

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 23: Spiritual Awakenings in North America

In the Wake of the Great Awakening

The Awakening not only brought spiritual renewal to God's people, and new conversions, but salt and light to the society around.

New Members

The first major result of the Awakening was the strengthening of the churches of America. The Congregationalists of New England received the greatest benefit: according to Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College, during the 20 years following 1740 the establishment of " ... above 150 new churches has taken place.... " The Awakening brought the total number of Congregational churches to 530. Historians have estimated that from 25,000 to 50,000 people were added to the membership of New England churches as a result of the revival.

The population of New England in 1750 was approximately 340,000, so that (taking the conservative estimate of 25,000 converts as our number) more than seven percent of the entire population of the New England colonies would have come into the churches as a direct result of the Great Awakening.

In the Middle Colonies, the increase in the New Light Presbyterian churches was the greatest. From 1740 to 1760 the number of Presbyterian ministers in the American colonies increased from 45 to over 100. The churches had multiplied even faster, and in 1760 there were more than 40 churches in need of pastors in Pennsylvania and Delaware alone. Substantial gains were also made in the Southern colonies.

While the Baptists had shown some opposition to the Awakening, they shared dramatically in its fruitfulness. During the period 1740–1760 in New England, Baptist churches increased from 21 to 79. In the South, the foundation was laid for the enormous Baptist expansion there later.

New Ideas

Beyond church growth, the Awakening brought major advances and changes in the religious thought—the theological atmosphere—of colonial American Christianity. The historian Sydney Ahlstrom wrote:

In the long run the influence of Jonathan Edwards ... is the most enduring result of the New England Awakening.... A new and irrepressible expectancy entered the life of the churches. A national sense of intensified religious and moral resolution was born. Millennial hopes were kindled.... Edwards' powerful witness and his development of a distinct school of theology would help to nurture these results....

New Visions

Another result of the Awakening was the boost given to missionary and educational endeavors. An increased concern for missions was manifested wherever evangelical awakening was found. In New England and elsewhere this concern showed itself in efforts to reach the American Indians. At Stonington, Connecticut, and at Westerly, Rhode Island, as missionaries worked among the tribes there were extensive awakenings that resulted in the conversions of many Indians.

Among the early converts of the Awakening at Norwich, Connecticut, was Samson Occum, a 17-year-old Mohegan Indian. The Reverend Eleazer Wheelock of Lebanon, Connecticut, a strong promoter of the

Awakening, took Occum into his home for the purpose of educating the obviously talented young man. Occum was ordained as a minister in 1759.

Wheelock had been a pastor in Lebanon, Connecticut, when awakening broke out there under the influence of Jonathan Edwards. During the early 1740s, Wheelock devised a plan for educating Indians, and for training them as evangelists to their tribes. In 1754 he opened a school for this purpose, Moor's School, named after the man whose donation had made it possible. The school was moved to Hanover, New Hampshire in 1769 and renamed Dartmouth College. Dartmouth opened its doors to Indians and white settlers alike, and graduated over 40 New Light pastors.

As previously mentioned, Princeton University owes its origin to the Awakening, growing from the work of William Tennent, Sr. and his Log College. Several other early centers of education, such as Rutgers University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Brown University had their beginnings in the surge of energy from the Great Awakening also. The spiritual renewal greatly advanced the cause of education in America.

New Liberty and Unity

The Awakening also had a significant influence upon religious and political liberty. The expansion of certain denominations, such as the Presbyterians and the Baptists, paved the way for the toleration of differing viewpoints, and for a broader concept of liberty of conscience. Denominations with major differences existing side by side, and free to promote their ideas led to the introduction of the principles that guarantee religious liberty to all.

The work of Whitefield, in a remarkable way, touched every area of colonial life and brought contact between different groups. This made the Awakening the first inter-colonial movement, and the first ecumenical endeavor of the churches in America. Due to Whitefield's broad ministry, Christian groups that had not associated with, or had even avoided other groups were caught up in a spirit of cooperation and Christian brotherhood above and beyond denominational boundaries. Different churches worked together, and saw God's work as more important than party differences.