

CHURCH HISTORY

The Great Awakening: 18th Century

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The Modern Church, part 9

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. At the end of the seventeenth century, religion was on a decline in America. The church as a whole was fairly dead, and many in the various denominations remained unconverted. With the loss of evangelical enthusiasm that characterized the first generation of Congregationalists, Presbyterians and others, and with the increase of the unchurched on the expanding frontiers, religion and morals declined all over the colonies. Deism and Rationalism, which came from Europe, lulled many of the churches to sleep.
- B. The Colonial world was at a low ebb spiritually and needed a spiritual awakening. God brought it in a series of revivals called the Great Awakening. The Great Awakening in America and the Methodist movement in England occurred at the same time. The Methodist movement in England and the Great Awakening in America came together in the person of George Whitefield.
- C. The Great Awakening was not only the first significant inter-colonial movement in America, but it was also part of an international nonsectarian revival.

II. REVIVAL IN THE MIDDLE COLONIES

- A. The fires of revival began with the preaching of Theodorus J. Frelinghuysen, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Jersey around 1726. Frelinghuysen was a preacher of outstanding ability. In his sermons he put all the emphasis on the need of conversion, and his fervent preaching soon bore fruit. Other ministers heard about the revival and asked Frelinghuysen to preach in their churches.
- B. William Tennet was the Scottish minister of a Presbyterian church in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. He had four sons whom he wanted to train them for

the ministry. He established the “Log College” where he trained three of his sons and about fifteen others to preach the Word. He taught his students Latin, Greek, Hebrew, logic and theology. Above all he stirred in them a fervent evangelical spirit. Gilbert Tennet, one of the sons, took the pastorate of the New Brunswick Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. Here he was influenced by Theodore Frelinghuysen, and was permitted to preach in the Dutch Reformed churches. Gilbert’s flaming doctrinal preaching and his careful pastoral guidance soon provided leadership for revival among the Presbyterians. Among Gilbert Tennet’s sermons was a powerful message entitled, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” which caused a big stir in his own denomination. It is worth noting that the Presbyterians temporarily split in 1745 over revivalism. The Old Side opposed revivalism; the New Side favored it. They reunited in 1758.

III. REVIVAL IN NEW ENGLAND

- A. Revival came to New England Puritanism through the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, who was possibly the greatest theologian America has had. Edwards was born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut, where his father was minister of the Congregational church. He was graduated from Yale (which was established to train men for the ministry) at the age of seventeen. In 1727, after several years of further study and of preaching and teaching, he became minister to the Congregational church in Northampton in central Massachusetts. He claims he was converted while at Yale and averaged thirteen hours a day in his study until he met George Whitefield.
- B. Revival in New England began around 1734 but it reached its peak in 1739. It was in 1739 that Whitefield came to America and he became very good friends with Jonathan Edwards. Whitefield was a Methodist and preached the gospel with real fervor. In the Boston Common he drew 20,000 people to hear him preach at a time when there were only 30,000 in the whole city. Whitefield had a tremendous influence upon Edwards. Edwards changed some of his preaching habits and began to appeal to man’s will to believe, to be less formal in the pulpit, and to use more gestures. Edwards was opposed to emotional excesses but saw that there was value in a sincere appeal to the emotional nature of men. He stressed the sovereignty of God in his preaching. As were a great many revivalists, Edwards and Whitefield were both strong Calvinists.

- C. Edwards felt that the young people were “going down the tubes,” so he began to spend time with them and their troubles. He organized youth prayer meetings and fellowships. Soon adults and ministers got caught up in the revival.
- D. Late in 1734 Edwards began a series of sermons on justification by faith, which were the fruit of his regular thirteen hours of study a day. He emphasized man’s unworthiness and complete dependence upon God. On July 8, 1741 he preached his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” While he read the sermon, he had a spider on the end of a string. Each time he mentioned hell, he would put the spider over a burning candle. The spider would fight to avoid the flames. So powerful was the message, he had to stop and request silence that he might be heard, for there was such loud weeping.
- E. Of the 300,000 people in New England, between 25,000 and 50,000 were added to the churches as new members. The moral tone of New England was lifted to a higher plane.
- F. Because of his strong Calvinistic beliefs, his refusal to let the unconverted partake in the Lord’s Table, his preaching against the sins of people, his work with youth and his repudiation of the halfway covenant, Edwards was removed from his church in 1749 by a vote of 200 to twenty. He, with his family, went to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he became a missionary to the Indians and the settlers. Here he wrote many works, including *Freedom of the Will* and *History of the Work of Human Redemption*. In 1758, he was called to be president of Princeton University, but he died that same year of a smallpox vaccination.

Many opposed the revival with fervor, such as Charles Chauncy, pastor of the First Church of Boston. Chauncy later became a Unitarian. The Congregationalists were divided into the Old Lights who opposed revivalism (itinerant preachers, lay exhorters, emotionalism, and what they called doctrinal looseness). The New Lights favored revivalism, and its later exponents such as Timothy Dwight and Samuel Hopkins favored an unlimited atonement position. The Old Lights became more liberal and later formed the Unitarian branch of Congregationalism.

IV. REVIVAL IN THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

- A. The preaching of Whitefield had tremendous effects in Georgia among Christians in general, especially in the Church of England.
- B. The Awakening spread to Presbyterians in Virginia after 1740. Famous preachers such as Samuel Morris, William Robinson and Samuel Davies had an important part in revival.
- C. The Baptists and Methodists were too small in number at this time to have much impact.

V. THE END OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

- A. The Great Awakening died as quickly as it had started, which seems to be true of all revivals. By 1746, there was no sign of it.
- B. Jonathan Edwards said that the revival ended as quickly as it had begun. He felt there was no human cause for this, but that God just dipped down and did it, for God is the author of revival.

VI. CONTROVERSY OF REVIVALISM

- A. With revival comes bad as well as good things. It always causes much controversy among all men, even among Christian men.
- B. Revivalism tends to bring: 1) extreme emotionalism; 2) itinerant ministry; 3) splitting churches; 4) lack of emphasis upon works; 5) and sometimes superficial results.

VII. POSITIVE EFFECTS OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

- A. *Salvation of Souls*: Thousands were saved because of the Great Awakening, and it changed American history. Only about 10% of the population was directly affected by the revival but this was enough to give moral fiber to the country.

- B. *Separation*: Revivalism brought a separation of evangelicals from liberals in the New Side, New Lights and the Old Side, Old Lights. It preserved real Christianity.
- C. *Moral Improvement*: When people are converted, their lives are changed. Before Whitefield came to Boston, the president of Harvard University wrote to a friend complaining of the moral decay in the college. He said, “Whence is there such a prevalency of so many immoralities amongst the professors? Why so little success of the gospel?” Later, describing the revival which came to the Harvard Campus, President Willard wrote,
- That which forbodes the most lasting advantage is the new state of the college. Gentlemen’s sons that were sent here only for a mere polite education, are now so full of zeal for the cause of Christ and the love of souls as to devote themselves absolutely to the study of divinity. The college is entirely changed; the students are full of God — and will I hope come out blessings to this and succeeding generations.
- D. *Educational Institutions*: From a desire to prepare men for the ministry and to give students a Christian foundation for secular studies, many colleges were founded: Princeton College; Dartmouth College (established to train missionaries to the Indians); Browns College (established to train evangelists); Kings College (Columbia); Washington and Lee College; Hampden-Sydney College, and Queens College.
- E. *Missionary Work*: Missionary work among the Indians became very prominent, and Dartmouth College was established for that very purpose. David Brainerd was a product of the Great Awakening. His Brainerd’s diary inspired William Carey, Henry Martyn, Samuel Marsden and Thomas Coke to engage in missionary work.
- F. *Humanitarianism*: Whitefield created the Bethesda Orphanage at Savannah in 1741, and other works sprang up as a result of the Great Awakening.
- G. *Cooperation*: One should not forget that the Great Awakening stimulated intercolonial cooperation in the area of religion. This set a pattern that could be followed later in political and military cooperation among the colonies. This was the first attempt at inter-denominationalism.