Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen Biography

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Biography

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691-ca. 1748), a Dutch Reformed clergyman, was a noted exhorter and revivalist who initiated the Great Awakening in America's Middle colonies.

A pastor's son, Theodorus Frelinghuysen was born at Lingen, Germany. His father and a minister friend gave him a thorough classical education. Frelinghuysen was licensed in 1717 by the Classis of Emden and the next year became a chaplain and then subrector in Friesland.

Having learned that four Dutch frontier congregations in New Jersey desired a pastor, Frelinghuysen left for America in 1719. In a guest sermon in New York (1720) he immediately offended influential clerics by deviating from established rubric and by advocating revivalism.

In his scattered settlements Frelinghuysen taught and preached passionately that religious performance without true conversion was an abomination. His zeal appealed to the young and the poor, but many parishoners resented criticism of their behavior and Frelinghuysen's stringent requirements for taking Communion. They allied themselves with New York clergymen who proclaimed baptismal regeneration instead. A long, bitter dispute produced publication of a lengthy *Klagte* (*Complaint*), signed by 64 family heads in the parishes. Some clerics, however, sided with Frelinghuysen, who defended himself ably in sermons published in several pamphlets. Gradually Frelinghuysen's influence grew; he was increasingly invited to preach to other New Jersey congregations.

Eloquent and vigorous, Frelinghuysen stimulated community intellectual life and trained several ministers. His presentation of the Gospel had a reforming effect, and significant revivals followed. The movement spread to other denominations, and Frelinghuysen (with the aid of Gilbert Tennent and later George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards) led in generating the series of revivals called the Great Awakening.

Innovative and individualistic, Frelinghuysen worked to free the New World Dutch Church from the Classis of Amsterdam and urged greater authority for an American clerical tribunal than that granted by the Church in Holland. He also introduced private prayer meetings and lay preaching and advocated founding a college and theological seminary.

Frelinghuysen married Eva Terhune, a farmer's daughter; the couple had five sons and two daughters. The sons all entered the ministry, and both daughters married clergymen. Seven pamphlets of Frelinghuysen's sermons were published (several in English as well as in Dutch) during his lifetime.