

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen The Forerunner of the Great Awakening

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When evangelicals consider events in church history when the kingdom of God saw great expansion, the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century is often first recounted. Within a few short years the English speaking world was transformed by the power of God through the gospel both in Great Britain and the colonies. The ministry and preaching of pastor Jonathan Edwards and evangelist George Whitefield as well as John Wesley in England are set forth as the primary leaders of the revival during those glory days of gospel expansion. Often New England is set forth as the center of this great work of God in history. Perhaps one third of those living in New England were converted to Christ during this great revival. But years before the Great Awakening of 1740 and 1741, revivals had been occurring in the Middle Colonies, led by committed and courageous men who proclaimed the Word of God to their churches. One of the men that the Lord used in those earlier years to lead this great work of grace was Theodorus Frelinghuysen (1691-1747). In this paper we recount his life and ministry, with particular attention given to the nature of his preaching and pastoral ministry which generated great controversy, but in time proved to be the means that God used to advance His kingdom in the Middle Colonies. Frelinghuysen's ministry influenced other leading pastors in his region, but he contributed also to George Whitefield's spiritual development when he first came to the colonies as a young preacher. Whitefield himself referred to Frelinghuysen as "the beginner of the great work."¹ Another wrote of his influence, "So thoroughly was he the soul of the evangelical revival among the Dutch until the coming of Whitefield that the account of the movement up to that time is the story of his life."² The legacy of Frelinghuysen

¹ Beeke, Joel, ed., **Forerunner of the Great Awakening; Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691-1747)** (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. vii.

² Charles Hartshorn Maxson, **The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies** (The University of Chicago Press, 1920), p. 11.

may continue to bear fruit as we consider his legacy and how God worked through this man's ministerial labor.

Early Life in Western Europe

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen was born in Friesland, Netherlands,³ in 1691. Although Friesland was located in eastern Netherlands, it was a region populated by Germans with their language and culture. The Frelinghuysen family was German. Theodorus was the fifth child, born into a family with a strong Protestant heritage. His great-grandfather had led the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century in the German town of Ergste. His grandfather led his family in the Reformed tradition as early as 1669. They joined a German Reformed church in the town of Schwerte. As a young man Johan Frelinghuysen became the pastor of a new Reformed congregation in Hagan, Westphalia in 1683. There he met and married a daughter of a Reformed pastor, Anna Maragretha Bruggemann. In 1692 they baptized Theodorus, their fifth child.

Theodorus had a strong Reformed-centered education through childhood. He became a communicant member in his father's church at 17. He attended the Reformed *gymnasium* at Hamm for two years studying philosophy and theology. Here he was influenced by the life and theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669). Cocceius was from the German Pietistic tradition, who was an educator and theologian. He was a prolific writer who tended to depart from the norm of the day to expound systematic theology, choosing to write extensively biblical theology. He developed principles of interpretation of the Scriptures that continue to be employed today. He emphasized the analogy of faith of Scripture. He emphasized the need to interpret verses in context rather than to proof text verses to support systematic theological positions. He espoused the relation of the Testaments as in the rhyme, "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed." But his greatest contribution to theology was in the development of covenant theology. His influence was significant in that sometimes he is referred to as "the father of covenant theology." Clearly Frelinghuysen's theology was shaped and influenced greatly by Cocceius.

Upon graduation at Hamm, Theodorus entered the University of Lingen for further theological study. The emphasis in this theological department was for the theology of Gisbertius Voetius (1589-1676). Voetius was regarded as one of the leaders of the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*, which is commonly translated as the Dutch Second Reformation. It was the Dutch version of English Puritanism both in time and theology, with rich emphasis on the Christian's devotional life. It has been said:

³³ Today Friesland is a suburb of Hanover, Germany.

Voetius was to the *Nadere Reformatie* (usually translated as the Dutch Second Reformation) what John Owen, often called the prince of the Puritans, was to English Puritanism. Though largely unknown and ignored by English-speaking scholarship, Voetius is nearly as much an in-house name to students of Dutch Post-Reformation orthodoxy as Owen is to students of English Puritanism.⁴

There was a controversy between the Voetius and Cocceius that must have impacted Frelinghuysen when he was at the University of Lingen. Voetius took issue with the implication of Cocceius' covenant theology which rendered Sabbath observance (in a measure) to Old Testament ceremonial law rather than as an abiding Christian duty. Beeke wrote of the influence of Voetius on Frelinghuysen: "At Lingen, Theodorus became thoroughly committed to Reformed piety and the experimental divinity of the Voetian rather than the Cocceian mode."⁵

Frelinghuysen had been born into a German family and his native tongue was German. But when he was at the University of Lingen, he learned to speak and preach in Dutch. When he was first ordained in 1717, He served in the denomination of the German Reformed Church. He pastored a church in Loegumer Voorwerk for fourteen months. A flash flood devastated the community on Christmas Eve of 1718, which left the struggling church unable to support a pastor. Frelinghuysen left to assume the role of a co-regent in a Latin school Enkhuisen, North Holland. But within a few months he was approached by Classis Amsterdam⁶ of the Dutch Reformed Church and offered a pastorate in "Rarethans." He accepted the offer. At this time he encountered an unanticipated act of providence that would put him in place for his future, fruitful ministry. Beeke wrote of this:

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."⁷

After having been re-ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church, Theodorus Frelinghuysen left his homeland to travel to the new world in September of 1719.

⁴ <https://www.puritanboard.com/threads/gisbertus-voetius.10932/>

⁵ Beeke, Joel, ed., **Forerunner of the Great Awakening**, p. viii.

⁶ The classis in the Dutch Reformed Church is very similar to the presbytery of the Presbyterians.

⁷ Beeke, Joel, ed., **Forerunner of the Great Awakening**, p. ix.

His Family Life

In the first year of his arrival in the new world, Theodorus met and married Eva Terhume. She was the last of seventeen children, her father dying when she was 12 years old. They met through a mutual friend, Guilliam, who cared for Eva upon her father's death. Theodorus was more than twice her age, but they were happily married, becoming the parents of five sons and two daughters. Both of their daughters married pastors and all five sons became pastors in the Dutch Reformed Church. The family lived on 50 acres of land their church gave them and a small dowry that Eva brought to their marriage. This enabled them to live comfortably through the early difficult years of ministry.

Early Ministry in the New World

The spiritual life of the Dutch Reformed churches in New York and New Jersey was quite different than what was characteristic of the churches in the Netherlands. In contrast to many British who had immigrated to New England for religious reasons, the Dutch migrated to the new world largely out of economic concerns. The Dutch West India Company had established trading posts on Manhattan Island and on the Hudson and Delaware Rivers. The Dutch colonies grew in numbers, but there was little attention and effort given to developing religious life. Dutch Reformed churches existed, but they were not characterized by vital Christian experience.

The chronic shortage of ministers posed a problem for the new Dutch churches of North America. The shortage reflected the short-sightedness of the mother church, which insisted that ministers in the New World be educated and ordained in the Netherlands under the auspices of the Classis Amsterdam. Consequently, the spiritual life and moral tone of the colony was adversely affected.⁸

The churches themselves affirmed sound doctrine. They held the Three Forms of Unity which were adopted by the Synod of Dort. These included espousing and promoting the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618-19). But practical religious life and personal piety were at a low ebb. Dead orthodoxy was the characteristic of the people. There was a presumption of regeneration of all who attended church services and observed the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Abraham Messler, a later translator of Frelinghuysen's sermons, described the conditions of that time: "The necessity of a new heart had almost entirely been lost sight

⁸ Beeke, p. x.

of... formalism and self-righteousness almost universally prevailed. Christians were not ashamed to ridicule Christian experience, and many had become resolute in opposing it.”⁹

Frelinghuysen arrived in New York in January of 1720. Two leading churchmen of New York City received him, Gualtherus DuBois (1671-1751) and Henricus Boel ((1692-1754). They invited Frelinghuysen to conduct their worship service the next Lord’s Day, a decision they later regretted.

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.¹⁰

Another said of his first sermon in New York, “His first sermon was like the proclamation of a new gospel, so animated was his plea for a religion of power. Formalists like domino Boel, junior pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, were offended and sharply rebuked the apostle of revivalism, who had thus no sooner set foot on American soil than he aroused the opposition of men in high place.”¹¹

The reaction and response by his four congregations was similar to what he encountered in New York. But the pastoral ministry of Frelinghuysen was not what they were accustomed, which counted in his favor.

Soon the university graduate was making the circuit of his four frontier churches, traveling great distances between scattered settlements, fording streams, and picking his way through forests. The change was quite as great for his parishioners as for their pastor. Formerly a neighboring minister had made them an occasional visit for the administration of the ordinances, but their usual dependence had been upon the halting reading of a *voorleser* (a reader). Now they had a pastor, and with him came a teacher, for Dutch churches, like the German Reformed, aimed to establish schools in connection with their churches.¹²

Frelinghuysen gave his first sermon in the Raritan Valley on January 31, 1720. His text was 2 Corinthians 5:20, which reads, “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.” In this sermon the new pastor made it very clear that he was going to serve among them “in Christ’s stead.” What he meant was that he would be

⁹ Ibid, p. xi.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. xif.

¹¹ Maxon, p. 13.

¹² Ibid.

personally examining every individual's claim to be a Christian, assess his belief and behavior, in order to distinguish and identify those who were truly converted and those who were yet in their sin.

It was not long before the new pastor concluded that many of his parishioners demonstrated no fruit of true conversion. Spiritual ignorance was the norm. Godless living abounded. Later William Tennent Jr. wrote of the condition of the people in the early days of Frelinghuysen's ministry:

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.¹³

What was unique respecting Frelinghuysen's preaching was that he confronted people in his churches with the fact that they were not converted unless there was a vital, life-changing experience of the new birth which was demonstrated in Christian devotion and conviction. He did not presume that his people, though they claimed to be Christian and affirmed the Three Forms of Unity, were true Christians until they gave evidence by their transformed lives.

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.¹⁴

Basically, Frelinghuysen proclaimed a message that only by one's life, not by mere profession, can one be certain that he has salvation. His conviction was that the one thing needful for everyone was regeneration. This was at "the heart of his theology and that of the *Nadere Reformatie*."¹⁵ He commonly proclaimed in his sermons the need for his hearers to examine whether or not they had the evidence in their lives that they were regenerate.

In his preaching he would distinguish sharply the different lives of the ungodly from the regenerate. Here are his opening words from his sermon, "The Miserable End of the Ungodly", which was based upon 1 Peter 4:18 which reads, "And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"

The unregenerate and the regenerate differ greatly from one another in the following manner:

- In nature and disposition. The unregenerate are darkness, whereas the regenerate are light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8).

¹³ Beeke, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. xiii.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. xxxii.

- In conduct and walk. In the Dutch translation of Philippians 3:18, Paul describes the unregenerate as those who “walk differently” from the renewed and godly whose conversation is in heaven. The way in which the godly walk is the straight and narrow way, which is indeed a toilsome way but is nevertheless a way of righteousness, a holy way. “The way of life is above to the wise, that he may depart from hell beneath,” says Proverbs 15:24. But the ungodly walk according to their own fancy, their own desire, and after the imagination of their hearts in the way of perverseness. This is the broad way and is easy to the flesh. It appears good to the eyes of the ungodly, but it is, nevertheless, the way of death which leads to destruction.
- In how they handle adversity and affliction. The ungodly who are called to endure divine judgment murmur against the Lord, saying His ways are not equal (Ezek. 18:25). By contrast, the righteous humble themselves under the Lord’s hand, are silent in affliction, justifying God and praising Him. As Psalm 39:9 says, “I was dumb, I opened not my mouth.” Likewise, Micah 7:9 says, “I will bear the indignation of the LORD.”
- In how they die. O how great is the contrast between the righteous and wicked when called to die! They both must come to an end, but what a different end! The end of the righteous is joy and eternal glory, whereas the end of the ungodly is woe, wretchedness, and condemnation (Psa. 37:38; 1:6). This is what our text, 1 Peter 4:18, declares, “Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” We have already explained the first part of this verse which sets forth the state of the righteous. Now we will study the miserable end of the ungodly. In explaining this part of the text, we will concentrate on two points: the persons (the ungodly and the sinner) and their miserable state (where they shall appear).¹⁶

After setting forth with clarity and conviction the miserable condition of the unregenerate, he appealed for them to repent of their sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation:

Jesus stands before us with extended arms, inviting sinners and the ungodly to repentance. Oh let him who senses his sins and his state of condemnation before God surrender himself to the Lord Jesus! Let him who senses his helplessness and unwillingness and is convinced of Jesus’ all-sufficiency and willingness turn to God. Let him who desires to be reconciled to God through the merits of Christ and to be sanctified by His Spirit go to the Lord Jesus. He that cometh to Him, He will in no wise cast out (John 6:37).¹⁷

Again, what was most significant was that Frelinghuysen was preaching to his church members this message. He confronted them as unconverted unless and until their lives were characterized by holy desires, holy devotion, and holy living.

Frelinghuysen was ministering in the new world according to the doctrines and preaching of the *Nadere Reformatie* of the old world. This ministry was different in nature and form than Calvin and the earlier Reformers. They had sought primarily to distinguish between believers and unbelievers. But the Dutch preachers of the *Nadere Reformatie*, as the English Puritans, sought to distinguish people by how they lived, whether or not their lives were experiencing the grace of practical sanctification, which was the visible distinguishing quality of true believers.

¹⁶ Beeke, pp. 85f.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

Joel Beeke wrote that whereas both Calvin and Frelinghuysen preached about the new birth, they differed in “the *manner* in which they preached about the new birth.”¹⁸

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 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 the 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 a 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.¹⁹

This distinction between Frelinghuysen and the Dutch of the *Nadere Reformatie* with the early reformers parallels the distinction between the English Puritans and the early reformers. Arthur Pink wrote in his book, *Studies on Saving Faith*, that God in His sovereignty raises up different men and movements in history to address the great need of the day.

By way of introduction and in order to acquaint the reader with the particular angle of viewpoint from which we now approach our present theme, let it be pointed out that changing conditions in Christendom call for an ever-varying emphasis on different aspects of Divine Truth. At different periods the true servants of God have had to face widely different situations, and meet errors of varied character. This has called for a campaign of offense and defense adapted to the exigencies of many situations. The weapons suited to one conflict were quite useless for another; fresh ones needing to be constantly drawn from the armory of Scripture.

At the close of that lengthy period known as the “dark ages” (though throughout it God never left Himself without a clear witness), when the Lord caused a flood of light to break forth upon Christendom, the Reformers were faced by the hoary errors of Romanism, among which was her insistence that none could be positively assured of his salvation till the hour of death was reached. This caused Luther and his contemporaries to deliver a positive message, seeking to stimulate confidence toward God and the laying hold of His sure promises. Yet it has to be acknowledged there were times when their zeal carried them too far, leading to a position which could not be successfully defended from the Scriptures. Many of the Reformers insisted that assurance was an essential element in saving faith itself, and that unless a person *knew* he was “accepted in the Beloved” he was yet in his sins. Thus, in the revolt from Romanism, the Protestant pendulum swung too far to the opposite side.

In the great mercy of God the *balance* of Truth was restored in the days of the Puritans. The principal doctrine which Luther and his fellows had emphasized so forcibly was justification by faith alone, but at the close of the sixteenth century and in the early part of the seventeenth such men as

¹⁸ Ibid, p. xxxiv.

¹⁹ Ibid, xxxivf.

Perkins, Gattaker, Rollock, etc., made prominent the collateral doctrine of sanctification by the Spirit. For the next fifty years the Church on earth was blest with many men “mighty in the Scriptures,” deeply taught of God, enabled by Him to maintain a well-rounded ministry. Such men as Goodwin, Owen, Charnock, Flavel, Sibbs, etc., though living in troublous times and suffering fierce persecution, taught the Word more helpfully (in our judgment) and were more used of God than any since the days of the apostles to the present hour.

The ministry of the Puritans was an exceedingly searching one. While magnifying the free grace of God in no uncertain terms, while teaching plainly that the satisfaction of Christ alone gave *title* to Heaven, while emphatically repudiating all creature-merits, they nevertheless insisted that a supernatural and transforming work of the Spirit in the heart and life of the believer was indispensable to *fit* him for Heaven. Professors were rigidly tested, and the results and fruits of faith were demanded before its presence was admitted. Self-examination was frequently insisted upon, and full details given as to how one might ascertain that he was a “new creature in Christ Jesus.” Christians were constantly urged to “make their calling and election sure” by ascertaining that they had clear evidence of the same. While conditions were far from being perfect, yet there is good reason to conclude that more deluded souls were undeceived and more hypocrites exposed than at any other period since the first century A.D.²⁰

What Pink wrote of the English Puritans could have been written of Frelinghuysen in the Middle Colonies of the 18th century among the Dutch Reformed churches. In fact, this is what in essence Joel Beeke did write of Frelinghuysen”

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 sufficient for salvation. Against this background, it became essential to distinguish clearly between saving faith and historical faith by placing heavier emphasis on self-examination, the marks of grace, and the classification of hearers into various groups.²¹

Frelinghuysen in time gained the favor of many of his fellow ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church of the Middle Colonies. These included some notable men. One of these was Guilam Bartholf (1656-1726) who had organized all but two of the churches of the Raritan Valley before 1702. Another supporter was Bernardus Freeman (1660-1743), who was a German pietist, who had conducted fruitful evangelistic ministry among the Mohawk Indians even while serving Dutch Reformed congregations.

The Complaint

Frelinghuysen met immediate, hostile, and outspoken resistance from his churches and from the other Dutch ministers in his region. And hostility and opposition rose with the passing of time in his

²⁰ Arthur Pink, **Studies on Saving Faith** (Pietan Publications, 2009), pp. 209f.

²¹ Beeke, p. xxxiii.

earlier years of ministry. The reaction and resentment was not necessarily due to the substance of what he was saying. The reaction of the church attendees was that he was declaring and applying these teachings to them.

Though members in Frelinghuysen's church did not object to 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.²²

In one sermon to his church he addressed his hearers directly.

Come here, you careless ones at ease in sin; you carnal and earthly-minded ones; you unchaste whoremongers and adulterers; you proud, haughty men and women; you seekers after pleasure; you drunkards, gamblers, disobedient and wicked rejecters of the Gospel; you hypocrites and dissemblers. How do you think the Lord will deal with you?... Be filled with terror, you impure swine, adulterers, and whoremongers. Without true repentance, you will live with impure devils. All who burn in their vile lusts will be cast into a fire that is hotter than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The preaching of their pastor was itself an affront to the people in the pews, but what brought matters to a crisis was Frelinghuysen's efforts to guard the communion table, assuring that only those who gave evidence of the new birth should be welcomed to the sacrament. "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."²³ In a sermon entitled, "The Acceptable Communicant", he declared:

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 have been born again?... Therefore reflect upon and bear in mind this truth. Remember, that though moral and outward religious, if you are still unregenerate and destitute of spiritual life, you have no warrant to approach the Table of grace.²⁴

In a few cases he actually forbid individuals from participating, but his forceful manner of proclaiming who was entitled and who was not caused resistance and opposition to grow intense. On one occasion he saw some of his church approaching the communion table after he had warned them not to partake. He spoke out: "See! See! Even the people of the world and the impenitent are coming, that they may eat and drink judgment to themselves!" According to Beeke several people approaching thought that he was referring to them, and they returned to their seats.²⁵

²² Beeke, p. xiv.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, p. xvi.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. xvif.

Numbers of the members of his congregation objected and protested, particularly those who were among the wealthy. They complained to the Dutch Reformed pastors in New York, Boel and DuBois. Boel believed in baptismal regeneration and therefore was appalled that a man would dare presume he had the ability to look into someone's heart to ascertain if a true work of grace had been at work. To Boel Frelinghuysen was a heretic. The complaints and spreading of their opinions of opposing pastors resulted in great pressure placed on Frelinghuysen. Those who had complained to New York had returned home and spread the understanding of respected men that Frelinghuysen was both a schismatic and a heretic.²⁶ Frelinghuysen referred to them as unconverted men in the ministry.

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.²⁷

The opposition grew and a formal complaint was drafted and submitted to the Classis in Amsterdam that they had a problem in Frelinghuysen pastoring one of their churches. Here is the account:

Frelinghuysen had advocated in his sermons the power of the keys, the power of discipline in the hands of the consistory, even to the excommunication of the disaffected. After long delay four of the leaders were put under the ban. They represented the wealth and, according to their own account, the majority of the membership of the several congregations. Thus the reward of three years' toil was the disruption of his churches. In the next two years the disaffected gathered evidence against the pastor, and Lawyer Boel, the brother of the domine²⁸ of the same name, wove it together with considerable skill. This famous *Complaint*, making a printed book of two hundred and forty-six pages, published in 1725, is alone sufficient to gain for the domine the sympathy of the fair-minded. On every page what is now the usual order of things is treated as the unheard-of and monstrous. The defenders of Frelinghuysen among the pastors shared in the castigation of the reformer. Thereupon Freeman published a defense and Van Santvoor a dialogue in the interest of Frelinghuysen and evangelical doctrine. The *Complaint*, on the other hand, was sent oversees to the Classis Amsterdam, with a letter of approval signed by a number of pastors. Thus the division which began on the frontier now divided the Dutch pastors of the two provinces into hostile camps.²⁹

²⁶ Maxson, p. 14.

²⁷ Beeke, pp. xviii, xix.

²⁸ Domine is a term used in the US for a minister or pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church. It comes from the Latin domine (vocative case of Dominus 'Lord, Master').

²⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

Here is a more detailed account of the individuals who traveled to New York City to meet with their denomination's representative to submit their complaint:

The crux of the controversy revolved around several members within Frelinghuysen's congregations who were upset because they were barred from participating in the Lord's Supper. Subsequently, on March 12, 1723, three men, Pieter Dumont of the Raritan congregation, Simon Wykhoff (1660–1743) of the Six Mile Run congregation, and Hendrik Vroom of the Three Mile Run congregation, visited Bernhardus Freeman at Flatbush, Long Island, to voice displeasure concerning Frelinghuysen's ministry and the growing tension in the Raritan Valley. Their complaint specifically questioned his doctrinal standards. History has called these three men, along with their later comrades, the *Klagers* (complainants), who were countered by Frelinghuysen's supporters, the *Dagers* (summoners). Freeman, who later sided with Frelinghuysen, acted judiciously in his dealings with the three men and their charges of heresy against Frelinghuysen. Freeman perceived them to be full of hatred and revenge, so he instructed the men to produce reliable written testimony of any charges of false doctrine. At this point, he felt they had little substance for their claim. He indiscreetly reported the meeting to Frelinghuysen, who confronted the men, and the battle ensued. Frelinghuysen excommunicated the leaders of the *Klagers* in September 1723.³⁰

His Fruitful and Expanding Ministry

Frelinghuysen endured and survived those early years of opposition. The Lord sustained him in his labors, having convinced him early on that his responsibility was to proclaim the truth regardless of the absence of apparent results. He knew that his labor in the Lord was not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). But further, Frelinghuysen fully anticipated initial reaction and rejection as he plowed and sowed the good seed in his field even as he looked for an eventual harvest.

Frelinghuysen did not believe that the lack of success in his early ministry was anything but the temporary rebuff which every faithful minister must expect in an age when evangelical doctrine had become so obsolete as to be mistaken for heresy.³¹

Arnold Dalimore wrote of his endurance until the Lord blessed his efforts:

Such, however, was Frelinghuysen's confidence in God that he was unmoved by the storm of opposition. In season and out of season he fulfilled the command, 'Earnestly content for the faith which was once delivered to the saints', and God abundantly honored him. With the passing of months and the years he saw large numbers of people converted; among them were many of the unchurched and several notorious sinners, but among them also were several deacons and elders and church members who earlier had been his severest opposers.³²

³⁰ Scott Maze, **Theodorus Frelinghuysen's Evangelism: Catalyst to the First Great Awakening** (Kindle Locations 1046-1057). Reformation Heritage Books. Kindle Edition.

³¹ Maxson, p. 15.

³² Arnold Dalimore, **George Whitefield; The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), pp. 414f.

The Lord gradually began to transform the four churches which he pastored. Slowly the churches began to experience reform and revival as individuals underwent thorough conversion.

He denounced the sins rife in the valley with such stinging directness that a reformation in morals was slowly effected. He presented Christianity as a force that revolutionizes the conduct of the believer... The elders and deacons were converted one after another, until the last deacon made his new confession in 1725. The members of the four churches were becoming a 'very different people.' The congregations of the domine increased, and there were numerous conversions among people who were not before upon the roll of the churches. In some years, particularly in 1726, the ingathering was so great proportionately as to give a foregleam of the time when Whitefield should come flaming through the country. The subjects of the revival had all experienced such a conversion as had never been insisted upon in these provinces—a severe spiritual conflict ending in a passionate determination to make the attainment of their highest moral ideals the dominating purpose of their lives.³³

There is one firsthand account of the conversion of a slave that reveals the concern and character of Frelinghuysen for individuals to be converted to Christ. This is from the Kindle edition of a book by Scott Maze, *Theodorus Frelinghuysen's Evangelism*:

Numbers alone do not tell the entire story of Frelinghuysen's evangelistic success. Contemporary accounts of his evangelistic efforts and the testimonies of his converts also complement the historical accounts of his ministry. Frelinghuysen acquired a slave named James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw for fifty pounds and later led him to be converted to Christ. Gronniosaw describes Frelinghuysen's evangelistic efforts with him in great detail. Frelinghuysen taught the native African how to pray, as Gronniosaw detailed in his own account:

He took me home with him, and made me kneel down, and put my two hands together, and pray'd for me, and every night and morning he did the same.—I could not make out what it was for, nor the meaning of it, nor what they spoke to when they talk'd—I thought it comical, but I lik'd it very well. After I had been a little while with my new master I grew more familiar, and ask'd him the meaning of prayer: (I could hardly speak English to be understood) he took great pains with me, and made me understand that he pray'd to God, who liv'd in Heaven; that He was my Father and best Friend.— told him that this must be a mistake; that my father liv'd at Bournou, and I wanted very much to see him, and likewise my dear mother, and sister, and I wish'd he would be so good as to send me home to them; and I added all I could think of to induce him to convey me back. I appeared in great trouble, and my good master was so much affected that the tears ran down his face. He told me that God was a great and good Spirit, that He created all the world, and every person and thing in it, in Ethiopia, Africa, and America, and everywhere. I was delighted when I heard this.

Gronniosaw also mentioned Eva, Frelinghuysen's wife, as instrumental in his own conversion, as she gave Gronniosaw copies of both John Bunyan's *The Holy War* and Richard Baxter's *A Call to the Unconverted to Turn and Live*. Specifically, Gronniosaw referenced two of Frelinghuysen's messages as instrumental to his conversion; one of the messages was a sermon based on Hebrews 12:14, while the other message was based on Revelation 1:7. Gronniosaw described his reaction to Frelinghuysen's sermon on Revelation 1:7:

³³ Maxson, pp. 15f.

“These words affected me excessively; I was in great agonies because I thought my master directed them to me only; and, I fancied, that he observ’d me with unusual earnestness—I was farther confirm’d in this belief as I look’d round the church, and could see no one person beside myself in such grief and distress as I was; I began to think that my master hated me, and was very desirous to go home, to my own country; for I thought that if God did come (as he said) He would be sure to be most angry with me, as I did not know what He was, nor had ever heard of Him before.”

Gronniosaw’s distress over his sinful condition was only heightened the next Sunday as Frelinghuysen preached on Hebrews 12:14: “He preached the law so severely, that it made me tremble.—he said, that God would judge the whole world; Ethiopia, Asia, and Africa, and every where.—I was now excessively perplexed, and undetermined what to do.” Gronniosaw found little relief. Frelinghuysen’s sermons had a profound effect upon Gronniosaw as the thoughts of his sinful condition before the holiness of God caused him to wish he could die. Happily, Gronniosaw’s eventual conversion granted him the relief he so desperately desired from his sinful condition.

I was one day in a most delightful frame of mind: my heart so overflowed with love and gratitude to the Author of all my comforts.—I was so drawn out of myself, and so fill’d and awed by the Presence of God that I saw (or thought I saw) light inexpressible dart down from heaven upon me, and shone around me for the space of a minute.—I continued on my knees, and joy unspeakable took possession of my soul.—The peace and serenity which filled my mind after this was wonderful, and cannot be told.—I would not have changed situations, or been any one but myself for the whole world. I blest God for my poverty, that I had no worldly riches or grandeur to draw my heart from Him. I wish’d at that time, if it had been possible for me, to have continued on that spot for ever. I felt an unwillingness in myself to have any thing more to do with the world, or to mix with society again. I seemed to possess a full assurance that my sins were forgiven me. I went home all my way rejoicing, and this text of scripture came full upon my mind. “And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts that they shall not depart from me.” The first opportunity that presented itself, I went to my old school-master, and made known to him the happy state of my soul who joined with me in praise to God for his mercy to me the vilest of sinners.—I was now perfectly easy, and had hardly a wish to make beyond what I possess’d, when my temporal comforts were all blasted by the death of my dear and worthy Master Mr. Freelandhouse.³⁴

As word spread of the transformation of the churches under his preaching and pastoral care, Frelinghuysen was invited to preach in other churches of his denomination. But he also accepted invitations from other denominations. He developed close relationships and partnership with the English speaking Presbyterians who had settled in his region. The man closest to him in their mutual labors was George Tennent. This connection and cooperation between the Dutch Reformed preacher and the English speaking Presbyterian warrants attention to some background.

The Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies first formed their presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706. Unlike the Dutch Reformed churches, there was no formal connection with the Presbyterian Church of

³⁴ Maze, Scott. **Theodorus Frelinghuysen’s Evangelism: Catalyst to the First Great Awakening** (Kindle Locations 981-1020). Reformation Heritage Books, 2011. Kindle Edition.

Scotland or Ireland. It was not necessary, therefore, to gain approval or endorsement from outside the region to appoint or ordain candidates for the ministry. The majority of those who identified themselves as Presbyterian were of Scot and Irish heritage, but a minority were from New England Congregationalists, “then also very generally called Presbyterian.”³⁵ In the earlier decades of the 18th century the increase of Presbyterians was largely due to immigration from the north of Ireland. The Presbyterians expanded in the frontier and were scattered from New York south to Georgia. Although they were relatively weak in organization, they were universally committed to the standard of the Westminster Confession. “The Westminster Confession was to them a finality.”³⁶ Here is a description of their spiritual condition:

They were narrow, having no appreciation of the beauty of the English ritual and hating prelacy and the forms that brought to mind the tyranny under which they had suffered in Ireland. Their national prejudices were strong and yet they were chronically subject to divisions among themselves over infinitesimal questions of policy. These boisterous Ulstermen were not the congenial neighbors to peace-loving Quakers and Mennonites, and still less to the Indians, who were Canaanites in their eyes.

It was natural, therefore, that among conservatives and formalists, such as the Irish Presbyterians were, men lacking of the gentler graces of Christianity, the doctrine of the new birth was little known. A deep conviction of sin, preparing the way for what the revivalists called “a saving closure with Christ,” was stigmatized as “melancholy, trouble of the mind, or despair,” whenever it did appear among this people. They were without the deep emotional experience which the Pietists denominated “the life of God in the soul of man.” They were strangers to a consuming passion for God and personal righteousness. They made no pretention of a new heart with its new sympathy for the distressed and unfortunate of every race and creed.

William Tennant was from Ireland, where he had served as a priest in the Church of Ireland. His wife was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. When they came to the colonies, William was received into the membership of the Presbyterian synod, for he was dissatisfied with the hierarchal system and Arminian theology of his denomination. It was said of William Tennent, that he “was one of the greatest trophies won by Presbyterianism from Episcopacy in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.”³⁷ The Presbyterian historian said of William Tennent, “Above all others, is owing the prosperity and enlargement of the Presbyterian Church.”³⁸

William Tennent was a very studious man, whose own study became the schoolroom for his four sons. He built a log house in which they conducted their classes, which came to be derided as “the Log College.” William not only educated and trained his sons but also shaped the theological education of

³⁵ Maxson, p. 22.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Maxson, p. 26.

³⁸ This was the assessment of

sixteen or more graduates who went on to become greatly blessed pastors and evangelists. The Log College was “the mother of Princeton, but of many schools south and west and north.”³⁹

One of William’s sons, Gilbert Tennent, was the first English-speaking candidate for the ministry who received his education in the Middle Colonies through the Log College. All others before him had either been educated and trained in New England or Britain. The presbytery of Philadelphia ordained him. Yale College conferred on him the honorary degree of A.M.

As required by the form of government, he was no doubt examined by the presbytery upon his knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, logic, philosophy, and divinity. It appears, therefore, that Gilbert Tennent, first graduate of the school afterward called the Log College, fairly met these requirements.⁴⁰

Later George Whitefield said of the Log College that it was distinctly superior to the contemporary schools of New England and Europe.⁴¹

George Tennent began his ministry in 1726 as a pastor in the region of New Brunswick, in the Middle Colonies, which is today in central New Jersey. His English-speaking pastorate was nearby the Raritan Valley where Theodorus Frelinghuysen served his four Dutch-speaking congregations. When Gilbert Tennent arrived to minister the Word of God in the region, Frelinghuysen had already experienced a measure of revival after having served in the region for nearly 6 years. Tennent gave himself wholly to his ministry of the Word.

The effort of the new preacher at first was to build up a congregation and to commend his church and his person to the favor of the English speaking people. His success in this was such that both the pious and the profane delighted in his sermons and in his intercourse with them.⁴²

However, after a period of ministry, Gilbert fell quite ill and in his weakened state, not knowing that he would survive his sickness, he lamented what he perceived to be the barrenness of his ministry. One of the reasons Tennent felt his ministry was so barren was because of the fruitful ministry that was evident in the churches pastored by Frelinghuysen. While sick, Tennent received a letter from Frelinghuysen “that excited him to greater earnestness and to the adoption of the domine’s method of preaching.”

When Gilbert Tennent returned to his pastoral ministry he began to witness remarkable results. He had begun to preach in the same manner as Frelinghuysen, which the Lord had greatly blessed. Hendrik Visscher, who was Frelinghuysen’s friend and assistant described the uniqueness of Frelinghuysen’s

³⁹ Maxson, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 28.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 30

⁴² Ibid.

preaching to “his exceeding talent of drawing one matter out of another, thereby discovering the state and condition of his auditors to themselves.” Frelinghuysen described his preaching method in an ordination sermon:

Preaching must be structured to the differing conditions of the hearers. In the church there are godless and converted 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.⁴³

This method of preaching has been called *discriminatory preaching*. The uniqueness of this preaching method is in the direct application of the Word of God to the various identifiable spiritual conditions of the members of the congregation.

When he resumed his work, therefore, he directed his message so pointedly to each class among his hearers that every person imagined that he heard his own case described. No longer did the speaker restrain his emotions, he gave uncurbed expression to them... He passed beyond the domineer in his vivid portrayal of threatened doom. Some left his preaching with disgust. They charged him with blasphemy, “assuming the divine prerogative of being a searcher of hearts, and pretending to know, by seeing a man’s face, whether he would be saved or damned.”⁴⁴

But Tennent continued to proclaim the necessity of regeneration and that only the evidence of transforming grace in the life was true evidence of the new birth wrought by the Holy Spirit. He challenged his hearers to examine not only what they believed, but how they were living.

Frelinghuysen and George Tennent became good friends and co-laborers in the ministry. They would often conduct joint services, one preaching in Dutch and the other in English. This contributed to the reaction and rejection of Frelinghuysen by many, for he was viewed as corrupting the worship of the true church by bringing English into the services of the Dutch Reformed churches.

But through the years the Lord gave favor to Frelinghuysen in the eyes of many when they saw the hand of God upon him and the fruitfulness of his ministry.

The result of Frelinghuysen’s preaching and contacts with ministers and lay people and 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, a 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

⁴³ Beeke, p. xxvi.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

than a 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 he said that he had been influenced by Frelinghuysen's method of preaching with which he became acquainted through Gilbert Tennent.⁴⁵

His Legacy and Abiding Example

Theodorus Frelinghuysen is not a household name among evangelicals, or even among Reformed brethren. But he left an indelible mark in his region and had profound influence on men whom the Lord made very fruitful in their service for the kingdom. He is mentioned briefly in Iain Murray's biography of Jonathan Edwards and a few brief mentions of him are found in Arnold Dalimore's 2 volume biography of George Whitefield. Yes, there have been a few brief biographies produced and a volume of 22 of his sermons. But he remains unknown to most.

He did leave a legacy in the Middle Colonies. The Township of Frelinghuysen is located in western New Jersey. Rodney Frelinghuysen is the current congressman for the 11th district of New Jersey. We wrote of the educational enterprise of William Tennent and his Log College which was responsible for educating and training men which would lead to the founding of what later became Princeton University. Theodorus Frelinghuysen and his sons were also concerned about the developing education institutions in the Dutch communities in which they served. There was an occasion when the father and his five sons gathered with several other men to put their signatures to the charter of a new school in their region. This led to the charter in 1766 of Queen's College, which today is Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which is the largest higher education institution in New Jersey. In the prominent Kirkpatrick Chapel on the campus there is a large stained glass window that commemorates the Frelinghuysen family. (There is a photocopy of this below.)

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. xxviii, xxix.

