

**THE SEPARATES; OR,  
STRICT  
CONGREGATIONALISTS  
OF NEW ENGLAND**

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The separates; or, Strict Congregationalists of New England by S. Leroy Blake

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# Introduction

BY PROF. WILLISTON WALKER, D. D.

Among the more important of the consequences of that vast religious upheaval in eighteenth century New England, of which Whitefield's preaching was the most striking episode, was the revolt against the conservatism, formalism and rigid ecclesiastical discipline of the established churches of these colonies, to which the title, "Separatist Movement," has usually been given. The "Great Awakening," as the revival in general has been called, well deserves its fame as the most wide-spread and intense spiritual quickening in New England history. No other epoch of New England story has witnessed so generally diffused an interest in spiritual concerns or has beheld so extensive a manifestation of the visible working of the divine Spirit upon the hearts of men as the years 1740, 1741 and 1742, when the revival was at its height. It stands in retrospect like a mountain peak in colonial religious history above the monotonous level characteristic of the eighteenth century.

But the "Great Awakening" is not remarkable only for its accessions to the churches and its quickening of the life of the spirit. In some respects its methods and its characteristic manifestations were

unparalleled in New England history. It was distinguished far beyond any revival in this region beside, by fervent appeals to the feelings resulting in emotional excitement sufficient oftentimes to produce striking physical effects, and by such a sense of the divine presence and of the reality of unseen things as led many who came under its power to claim visions and spiritual gifts not granted to Christians in more ordinary times. These more unusual and extravagant manifestations were opposed, indeed, by the vast majority of the ministry of New England; but they were wide-spread and impressive among the humbler and more ignorant subjects of the "Great Awakening."

Born of the intenser manifestations of the revival and emphasizing thus its more emotional and transitory aspects, the Separatist movement had in itself from the first the seeds of ultimate dissolution. Its adherents laid weight on bodily effects as evidences of the working of the Spirit of God. They denied the necessity of an educated ministry. They believed themselves so gifted with the "key of knowledge," as to be able to discern by spiritual intuition who were truly Christians and who were not. They regarded discipline as a prime duty. Holding such opinions, prevailingy recruited from the more ignorant and less well-to-do portion of the population, and persecuted by the heavy hand of the colonial government for many years, it is no wonder that the Separatists as a whole ended in disaster.

Yet these traits were far from exhausting the characteristics of the Separatist movement, and had they been all, that movement would have lost much of the significance which properly belongs to it. The Separatists were in large degree a protest against the departure of eighteenth century Congregationalism from its earlier ideals. The lapse of a century since the planting of the New England churches had resulted in great modifications. The dying out of the fire of the original spiritual zeal in which the colonies were planted was followed by a decreasing intensity of religious experience and a diminishing emphasis in preaching on the possibility and necessity of a conscious "conversion," such as had prevailed in early New England. Since men had little of striking religious experience to tell, the custom of "relations" of God's dealings with the soul passed into comparative disuse as a condition of entrance into church-membership. New England preaching, till awakened by the revival, had been growing formal and increasingly essay-like for two generations. And, in Connecticut at least, a state-supported ecclesiastical organization, approaching Presbyterian government in several of its features, had taken the place of the freedom of earlier Congregationalism.

Most disastrous of all was the Half-Way Covenant system. Begun by earnest pastors in the seventeenth century in an honest desire to hold young people under the watch and discipline of the

churches, it really lowered the spiritual tone of the churches as a whole. It established a half-way house between a neglect of Christian privileges and a full acknowledgment of the claims of the gospel. Those who had been baptized in infancy by reason of their parents' Christian profession were now allowed and encouraged to bring their own children for baptism and a similar church-membership even if conscious themselves of no regenerative change. Such imperfect members satisfied the conditions of their "half-way" status if they gave intellectual assent to the main doctrines of the Christian faith and agreed to submit themselves to church discipline. The chief evil of the system was that it encouraged men and women to do something to which they and the church alike ascribed value; but something, nevertheless, far short of a full consecration to Christ and his service. Having "owned the covenant" and entered into "half-way" membership, they too easily satisfied themselves that they had done all possible for themselves and their children.

Against all these serious modifications of earlier Congregationalism the Separatists protested. They were not the only ones in our churches who antagonized these evils. The more strenuous supporters of the "Great Awakening" who never left the fellowship of the established churches did so very generally. But the Separatists were determined and consistent opponents of these things, and in their attitude they are amply justified by later Congre-



gational history. Whatever their errors and shortcomings in other respects,—and the following narrative shows that these were fatally numerous,—the Separatists were right in their opposition to many serious spiritual declensions in the churches of their day.

This movement, never told heretofore with the fullness that it deserves, has found a painstaking and sympathetic historian in Dr. S. L. Blake, and students of eighteenth century New England religious story will welcome his narrative of the rise, growth and decline of the Separatists. The episode is one well deserving the labor and care which he has bestowed upon its presentation.



## A Foreword

In "Some Aspects of the Religious Life of New England," Dr. George Leon Walker, speaking of the Separates of Connecticut, says, "The subject deserves a fuller investigation than it has ever yet received." He also speaks of it as "a chapter which still awaits its proper treatment at the hands of some painstaking and sympathetic historian." In preparing the second volume of the history of the first Church of Christ, New London, Connecticut, the writer found a considerable wealth of material concerning this unwritten chapter of ecclesiastical history in New England. He also became aware that more was within reach, much of which had never seen the light. He was led to further investigation and found so much that he resolved to gather the material into a volume. Besides, on studying the subject, as it presented itself, the writer, while recognizing the many foolish extravagances of the "New Lights," as they were often called, yet found himself so in sympathy with many of their contentions that he seemed to himself so far forth to fulfil Dr. Walker's condition of a "sympathetic historian."

The story is a somewhat thrilling one. It throws a strange light upon religious liberty in Connecticut between 1742 and 1784. The materials were gath-