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There is nothing he (i.e., Satan) is so much afraid of as the power of the Holy Ghost. Where he cannot arrest the showers of blessing, it has ever been one of his devices to dilute or poison the streams. . . . With the obvious signs of the times in view, who does not see that this artful foe would enjoy his malignant triumph, if he could prejudice the minds of good men against all revivals of religion? This he does, not so much by opposing them, as by counterfeiting the genuine coin, and by getting up revivals that are spurious and to his liking. Revivals are always spurious when they are got up by man's devices, and not brought down by the Spirit of God.

—Gardiner Spring

Controversies of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies

Christopher Byrd

The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies was a period of much religious revival and spiritual awakening that began with the religious "stirrings" of Theodorus J. Frelinghuysen in the mid-1720s and swelled to a crescendo of revivalistic and religious excitement with the coming of George Whitefield in 1740. Not only did it change the spiritual condition of many people, it also had a great effect on the religious and political thought of the nation. It was, to be sure, a reaction against the rationalism and legalism which had crept into the church. It challenged religious indifference, dead formality, and dependence upon self-righteousness while emphasizing the necessity of the "new birth" and "of being first in Christ by a vital union, and in a justified state before our religious services can be well pleasing and acceptable to God."[1]

But a movement which challenged such deep and fundamental views on religion as those which pervaded the pre-Awakening Middle Colonies, would inevitably cause rampant division. This division, manifested chiefly in the Presbyterian Church, was the confrontation between the eighteenth-century forces of Pietism and the Enlightenment.[2] This paper aims to set forth a short summary of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies, and to examine the theological and political dimensions of the controversies arising from the Great Awakening, giving some brief biblical analysis along the way.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE AWAKENING IN THE MIDDLE COLONIES

The religious state of the Middle Colonies in the early eighteenth century was deplorable—a condition due chiefly to the failure of the church as an institution to establish itself successfully as it had in Europe. Much of this failure can be attributed to the religious and ethnic diversity that was unique to the Middle Colonies. Nowhere else in the world at that time were there more groups of varying religious and cultural backgrounds in one area of comparable size. Churches simply did not have the same power and influence they had enjoyed in Europe where religious institutions were inextricably tied to culture and often to civil government.

> Christianity had lost some of its vitality in being transplanted from the Old World to the New. The second and third generations did not inherit in full the faith of the pioneers. Old World theological issues were matters of less concern in the new environment, and authoritarian church organizations were less effective in the freer life of the colonial frontier. Religious pluralism weakened the prestige of all church groups, and heterogeneous population made a close-knit religious community impossible in many areas.[3]

The problem that the churches had in planting their religious traditions and institutions lay also in their inability to provide enough ministers for the growing numbers of congregations and their failure to uphold the traditional authority and prestige of the clergy. Before 1740, and for a long time thereafter, not one denomination managed to supply all of its congregations with ministers.[4] The absence, in many cases, of ministers fostered the growth of a "congregational democracy" which undermined the authority of ministers and further hampered the establishment of a

strong church and ministry.[5]

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The most obvious result of the failure of the church in the Middle Colonies was religious indifference among the people. While some were outright unbelievers and atheists, most professed unbelief, not with their mouths, but with spiritual indifference. Many ministers, weary in their struggle against this indifference, began to hold to a more externally oriented approach to Christianity which made few spiritual demands upon the people, resulting in a kind of heartless, rationalistic legalism. The ministers gave in to compromise by lowering the spiritual requirements of Christian fellowship, content for their congregations to follow the mere externals of religion in terms of correct doctrinal confession and outward morality. It would not be an exaggeration to say that at the dawn of the Great Awakening, the church in the Middle Colonies lay near death. Thus, in the words of the great revivalist, Samuel Blair, "Religion lay, as it were, dying, and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church. . . ."[6]

The beginning of the Awakening is often marked by the revivals of Theodorus J. Frelinghuysen, who, in the early 1720s came to pastor four Dutch Reformed congregations in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey. There he brought a revivalism which had never before been experienced in the Middle Colonies. He declared in his first sermon, "The outward performance of religious duties apart from a suitable frame of mind, God hates."[7] He declared regeneration as such a thoroughgoing experience and as such a crisis in the life of the believer that none of his elders or deacons dared claim they were converted. Nevertheless, Frelinghuysen's labors eventually bore fruit, and many were converted, adding to a church membership that had grown remarkably in each of his congregations by 1730.

The most important source of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies, however, can be found in William Tennent. Tennent came to America in 1718 and was received into the Synod of Philadelphia. In 1726, he established the Log College for the training of his four sons and others in the gospel ministry. This "seminary" turned out nearly a score of pietistic revivalists during the Awakening, including its most important leaders.

William Tennent's son, Gilbert, was ordained at New Brunswick in 1726. There he was inspired by the revivals of Frelinghuysen, who helped Tennent develop much of his own revivalism and his vision for a broader revival. After developing more fully his revivalistic methods of preaching, Tennent began to see the conversion of many of his own congregants.

In Freehold a full-scale revival in the early 1730s was excited under Gilbert Tennent's brother, John, and then William, Jr., who took over at his brother's death. Religion became the common topic of conversation. Frolicking, dancing, horse racing, and other profane entertainment ceased as people gathered in private meetings for prayer

and confession, and many were converted. Gilbert Tennent's own vision of a Colonies-wide revival was encouraged by the Freehold Revival, and he began taking measures to effect such an awakening. Tennent sought to get the backing of the Presbyterian Synod, to coordinate the activities of Calvinist revivalists in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, to reach broader audiences through the colonial press, and to use the Log College to feed more ministers into the movement.[8] By 1736, Tennent had been joined by several other ministers in the Raritan Valley: William Tennent at Freehold, John Cross, who settled in present day Orange, New Jersey, where he drummed up a revival in 1734-35, and Eleazar Wales, a Yale graduate who settled ten miles from New Brunswick and eventually fell in with the Tennents. The most important addition to Tennent's adherents was Samuel Blair, a Log College graduate who was ordained at Shewsbury and Middletown in the Raritan Valley (though he would move six years later to Faggs Manor where he lead a dramatic revival). In 1738, these men were given their own presbytery—that of New Brunswick—which encompassed the entire Raritan Valley. By the end of the decade, the Raritan brand of revivalism became a powerful force within the Presbyterian Church, and the Awakening was in full swing. As the end of the decade approached, however, a riff developed in the Presbyterian Church between those who opposed the Awakening, at first the majority, and those who favored it.

CONTROVERSY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The controversy in the Presbyterian Church was between the Old Side and New Side parties. The schism between these two parties was the result of their conflicting views on regeneration and church government; yet two factions had begun to develop even before the Awakening.

The subscription controversy in the 1720s was the first

controversy where two substantially different parties could be seen. The controversy involved the question of whether strict adherence to the *Westminster Confession* should be the requirement for ministerial candidates. The alignment tended to follow ethnic lines, with the Scots and Scotch-Irish who demanded strict doctrinal subscription to the *Westminster Confession* and stricter presbyterial discipline, and the New England Presbyterians, led by Jonathan Dickinson of Elizabethtown, who advocated the usefulness of a comprehensive creed, but insisted subscription to it must not be required. He pointed out the "glorious contradiction" of subscribing to chapter twenty of the *Westminster Confession*, which calls God *alone* "Lord of the conscience," and then submitting to the rigid authority of the other chapters.[9] A compromise was reached in 1729 in the Adopting Act which allowed ministers the freedom to disagree with those articles of the *Westminster Confession* deemed non-essential.

Having a Puritan heritage, the New Englanders, among them Dickinson, Pemberton of New York, and Burr of Newark, were more kindly disposed than were the Scotch-Irish to the ideals of personal religion soon to be proclaimed by the evangelists of the Great Awakening; and though they were not the chief promoters of the revival they were warmly devoted to evangelical principles and eventually allied themselves with the revivalist party.[10]

CONFLICTING THEOLOGICAL VIEWS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The fundamental difference between the Old Side and New Side during the Awakening was their understanding of regeneration. Their views of regeneration displayed the rationalistic and pietistic sentiments of the Old and New Sides respectively.

The New Side, or the revivalists, held that regeneration

is a change for which evidence can be found through examination. Frelinghuysen had defined regeneration as a shattering experience of spiritual rebirth.[11] It was characterized by agonizing conviction of one's sinful condition and the realization of one's utter helplessness before God. Falling into great disquietude, one would condemn and abhor oneself. This was then followed by a yearning for and then trusting in the righteousness of Christ. "But do you ask," said Frelinghuysen, "are there none then saved, who do not experience such a conflict? No: none other."[12] Frelinghuysen reinforced in Gilbert Tennent "that staple insistence . . . that a definite experience of regeneration followed by assurance of salvation was the indispensable mark of a christian."[13]

The Old Side believed that the inward workings of grace were "barely perceptible" and that true assurance of conversion was attainable by few. Thus faith was reduced to mere intellectual religion and outward morality.

With this underlying view of regeneration, the revivalists saw the Awakening and its emotions as a genuine work of God. Their revivalism was aimed at provoking this conversion experience. It was an experience affecting not merely the intellect, but the heart and the emotions as well.

Thus their revivalist views were formed by an essentially pietistic understanding of regeneration.

The Old Side, however, understood regeneration in a rationalistic way. This was in direct conflict with the revivalists' view.

> Regeneration, they held to be necessary in order to acceptance with God, both in partaking of the Lord's Supper and in performing the duties of the ministry; but a qualification not ascertainable by examination, and to a regular standing in the church. In short, they insisted that all should be regarded as regenerate, who did not give evidence to the contrary by manifest heresy or immorality.[14]

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Because faith was reduced to a merely rational religion and because the importance of an inward change was minimized, the revivalism of Tennent was repulsive to the Old Side ministers. They condemned as heretical the revivalistic sermons with their emphasis on the inward piety. They saw the emotional responses of the Awakening not as the work of God but of the Devil. The pietistic revivalism of the New Side, derisively dubbed "enthusiasm," was seen by the Old Side as "altogether irreconcilable with Gospel Order . . . being as opposite thereto as Anarchy to Order."[15] In short, they condemned the Awakening because it stemmed from a religion that was irreconcilable with their own rationalism. As Martin Lodge put it, the revival of Tennent and his adherents was unacceptable to the Old Side "because [they] could not swallow its underlying assumption that conversion could actually be experienced, that the grace of God could be perceived directly through the senses."[16]

Neither the Old Side nor the New Side had properly understood regeneration. Although they both held that it was necessary in order to have acceptance with God, neither seemed to have a complete and entirely biblical understanding of the true nature of regeneration and what its evidences were. The Old Side position, that evidence of regeneration cannot be found through examination, that all who know the catechisms and creed and live moral lives should be considered regenerate, seems both biblically incomplete and naive. God complained of Israel, "These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their *hearts* far from Me" (Isa. 29:13, NKJV). Similarly, the Rich Young Ruler came to Jesus, *having obeyed the law from youth*, yet he went away sorrowful for he did not seek God first in his heart. There is something more, then, to regeneration than mere intellectual assent and outward morality. Regeneration involves a change of the heart from hostility toward God to love for Him and one's neighbor. It involves a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) and gives with it the outward manifestation of this love that shows evidence of regeneration. The apostle John says in his first epistle: "Let us not love in word or in tongue but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him" (3:18-19, NKJV). "If we truly love our neighbor," says Calvin in his commentary on 1 John, "it is a testimony to us that we are born of God, who is the truth, or that the truth dwells in us."[17] Thus, by our fruit of love, graciously given and manifested in our life by God, we can have confident assurance (though we cannot know infallibly) that we are born again.

The revivalists, however, saw an outward crisis experience as the true mark of regeneration. Yet Christ told us, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but can not tell where it comes from and where it

goes" (John 3:8, NKJV). We do not see God's work of regeneration; we see only its fruits. The emotional experiences which the revivalists described may have been *conversion* experiences of those whose hearts had *already* been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Not all conversions, however, are like those which the revivalists depicted, and not all those who experience a "crisis conversion" experience a genuine conversion. Rather, some are simply caught up in the emotions and religious fervor of a "conversion" that may be sincerely felt but is ultimately spurious. For, like the seeds sown on stony ground, there are those who immediately spring up, but when the sun comes up they are withered because they were not truly born of the Spirit (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21). Indeed, we are assured of union with God only when He manifests Himself in our love by the efficacy of His Holy Spirit.[18]

PRESBYTERIAN POLITICS

Because the Old Side was hostile toward the Awakening they began to enact laws in the Synod to prevent its spread. These actions brought to surface the conflicting views of the Old and New Sides on church government.

On May 23, 1737, Gilbert Tennent preached a revival sermon at Maidenhead to the vacant congregation of Joseph Morgan, who had been suspended for excessive drinking. While Tennent had not received permission from the Presbytery of Philadelphia to do this, he had undoubtedly been invited by the congregation. A week later, the Synod adopted the Itineration Act which declared that no minister or probationer was to preach in the bounds of any Presbytery other than his own without permission of that presbytery, even if the outsider was invited by the congregation and its ministers.[19] This was clearly an attack on revivalism since itineration was the most effective method through which the revivalists spread the Awakening. This

was, however, only the first in a series of attempts by the Philadelphia Synod (controlled by the Old Side) to confine revivalism to the Raritan Valley.

A compromise was reached at the Synod of 1738: Any minister could preach in any vacant congregation to which he was invited, even though it was in the bounds of another presbytery, unless he was advised by a member of that presbytery that his preaching there was likely to cause division. In return for acceptance of this compromise the New Brunswick revivalists were given their own presbytery. Thus Gilbert Tennent would be free to license and ordain ministers independently of the Synod, and he would inevitably draw from his father's "seminary" which was about to graduate a crop of young pietistic revivalists.

As the Synod drew to a close, however, an act was proposed which would require all ministerial candidates who had not graduated from New England or European colleges to be examined by a committee of the Synod (which by a majority was controlled by the Scotch-Irish opponents of the revival) before the presbyteries admitted them to ordination trials.

> Not only did this proposal strike at the source of the revivalists' future strength, the Log College, but it emasculated the newly created Presbytery of New Brunswick, whose constitutional right it was to license and ordain ministerial candidates independently of the Synod.[20]

The Scotch-Irish passed the measure by a large majority over the loud protests of Gilbert Tennent and his men. Their defeat in the Synod thus forced them to pursue implementing the revival in defiance of the Synod's acts.

At the first meeting of the Presbytery of New Brunswick on August 8, 1738, the Tennent party declared the Synod's Licensing Act unconstitutional and proceeded to examine

John Rowland, a Log College graduate. They licensed and ordained him, just as they did many other Log College men, in defiance of the Synod's act, but they departed from such rules and order only after prayerful deliberation.[21] Shortly after Rowland was licensed, a delegation from the "awakened" at Hopewell and Maidenhead presented a certificate from their Presbytery permitting them to receive any regular candidate from the other presbyteries, and they requested Rowland's services.

At Maidenhead and Hopewell, Rowland effected one of the most dramatic revivals of the Awakening. The Presbytery of Philadelphia censured Rowland's conduct and sent letters to him and his supporters declaring their disapproval. Proving ineffective, the Presbytery restored Joseph Morgan to the ministry there, even though a month earlier they had refused Morgan's petition to remove their suspension, and even though Morgan had declared that he would have nothing more to do with that body.[22] As happened so often during the awakening, the congregation was divided between the "awakened" (those who supported the Awakening and desired the preaching of the revivalists) and those who stood with the Old Side. The awakened at Hopewell received permission from the Presbytery to form themselves into a separate congregation.

The Synod, however, now attempted to destroy the Awakening in New Jersey. On May 28, it severely censured the Presbytery of New Brunswick for licensing Rowland, and it warned all congregations against him. It then condemned the awakening at Hopewell and overturned their Presbytery's permission to organize their own congregation. Despite these attempts, however, the Awakening spread rapidly and was fanned to its greatest height with the coming of George Whitefield in 1740.

The attempts of the Synod to control revivalism brought out the parties' differing views on church government.

The Old Side believed in a more tightly and centrally controlled government. They claimed for the church the right to enact rules not contrary to the laws of Christ which would be binding on the conscience and which the church would have the ecclesiastical power to enforce. In *The Government of the Church of Christ* John Thomson asserted that

> Church judicatories being a [Representative] of the whole collective Body, which they represent, must of Course be the only proper Judges of the Just Liberties of the whole Body, and of every particular Member thereof as such, and while he continues a Member.[23]

All members should, then, "submit to the Rules and Orders of [church government], whether they approved of the rules or not."[24]

It is clear that the Old Side was appealing to and using legislative power in order to kill pietistic revivalism towards which they were hostile. The synod, thus, became a forum for the political gain of the Old Side. They desired stronger central power so they could control the church.

The New Side, however, said that Christ *alone* is the lawmaker of the church. The church, then, has only administrative function, and not legislative. It may decide on rules in

application of the general or explicit laws found in the New Testament, but these rules are not to be designated as acts or constitutions. A wide liberty was left to the individual where conscience would not let him follow such acts. Thus, church judicatories could in cases of scandal and heresy try ministers for the violation of Christ's laws, but the courts should not censure ministers for the violation of ecclesiastical regulations against which their consciences chafe.[25]

The revivalists were accused of designing "to overthrow all authority, and cast out all order and government out of the church."[26] By "order and government" they meant synodical control over local ministers and congregations. The explicit focus of church government in the New Testament, however, is that of the local congregation, the minister, elder, and deacon. The only intercongregational council in Scripture was one called *ad hoc* to settle doctrinal issues. Scripture, in fact, dictates no *standing* ecclesiastical body which has legislative power over the local congregation.

It is clear that the Old Side was appealing to and using legislative power in order to kill pietistic revivalism toward which they were hostile. The synod, thus, became a forum for the political gain of the Old Side. They desired stronger central power so they could control the church. The revivals appealed to many in the church who were not being spiritually fed by the rationalistic Old Side ministers. These people left their ministers for the preaching of the revivalists. Threatened by this loss of power and influence they attempted to snuff out revivalism by asserting the binding power of synodical rules and regulations over ministers and local congregations. As the revivalists themselves pointed out, however, such legislative power was an unwarrantable encroachment upon the rights of conscience and private judgment that seemed to condemn the entire Protestant Reformation and the Presbyterian dissent from the Church of England.[27]

There certainly were sincere Old Side ministers with genuine concerns, and there certainly were revivalists who were guilty of excesses and of presumptuously judging Old Side ministers of being unconverted (though many repented of these things after the Awakening). But what the revivalist did stemmed from a genuine desire to spread the saving power of the gospel of Christ. When they departed from synodical legislative acts and ecclesiastical procedures, they do so for the purpose of spreading Christ's kingdom.

When the Presbyterian Church split in 1741, the New Side formed their own independent Synod of New York while the Old Side kept the Synod of Philadelphia, each with twenty-two members. During the eighteen-year schism, the New Side had increased to seventy-three members while the Old side had decreased by one member. Ironically it was Gilbert Tennent and the New Side who initiated the reunion in 1758. Ahlstrom says that this "outstanding characteristic . . . speaks eloquently of their magnanimous spirit and genuine concern for the church as a whole."[28] Although a significant part of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies was attended by controversy and schism in the Presbyterian Church, and although both sides overstepped their bounds at some time or another, the Great Awakening was, in its essence, a move of the Holy Spirit of God to grant repentance from dead religion and rationalism, and breathe spiritual renewal into His people.

CONCLUSION

The Great Awakening came to America at a time when the Middle Colonies were a "fruit salad" of diverse cultures and denominations. The Awakening transcended these differences among the people and united them by its universal emphasis on the inward experience of grace. Most importantly, it helped America develop into a nation that

would be unique from the rest of the world. The New Side's battle for the decentralization of church government and its emphasis on the liberties of the conscience of the individual was a prelude to the democratic political philosophy of our country, a philosophy that would give Americans a freedom unparalleled in the Old World.

While eighteenth-century Europe was embracing the Age of Reason and forsaking its Christian faith, rationalism was creeping into America through the church. "The notion that Christianity is pre-eminently a rational religion permeated the thinking of Old Side Presbyterianism."[29] In fighting the Old Side rationalism, the revivalists helped give America a uniquely Protestant Christian ethos and heritage, and secure God's blessing for the next century as well. Sadly, America has now forsaken that heritage.

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Notes

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