which seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Though no names were mentioned, the *Klagers* must have known that this sermon targeted them. Remarkably, Classis Amsterdam, which usually supported the *Klagers*, approved this pamphlet for publication. After carefully examining *Een Spiegel*, classis had found nothing in it that conflicted with God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity.

The controversy between the *Dagers* and the *Klagers* raged intermittently until, through the prodding of Classis Amsterdam, they reached a compromise. On November 18, 1733, the churches served by Frelinghuysen adopted eleven "Peace Articles," which were read from the pulpits on the first three Sundays of 1734, then forwarded to Amsterdam for final approval. The articles, to which the *Klagers* subscribed, stated that the consistories should forgive the shortcomings of the *Klagers* and rescind their excommunication, providing the *Klagers* accept Frelinghuysen as an orthodox Reformed minister and return to the church. Though Boel's opposition to

Frelinghuysen and the revivals continued, DuBois inaugurated a movement to join the revival party in a petition for independence from Classis Amsterdam. Two parties emerged by mid-century, the *Coetus* and the *Conferentie*. The *Coetus* party was composed largely of ministers who represented Frelinghuysen's pro-revivalist, progressive piety. The *Conferentie* party represented anti-revivalist, traditional orthodoxy and consisted of those who desired to remain "in conference" with Classis Amsterdam. For decades, the two parties exchanged a series of pamphlets. In the end, the goals of Frelinghuysen and the *Coetus* were reached: preaching in English was sanctioned, ministers were trained and ordained in America, and the American church was granted full autonomy.

#### INFLUENCE IN AND BEYOND THE DUTCH REFORMED COMMUNITY

Despite relentless criticism, Frelinghuysen faithfully carried on his labors. While some people were offended by his searching preaching, others were convicted by it and came to a saving knowledge of Christ. Abraham Messler, one of Frelinghuysen's successors, wrote that his predecessor's banner years were 1726, 1729, 1734, 1739, and 1741, during which 16 to 122 persons made confessions of faith. It appears that more than 300 persons were converted under Frelinghuysen's ministry in New Jersey. That does not include the effect of Frelinghuysen's preaching beyond his own congregations. Those numbers become more significant when one considers that the total number of communicants in 1726 was approximately twenty. Messler exaggerated when he said that the numbers evidence "a great revival," though we may conclude that there were at least several mini-revivals under Frelinghuysen's ministry that paved the way for the Great Awakening.

Although Frelinghuysen remained firmly committed to the Dutch Reformed faith in which he had been nurtured, he ventured freely outside the confines of his Dutch constituency. From the commencement of his ministry in North America, he sought contact with Christians from other backgrounds. Among his close associates were clergymen of

Presbyterian, German Reformed, and Anglican persuasions. Due to these contacts, he was able to influence the English-speaking community in the Middle Colonies and thereby augment his contribution to the Great Awakening.

In 1726, one year after the publication of the *Klagte*, Gilbert Tennent, a young, Presbyterian minister, came to New Brunswick to labor among the English-speaking colonists. He had been trained for the ministry by his father, William Tennent, an Episcopalian-turned-Presbyterian. Convinced of the necessity of sound biblical and experimental preaching, William Tennent began a program for preparing godly young men for the ministry. A log house was built at Neshaminy, New Jersey, to accommodate the eager students, including three of Tennent's sons. This small, unpretentious theological institution, derisively referred to by its opponents as the "Log College," produced twenty preachers who played key roles in the Great Awakening.

William Tennent's oldest son, Gilbert, enthusiastically undertook his pastoral duties in New Brunswick. The young preacher soon won the admiration and friendship of his neighbor, Dominie Frelinghuysen. Tennent was impressed by the soundness of the numerous conversions that were taking place under his Dutch colleague's preaching and felt discouraged by his own, seemingly unfruitful labors. In his journal he wrote:

When I came here I had the privilege of seeing much of the fruits of Frelinghuysen's ministry. . . . This, together with a kind letter which he sent me respecting the necessity of dividing the Word aright and giving to every man his portion in due season through the divine blessing, excited me to great earnestness in ministerial labours.

Tennent's friendship with Frelinghuysen proved beneficial as a rebuke and as an inspiration. Tennent implemented his more experienced colleague's advice on how to preach and soon began to witness significant numbers of conversions. The revival begun under Frelinghuysen in the Dutch

community now spread to the English-speaking settlers under Tennent's ministry.

What was it in Frelinghuysen's style of preaching that led, with the Spirit's blessing, to so many conversions? Hendrik Visscher, Frelinghuysen's friend and assistant, described it as "his exceeding talent of drawing one matter out of another, thereby discovering the state and condition of his auditors to themselves." Frelinghuysen, in other words, excelled in *discriminatory preaching*. As he stated in an ordination sermon of a colleague:

Preaching must be structured to the differing conditions of our hearers. In the church there are godless and unconverted persons; civil, false, and pretending Christians. . . . There are also converted persons in the church, and little children and those more advanced. Each one . . . must be spoken to and handled according to his state and frame.

Tennent was a fast learner and soon excelled in discriminatory preaching. Emphasizing the necessity of regeneration, he challenged his hearers to examine whether they possessed the scriptural evidence of the new birth.

Tennent's ministry became increasingly bound up with Frelinghuysen's. On occasion they held combined worship services in the Dutch and English languages. The *Klagers* charged that by allowing "this English Dissenter" (i.e., Tennent) to preach and administer the sacraments in his church, Frelinghuysen was violating the Dutch Church Order and liturgy, and thereby undermining the authority of Classis Amsterdam. Viewing themselves as the guardians of Dutch orthodoxy, they deplored his ecumenicity as inimical to the true, Dutch Reformed religion. As orthodox traditionalists they appealed to Classis Amsterdam, saying, "We must be careful to keep things in a Dutch way in our churches." Frelinghuysen's goal, on the other hand, was the conversion of sinners. Whoever shared this vision was his friend, regardless of denominational attachments, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, parish boundaries, and social distinctions.

In June 1729 Classis Amsterdam charged Frelinghuysen with deepening the rift in the churches by moving beyond his denominational boundary and linguistic background:

You did permit a dissenting candidate [Gilbert Tennent], in one of the churches where you preached, at the Communion, to offer a prayer in English before a Dutch congregation. . . . Also, you had no objection to letting him preach in our Dutch churches. . . . Is there to be no accounting for this before Divine and Ecclesiastical judgment seats?

. . . Then there is also that which was done against the order of the established Consistory of Navesink, and against the wish of Rev. Morgen their pastor. Did you not go there and preach in a barn? And did you not also go and preach at Joris Ryerson's in the Rev. Coen's congregation, where there is an established Consistory and pastor?

Critics and classis notwithstanding, Frelinghuysen continued to accept invitations to preach in barns and churches in New York, Staten Island, Long Island, and as far west as Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. He could not keep up with all the demands for his services, but responded as a man of vision. He published a number of his sermons in order to reach a wider audience. To foster the communion of saints and maintain a high level of spirituality, he held private devotional meetings of fellowship (conventicles or *gezelschappen*) for those whom he regarded to be God's people. He transformed "helpers" (*voorlezers*) into lay preachers, several of whom he trained to assume the full duties of pastors, with the exception of administering the sacraments. During his absences to preach elsewhere, those lay preachers would lead services and preside over the *gezelschappen*. Most notable among them was the first translator of Frelinghuysen's sermons, Hendrik Visscher, whose sermons were published and cherished for years by Reformed pietists in Raritan Valley. Frelinghuysen also trained several men for ordained ministry (including Samuel Verbryck, John Goetachius, and Thomas Romeyn), advocated the establishment of a colonial theological seminary, and

helped lay the groundwork that ultimately led to the ecclesiastical independence of the American churches from Classis Amsterdam.

The result of Frelinghuysen's preaching and contacts with ministers and lay people of kindred spirits was that revivals gradually spread until much of New Jersey and New York was caught up in what was later called "the Great Awakening." When this revival was in full swing, George Whitefield came to preach in New Brunswick and met Frelinghuysen. Later he wrote in his *Journals*:

Among those who came to hear the Word were several ministers whom the Lord has been pleased to honour in making them instruments of bringing many sons to glory. One was a Dutch Calvinistic minister, named Freeling Housen, pastor of a congregation about four miles from New Brunswick. He is a worthy old soldier of Jesus Christ, and was the beginner of the great work which I trust the Lord is carrying on in these parts. He has been strongly opposed by his carnal brethren, but God has always appeared for him in a surprising manner, and made him more than conqueror, through his love. He has long since learnt to fear him only who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

Whitefield not only acknowledged Frelinghuysen as God's instrument for the commencement of the revivals of the 1740s, but also was influenced by Frelinghuysen's method of preaching with which he became acquainted through Gilbert Tennent.

#### FRELINGHUYSEN'S PLACE IN AMERICAN CHURCH HISTORY

Frelinghuysen has been called the father of American pietism, but this title needs further explanation. The words *pietist* and *pietism* mean different things to different people. For many, these terms are negative. In fact, they were originally used as derogatory terms, just as *puritan* originally downgraded those who desired to reform and "purify" the Church of England and were pastorally concerned about living a biblical,

godly life within the scope of the Reformed doctrines of grace. All of these terms evoked images, real or imagined, of sanctimonious and hypocritical persons who went too far with their religious zeal. But people like Frelinghuysen used terms like piety to mean *vroomheid* or godliness.

Historically we have to distinguish between Lutheran, Reformed, Moravian, and other forms of pietism. All those forms of pietism emphasize personal, experiential religion. Pietism with a capital "P" arose in German Lutheran circles as a protest against the dead orthodoxy and formalism in the established church. Similar pietistic, protest movements (*Nadere Reformatie* and Puritanism) arose against the same abuses in the national churches of the Netherlands and England. Despite these similarities, there were important differences in these movements, especially with regard to the doctrines of grace. Frelinghuysen was a Calvinist; his pietism was of a distinctly Reformed variety. The Dutch Reformed pietism that he championed was more closely related to English Puritanism than to German Pietism. The Dutch learned much from the English in practical, daily sanctification. One of the first Puritan treatises translated into Dutch was Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety*. But the Dutch pietists also contributed to the English Puritans and their successors, especially in their understanding of preaching. As we have shown, Frelinghuysen influenced Tennent's preaching, and Tennent's preaching impacted Whitefield's. Though Tennent and Whitefield were molded by generations of Puritan divines whose reputation was largely based on their pulpit work, they found in Frelinghuysen an ability to preach to different classes of hearers that went beyond most Puritans. This type of preaching has been designated by historians as "the classification method."

#### THE CLASSIFICATION METHOD OF PREACHING

Frelinghuysen excelled in distinguishing between true and false religion. He developed this skill with the assistance of Dutch, pietistic mentors who divided a congregation into various states and conditions of soul and then made personal applications in preaching to each group. Pioneers of this

classification method in Dutch pietism were Jean Taffin (1528-1602), Godefridus Udemans (1581-1649), and Willem Teellinck (1579-1629). This practice of classification expanded and developed under the Voetian circle of preachers, such as Jodocus VanLodenstein (1620-1677), Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711), and Bernardus Smytegelt (1665-1739). Those *Nadere Reformatie* divines represented the cream of Dutch pietism. Frelinghuysen's foremost mentor, Johannes Verschuur (1680-1737), belonged to this Voetian circle of preachers. Verschuur was born and raised in Groningen and spent his entire ministry in that northern province. Verschuur is known mainly for his *Waarheit in het Binnenste, of Bevindelyke godtgeleertheit* (Truth in the Inward Parts, or Experimental Divinity). In that treatise, Verschuur argued that true Christianity is a rare thing; many who think they are believers are deceiving themselves. Since ministers must be able to distinguish between what is true and false in religion, Verschuur wrote especially for young pastors to help them deal with souls entrusted to their care. Verschuur distinguished between several categories of churchgoers, all of whom need to be addressed by the preacher: (1) the strong Christian (*sterk Christen*) who is converted and has reached a degree of maturity in spiritual life; (2) the concerned Christian (*bekommerde Christen*) who is also converted but struggles with many doubts and lacks assurance of faith; (3) the "letter-learned" (*letterwyse*) who are unconverted but instructed and conversant in truth though not knowing its experience or power; (4) the ignorant (*onkunde*) who are unconverted and unlearned but who may still be persuaded to learn because they have native intelligence. Further distinctions are made among the various types of the wicked.

Frelinghuysen's sermons show that he usually followed Verschuur's method of classification. More preaching is devoted to counselling the concerned Christian than the strong Christian. By the time he spent on encouraging this class of hearers, we may conclude that Frelinghuysen believed that most of the true believers in his congregation belonged to this category. Most of his warnings are directed to the "letter-learned." They are viewed as being in great danger because

they are "almost Christians," not far from the kingdom of God. They walk with Christians and talk like Christians, but they do not possess the new birth. Despite their outward morality and profession of truth, they will perish if death overtakes them.

Frelinghuysen's conviction that the one thing needful is regeneration constitutes the heart of his theology and that of the *Nadere Reformatie*. In a typical sermon, he exhorts his hearers to examine whether they possess the evidences of the new birth. Closely related to this is the call to *conversion*, by which Frelinghuysen usually does not mean the daily conversion of the believer but the initial conversion of the unsaved. He used conversion in that sense interchangeably with regeneration or the new birth.

Frelinghuysen preached that the new birth must be experimental. That is to say, a convert had to know how he had passed from death to life and was expected to be able to relate what God had done for his soul. Particularly these two things—a heavy emphasis on the necessity of the new birth and on classifying churchgoers into various categories—impressed Tennent, Whitefield, and other revival preachers.

All of this is consistent with Frelinghuysen's philosophy of preaching. In the application to a sermon, "Duties of Watchmen on the Walls of Zion," he reflects upon his duty as a preacher:

Though I would prescribe a method of preaching to no one, I am yet of the opinion that the application should be discriminating, adapted to the various states of all hearers (Jude 20, 21; Jeremiah 15). In the church are wicked and unconverted persons, moral persons, Christians in appearance and profession: and these constitute the greater number for many are called but few are chosen. Also are there in the church converted persons: little children and those more advanced. Each one longs and calls, each one must be addressed and dealt with according to his state and frame; according to Jer. 15:19. How pernicious are general applications, has been shown by many zealous divines (Ezekiel 13:19-20).

According to Teunis Brienen, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the classification method used by preachers of the *Nadere Reformatie* (*The prediking van de Nadere Reformatie*), this approach varies from the method of Calvin and other early Reformers who simply divided church members into two categories, believers and unbelievers. Not that Calvin was unaware of differences between strong and weak believers and that there are various kinds and degrees of unbelief, but he did not draw such detailed distinctions as did the later representatives of the *Nadere Reformatie*. The difference between early Reformers like Calvin and post-Reformation divines like Frelinghuysen are due in part to the different settings in which they preached. The Reformers preached, as John Macleod pointed out, to “a generation of believers on which the Gospel of the free grace of God in Justification burst in all its wonder as something altogether new.” Post-Reformers like Frelinghuysen preached in a setting in which mere assent to the given truths of Scripture without a believing response from the soul was regarded as sufficient for salvation. Against this background, it became essential to distinguish clearly between saving faith and historical faith by placing a heavier emphasis on self-examination, the marks of grace, and the classification of hearers into various groups.

Brienen said that the English Puritans did not go as far as their Dutch counterparts in making distinctions among various hearers. That explains why Tennent and Whitefield were impressed by Frelinghuysen’s preaching. His method of classifying hearers and his soul-searching applications went beyond what they had been accustomed to hearing. Tanis concluded:

Tennent’s preaching was Frelinghuysen’s method perfected. . . . Whitefield’s own method of preaching was greatly affected by this instruction, and so the torch which Frelinghuysen bore from East Friesland passed to Tennent, on to Whitefield.

Was Frelinghuysen’s classification method of preaching biblical in every respect? Brienen goes too far in rejecting the classification method, but is he not correct in pointing out the

danger of its going beyond Scripture? The Bible *generally* draws only one distinction between hearers; it says people respond in either faith or unbelief. While the Scriptures do recognize different stages in the life of faith, as well as varying degrees of unbelief, they do not support a detailed system by which everyone is *habitually* placed in a separate category. On the other hand, we should not forget that the positive, scriptural purposes of categorizing were to focus on the necessity of the new birth; to foster growth in grace through specific instruction, encouragement, and warning; and to point out the danger of deceiving oneself for eternity. The classification method has its place, providing it is not overdone by forcing itself out of the text it is expounding. If the preacher is controlled by his text, the classification method yields specificity and a rich harvest of diverse applications. When applications in preaching are not controlled by the text, the classification method tends to produce repetition or, even worse, promotes the preacher’s criteria for self-examination rather than the criteria of Scripture.

#### CALVIN AND FRELINGHUYSEN ON THE NEW BIRTH AND THE COVENANT OF GRACE

The classification method of preaching brings to light another difference in emphasis between Frelinghuysen and Calvin: the *manner* in which they preached about the new birth. Both agreed that regeneration was essential to salvation. But while Frelinghuysen stressed the necessity of looking for evidences of the new birth through Word-centered and Spirit-directed self-examination, Calvin emphasized faith in the promises of the gospel. He said such promises addressed the whole congregation or covenant community.

Calvin viewed the covenant of grace as established by God with believers and their children. He taught that all are under the promise of salvation. Though he distinguished two kinds of covenant children—those who were savingly united to Christ by faith and those who were only outwardly connected to Him—both are in covenant with God, the Isaacs as well as the Ishmaels.

Frelinghuysen's view of the covenant had a somewhat different focus. For him and for most of the *Nadere Reformatie* theologians, the covenant of grace was established only with the elect, and therefore the promises of the covenant were meant only for them. For such theologians the emphasis on marks of grace as evidences of the new birth and election played a larger role than for Calvin. Frelinghuysen said a person could appropriate the promises of the gospel and entertain hope that he was in the state of grace only when he, by the light of the Spirit, was able to conclude from these marks that he belonged to God's elect.

Frelinghuysen's view of the covenant naturally had consequences for his view of the church and the sacraments. Frelinghuysen believed that the church was essentially a congregation of believers to which only those should be admitted who could give an account of their conversion. This was the view of Jean de Labadie for whom Frelinghuysen had some sympathy, though he realized that a perfect church cannot be expected in an imperfect world. But if a pure church could not be attained, at least a pure communion table must be sought. That is why Frelinghuysen set very high standards for admission to the Lord's Supper.

We can appreciate Frelinghuysen's concern for the sanctity of the sacrament. In an environment in which many church members lived immoral lives, he had to apply strict rules. The problem is that he also may have kept from the Lord's Supper some whose lives were exemplary but who, in his estimation, did not possess the marks of grace. Here he went too far because he assumed the right to judge the heart, and that is God's exclusive prerogative. That increased tension in the congregations he served.

### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The Great Awakening and similar revival movements have been used mightily by God to bring sinners to Christ and into his kingdom. But they have their downside as well, due to the sinful tendencies of human nature. In some instances they have led to rampant individualism and have contributed to

divisions in congregations and denominations. It is not difficult to see why this was so. The revivalists' emphasis on new birth and sudden conversion caused some who experienced such radical change to think of themselves as the true church. This led to the desire to organize into exclusive fellowships of visible saints, fostering conventicles (*gezelschappen*). While these conventicles helped believers edify each other and experience the communion of saints, they also tended, if not carefully monitored, to split congregations into various factions or "churches within the church" (*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*). Frelinghuysen realized this danger of exclusivity in his latter years, and in 1745 took the radical step of opening his conventicles to anyone who desired to attend.

Despite his weaknesses and shortcomings, Frelinghuysen was used powerfully by the Lord in building his church in America. Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, a Lutheran pietist who toured the Middle Colonies in 1759, referred to Frelinghuysen as "a converted Dutch preacher who was the first in these parts to insist upon true repentance, living faith, and sanctification, and who had much success." God is sovereign and accomplishes his purposes through a great variety of instruments. Though Frelinghuysen did not have an irenic character, he was a man of profound spiritual conviction and of tremendous courage. He personified the concluding words of the preface to a collection of his sermons, "*Laudem non quæro; culpam non tiemo*" (I seek not praise; I fear not blame). When matters concerned the truth, he would not waver: "I would sooner die a thousand deaths," he declared to his flock, "than not preach the truth." He was an eloquent speaker, a vigorous writer, an able theologian, and a zealous, experiential preacher. "By the fervor of his preaching," Leonard Bacon wrote, "he was to win the signal glory of bringing in the Great Awakening." Jonathan Edwards regarded him to be one of the greatest divines of the American church and, under God, attributed the success of the revival in New Jersey to his instrumentality. Throughout his long tenure in New Jersey, he served as God's man of the hour to herald a number of bountiful harvests which promoted Reformed, spiritual piety. Tanis concluded:

His influence in the developing structures of American theology was enormous. His role was that of a transmitter between the Old World and the New; his great contribution was his infusing into the Middle Colonies that Dutch evangelical pietism which he carried within himself.

Age often mellows, matures, and sanctifies people. In his later years Frelinghuysen became more aware of his character flaws. He became less judgmental of others and realized that he had at times made life unnecessarily difficult for himself and others. It troubled him increasingly that he had treated some of his colleagues with disdain, and he apologized for calling some of them unconverted. Reconciliation efforts between Frelinghuysen and DuBois were successful; at a revival meeting in 1741 at which Whitefield preached, both dominions sat together on the platform. May we experience in our divisive day more spiritual unity with all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and who long for revivals like those given by God in the days of Frelinghuysen, Tennent, and Whitefield.

Few could remain neutral to Frelinghuysen; his searching theology of regeneration, his demand that the converted live in a holy and precise manner, and his zeal to keep the church pure produced many friends and many foes. In the end, however, Frelinghuysen's indefatigable work, zeal, and piety won the day; even many of his former enemies came to accept him, for they could not deny the fruits of his ministry. His ministry underscores for us the importance of enduring hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ and of keeping our hand on the plow in kingdom work.

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