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Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 4, Number 3 • Summer 1995

When God visits his church according to his promises, effects follow that make people shout, "This is the finger of God!"

John Elias

In any biblical revival the norm is heightened; it is not suspended while another type of Christianity is introduced.

Iain Murray

Revival is not an earthly concoction; it is a heavenly creation.

Arthur Skevington Wood

The whole history of revivals is involved in these two facts; viz., that the influence of the Holy Spirit is concerned in every instance of sound conversion, and that this influence is granted in more copious measure and in greater power at some times than at others. When these facts concur, there is a revival of religion.

Joel Hawes

The Great Awakening: A Pattern Revival

Robert H. Lescelius

The Great Awakening (1726-56) in the American Colonies has been recognized by even secular historians as "the most potent, constructive force in American life during the mid-century." Though it was made up of a series of local revivals, it has been called a Great Awakening, because it was a general movement of spiritual renewal touching many regions and dimensions of colonial life. The rehearsing of the mighty works of God during the Great Awakening thrill the heart of the child of God, who longs to see such times of refreshing again. It also stands as a model for subsequent generations of the church to study, for it is a microcosm of features, problems, solutions and blessings that arise from the phenomenon of spiritual awakening, or revival. We will look at this great event with respect to its context, course, and consequences, and close with some considerations.

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Its Context

1) **The historical context.** The Great Awakening must be seen in relation to the broader spectrum of what has been called the First Great Awakening (1726-76). God in sovereign mercy poured out His Spirit in Germany and Great Britain as well as in the American Colonies. About the same time as there were stirrings of revival in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey under Theodore Frelinghuysen, the Moravians were experiencing their "Pentecost" (August 13, 1727) on the estates of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf at Herrnhut. The Moravian Revival was a perpetuation of the Pietist movement that had been led by such men as Philip Spener (1635-1705) and August Franke (1663-1727) in renewing the Lutheran Church, deadened by Protestant scholasticism. It is interesting that Frelinghuysen (1691-1747), who was born in Germany, trained in Holland and sent by the Dutch Reformed Church to America, was influenced by Pietism in his concepts of conversion and the Christian life.

About the time Jonathan Edwards was seeing a remarkable

work of the Spirit of God in New England (1734-35), God also was beginning to use George Whitefield in revival in England (1737 on). Both of these men were greatly influenced by the heritage of the Puritans, and both were to play key roles by the hand of God in the mighty movement in America. Thus we see the sovereignty of God displayed in the dispensing of His grace to His church and the world. This was a truth believed by Frelinghuysen, Edwards, Whitefield and the church in general of that day.

2) **Its religious context.** It was a time of spiritual declension. We made note of the dead orthodoxy of Germany, and the same spiritual deadness was evident in Great Britain and the Colonies. Since the days of the Puritans the church had fallen upon evil days in Britain. England was ripe for a fate similar to France and the French Revolution. The Church of England saw a corrupt priesthood, and the Free Churches had no power. Society was given over to drunkenness, gambling, cruel and inhumane treatment of children and women, and other deplorable moral vices.

The American Colonies had also departed a long way from the noble experiment founded by the early Puritans in New England. Generations had succeeded that godly first generation, each departing further from the spiritual standards of their forefathers. The population of the Colonies had grown; multitudes had no church connection and no church or pastor to minister to them. The expansion into the wilderness with its rigors and hardships had also hardened the people to spiritual matters. The necessity of surviving in the now kept men from thoughts of eternity.

In New England the declension in the Congregational churches was a source of great lament to godly pastors. The original Puritans taught the necessity of a converted membership, but subsequent generations saw baptized infants grow up without being converted. A compromise later was made, called Half-Way Covenant (1662), to allow the unconverted

into the membership and their children to be baptized, provided they attended worship, led moral lives, prayed and read the Scriptures. The Lord's Table was denied them. Later this too was allowed, an outstanding exponent of open communion being Solomon Stoddard. The rationale for this was the hope that they would be converted through the means of grace. Instead the unconverted soon outnumbered the converted, and with the departure of Harvard and Yale from the Puritan position, ministers arose who were unclear on the doctrine of Justification by faith and confused over the relationship of faith and works. The Enlightenment rationalism of the Continent also had an influence on many ministers. The latter taught what has been called "Crypto-Arminianism," not the evangelical rationalism that judged Christian doctrine by human reason.

3) **Its geographical context.** Thus there was a great need of revival in New England due to the situation described above, in the Middle Colonies because of increased immigration from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Holland and Germany, and in the South where the Church of England helped perpetuate the status quo. Noll points out the regional expectations and God's surprise:

By the 1730s it was possible to discern three distinct religious patterns in the thirteen colonies: New England, with its heritage of Puritanism as a vital people's religion, was the scene of some uneasiness about the decline of ecclesiastical influence. In the middle colonies a Protestant pluralism was in place, though it was neither celebrated nor always even noticed. In the South the Anglican Church had become part of a deferential culture in which slavery was a key feature, both economically and ideologically. Under these conditions, the mid-century religious quickenings proved explosive, both in simple Christian terms and with the Church's relationship to the social order. New England ministers may have sought revival to shore up their status, mid-colony preachers may have thought revival would expand the

outreach and deepen the spiritual life of their denominations, and southern Anglicans may have hoped that a deeper piety could be assimilated within a stable establishment. When it arrived, however, the colonial Great Awakening was a surprise. Its currents of renewal outran the expectations of the clergy and from Nova Scotia to Georgia changed the rules of the game for the American churches.¹

Its Course

1) **Beginning in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.** As mentioned above, the first stirrings of awakening took place in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey around 1726 under the ministry of the Dutch Reformed pastor, Theodore Frelinghuysen. He had been sent from Holland to minister to the Dutch-speaking people in that rural area (January 1720). What he found were congregations filled with what he discerned were unconverted people. He held the Pietist and Puritan view that conversion was a threefold process of awakening and conviction under the preaching of the Law, a commitment in repentance and faith in Christ as He is offered in the Gospel, and an ensuing life of holiness. He commenced a eucharistic evangelism, preaching conversion to his congregations in preparation for communion, lest they eat and drink damnation to themselves. The result was a revolt on the part of his parishioners, who took their complaints to the church officials as far away as Amsterdam. Their efforts to get rid of him failed, however, and he continued to preach for conversions. Conversions did result and revival blessings came upon his churches, though the movement provoked a division between the revival and anti-revival parties.

Influenced by Frelinghuysen's ministry and approach was Gilbert Tennent, pastor to an English-speaking Presbyterian congregation in nearby Brunswick, New Jersey. Tennent had been trained for the ministry by his father, William Tennent, Sr., in a small building adjoining his Presbyterian Church in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, along with his three brothers and

some fifteen others. The school was disparagingly called the "Log College," but it was a noble effort to meet the need of ministers to reach the Scot-Irish immigrants flooding into Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. The humble beginning later evolved into Princeton University.

Gilbert Tennent undertook a ministry following Frelinghuysen's message and methodology and soon emerged as a leader of an evangelistic outreach in the Middle Colonies followed by other Log College preachers. The emphasis, along with intrusions into other ministers' parishes, brought opposition. The Presbyterians split over the issue of the revival. The Old Sides counted a baptized church member regenerated if there was no evidence to prove otherwise. The New Sides preached that conversion and evidence of Regeneration were necessary. The Log College preachers were rejected and eventually forced out of the synod of Philadelphia. A New Brunswick synod was formed by pro-revival pastors, joined by the synod of New York. The issue was hot through the Great Awakening, and reconciliation was not secured until some years later.

2) **The Awakening in Northampton, Massachusetts.** In New England God had a man for the hour, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). Edward's father was a minister, and the young Jonathan had a religious bent from his youth. He struggled with the truth of God for some time. As a student at Yale his struggles ended, when God brought him "to a new sense of things." The passage—"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17)—brought him to a sense of the glory and presence of God different from anything he had ever experienced. He was brought to peace and a new life of submission to God. This sense of the grandeur and glory of God marked his life, ministry and writings.

In 1727 Edwards was asked by his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, to assist him in the pastorate of the Congregational

Church at Northampton, Massachusetts. Stoddard, we noted, had advocated opening the communion table to the unconverted with hopes of their conversion. Stoddard had developed a strong evangelistic style of ministry that had been blessed of God with five revivals, or “harvests” (1679, 1683, 1696, 1712, 1718), in his local church over his 60-year pastorate. In 1729 Stoddard died, and Edwards became pastor.

Concerned with the spiritual declension in the church and community, as well as the rise of young ministers among the Congregational churches with questionable views on Justification, in 1734 Edwards swept away from his listeners all hope of Salvation in anything they had done or could do. He preached the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man and the Gospel of the grace of God. The result was sleepless Sunday nights for his congregation. He was relentless in his pursuit, naming the sins of the people—irreverence in God’s house, disregard for the Sabbath, neglect of family prayer, disobedience to parents, quarreling, greediness, sensuality, hatred of one’s neighbor. Soon he could report: “There was scarcely a single person in the town, either old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.”

The first converts were reported in December 1734, and others followed. In six months 300 were converted in the town of 1100. The revival began to spill over into other towns, and a wave of awakening moved through the Connecticut Valley in 1735, affecting some 100 communities. Edwards wrote a letter to Benjamin Coleman of Boston in 1736, analyzing the events and experiences of the Northampton movement, which later was published as *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*.

The revival movement brought opposition from the Evangelical Rationalists as the movement progressed, the lines being drawn between the pro-revival New Lights and the anti-revival Old Lights.

3) George Whitefield and revival in the Middle Colonies.

George Whitefield came to the American Colonies in 1739, his

second visit, having founded an orphanage in Savannah, Georgia, on a short previous one. He had already seen mighty movements of the Spirit of God in revival in England, preaching to great crowds in the open air. Whitefield landed in Lewes, Delaware, October 30, 1739, with the intention of picking up supplies in Philadelphia for his orphanage in Savannah. Arriving in Philadelphia November 2, he was asked to speak in the Anglican Church, unaware of the spiritual stirring going on in the Middle Colonies and what part he would play in the revival. In Philadelphia his dramatic preaching was a sensation, moving vast crowds who gathered to hear him, even amazing Benjamin Franklin.

Whitefield was invited to preach in other areas, and on November 14 he left for New Jersey where he met Gilbert Tennent, who accompanied him to New York City and took part in the preaching. Tennent greatly impressed Whitefield with his searching preaching. The tour took them back through New Jersey, where Whitefield met Frelinghuysen. Whitefield was taken with what God was doing in those parts through these men.

Upon returning to Philadelphia Gilbert took Whitefield to visit his father’s Log College. These revivalists were knit together in heart and learned from each other in their efforts to further the cause of the Gospel.

Whitefield returned again to Philadelphia, preached in Germantown, and finally left for Savannah, where he spent the winter of 1740. His two-month tour of the Middle Colonies had intensified the fires in New Jersey, started revival in Philadelphia, and greatly encouraged him.

4) **The Great Awakening in New England.** If Jonathan Edwards had been used of God to spark revival in New England, George Whitefield was His instrument to spread the flames. Between April 2 and June 5, 1740, Whitefield made another tour of the Middle Colonies and returned to Savannah. On August 14, 1740, he sailed to Newport, Rhode Island,

to begin an evangelistic tour of New England. Where the movement of 1734-35 affected the Connecticut Valley, Whitefield's ministry spread revival from Boston up the New England coast to York, Maine. He returned to Boston, October 6-13, and then traveled to Northampton, where he met with Edwards, October 17-19. From there he headed south to Connecticut, New York City, and Philadelphia, and by land back to Savannah. Whitefield sailed back to England, January 24, 1741, having left a tremendous impact upon the Colonies. This Anglican preacher had joined hands with others of various denominations, who rallied with him in the great harvest of souls.

George Whitefield was an eloquent and passionate evangelist. In Philadelphia, preaching from the courthouse on Market Street, he could be distinctly heard by seamen on a sloop anchored at the wharf 400 feet away. Ben Franklin estimated that Whitefield could be heard by a crowd of 25,000 people. He preached in churches and in the open fields as crowds were magnetized and drawn to his meetings. He preached and the Spirit moved with conviction upon men. Without "invitations," personal workers, or decision cards, men were converted and leaped to make it known, or struggled under the power of conviction until they came to faith under the counsel of their pastors or on their own. He thundered against an unconverted ministry, and preachers were converted as well. One old minister took him aside and said, "I have been a scholar and have preached the doctrines of grace for a long time. But I believe I have never felt the power of them in my own soul."

Whitefield made seven trips to the Colonies, much to the profit of the churches, though his later visits did not see the results of the 1740 tour, and more opposition was faced as the revival influences waned. George Whitefield died in 1770 on his seventh visit, and was buried under the pulpit of the Presbyterian church in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

5) Revival in the Southern Colonies. The revival blessings were experienced in the South mainly among Presbyterians and Baptists. Many conversions resulted from the witness of Samuel Morris, planter and bricklayer in Hanover, Virginia, from 1740 on. The New Light Presbytery of New Brunswick sent Log College graduate, William Robinson, in 1743 to organize them into a Presbyterian church. Another preacher, Samuel Davies (1723-61), organized the Hanover Presbytery, the first in the South (September 3, 1755).

The Baptist cause was advanced in Virginia and North and South Carolina by the labors of Shubal Stearns (1706-71). From a group of sixteen organizers of a church in Sandy Creek, North Carolina, September 1755, they soon grew to 600, and by 1772 there were forty-two churches with 125 preachers. The Sandy Creek Association was formed in 1758.

Presbyterians and Baptists faced oppositions from the established church in Virginia. Baptists were especially persecuted by officials and mobs, but the opposition did not hinder their effectiveness and growth under the blessings of God.

So from New England to the South the blessings of revival fell upon the churches of the Colonies.

Its Consequences

1) Fruitfulness. The first and most glorious result of the Great Awakening was the great number of souls converted to Christ. Estimates of conversions have ranged from 25,000 to 50,000 in New England (population 350,000). Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists increased in membership and churches substantially, as did other groups like the Lutherans. The revival produced 150 new Congregational churches. Presbyterian pastors increased from forty-five to more than one hundred between 1740 and 1760. Baptist growth in the South has been noted, but there was an increase in the North. Due to the controversy over the revival in New England many Congregational churches split and produced Separate

churches. Many of these Separate churches became Baptist. The evangelistic efforts of the Baptists, who first were skeptical of the revival but soon got in on it, increased their numbers. In New England they grew from twenty-one churches in 1740 to seventy-nine by 1760 and 312 in 1804.

2) **Outreach.** The Awakening moved the churches to a more militant outreach for souls. The necessity of a conversion experience became a prominent mark of evangelical Christianity in America from that time. Without the benefit of state support, most of the denominations in the Colonies, such as the Presbyterians and Baptists, had to depend on evangelism for survival and growth. Itinerant evangelists, such as Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, also became an important feature of American evangelicalism.

The Awakening sparked missionary outreach to the Indians and black slaves. David Brainerd (1718-47) labored among the Indians of New York and in Eastern Pennsylvania. He saw an awakening among Indians at Crossweeksung between July and November 1745, seeing forty-three adults and forty-two children converted. He died of tuberculosis in the home of Jonathan Edwards at age 29. Edwards printed Brainerd's diary with a short biography, which had a profound influence for missions by its impression upon such men as Henry Martyn, William Carey, Thomas Coke and Samuel Marsden.

Samson Occom was a seventeen-year-old Mohegan Indian convert of the Awakening at Norwich, Connecticut. A pastor in Lebanon, Connecticut, Eleazar Wheelock, who labored hard in the revival, took Occom into his home to educate him for the ministry. Occom was later ordained. In the early 1740s Wheelock devised a plan for educating Indians and sending them to evangelize their own people. In 1754 he opened Moor's Indian Charity School, which was moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1769 and named Dartmouth College. It was open to Indians and whites alike.

Gilbert Tennent was pleased to see among the awakened in

Massachusetts young people, children and negroes. Samuel Davies made it part of his goal to reach blacks in his evangelistic efforts in Virginia. In 1757 he testified to baptizing 150 adults and saw sixty black faces at the communion table.

3) **Education.** Mention has been made of the Log College, which became the College of New Jersey and then Princeton. We also made reference to Dartmouth. Baptists started several academies, including Rhode Island College (later Brown University) in 1764. Dutch Reformed revivalists founded Queens College in 1766 (later Rutgers University). A hall was built for Whitefield in Philadelphia in 1740 for him to use. This later became an academy (Charity School), which evolved into the University of Pennsylvania.

4) **Unity and liberty.** The Awakening was the first movement to cross colonial as well as denominational lines. It united the Colonies spiritually. It was a movement for the common people and weakened traditional establishment dominance. It produced suspicion for European influences, weakening, for instance, the Church of England in America. Thus it contributed to the uniting of the new nation later.

The Awakening infused a long-lasting moral fibre of Christian values into the warp and woof of American society.

5) **Controversy.** Everywhere revival was experienced there was also opposition. We have made reference to this a number of times. The widely publicized controversy was in New England. Three groups emerged. There were the New Lights, who favored and promoted the revival, led by Jonathan Edwards. Excesses arose during the movement as emotionalism was allowed to run rampant in some circles. An exponent of this was James Davenport, who threw off all restraints and denounced all ministers who opposed him as unconverted. This brought the revival into disrepute and polarized opposition to it. Davenport later repented of his error, but the damage was already done. Leading the opposition were Old Lights, rationalist liberals, led by Charles Chauncy of Boston.

Also concerned were those called Old Calvinists, who were concerned about the uprooting of the church and society.

Here is where Jonathan Edwards made his greatest contribution to the church of his day and since. He too was concerned about the excesses, and proceeded to examine the evidences of a true work of the Spirit of God. He produced the first theology of revival in his works: *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1734), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742) and especially, *Religious Affections* (1746). He showed the difference between carnal religious activity and emotionalism and true spirituality. The church was left with a rich legacy in these works, which, sad to say, it has neglected to its own detriment.

The Awakening caused diversions, much provoked by carnal zeal, but in other cases it was the result of people wanting to be genuinely ministered to by spiritual pastors. The Awakening did not cause the basic underlying problems in the controversy. It amplified what was there to begin with. The basic problems were theological. Edwards saw that "Rational Evangelicalism" and "Crypto-Arminianism" undermined the doctrine of supernatural conversion and orthodox Christianity. Charles Chauncy and his Old Light followers eventually ended up in Unitarianism in the years following.

Its Consideration

We will close with some consideration drawn from the historical material. Consider some warnings and lessons to observe.

1) **Warnings.** Beware of "Half-way Covenants!" May the twentieth-century church be warned about seeking to compromise Gospel principles to accommodate depraved humanity and seek to make the Gospel more palatable to them. Efforts to get numbers of adherents at any price will backfire. Our methodology must be consistent with true theology.

Beware also of experience divorced from Scripture truth.

Dead orthodoxy is an evil, but so also is fleshly enthusiasm as a substitute for true spirituality. We must also beware of a counterfeit religious experience. Only the Word of God can give discernment in these areas. Edwards is a great help here. Every soulwinner should read his *Religious Affections*.

2) **Lessons.** We learn, first, that no day is too dark for revival. Even in the time of declension Stoddard's church saw its five "harvests." A local church should pray, preach and hope for revival. Our day and time are not without hope that our sovereign God can and will pour out His Spirit upon His church and the world. If God could send revival to colonial America, He can send one today.

Second, may we see the importance of sound doctrine and preaching. The major denominations of the Great Awakening were Calvinistic in their confessions, including the Congregational, Dutch Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist and even the Anglican, George Whitefield. They had a God-centered theology and gospel. The need of our hour is a reformation in doctrine and renewal of biblical preaching. Especially important is soundness on the doctrines of Justification by faith, Regeneration and Conversion.

Third, along with sound doctrine must go a heart with real experimental Christianity. Dead orthodoxy and rationalism opposed the Awakening. True "religious affections" must motivate our worship and service to God. Our preaching of sound doctrine must be in the spirit of Samuel Davies, who sought to preach "as a dying man to dying men."

Finally, touched by the remembrance of this mighty work of God, the Great Awakening, may our hearts rise up in prayer to our Father to do it again!

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Endnotes

- 1 Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William P. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 90.