

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 69

The Great Awakening – Part 1

We need a revival!

The word “revival” means different things to different people. For anyone who has a religious background in one of the mainline Protestant denominations here in America, revivals conjures up memories of a series of local church services held for several days with a guest evangelist and music leader. The theme would focus on repentance and salvation and inviting friends and neighbors to attend.

In small towns these revivals could literally be the talk of the town for several days to a couple weeks. The hopes would be high that lives would be changed for the better, that unchurched individuals would be saved, and that there would be a marked positive affect on the community as a whole. Years ago, in simpler times when people’s schedules were less hectic, the revival would also be a social highlight.

Billy Graham is arguably the most famous evangelist of modern time because he is known throughout the world for his large city-wide crusades and associations with world dignitaries. He has reportedly preached to live audiences numbering more than 210 million people in over 185 countries.¹ Millions more have heard him on television and radio.

His most famous crusades ran for numerous weeks with overflow crowds in Los Angeles, London and New York’s Madison Square Gardens from 1949 to 1957. All of his crusades through the years have received wide media coverage and positive response.

Even though America is only 230 years old as a nation, since the time of the earliest settlers in early 1600, the land has experienced spiritual highs and lows. Much like in the book of Judges when Israel would experience cycles of spiritual renewal as well as indifference and decay, throughout American history there have been times when the people of the land have drifted spiritually only to have God raise up voices crying in the wilderness to bring souls to repentance and revival.

¹ Billy Graham Evangelistic Association website, www.billygraham.org.

Before Billy Graham came into America's evangelical limelight in the twentieth century, other evangelists had paved the way in similar fashion. God used men such as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles G. Finney, D.L. Moody, Sam Jones and Billy Sunday. These and many more were used by God to preach the gospel to millions of people which had a profound impact on American religious and social life.

A unique time in American history

There has not been such a spiritual movement as profound as the sweeping revival in America known as The Great Awakening. While God has used large and small crusades, revivals and evangelists in significant ways through the years of this nation, they cannot be compared to The Great Awakening. As historian Richard L. Bushman points out:

We inevitably will underestimate the effect of the Awakening on eighteenth-century society if we compare it to revivals today. The Awakening was more like the civil rights demonstrations, the campus disturbances, and the urban riots of the 1960's combined. All together these may approach, though certainly not surpass, the Awakening in their impact on national life.²

People, places and events

It is quite impossible to survey all the dynamics and significant people involved in The Great Awakening in these notes or even in one class. The events leading up to the revival are just as important and complex as what happened during and after it. However, the following paragraphs will briefly cover some of the background for the setting of the stage for the Great Awakening and some of the key individuals God used in accomplishing amazing things for the Kingdom.

By 1740 the religious and social climate was very different from what it was like just a century earlier. When the first settlers came for religious freedom and a passion for God, they were fervent and deeply committed in their faith.

² *The Great Awakening* by Richard L. Bushman, editor (p. xi).

They were not just religious, but they had a personal faith in Christ. But the scene was very different for the generation to follow.

Many of the children had not trusted Christ as their personal Savior. The churches were filled with unregenerate members and had grown cold and ineffective. In 1662, to correct the problem of children becoming disconnected from the church, ministers of congregations in Massachusetts adopted a “Half-way Covenant” in which they would baptize the children of church members in good standing whether the children had personal conversions to Christ or not. The lines between church and state were virtually non-existent so it was important that a child be in covenant with the church but also in right standing within the community. Baptism was seen as accomplishing that end.

The Anglicans and Congregationalists were the predominant denominations in the early years of colonial America. State churches existed that would severely persecute anyone who dissented—Baptists and Quakers felt the brunt of persecution in particular. Worship services and sermons were long, cold and lacked application to real life. Many of the clergy lacked integrity, were bigoted, and unspiritual.

The society had declined both spiritually and morally. Drunkenness, infidelity, and greed became an increasing problem and the country was becoming more densely populated and prosperous. In the one hundred years between 1660 and 1760 the population of the colonies went from 75,000 to 1,600,000 people.³ The cities were becoming larger and drawing more and more people away from the smaller rural towns and villages. Innocent people were being falsely accused of being witches in New England and were subsequently imprisoned, tortured and even hanged or burned at the stake.

Anglicans and Congregationalists dominated the denominational landscape since the 1660's, even though there were Baptists, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. However, by 1740 they made up only 57% of the churches in the colonies. More Quakers and Baptists were coming from England and attracting people disillusioned with the state of the churches here.

³ *Eerdmans' Handbook to Religion in America* (p. 96)

In addition to the deadness of the churches, the moral decay of society, the lack of integrity of some of the clergy, the large number of unregenerate church members and the overall form of religion without power, there were other factors that were significant in preparing the soil for revival. Many New Englanders had lost their lives to an outbreak of diphtheria in the 1730's, tensions had come about because of economic difficulties in other areas, some merchants were concerned about the economic impact of England's declaration of war on Spain in 1739 and other societal changes all taken together made people's hearts ready for some measure of spiritual renewal and hope.⁴

Before the real beginning of The Great Awakening under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, the pastor of a Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734 (who we will study next week), God used three men in particular to begin sowing the seeds for revival in the Northeast. In Boston, a pastor named Cotton Mather wrote extensively and was gifted with a superb intellect. He became the pastor of North Church when he was only nineteen years old and remained in that same place of service until his death. He wanted desperately to see spiritual renewal and for people of all Christian denominations to work together to bring converts to Christ.

Early signs of revival began to be seen in New Jersey in the 1720's among the Dutch Reformed. Jacob Frelinghuysen came to New Jersey from Holland in 1720 and began working with residents of the Dutch-speaking residents along the Raritan River Valley.⁵ From the very beginning, Frelinghuysen began preaching about the dangers of religious apathy, formality and the need for genuine conversion. Before long, churches began to grow and people began to experience deeper piety.

Frelinghuysen became friends with and greatly influenced a young Presbyterian minister in New Brunswick named Gilbert Tennent. Tennent also longed to see the flames of revival sweep across his people and warned about spiritual lifelessness and the need for genuine spiritual conversion. He was very instrumental with his brothers John and William in preparing people's hearts for the coming Great Awakening.

⁴ *Eerdmans'* (p.114)

⁵ *Evangelism: Christ's Imperative Commission* by Landrum P. Leavell (p. 94)

Once revival began to break out in Northampton, it was perpetuated under the preaching of Edwards, Methodists John Wesley and George Whitefield, Baptist Isaac Backus in New England, and Shubal Stearns and his brother-in-law Daniel Marshall in the South.

The effects

Scholars debate the actual outcomes of The Great Awakening. Some estimate that in just one generation, “about one-seventh of the population of New England was converted; and proportionate results were seen in the other colonies.”⁶ While church membership did increase, it is not actually clear whether or not this indicated a great number of conversions. This is not to say that revival did not take place. Indeed, a number of very positive spiritual outcomes came about during the period between the late 1730’s to late 1750’s.

In addition to increased church membership the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield brought about a resurgence of Calvinism with its emphasis on the sovereignty of a holy God and man’s sinful and absolute helpless standing without the Savior. Secondly, there was a revival of genuine spiritual renewal in individual lives and a marked impact on the social woes of the culture. Finally, there came a greater concern for higher education. While only Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale existed in 1740, the Presbyterians started Princeton in 1746, the Baptists began what would become Brown University in 1764, Queens College (later Rutgers) was founded by the Dutch Reformed in 1766 and Dartmouth by the Congregationalists in 1769.

Points for home

1. How do you define revival and have you experienced it in your life and the life of your family.
2. We cannot ever become complacent and rely on the work of the Savior in days gone by to see us through today. Our relationship with Christ requires daily renewal and attention.
3. Consider Acts 2:14-47 and how the events of that day were like those of The Great Awakening.

⁶ Leavell (p. 95)