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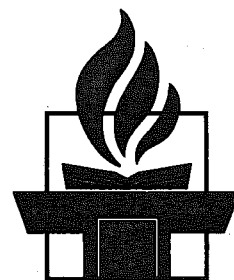
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Another Look at the First Great Awakening

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There has been an astonishing lack of interest on the part of the evangelical church in the Great Awakenings of America which took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Oddly enough secular historians seem to place more value upon them than modern Christians. One can check the index in any reputable college library in America and he will probably find numerous studies of the Awakenings, often from a purely sociological and historical standpoint. For example, I have found much help in such volumes as *The Great Awakening, 1787-1805*, by John B. Boles, published by the University of Kentucky, and *Revivals Awakening and Reform*, by William G. McLoughlin, produced by the University of Chicago.

Students of American church history are unanimous in their opinion that the Great Awakenings have had a major role in the formation not only of the American church but of American culture as a whole. McLoughlin, referring to the Puritan movement, says that "America was born in an awakening."¹ He also states that the American Revolution was in fact "the secular fulfillment of the religious ideals of the First Great Awakening."² Martin Marty asserts that studies of colonial life reveal that "The Great Awakening was perhaps the *most extensive intercolonial event*," and that "it relates to the unsettling of the established order and is related to the War of Independence and nation-building endeavours."³ He cites the contention of Puritan scholars Perry Miller and Alan Heimert that the First Great Awakening began "a 'new era' not merely of American Protestantism, but in the evolution of the American mind, that it was a watershed, a break with the Middle Ages, a turning point, a 'crisis.'"⁴

There are many reasons we should study the Awakenings. For one thing, ignorance of the past accounts for mistakes of the present. The modern church has totally ignored its sources and is now adrift without a purpose. The revival accounts of

our country and in other parts of the world are a rich source of devotional material and encouragement for the battles we face today. The study of such treatises as Edwards' *Religious Affections* provide a rich source of devotional material and can help us to analyze religious movements today. Interestingly, many of the same types of problems we contend with today in the charismatic and Vineyard movements cropped up in the Great Awakening eras. Edwards, Bellamy, Hopkins and Tennent also had to deal with emotional excesses, subjectivism and dependence upon visions, dreams, and supposed extra-biblical revelations. They were well schooled in such themes as the need for and the causes of revival, as well as the dangers of excesses and counterfeits. In this article I will sketch in a brief introductory way some of the leading features of the First Great Awakening, with some attention to some of the leading personalities involved in it.

Background of the First Great Awakening

Notwithstanding the noble intentions of the first Pilgrims to establish a Holy Christian Commonwealth, sincere religious devotion was far from universal in the succeeding generations. Most of the early settlers came out of ambition and desire for material success rather than to serve God. They were, to be sure, an adventurous breed: intelligent, determined, and courageous. But they were not always godly by any means. It is estimated that in the early colonial days hardly a fifth of those in Massachusetts were professed Christians.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century the spiritual ideals of the Pilgrims had been largely forgotten, and serious theological and moral decline had set in. The wellsprings of piety that had flowed freely in an earlier generation had run nearly dry. Ardent devotion had given way to self-satisfaction and indifference. Historians generally acknowledge that preoccupation with politics and personal security characterized this period. Drunkenness and debauchery were common.

Even the ministers were not immune from the general apostasy. In the 1730s Governor Sharpe of Maryland cited cases among the clergy of "scandalous behavior," "notorious badness," "immoral conduct," and "abandoned and prostituted life and character." Such epithets could have easily been applied to the New England clergy.

Cotton Mather, whose opinions deserve great respect, gave a shockingly negative assessment of the religious situation in 1704.

It is confessed by all who know anything of the matter ... that there is a general and horrible decay of Christianity, among the professors of it ... the modern Christianity is too generally but a very spectre, scarce a shadow of the ancient. Ah! sinful nations. Ah! children that are corrupters; what have your hands done! ... So notorious is this decay of Christianity that whole books are even now and then written to inquire into it.⁵

The churches seemed to be filled mostly with nominal Christians who gave no evidence of regeneration. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, was the compromise of biblical standards for participation in the church ordinances. The earlier Puritans required that those who were admitted to the Lord's supper give evidence of being genuinely converted. Later leaders receded from this standard and adopted the position that persons baptized in infancy who were not scandalous in life should not be excluded. The teachings of Solomon Stoddard on the "Half-Way" Covenant continued the corrupting influence. He taught that the sacraments should be taken by the unconverted; this would assist them in their pursuit of a relationship with God. This policy filled the churches with baptized pagans. Easy standards of church membership are always symptomatic of a backslidden church.

The moral corruption of the individuals who made up the rank and file of the churches was not the only problem. A

liberal form of Arminianism was in vogue. It was thought that the unconverted could carry on a series of works preparatory to conversion which would more or less guarantee their acceptance with God. There was much self-satisfaction and security but little dependence upon God. The masses had no consciousness of the strict and holy requirements of the Law of God, and deluded themselves into thinking that as long as they did their best they had nothing to fear.

If a smug self-confidence characterized the churches, the educational institutions were plagued with arrogant skepticism. Joseph Tracy says in his *History of the Great Awakening* that "The English universities at that time, were little else than learned dens of infidelity and dissipation."⁶ Already the deism of the continental "enlightenment" was beginning to infect the upper classes of New England, a trend which culminated in Europe in the French Revolution with its violent reaction to all authority, especially religious. America was desperately in need of a spiritual awakening. Without such a movement a breakdown of the social order seemed likely. The dark clouds of divine wrath seemed to be hovering over the Colonies, ready to burst forth with a torrent of judgment.

Beginnings of the Awakening

Then suddenly things began to change. Here and there the Spirit of God began to move mightily in the churches. It is generally acknowledged that the beginnings of the First Great Awakening were in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the semi-wilderness of the Raritan Valley. The primary instrument was T.J. Frelinghuysen (1691-1747) who became pastor of the Dutch people in the vicinity of the present city of New Brunswick, New Jersey. He found the population in this newly and sparsely settled county to be formally religious but void of real spiritual life. Although he was often insulted, ridiculed, and even attacked in the civil courts he fearlessly preached the necessity of the new birth and the emptiness of mere

nominal religion. Under his preaching large numbers were converted, including many prominent people and some notorious sinners. He once said, "I would rather die a thousand deaths than not preach the truth."

Another revivalist during this period was the fiery Irishman Gilbert Tennent (1703-64). A graduate of his father's Log College at Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, he had been encouraged by the success of Frelinghuysen to embark on a course of evangelism. A silvery-tongued orator with long flowing hair, he burst upon such towns as New Haven and Boston with the fury of Elijah the Tishbite. His most famous sermon was "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" which was later published by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. Gilbert, like his less famous father William (1673-1746), was convinced that many of the ministers were devoid of spiritual life. With devastating bluntness, he referred to the New England clergy as "Catterpillars who were laboring to devour every green thing." Under such withering verbal fire many were angered but others came under conviction and were converted.

Whitefield and Edwards

The two greatest human instruments in this great revival, however, were the English evangelist George Whitefield (1714-70) and the colonial pastor Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). The former was, unquestionably, one of the premier evangelists in the history of the Christian church. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that he was the greatest preacher that England has ever produced.⁷ E. C. Dargan, in his *History of Preaching*, states, "The history of preaching since the apostles does not contain a greater or worthier name than that of George Whitefield."⁸

Whitefield was a man of entire devotedness to God, indomitable zeal, and intense compassion for his fellow men. Along with these spiritual qualities he was blessed with magnificent talents as a public speaker. Benjamin Franklin, who considered him a personal friend, though unwilling to submit to his

gospel, often went to hear him simply for the pure pleasure of listening to his captivating oratory. He described him as having “a loud and clear voice, and articulated his words so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great distance, especially as his auditors observed the most perfect silence.”⁹ Once while listening to him speak from the court house steps in Philadelphia he calculated by gradually stepping back from him that he could be heard by 30,000 in open air.

Whitefield preached the message of the Puritans uncompromisingly and passionately. His primary themes were the desperate depravity of human nature, the absolute necessity of Regeneration, and Justification by faith. On the question of Election he was a Calvinist, agreeing with a strict interpretation of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England to which he belonged all his life.

The English evangelist first came to the Colonies in 1738, laboring in connection with an orphanage in Georgia. During his visit the next year he preached up and down the Eastern Seaboard to huge crowds of people. These meetings had a powerful moral impact on the community. Watson, in his *Annals of Philadelphia*, stated that after Whitefield preached to 15,000 people on Society Hill, “The dancing school was discontinued and the ball and the concert rooms were shut up as inconsistent with the gospel.” *The Gazette* of the day said, “The change to religion here is altogether surprising, through Whitefield’s influence. No books sell but religious, and such is the general conversation.” Benjamin Franklin confirmed this appraisal of the power of revival. He said,

It was wonderful to see the changes soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing Psalms sung in different families of

every street.¹⁰

Edwards experienced similar revival blessings while pastoring in the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Shortly after he became pastor he began to protest the prevailing ignorance of the people and preached on themes such as original sin, Justification by faith, and the sovereignty of God. These messages were not delivered with studied oratorical effect or flamboyance, but in simple and quiet dignity. In the winter of 1734-35 many became very distressed about their spiritual condition. In his *Narrative of Surprising Conversions* he describes what happened in his church.

The Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in and wonderfully work among us.... Presently ... a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world, became *universal* in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and of all ages. The noise among the drybones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things were soon thrown by.... The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and everyone appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid, it appeared in their very countenances. It was then a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, of danger every day of dropping into hell ... and the work of *conversion* was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more. Souls did, as it were, come by flocks to Jesus Christ.¹¹

In a town of 1400 Edwards received about one hundred to membership before one communion and sixty at another. A transformation took place in the appearance of the town.

It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over

their husbands. The goings of God were then seen in His sanctuary, God's day was a delight and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God's service ... every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister ... the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.¹²

This flame of revival which was first ignited in Northampton spread to other towns.

One of the products of this movement which swept through New England, the Middle States, and the Colonies on the Southeastern Seaboard was the missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd. He was converted while laboring upon a farm in Haddam, Connecticut, and became associated with the spiritual awakening at Yale when Gilbert Tennent was preaching in the vicinity. His diary, which was published by Jonathan Edwards, has had a powerful impact upon missionary endeavor throughout the years. Even today Brainerd's life is a stimulus to missions and a source of encouragement to all who labor in evangelism.

The United States is still drawing dividends from the Great Awakening. But the capital is nearly spent. We need another mighty movement of the Spirit of God in our land. We need ministers who will preach the message of Edwards, Whitefield, and Tennent in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes

- 1 William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 24.
- 2 McLoughlin, 97.
- 3 McLoughlin, viii
- 4 McLoughlin, viii
- 5 Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (London: The Banner

of Truth, 1970), 1:413.

- 6 Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1989), 39.
- 7 Dallimore, ix.
- 8 Edwin C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 2:307.
- 9 Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Spenser Press: n.d.), 137.
- 10 Franklin, 133.
- 11 *The Works of President Edwards* (New York: Levitt, Trow and Co., 1849), 4:134-35.
- 12 Edwards, 135.

Author

Dr. John F. Thornbury is senior pastor of Winfield Baptist Church (ABC), Winfield, Pennsylvania. He is a conference speaker and author of several books, including the important biography, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*. He has contributed to earlier issues of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.