

Critical Junctures in American Evangelicalism: I The Age of Revivals and the First Amendment

By Randall Balmer*

With the possible exception of the Second Great Awakening, no event in American religious history was more formative than the First Great Awakening, a massive revival of religion that swept through the Atlantic colonies in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The Great Awakening reconfigured religious life in the colonies, and it introduced to American society a peculiar strain of evangelicalism that remains America's folk religion to this day. The Great Awakening featured such itinerant preachers as James Davenport, Gilbert Tennent, George Whitefield, and Andrew Crosswell, who articulated their evangelical message to receptive audiences, and it also showcased the intellectual gifts of Jonathan Edwards, who emerged as the principal theologian and apologist for the revival.

Edwards was a grandson of the estimable Solomon Stoddard, known (not affectionately) to Puritans in Boston as the "pope of the Connecticut Valley." Edwards's father, Timothy Edwards, was also a Congregational minister, and young Jonathan, a precocious and intellectually curious child, prepared to take up the family business. He graduated from Yale College at the age of seventeen and studied an additional two years to study theology. After a brief and unremarkable stint as pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in New York City, Edwards returned to Yale as tutor in 1723, serving effectively as head of the institution in the confusing aftermath of the Anglican Apostasy, when the rector of the Congregationalist school, Timothy Cutler, and several tutors converted to the Church of England.

Edwards stayed at Yale for two years before accepting a call as assistant pastor to Stoddard, his grandfather, in Northampton, Massachusetts, and then succeeded to the pulpit at Stoddard's death in 1729. As early as the 1690s, contemporaneous with accounts from Gulliam Bertholf, a Pietist preacher in New Jersey, Stoddard had been reporting "harvests" among his congregations, by which he meant stirrings of religious revival. Stoddard's detractors in Boston were skeptical, in part because they didn't care for Stoddard's theological innovations regarding the Lord's Supper, which he treated as a converting ordinance and not one reserved to those who were demonstrably regenerate.

During the winter of 1734-1735, a revival of religion swept through Northampton, during Edwards's tenure as pastor. Three hundred people were added to the congregation, and religion, according to Edwards, became the dominant topic of conversation among the townspeople. After the revival waned somewhat, the fires were rekindled with the visit of George Whitefield in 1740, during his tour of the Atlantic colonies. By this time the revival was widespread, a phenomenon

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known to contemporaries as a “great and general awakening” and to historians as the Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening reshaped American society in important ways. In New England especially, and to a lesser degree in the Middle Colonies and in the Chesapeake, the revival fractured the unity of colonial society. Countless New England towns bear witness to the effects of the revival. The village green in New Haven, Connecticut, for instance, has the Old Light Congregational church at the center, flanked by the New Light congregation on one side and the Episcopal church on the other. The revival divided congregations and communities, but it also disrupted the social fabric of colonial America, the halcyon vision of the Puritans where church and state were both coterminous and mutually reinforcing.

The Awakening also introduced evangelicalism into American society; more accurately, it created a strain of evangelicalism unique to North America, unlike previous iterations coming out of the Protestant Reformation. I generally refer to the ingredients in this mixture the three Ps: the remnants of New England *Puritanism*, *Pietism* from the Continent, and Scots-Irish *Presbyterianism*. The confluence of these streams during the years of the Great Awakening produced evangelicalism in America, and to this day evangelicalism retains some of the characteristics of each: the obsessive introspection of Puritanism, the doctrinal precisionism of the Presbyterians, and the warm-hearted spiritual ardor of the Pietists. Although, as we will see, the Second Great Awakening utterly recast evangelical theology, the essential elements of the three Ps can be discerned to the present day.

Other forces were at work that abetted the success of the Great Awakening, factors that would have a profound impact on evangelicalism throughout American history. The arrival of Whitefield signaled an important shift in the tactics of revivalism. Whitefield, an Anglican clergyman, had been trained in the London theater, so he understood how to modulate his voice and pause for dramatic effect. In the context of colonial America, in a society that had no theatrical tradition, Whitefield’s stentorian preaching was inordinately successful. Contemporaries said that he could bring tears to your eyes simply by saying “Mesopotamia,” and as even the hardened religious skeptic Benjamin Franklin could attest, Whitefield was a persuasive orator. Franklin’s famous account of Whitefield’s visit to Society Hill in Philadelphia stands as a monument to Whitefield’s effectiveness. Franklin admired Whitefield as a friend, though he had no time for his religion or for Whitefield’s pet project, an orphanage in Georgia, which Franklin regarded as too remote to do much good. Early on in Whitefield’s oration, Franklin recognized that he was heading toward an appeal for funds. He resolved not to give anything, then, after a time, decided to surrender the coppers in his pocket. Another rhetorical flourish and Franklin consented to give the silver, and Whitefield concluded so gloriously that Franklin entirely emptied his pockets into the collection plate, gold and all.

Franklin’s account of Whitefield’s visit to Society Hill also included his careful calculations that Whitefield’s voice could be heard by ten thousand people. This brings us to another observation about evangelical innovations during the Great Awakening: popular appeal. As Whitefield perambulated along the Atlantic

seaboard, he would often ask to use the local meetinghouse. But as word of Whitefield's success began to circulate, many of the settled clergy, fearing for their livelihoods, denied him access. Undaunted, Whitefield took his message directly to the people, preaching in the open air in the fields or on the village greens or Society Hill. By circumventing the clergy and the established churches, Whitefield and his evangelical confrères displayed the knack for populist communications that would become characteristic of evangelicalism to the present day. From the open-air preaching of Whitefield and a passel of itinerant preachers to the circuit riders and the colporteurs of the nineteenth century to the urban evangelism of Billy Sunday and Billy Graham in the twentieth century, evangelicals have always understood the importance of communicating directly with the masses, absent the niceties of ecclesiastical and denominational forms or even sanctified venues.

So influential was Whitefield's extemporaneous preaching that even Edwards struggled to keep pace with the changing times and circumstances of the Great Awakening. If you visit the Beineke Library at Yale and ask to see the originals of Edwards's sermons, you'll notice that they are palm-sized folios stitched into a booklet; Edwards scholars speculate, plausibly, that Edwards concealed the text of his sermons in his hand in order to convey the impression that he was preaching extemporaneously, when in fact he was not. Itinerant preachers like Whitefield, on the other hand, had the advantage of being able to repeat the same sermons time after time to changing audiences, thereby perfecting their styles of delivery – an advantage, as Franklin noted, denied to the settled clergy, who had to come up with fresh material every week.

Aside from the rhetorical advantages enjoyed by Whitefield and others, itinerancy had an enormous effect on religion in the eighteenth century. It provided religious options for the populace, options other than the established Congregationalist churches in New England, the Church of England in the South, and the traditionalist Dutch Reformed and Anglican churches in the Middle Colonies. The presence of itinerants forced the settled clergy to compete in what was emerging as a religious marketplace. Clergy could no longer rely solely on their livings; they had to maintain a rapport with their congregants for the simple reason that their congregants had other ecclesiastical options, especially with the emergence of the Baptists in New England and the Chesapeake, the Pietists and the Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, and various religious “entrepreneurs” in Pennsylvania and the South.

A kind of religious populism emerged in the eighteenth century that obtains to this day and can be seen most clearly in the televangelists and the megachurches. The televangelists, moreover, have solved forever the great riddle of itinerancy throughout American history: Through the miracle of electronic communications, the itinerant preacher, always an insurgent presence, can now be everywhere at once. But the ubiquity of itinerant preachers and the emergence of religious options in the eighteenth century had another important effect: the absence of anticlericalism. The caricature of the besotted, overweight, indulgent vicar or parson – so common in British humor – has no real counterpart here in America. The reason, I believe, is simple. In a free marketplace of religion, clerics cannot

afford to be complacent or negligent toward their congregants. They must always be conscious of popular sentiment – a two-edged sword, no doubt, because populism can always degenerate into demagoguery or into a theology of the lowest common denominator. But itinerancy and the religious marketplace ensure that religious leaders are always attentive to popular sentiment, and they ignore it at their peril.

Itinerancy and the free marketplace for religion also figured into the First Amendment proscriptions against religious establishment. Roger Williams, Puritan minister in Salem, Massachusetts, ran afoul of the Puritan authorities shortly after his arrival in the New World in 1631. Specifically, Williams feared the deleterious effects on the faith if church and state were too closely aligned. In his words, he sought to protect the “garden of the church” from the “wilderness of the world” by means of a “wall of separation.” This notion challenged the orthodoxy of the Puritan experiment, and for his troubles Williams was banished from the colony. He proceeded to Rhode Island, which the Puritans came to regard as a cesspool of religious heresy, and founded there a haven of religious toleration, which guaranteed liberty of individual conscience and the separation of church and state.

While in Rhode Island, Williams also founded the Baptist tradition in America, a tradition that, until very recently, enshrined two notions: adult or believer’s baptism (as opposed to infant baptism) and the separation of church and state. Williams’s ideas about disestablishment were picked up by such evangelical leaders as Isaac Backus and John Leland, and one of the great ironies of the eighteenth century is that the evangelicals allied themselves with Enlightenment types to press for religious disestablishment in the new nation.

This alliance of strange bedfellows produced the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which reads in part: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It codified the free marketplace of religion that had been the configuration by default in many of the colonies. It ensured that Americans would never have to deal with the miserable effects of religious establishment, effects that many of the founders knew all too well from their experience of Great Britain and the Continent. While it is probably true that Thomas Jefferson wanted to maintain that “line of separation” in order to protect the fragile new government from religious factionalism, whereas Williams wanted the “wall of separation” to preserve the integrity of the faith, the happy consequence of the First Amendment is that both sides benefited handsomely. Religious faith has flourished in America as nowhere else precisely because the government has (for the most part, at least) stayed out of the religion business. At the same time, allowing religious groups to function freely in the marketplace of popular discourse has tended to dissipate voices of political dissent, just as James Madison predicted in *Federalist Number 10*.

The First Amendment has allowed religious entrepreneurs, from Mother Ann Lee and Joseph Smith to Mary Baker Eddy and Elijah Muhammad, to peddle their wares in the free marketplace of American religion. But no group has functioned more effectively in this marketplace than evangelicals themselves. Evangelicals understand almost instinctively how to speak the idiom of the culture,

whether it be Whitefield's extemporaneous, open-air preaching, the circuit riders blanketing the South in the antebellum period, or the curricula and the entertainment of the megachurches, exquisitely attuned to the tastes of suburbanites in the late twentieth century. No religious movement in American history has benefited more from religious disestablishment, which makes the persistent attempts on the part of the Religious Right to eviscerate the First Amendment utterly confounding. Why would any evangelical seek to compromise the very basis for the popularity of his faith?

Perhaps we can bring some clarity to the issue with a counterfactual proposal: Suppose the founders had followed the historical precedent of at least a dozen centuries and established a religion for the new nation. Suppose, in other words, that the First Amendment contained only the provisions of the second clause, guaranteeing freedom of speech and the press, and no proscription against religious establishment? What would religion in America look like today?

We don't have to search very far. In Great Britain, the Church of England, the established religion, draws less than 3 percent of the population to its Sunday services. Several years back, the bishops of the state Lutheran church in Sweden, seeing the benefits of disestablishment, successfully petitioned the Swedish parliament to rescind the Lutherans' establishment status. The results were so overwhelming that the Lutheran bishops in Norway have now asked to be disestablished.

The First Amendment has ensured a salubrious religious culture in the United States, one unmatched anywhere in the world. If the founders had not stood up to those who wanted to designate Christianity as the religion of the new nation, the religious environment would most likely look very different, anemic in comparison with the religious vitality we see both today and throughout American history.

If the First Great Awakening introduced evangelicalism into the American context, the Second Great Awakening in the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century reshaped the movement in profound ways. Although some of the changes were tactical, the most dramatic shift was theological.

One of the first things I learned in my study of American church history was the profound difference in the theological underpinnings of the First and the Second Great Awakenings, as reflected in the theological dispositions of their respective apologists, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Grandison Finney. Edwards's history of the revival, published in 1737, remains a classic statement of a Calvinist approach to revival. The title, in many ways, tells you all you need to know about Edwards's understanding of the remarkable events in Northampton: *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*. It was Edwards's clear understanding that the revival in Northampton was a gracious visitation of the divine; there was nothing that Edwards had done to prompt such a visitation, much less to merit it. God, in his wisdom and infinite mercy, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, had chosen to work his regenerative wonders among the people of Northampton without regard to the merit or the efforts of either the congregants or their minister. In so doing, God had demonstrated his unfathomable mercy for all to see.

Charles Finney, on the other hand, had a very different understanding of revival. Finney famously declared in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* that revival was “the work of man.” Finney, born in Warren, Connecticut, and trained as a lawyer, had a religious conversion in 1821 and determined that he had been given “a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause.” The St. Lawrence presbytery licensed him to preach in 1823 and ordained him the following year. He began preaching in upstate New York under the auspices of the Female Missionary Society of the Western District in 1824.

Early in his career, Finney harbored doubts about Calvinism, not so much on theological as on pragmatic grounds; Finney was convinced that Calvinistic determinism simply did not lend itself to revival. Instead, he preached that by the mere exercise of volition anyone could repent of sin and thereby claim salvation. Contrary to the Calvinist and Edwardsean doctrine of election, the notion that God alone determined who was or was not part of the elect and thereby regenerate, Finney preached that salvation was available to all; it required merely an assent on the part of the individual.

Finney’s soteriology elevated persuasion to new heights of importance. If only the preacher could convince sinners to repent and to accept salvation for themselves, then the revival would be assured, no need any longer to wait for the mysterious movings of the Spirit or the even more elusive effectual “call” of Calvinist election. In order to help things along, Finney promoted what he called “new measures,” a set of strategic initiatives to engender revivals: protracted meetings, the use of advertising, allowing women to testify at religious gatherings, and the “anxious bench” or “mourner’s bench,” where those deliberating their eternal fates could come for counseling.

It doesn’t take much imagination to recognize that these “new measures” have become part of the fabric of modern evangelism, as witnessed by Billy Graham crusades in the twentieth century; Graham’s call for his auditors to “make a decision for Christ” comes straight from Finney’s playbook. But the familiarity of these tactics tends to disguise their revolutionary character in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas Jonathan Edwards had understood revival as “a surprising work of God,” Finney described it as “the work of man.” Therein lies an utter reconfiguration of evangelical theology, from the Calvinist orientation of the First Great Awakening to the Arminian theology of the Second Great Awakening, which also had strong affinities with Wesleyanism, the theology of John Wesley.

Why did Finney’s formulation take hold so rapidly in the early decades of the nineteenth century? Several reasons. First, Finney’s new theology fit the temper of the times. Among a people who had only recently taken their *political* destiny into their own hands, Finney assured them that they controlled their *religious* destiny as well. At least as popularly understood, salvation was no longer an anxiety-laden process of waiting to determine whether or not you were among the elect; now, in Finney’s scheme, an individual could initiate the process by means of volition. If you want to be saved, all you need to do is to decide to be saved. No need any longer to sweat through the elaborate Calvinist soteriology as

propagated in deadly detail by such Puritan divines as William Perkins and Jonathan Edwards.

Finney's formula had obvious appeal in the new nation, especially among a people inebriated with self-determinism. And to this day we Americans cherish this notion of rugged individualism and control of our own destinies. The Edwardsean theology of salvation and revival seems stilted and confining, whereas Finney's is supple and accommodating.

Finney's formulaic approach to revival also fit the social and economic circumstances of the nineteenth century. In an age of nascent industrialization and scientific rationalism, Finney's notion that revival was available simply by following an ordered set of steps and observing certain conventions worked very well. To hear Finney tell it, all you needed to do was combine the elements – advertising, protracted meetings, women's testimony, anxious bench – like you would in a chemical formula, and revival would be assured. And in an age of nascent industrialization and one increasingly enamored of technology, Finney's formulaic approach to revival fit the temper of the times. By the time that B. W. Gorham published his *Camp Meeting Manual* in 1854, the business of revivalism had been reduced to a science; Gorham, enlarging on Finney's prescriptions, dictated everything from locations to publicity strategies to instructions on how to construct the tents – all in the effort to guarantee a successful camp meeting.

The twentieth-century iteration of Gorham's *Camp Meeting Manual* is the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and especially its preparations for one of Graham's crusades. The well-oiled corporate machinery of the BGEA has been honed to utter perfection and a model of efficiency. Once a venue has been chosen for a revival (at least three years before the event itself), the organization sweeps into motion, calibrating everything from site selection and religious alliances to music programs and press coverage. Nothing is left to chance, and all contingencies are accounted for down to the tiniest detail. Far from relying on "a surprising work of God," modern revivalism owes an incalculable debt to the formulaic strategies of Charles Finney and B. W. Gorham.

The overriding genius of Finney and the theological innovations he introduced to American evangelicalism is that they suited perfectly the *Zeitgeist* and the emerging self-perception of Americans. Finney's Arminianism comported well with the storied rugged individualism that so shapes American identity, and his insistence that we control our own religious destiny was far more congenial to the American illusion of self-determinism than the arcane Calvinist doctrines of foreknowledge, predestination, and election.

After the Second Great Awakening and the theological innovations of Charles Finney, evangelical theology would never be the same. Reformed theology made one last, albeit sustained, stand in the person of Charles Hodge and his nineteenth-century colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary. But theirs was a forlorn and hopeless battle, one fought increasingly on the ramparts of a hyper-rationalism that owed more to the Enlightenment than it did to Calvin or even to historic Christianity.

In recent years, Calvinists have tried to stage a comeback on two fronts, both theological and historical. Various evangelical historians have tried to assert that the theological essence of evangelicalism is Reformed, not Wesleyan or Arminian, and that the true progenitors of contemporary evangelicalism are the Princetonians, not the Finneyites. Some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and my own denomination, the Evangelical Free Church, have even tried to recast themselves in the tradition of Reformed theology rather than Arminian theology. The Free Church, for instance, a denomination with deep roots in Pietism and strong affinities with Arminianism, has, through the agency of its flagship seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, laid claims to be Calvinist. Among other consequences, a denomination that ordained women in its early years, now frowns on the ordination of women.

What's the attraction of Calvinism to contemporary evangelicals? I think the attempt to recast themselves in the Reformed tradition is a reaction, at least in part, to the runaway success of pentecostalism in the twentieth century. That is, many evangelicals, especially those associated with seminaries, believe that Calvinism is more intellectually respectable and theologically rigorous than Wesleyanism or Arminianism, and so they have taken great pains to associate themselves with the Reformed tradition in an attempt to trade on what they perceive as its intellectual heft – even to the point of denying their own historical and theological roots.

Such efforts come largely to naught, however, at the grass roots. Finney's pragmatism and his brand of Arminianism carried the day among evangelicals – in the antebellum period and ever since. At least as understood at the popular level, the revivalist's plea to come to Jesus or Billy Graham's invitation to "make a decision for Christ" make little sense in the Calvinist and Edwardsean scheme of revival, where the even the repentant sinner must await the visitation of grace. Finney assured all Americans that they controlled the mechanism of salvation, and the evangelical tradition has never been the same.

But it still would have foundered without the underpinnings of the First Amendment. Freed itself from establishment status, and not compelled to compete against another religion that enjoyed establishment status, evangelicalism has competed freely in the American religious marketplace. And it has done so with intelligence, vigor, and savvy. From the open-air oratory of George Whitefield to the organizational efficiency of Billy Graham, evangelicals have understood better than anyone else how to communicate to the masses, how to speak the idiom of the culture. The message they propagate is simple, straightforward, and utterly indebted to Charles Finney. Come to Jesus. Make a decision for Christ. You control your own spiritual destiny.

And somewhere, on president's row in the Princeton, New Jersey, cemetery, Jonathan Edwards, theologian of the First Great Awakening, is spinning in his grave.