

CHURCH HISTORY

American Christianity: 19th Century

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The Modern Church, part 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Christianity in America had its ups and downs in the nineteenth century. The early part of this century was filled with Evangelical fervor as a result of the Second Awakening. But this enthusiasm was greatly shaken in the last half of the century.
- B. From 1850 on, there were the threats of evolution, liberalism, cultism, fanaticism, war and urbanization. The church in America has never recovered from the dark days of the late 1800's.

II. THE FINNEY REVIVALS

- A. Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) was a lawyer who lived in western New York. He was converted in 1821, and his conversion was very emotional for he said, "The waves of liquid love flowed over me," and "Don't fan me anymore or I will die." He began an independent theological study, and then entered the Presbyterian ministry. He had real doubts about Calvinistic theology, and transferred to the Congregational Church.
- B. He became a successful evangelist, and from 1826 he conducted large meetings in such cities as Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Finney, a strong freewill theologian, was the first evangelist in history to introduce the anxious seat or the altar call, where those concerned about their souls came forward to the front of the auditorium or church.
- C. Finney was invited to become the first professor of theology at Oberlin College, of which Asa Mahan was founder and president. The same year there was a split over the issue of slavery at Lane Seminary, and four-fifths of the students walked out promising to go to Oberlin College if Finney would come there to teach. Finney did come and later became the president of the college.

- D. Today the church still suffers from Finney's teachings. If Finney would have stayed on as an evangelist instead of becoming a theologian, the evangelical world today would be on a more sound foundation. Finney taught three damaging doctrines:
1. He stressed man's natural ability to take hold of the blessing of God, claiming that the only thing keeping people from God's blessings is their own free will. To Finney, salvation was not a supernatural gift, but an act of the will in which a man chooses God without supernatural enablement. This went beyond Arminianism, approaching Pelagianism.
 2. Sanctification was a series of experiences including a third and fourth work of grace. He split justification and sanctification, saying a man could be saved and not sanctified to any degree. Sanctification supposedly came later and continued in an experience subsequent to justification. He claimed that he was carrying Wesley's doctrine of sanctification to its logical conclusion.
 3. Finney taught entire sanctification or eradication. He insisted that one can actually live above known sin, becoming sinless. This is nothing but perfectionism. Finney's work at Oberlin College, where his perfectionist ideas led him to promote social reforms — particularly opposition to slavery — constituted another area of important influence of his life.
- E. Finney's theological beliefs are the beginning of the "Holiness" or "Pentecostal" movements of today. Not only did Finney's work shake America, but he also made two trips to Europe where he experienced extensive revival.

III. THE CIVIL WAR

- A. In 1861 America was plunged into a bloody civil war. For years before the War broke, out there were political, economic and moral differences between the North and the South. Slavery became the moral issue over which the Civil War was fought, but it probably was not the main reason for the War. Slavery, however, was an issue over which the common man could get involved so as to stir him to action. The issue of state's rights was probably the big issue in the War, plus many economic reasons.

- B. The humanitarianism inherent in the early revivals, the deistic interest in man, and natural rights philosophy all helped develop means to deal with slavery. It is interesting to note that it looked like slavery might die out around 1785, but then in 1792 Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin and the cotton industry became the main economic source for the South. Manual labor was needed to pick the cotton and slavery met this demand.
- C. Northerners demanded the immediate abolition of all slaves, for slavery in itself is an evil system. When the war came, Christians in the North and South divided. There were then the Northern and Southern Baptists, Northern and Southern Methodists, Northern and Southern Presbyterians, etc. To this day, the Baptists and Presbyterians still have not reunited on a grand scale. Of course, the dividing issue is no longer slavery. Rather, the Northern denominations seem to be more liberal than the Southern denominations.
- D. Christians fought on both sides of the War. Church leaders recruited men for their respective sides, and the churches quickly assumed responsibility for the moral and spiritual welfare of the soldiers. They also engaged in humanitarian activities to relieve the physical needs of war sufferers. Southern generals like Jackson and Lee were quite religious, and welcomed both the churches' provision of chaplains for their regiments and the visits to the camps by Southern clergymen. During the war, a revival began among the Confederate forces around Richmond in 1861, reaching its peak in 1863 and 1864. Perhaps 150,000 or more were converted in this revival. Some scholars have asked who really lost the war, for in defeat many Southerners turned to Christ. When they returned home after the war, the South became known as the Bible Belt.
- E. The church, both in condemning slavery in the North and supporting it in the South, participated in politics as an organization in a way that compromised its spiritual message. War always takes its toll, and there is really never a winner. After the War, the church and the nation were left in economic, political and moral chaos.
- F. After the war, the former slaves formed their own churches, pulling away from anything that once involved white masters. Their churches often became quite emotional, unfortunately forgetting doctrine. There were not many trained Black pastors. Demagogic Black leaders in urban areas occasionally used their members as political tools. It was out of this era that the "Negro spiritual" was born, which has been great cultural contribution to our land.

- G. During and after the War, the churches became more alert to their social obligations. City rescue missions, orphanages, hospitals, homes for the aged, and other agencies were established to meet the needs of various groups. The YMCA and YWCA movements spread rapidly across the country to meet the needs of youth in the cities for lodging, social activity, and Bible study. This social concern has become more pronounced in the twentieth century.

IV. THE MOODY REVIVALS

- A. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, America became less agrarian and more industrial. People left the country in large numbers and came to the city. Thus, there developed a great need to reach the masses of people moving into or immigrating to American cities.
- B. God met this need through organized, urban, mass evangelism. The first real pioneer in this field was D.L. Moody. He was converted as a shoe salesman through the efforts of a Sunday school teacher. Moody went to Chicago and prospered in the shoe business, but felt the call to preach the gospel. He had no seminary or college training, but God used him in a mighty way to reach men for Christ. Starting out in the YMCA and army camps during the Civil War, he went on to conduct mass evangelistic campaigns with the assistance of Ira D. Sankey in the large cities during the last three decades of the century.
- C. Moody was a modified Calvinist who believed in unlimited atonement, and his teaching balanced the radical teachings of Charles Finney earlier in the century. Not only did he have remarkable success in this country, but he made several trips to England, one of the most notable of which was the 1873-1875 campaign during which he preached to over 2,500,000 people in London.
- D. Moody, having no training himself, saw the need to train men for the ministry, so he established Moody Bible Institute. This is still one of the leading schools in the country for training missionaries.
- E. R.A. Torrey, J. Wilbur Chapman, and other evangelists followed after Moody, with great success. Moody's revival was the last major revival that America has seen. We must pray that God will bring us revival lest our nation perish.

V. CULTS

- A. While evangelical Christianity was flourishing, the cults were having their beginnings. The Mormon movement came into being in 1830; the Seventh-Day Adventists in the following year; Spiritism in 1848; and Christian Science in 1876.
- B. The separation of church and state in America provided the opportunity for cults to grow. While the Evangelical message was being preached, there was a woeful neglect of doctrine among Christians. Thus, many professing Christians became targets for the cults.

VI. MISSIONS

- A. The real modern missionary movement began in the nineteenth century. There was a burning desire among Christians in America to fulfill the Great Commission. Kenneth S. Latourette in his church history designates this time as “the great century” in missions among Protestants.
- B. At the beginning of the century, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions came into being (one of its first missionaries was Adoniram Judson). The American Bible Society was founded in 1816, and the American Tract Society in 1825. At the end of the century, a large number of faith missions came into existence for the propagation of the gospel on foreign fields. These included: Africa Inland Mission, 1895; Central American Mission, 1890; Evangelical Alliance, 1890; The Regions Beyond Missionary Union, 1878; Sudan Interior Mission, 1901.