

His-Story

Church history and why it matters to me

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING (1700-1799)

I. Prayer from George Whitefield

*My life, my blood, I here present,
If for Thy cause they may be spent,
Fulfill Thy sovereign counsel, Lord,
Thy will be done, Thy name adored.
Give me the strength, O God of power;
Then let winds blow, or thunders roar,
Thy faithful witness will I be;
'Tis fixed: I can do all for Thee! Amen.*

II. General time line (see right)

III. Overview of the Great Awakening (see page 3)

IV. The context in America

A. A Dead Orthodoxy

"The body of the rising generation is a poor, perishing, unconverted, and (except the Lord pour down his Spirit) an undone generation" (Cotton Mather, 1678).

1. Spiritual vitality had declined from the first generation of Puritan pilgrims and settlers
2. Dulness/boredom of the Gospel
3. Affluence and worldly ease more popular than spiritual matters
4. Growing liberalism: Deist beliefs coming to America (esp. at Harvard and Yale)

B. Key preachers

1. Theodore Frelinghuysen (1691-1747)
 - a. Dutch Reformed pastor who settled in New Jersey
 - b. Revival came to the Dutch in NJ
2. Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764): Presbyterian in central NJ
3. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
 - a. Showed brilliance as a child: enrolled at Yale at 13 y. o.

Time Line: 1700-1799 (from <http://www.churchtimeline.com>)

- 1703 b. Jonathan Edwards
- 1706 Francis Makemie founds the first Presbytery in America in Philadelphia
- 1714 b. George Whitefield
- c. 1720 During the 1720's, revival breaks out as Theodore Frelinghuysen preaches in New Jersey. It spreads through Gilbert Tennant to New Brunswick (beginnings of the Great Awakening)
- 1727 The Golden Summer. Revival broke out among Count Nikolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf and the Hussite Moravian refugees he had taken in. Many Moravian missionaries were sent overseas
- 1734-37 Great Awakening continues as Jonathan Edwards preaches in Massachusetts. Revival spreads to Connecticut
- 1739-41 Whitefield joins Edwards. He traveled diligently, traveling between England and America 13 times, and was able to reach about 80% of the colonists with the gospel
- 1739 The Methodists begin as a parachurch society in London
- 1741 Conservative Old Side/ pro-revival New Side controversy in American Presbyterianism (healed in 1758)
- 1746 Princeton founded by the Presbyterians
- 1754 Dartmouth founded for Native Americans
- 1759 b. William Wilberforce, evangelical in the Church of England, who fought against slavery
- 1761 b. William Carey
- 1764 Brown founded by Baptists
- 1766 Rutgers founded by Dutch Reformed
- 1768 Lady Huntingdon, who brought Methodism to the upper classes and founded "The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion", opened Trevecca House as a Methodist Seminary
- 1772 b. Archibald Alexander, who would organize Princeton Theological Seminary
- 1773-75 Founded, the first black Baptist church in America, Silver Bluff, South Carolina
- 1779 Olney Hymns produced by John Newton and William Cowper (includes *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* and *Amazing Grace*)
- 1784 John Wesley baptizes Thomas Coke, making Methodism a denomination separate from the Church of England
- 1792 Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen founded, later called the Baptist Missionary Society
- 1792 b. Charles Finney, inventor of modern revivalism
- 1792 William Carey preaches "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."

- b. Loved to study
 - Fell in love with the doctrine of the sovereignty of God (while meditating on 1 Tim. 1:17)
 - Edwards was known as a man who truly loved God
 - Edwards spent at average of 17 hours a day in his study (he wasn't fond of visitations or parishioners stopping by unannounced)
- c. Calvinist pastor of a Congregational church in North Hampton, Massachusetts, took over his grandfather's church (Solomon Stoddard)
- d. Revival came through his preaching in 1734
 - Edwards called it a "surprising work of God"
 - Revival began with the young people and spread to adults
- 4. George Whitefield
 - a. Born in Gloucester (England), attended University of Oxford in 1732 where he and the Wesley brothers (John and Charles) started "The Holy Club"
 - b. A dynamic preacher and writer (if he wasn't preaching he was writing)
 - c. One of Benjamin Franklin's closest friends, though Franklin never fully converted (both men had deep respect for each other).
 - d. Preached throughout the colonies in America, and was used to bring about revival

V. Discussion: What is revival?

- A. Intellectual or emotional happening?
- B. What is the true "fruit" (or evidence) of revival?

VI. The results of the Great Awakening

- A. **Conversions** (in the thousands)
 - 1. Evangelical message: "*You must be born again*" (interesting fact: all the revivalist preachers were Calvinists, with the exception of John Wesley)
 - 2. A new identity among Believers: a new concept emerged from the preaching about the Body of Christ that cut through denominational lines: Believers began to identify as being "Christian" (and not Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.)
- B. **Division and Controversy**
 - 1. Church divisions: while Christians were brought together, churches divided further
 - 2. Controversies emerged as to the efficacy of "revival" (people debated as to whether or not revivals were good)
- C. **A "Spiritual Democracy" formed**
 - 1. Whitefield's preaching & teaching taught that everyone was equal: slaves, women, orphans, Indians, etc. (all of whom Whitefield associated with)
 - 2. First Great Awakening caused upheavals in many social institutions
- D. **Schools founded**
 - 1. Princeton (College of NJ)
 - 2. Dartmouth: began as a school for Native Americans
 - 3. Rutgers: (in NJ) among the Dutch Reformed
 - 4. Brown (in Rhode Island)

The Great Awakening

The eighteenth century brought to North America the same Pietistic currents that it brought to Germany and England. Presbyterians, for instance, were divided by a controversy between those who insisted above all on strict adherence to the teachings of Westminster—the Old Side—and those of the New Side, whose emphasis was on the experience of redeeming grace. Although eventually the two sides would come together, for a time the controversy led to schism—a schism that was made more acute due to the great Pietistic wave known as the “Great Awakening.”

From an early date, many among the North American colonists had felt that a personal religious experience was of great importance for Christian life. But that feeling became more generalized in a series of events that began in 1734, when the first signs of the Great Awakening appeared in Northampton, Massachusetts. The pastor there was Jonathan Edwards, a staunch Calvinist who had been trained at Yale, and was convinced of the need for a personal experience of conversion. He had been preaching in Northampton for several years, with average results, when his preaching began evoking a response that surprised him. His sermons were not exceptionally emotive, although they did underscore the need for an experience of conviction of sin and of divine forgiveness. In that year of 1734, people began responding to his sermons, some with emotional outbursts, but many with a remarkable change in their lives, and with increased attention to their devotional lives. In a few months, the movement swept the area and reached into Connecticut. Soon it subsided, and after three years its extraordinary signs had almost disappeared. But the memory remained, as well as the hope that it would be rekindled.

Shortly thereafter, George Whitefield visited New England, and his preaching led to many experiences of conversion as well as outward expressions of repentance and joy. Although Edwards was a Congregationalist, he invited the Anglican Whitefield to preach in his church, and it is said that while the visitor preached the pastor wept. This gave the awakening new impetus. The Presbyterian ministers of the New Side, and others of similar inclinations, joined it. While some preachers followed Whitefield's example, traveling throughout the countryside, many local pastors of various traditions—Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists—brought new zeal to their pulpits, and extraordinary responses were evoked in their churches also.

People wept in repentance for their sins, some shouted for joy at having been pardoned, and a few were so overwhelmed that they fainted.

Such reactions to preaching led the enemies of the Great Awakening to accuse its leaders of undermining the solemnity of worship, and of substituting emotion for study and devotion. It must be said, however, that many of the leaders of the movement were not particularly emotive, that many were scholars, and that in any case the goal of the movement was not worship services marked by continual shows of emotion, but rather a single experience that would lead each believer to greater devotion and more conscientious study of Scripture. This may be seen in Jonathan Edwards's sermons. They are not emotive harangues, but careful expositions of profound theological matters. Edwards believed that emotion was important. But such emotion, including the high experience of conversion, should not eclipse the need for right doctrine and rational worship. The leaders of the Awakening were orthodox Calvinists. It was precisely his Calvinism that led Whitefield to break with Wesley. And Edwards wrote solid and profound defenses of the doctrine of predestination. But, although the movement in its early stages was led by Congregationalists and Presbyterians, in the long run it was the Baptists and Methodists who most profited from it.

At first, the Baptists opposed the movement, calling it frivolous and superficial. But the Awakening led many people to conclusions that were favorable to the Baptists. Indeed, if an experience of conversion had such central importance in Christian life, this raised doubts as to infant baptism.

Therefore, many Congregationalists and Presbyterians, led by the Awakening's emphasis on personal experience, eventually rejected infant baptism and became Baptists. Entire congregations did so.

The Great Awakening also led both Baptists and Methodists to the western frontier. At this time, whites were constantly appropriating Indian lands, and it was the Methodists and Baptists who, imbued with the spirit of the Great Awakening, took up the task of preaching to these western settlers and organizing their religious life. For that reason, these two groups became the most numerous in the newly settled areas. And, as a consequence of that Great Awakening, and of later similar movements, the hope for an “awakening” has become typical of a significant sector of North American Christianity.

Finally, the Great Awakening had political consequences. This was the first movement that embraced the thirteen colonies that would eventually become the United States. Thanks to it, a sense of commonality began developing among the various colonies. At the same time, new ideas were circulating regarding human rights and the nature of government. Those ideas, joined to the growing sense of commonality among the colonies, would produce momentous events.