

# Ordinary People, Extraordinary Things

How God Brings Revival

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## **PART II: THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING**

### CHAPTER 3: THE REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

So the flood of emotion deep and strong  
Troubled the land as it swept along.  
But left a result of holier lives,  
Tenderer mothers and worthier wives,  
The husband and father whose children fled  
And sad wife wept as his drunken tread  
Frightened peace from his roof-tree's shade,  
And a rock of offence his hearthstone made,  
In a strength that was not his own began  
To rise from the brute's to the plane of man.  
Old friends embraced, long held apart,  
By evil counsel and pride of heart,  
And penitence saw through misty tears,  
On the bow of hope on its cloud of fears,  
The promise of Heaven's eternal years,  
The peace of God for the world's annoy,  
Beauty for ashes, and oil of joy.(1) (John Greenleaf Whittier)

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. (Judges 2:10)

The first quote above is from a poem describing the ministry of George Whitefield. The Great Awakening, as this Quaker poet notes, had far-reaching effects in the lives of the ordinary people in this country. When you see, as we did in the last chapter, all the positive effects of this movement, you would think, wouldn't you, that it would go on and on, a constantly growing wave of revival spirit that would eventually engulf and change the nation? That was not the case, and that is why I've included the second quote above, from the book of Judges. We will see this pattern repeated again and again in the history of revivals in this country, for this statement pretty accurately describes the phenomenon of Christianity in America after the Great Awakening. During the period of the Great Awakening there was a new fervency, a deeper spirituality, a heightened awareness of the work of God in the affairs of men. That spiritual climate, however, did not continue to grow until it became the norm for all of America. Instead, as we saw in the previous chapter, the tide began to diminish already in the 1740s and 1750s. Quickly, it seemed, apathy toward religion returned. The reasons for this change in the religious commitment of the United States are many, complex and varied. However, when we look at this period we will see that there were two primary forces that caused people to go back to sleep spiritually after the Great Awakening. These forces came from the world of ideas and the world of finance. In this chapter we will examine how the Enlightenment and the economy after the Revolutionary War had an effect on the spiritual character of the nation.

After the Revolutionary War, America was invaded, not by an army coming from Europe, but by many of the ideas that resulted from scientific advances. The period was known as “The Enlightenment,” a name that implies that people were walking in some kind of darkness until science began to turn on the light. In a sense that was true. Science began to make many discoveries that broadened the view of the world. However, the same discoveries had the negative effect of narrowing the concept of God. Let’s look at a few of the most important contributors to this process.

Copernicus is known as the founder of modern astronomy. He earned this reputation by virtue of being the first to suggest that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system. His primary ideas were published in 1543 in a work entitled, “The Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres,” in which he challenged the traditional view of the universe. Orthodox scientists and theologians up to this point had taught that the earth was the center of the universe. Above and around the earth were “the heavens,” the world of the sun and stars and planets. These were in constant movement around the earth, which did not move.

Obviously, this new teaching was radical for the 16<sup>th</sup> century, not only for the scientists of that day and age, but also for the church. It was a revolutionary departure from the teaching that was supported by the Roman Catholic Church. For that reason, Copernicus expected persecution by the church, and therefore published his theories anonymously. It was only on his deathbed that he allowed his name to be associated with the ideas presented in “The Revolution.”

Galileo was an Italian astronomer who did his work many years after Copernicus. He became interested in the work of Copernicus, however, when he began to study “the heavens.” In order to better observe this aspect of the creation, Galileo invented his own telescope. The best telescopes prior to Galileo’s were of Dutch design and were 6 power, or brought things six times closer. Galileo was able to design a telescope that was 30 power, and therefore gave to him a better view of the planets and stars than that afforded any preceding human being. With this telescope he was the first to see the moons of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn, and the first to study the phenomenon of sunspots. It was his work on sunspots that began his conflict with priests and professors. In 1613 he published “Letters on Sunspots,” which posited that the sun is the center of the universe, as Copernicus had said in Poland many years before. Immediately the church reacted against this theory, because, they said, it was not what the Bible taught. Galileo then suggested that the Bible should not be accepted as an authority over science when the subject was science. The Bible speaks of theology, Galileo claimed, not science.

In order to understand the tremendous upheaval that this caused, you have to recall that at this point in history, the Roman Catholic Church was all-powerful, holding authority even over the government. Galileo’s claims were seen as an attack on the authority of the church, and therefore, the church reacted negatively. In 1615 the Pope established a committee to study the phenomenon of the earth’s movement. The committee’s conclusion was that the Copernican view of the universe was opposed to the Bible, and therefore was wrong. In 1616, therefore, the Pope forbade Galileo to teach this theory.

For several years this ended the controversy, since Galileo obeyed the Pope’s ruling. However, with a rising tide of popular, scientific support for his views, Galileo published another book in 1632. In it he did not openly propagate the new ideas, but compared the traditional view of the universe with what Copernicus had taught many years before. This was the period of the Inquisition, you will remember, when any challenge to the church was met with a trial. Galileo was once again accused of heresy and of defying the church by disobeying the Pope’s ruling to not propagate his views. He was called before the Inquisition, tried for heresy, and convicted. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. This sentence was changed to a house arrest shortly thereafter.

What does all of this have to do with the ebbing of spirituality in America? Simply this: by the

time of the Revolutionary war, Galileo's interpretation of the universe was widely accepted. As a result of his discoveries, the narrow interpretation of the creation by the church was challenged, with the result that the church was seen as increasingly out of touch with reality. Also, scientists and mathematicians were encouraged to use exploration and experimentation as the means to discover truth. The church was no longer considered the authority in this area. We will see the results of that change in a short while. First, let's look at the other major generators of the Enlightenment.

Isaac Newton is the next person considered to be a father of the Enlightenment. Every school child knows the story that tradition has immortalized--that Newton discovered the law of gravity while seated in his orchard when he saw an apple fall to the ground. It is not true, by the way, that the apple fell on his head, as some versions of the story suggest. Seeing the apple fall, however, got the thought process going for Newton. He gave credit to this event as a catalyst in his studies of the gravitational pull of the earth on the moon, and the ideas that were born in that orchard came to fruition in his widely known "Principia Mathematica," published in 1686. In this landmark work he developed the three laws of motion.

The contribution of Newton to the continuing development of science was a demonstration that the universe worked according to established laws of motion, and that these laws could be demonstrated mathematically.

These scientific discoveries were hailed at the time, and are still taught in our schools as the foundation of what has become known as Modern Science and the scientific method. However, what is not taught is the effect that discoveries such as these had upon mankind's attitude toward religion. Prior to the work of such men as these, it was assumed the world continued and operated because of the direct intervention of God. If there was a storm that destroyed your home, it was God trying to tell you something, applying discipline for some wrong attitude or action in your life. If there was an eclipse, it was a warning of some act of judgment or of the end of time. Sunrise and sunset were God's gracious controlling of His universe. Now Christians were confronted with a vision of the universe that had been discovered to be in motion, with the sun at the center of this solar system, and this solar system being only one of many. Rather than God causing things like sunrises and sunsets and the movement of stars in the sky, it was now obvious that these things were the product of mathematically predictable forces. Gravity, not God, was at work. The faith of many was challenged. Newton himself, toward the end of his life, refused to take the Lord's Supper. He felt that he remained a Christian, but considered many of the doctrines of the church as irrational and superstitious. Others, reflecting on his work, came to the same conclusion and began to reject the traditional faith of Christianity. Reason and science were thought to be the means to answer the major questions of life. The natural world and the rules that governed it, were easily probed by the application of the human intellect. What could not be rationally demonstrated and experienced was to be questioned.

The Christian Church was threatened. There were even some who questioned whether Christianity would survive. Voltaire, a French philosopher who lived during this period (1789-1815) predicted that Christianity would die away within the next thirty years.(2) Francis Scott Latourette, eminent Christian historian, said of this time: "...it looked as though Christianity were a waning influence, about to be ushered out of the affairs of man."(3) Reason or Rationalism, as it came to be known, reigned supreme. It would be the exercise of the human reason that would solve the problems of mankind, not the intervention of a Divine being.

John Locke, an English philosopher who lived from 1632 to 1704, is another major figure in the Enlightenment that we should learn about. He is known for taking the scientific methods of rationalization and experimentation and applying them to the social problems of the day. Sydney Ahlstrom describes the significance of his thought this way:

He more nearly personifies the reigning spirit of the eighteenth century than any other thinker. His thought is guided by three great optimistic principles: that the chief end of man is felicity in this world and probably in the next; that man's rational powers, if rightly disciplined and employed, provide a means for solving the problems of life and attaining this felicity; and that the essential truths of such a view are so self-evident, and man himself so responsive to such evidence, that progress in human felicity is inevitable.(4)

In other words, reason should be applied to every area of life, and if it is, happiness will be the result.

Locke is important in our consideration of the decline of the Great Awakening because he wrote political works that became the germinal ideas of the founders of America. He also wrote on religion, turning the light of reason on the spiritual experience. And Christianity began to wither in response, even though Locke himself defended Christianity. In his 1695 work, "The Reasonableness of Christianity," he said that Christianity was good if defined by a belief in Jesus and living a moral life.

### **How Did It Come to America?**

How did this questioning of faith become part of the American Church scene? How could views that seemed so contradictory to Christianity find a hearing in a nation that began as a "city set on a hill?"

Actually, this emphasis on human reason was very much part of the life of the United States, and played an intimate role during the period of the Revolution. Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams (possibly the founding fathers with the greatest influence on the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) spent many years in Europe during and after the Revolutionary War. In their travels through France and other European countries in an effort to obtain treaties and loans, they were exposed thoroughly to the thought that lay behind the Enlightenment and were "converted." Jefferson, in particular, became a Deist--that is, he believed that there was a supreme being, but that Christianity probably did not represent the revelation of the Deity. He was convinced that the only legitimate learning comes through experience. Therefore, there probably is not any "divine" revelation. Nature is the revelation. Jefferson saw the universe as a clock: the Creator made it, set it in motion, and then backed away and watched it tick.

Because there was not, in Jefferson's mind, any divine revelation and no supernatural happenings, many of the traditional Christian doctrines were cast aside as illogical and irrational. The Trinity just could not be a reality. Jesus could not be divine, but was a great moral, human teacher.

Jefferson, because of his inquisitive mind and commitment to the way of rationalism, set upon a quest to discover the original, pure religion, the religion that was not corrupted by priests and ministers. Over a period of twenty years he redefined the text of the Bible, taking out references to God's intervention in the world, the divinity of Jesus, etc. He did this by taking a Bible, snipping out the passages that he felt were genuine, gluing them on another sheet, and throwing the rest away.

So these ideas were here in America, affecting the political and scientific world, and as the European scientists and philosophers were studied in the colleges of the land, these teachings became the norm.

## The Reaction of the Church

How did the churches respond to this “invasion” of ideas? There were at least three varying reactions. One was to ignore the controversy and stick with the simple truths of Scripture. During this period we find that the Methodists continued to grow in the frontier areas of our country, where there wasn't much concern with thoughts that were considered to be above them. Rather, men like Francis Asbury and some conservative Calvinists continued business as usual, calling people to conversion.

A second response was to try to find a compromise, to recognize the discoveries of science, but maintain a commitment to the Bible with the view that it was a book on theology, not science. Such was the response of some Presbyterian and Anglican churches. This was the middle ground.

Thirdly, there was the reaction of accommodation. Some churches decided to buy everything the philosophers and scientists were saying, thereby limiting God to being the “first cause.” Those who adhered to this view called for “enlightened” Christianity, and became Unitarian. The following characteristics apply to these churches.

1. There was an emphasis on mankind's freedom to choose for the good and his natural inclination toward goodness.
2. The Christian faith was proclaimed as simple, and the complex theologies of the Reformation and even medieval church were ridiculed. John Locke boiled genuine “enlightened” Christianity down to two rules: Believe in Jesus; and lead a life of virtue.
3. Living a moral life was considered the ultimate goal of Christianity.
4. Because of #3, belief in the effectiveness of anything like the sacraments was considered to be superstition.
5. The idea of progress is prominent. In other words, mankind would gradually improve and bring about a Kingdom of God here on earth, as we learned more about the natural world.
6. God was seen as a Power, or as a First Principle, or as Creator. He was often called “Deity.” This, as you can see, is a very impersonal view of God. The enlightened rational man would have a hard time seeing God in a close relationship with man, and would probably have trouble saying anything like David's “The Lord Is My Shepherd.” These kinds of beliefs radically altered the belief system so that it was barely recognizable as Christianity.

## The Post-Revolutionary War Phenomenon

In addition to the invasion of the ideas of the Enlightenment, there was another force that played a role in the decline of vital spirituality in the new United States. It was the despair and depression of the post-war country. Soldiers had returned from the war to fields that had not been kept up for many years. Poverty gripped the nation, and in the confusion of this period, morality declined. J. Edwin Orr, a historian who specializes in the history of revivals, characterized the moral life of the fledgling country in these words:

Of a population of five million the United States suffered three hundred thousand drunkards, and buried about 15,000 of them annually. Christian chroniclers complained that, for the first time in the history of the country, there was a surfeit of lawlessness, a profusion of gamblers, of gangs of robbers and slave-stealers. Drunkenness was common and profanity prevalent, they said. Immorality had increased as standards of honesty and morality declined.(5)

## The Resulting Effect on Christianity

What effect did this have on the church, and on the church's influence in the country? Church membership declined. The typical college student was an atheist and living an immoral life. Lyman Beecher described it this way:

College was in a most ungodly state. The college church was almost extinct. Most of the students were skeptical and rowdies were plenty. Wine and liquors were kept in many rooms; intemperance, profanity, gambling and licentiousness were common.(6)

There were those who felt that Christianity was coming to the end, and that new religions would naturally evolve, but Christianity would not be the religion of the future. Chief Justice John Marshall wrote that the church was too far gone ever to be revived.(7) Bishop Samuel Provost of New York felt that the situation was hopeless, and he simply stopped functioning as bishop.(8) In 1793 the Kentucky legislature voted to do away with the position of chaplain, because such a person was no longer necessary.(9) Colleges and universities, the training ground for leaders of the future, were in the hands of atheists. It looked like a dark time for the church and the nation. How would God and the church respond? That is the subject of the next chapter.

### Notes:

1. John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Preacher," *Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882), p. 254.
2. Voltaire
3. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Vol. III), p. 454.
4. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 353.
5. Edwin J. Orr, *The Eager Feet* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 8.
6. Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, p. 43.
7. Orr, p. 10.
8. Ibid.
9. Frank Beardsley, *A History of Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1912), p. 81.



## CHAPTER 4: THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

The power and influence of the church had ebbed. Only 5% to 10% of the country was affiliated with the Christian church. Predictions were being made that Christianity would die out within a generation in America. How would God respond? What tactic would the church employ to regain lost ground? J. Edwin Orr puts well the human action taken, that opened up the way for supernatural intervention by God.

The problem was too big for human ingenuity or human energy. Neither denominational organization nor inter-denomination cooperation could cope with the emergency. Demonic forces with carnal collaboration had forced the churches into a corner. How did they retaliate and turn the defeat into victory? The only weapon left was prayer, and pray they did...Intercessors simply supplicated the God of the Universe to intervene on their behalf, in a revival of religion and an extension of the kingdom of Christ on earth.(1)

The extraordinary prayer began to reap results as early as 1791 in the First Baptist church in Boston. Following the example of churches in England, this church began a weekly prayer meeting for revival, held in the vestry of the church. When that area became too crowded, the group moved to the sanctuary. Over that year, even through the winter months, a goodly number of people came, and the church began to grow, adding 138 members.

Similar prayer meetings were begun elsewhere in the Boston area, with similar results. However, the first united tactic of prayer began in 1794. This was when the “Concert of Prayer” idea began to take hold.

As people saw the results of prayer in a few New England churches, a group of ministers sent a circular letter around the country inviting other pastors and churches to engage in a concert of prayer. A concert, of course, is where all the instruments in the orchestra play different parts, but also play together, following the same score. This concert in prayer was to be a joining together of Christians around the country at the same time, imploring God for the same thing: a renewal of religious fervor in the land. The first Tuesday in January 1795 it was to begin, and thereafter it was to continue every quarter.

The response was encouraging. Presbyterian synods recommended the plan to their churches, the Methodist Episcopal Church agreed to fast and pray at the agreed-upon time, Baptist churches, Congregational churches, Reformed denominations, and Moravian churches all agreed to this unique request.

In many areas they prayed more often than the requested quarterly meeting. Some groups of Christians covenanted to pray for the salvation of people a half hour at sunset on Saturday, and a half hour before sunrise on Sunday.

It wasn't long before God answered these prayers. Local awakenings began in such places as West Simsbury and New Hartford, Connecticut in 1798, in Farmington, Canton and Norfolk,

Connecticut in 1799, and continued to spread to Massachusetts and Vermont. Churches that had no new members for 16 years, as in Lenox, Massachusetts, began to grow again. In New London, New Hampshire, a small church of 18 members welcomed 100 converts in a short time. In New York City, from 1807 to 1812, the Rutgers St. Dutch Reformed Church increased from 80 to more than 700 members.

This revival was different from the Great Awakening of some forty years before in a couple of distinct ways. First of all, there were no prominent names at the beginning, no figures like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield who were the instruments of

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initiation. It was not fired by itinerant evangelists the way the Great Awakening had been, with first Whitefield and then others traveling the colonies and uniting them. Rather, it was the local pastor in the local church that became the catalyst for the release of the power of God. A second way this awakening differed from the first was the fact that demonstrations accompanying conversion that had become so controversial in the Great Awakening were absent at the beginning of the Second Great Awakening such as falling down and rolling on the floor, screaming, and some of the other physical manifestations of grief for sin. The meetings were orderly but conversion still occurred.

### Early Events

Though there were no well-known itinerant evangelists at the beginning of this period of awakening, there were some people and places that are worth mentioning as an example of the variety of ways that God worked. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to a consideration of the revival at Yale college under the leadership of Dr. Timothy Dwight, the Cane Ridge revival, and the revival at William and Mary college. These were the highlights early on in the Second Great Awakening. Then we'll close the chapter by seeing how God called and equipped Charles Finney to extend the revival for the next several decades.

### Yale College

Even though there was no primary evangelist in the early years of this second spiritual awakening, there were some people who made an impact that was memorable. One of those people was Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards. Dwight's work revolved around higher education. He was educated at Yale College, from which he graduated in 1769. From 1771-1777 he served the college as a tutor. At that point he was disappointed at not being named college president, and responded to the appointment of someone else by joining the Union Army as a chaplain. After the Revolutionary War, he was ordained in 1783 in the Presbyterian Church, and accepted a call to serve as the head of an academy in Greenfield, Connecticut. From there he accepted a call to become what he had desired earlier: President of Yale College. His term of service at that institution began in 1795 and lasted until his death in 1817.

When Dwight arrived on the Yale campus he found a largely unbelieving student body, skeptical of the Christian faith and even hostile to it. Dwight, however, was a fervent believer in the truth of Christian doctrine and was determined to use his post to fight the beliefs of the Enlightenment, which had come to be known among committed Christians as the "French infidelity." Therefore, upon assuming his post, he met with a variety of student groups and listened to their arguments against Christianity and their doubts about its truth. He then proceeded to preach Jesus Christ in chapel exercises. In these chapels he answered the doubts and arguments he had heard from his students. Not much happened at first. However, in 1802 a powerful revival swept the campus that resulted in seventy-five of the approximately two-

hundredand-thirty students being converted. Many of these made a commitment to become involved in mission work.

In this instance of revival we see how the practice of preaching and the perseverance of one man were used by God to make a powerful impact not only on that one college campus, but through its graduates on the world.

## **The Cane Ridge Revival**

The Yale revival was one example of how God caused revival during this period. An entirely different modus operandi was used on the frontier. Most notable among the many revivals that swept the outer edges of civilization was what has become known as the “Cane Ridge Revival.” The meetings in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, began in the heart and mind of a Presbyterian minister by the name of Barton Stone. He had been impressed by other large gatherings on the frontier areas of the country, and therefore determined to organize such a meeting himself for the purpose of preaching the gospel. A circular was produced and news began to spread through word-of-mouth. The announcement was made that a great religious meeting was going to take place at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, on August 6, 1801.

In order to understand the phenomenon of the Cane Ridge Revival, you must remember what life was like on the frontier at that time. The movement of people had usually outstripped the development of new churches, so there had been little religious influence on many of these people for some years. The rugged frontiersman was usually a hardened, profane, tough-minded, rough-speaking, and hard-drinking individualist. Such people did predominate, but by this time some families were living out in the wilderness too, causing society to grow. Whether family or rugged individual, though, an announcement of a gathering with others was joyfully anticipated, since people usually lived at great distances and had few social opportunities. Still, when one announced a meeting, there was no way to predict how many people would show up—especially if that meeting was supposed to be religious in character.

When August 6 arrived, Barton Stone was astounded to see somewhere between ten and twenty-five thousand people gathered in the fields of Cane Ridge. Many Methodist and Baptist ministers also came in response to the announcement of the meeting, and it was a good thing: they were needed to help conduct the variety of meetings that became the Cane Ridge Revival. The astonishing number of people that showed up is even more phenomenal when you consider that Lexington, the largest city in Kentucky at that time, had only two thousand inhabitants. Over ten thousand people, many of them traveling huge distances, came in order to hear the Word preached.

The meetings were quickly organized. Preachers preached at the same time in various parts of the camp from a log, or a crude platform, or in a tent. People would wander from place to place to hear the various sermons. All preachers called upon people to confess their sins and enter the kingdom. In the evenings, around a myriad of campfires, the people would discuss the messages of the day.

The official part of this experience lasted for six or seven days; history does not record the exact length of time. We do have recorded, though, the accounts of many “miracles” of conversion, as people would fall down in tears over their sins and beg for forgiveness from a benevolent God. It is difficult to tabulate the number of converts that were won during this meeting. However, it is considered by many to be the greatest outpouring of the Holy Spirit since Pentecost, as people from various theological persuasions gathered together with a common purpose and a common theme: conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. We don’t know how many people were converted, but we do know of some of the results of this and other such camp

meetings. Shortly after this time a Rev. George A. Baxter traveled through Kentucky. He reported in a letter what he found:

On my way I was informed by settlers on the road that the character of Kentucky travelers was entirely changed, and that they were as remarkable for sobriety as they had formerly been for dissoluteness and immorality. And indeed I found Kentucky to appearances the most moral place I had ever seen. A profane expression was hardly ever heard. A religious awe seemed to pervade the country.(2)

Over the next years the “camp meeting,” as it came to be called, became the standard technique used on the frontier to aid the awakening that God was sending.

### **The Haystack Meeting**

Another example of how God worked during these years is what has become known as the Haystack Revival. During a summer afternoon in 1806 five students from William and Mary college were forced to find cover in a thunderstorm. They had been meeting in a grove of maple trees for prayer, afraid to let it be known to their skeptical and cynical fellow scholars that they were praying. While waiting out the rainstorm burrowed in the haystack they discussed the need to reach the heathen for Christ. They prayed, and committed themselves to expending themselves in sharing the gospel, and formed a society right then and there to further their plans.

At this time William and Mary College was largely committed to the principles of the Enlightenment. In fact, the five young men met in secret in order to avoid the ridicule that they expected should it be known that they were Christians. Minutes of their meetings were recorded in a code to keep the suspicious from making an issue of their meetings. Things were so bad on campus that these five students, when they subtly talked to others on campus to learn about their religious convictions, found less than 20 others who shared a burden for the lost.

The Haystack Revival is considered a significant event in the beginning years of the Second Great Awakening for two primary reasons. First, it was a lay movement without strong ministerial leadership. The five young men were independent of any particular church or organization or clergy associated with any denomination. Secondly, this was the beginning of Americans becoming involved in foreign missions. These five lived out their commitment to become involved in missions. The best known of the five was Adoniram Judson, who went to Burma as a missionary. Another was Samuel J. Mills, who did not end up in foreign missions, but was instrumental in the beginning of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

### **Charles G. Finney**

At the beginning of the Second Great Awakening, as mentioned earlier, no main figure appeared that became the focus of the energies of the revival. However, this great movement of the Holy Spirit that we call the Second Great Awakening had a second wave that picked up the power of the first wave, organized it, and spread it with power throughout the nation. The second wave produced the person with whom this revival is often associated: Charles Gradison Finney.

Finney began his career as an evangelist in 1821, but the years prior to his emergence as a spiritual leader are worth noting in order to see how God worked in the life of an ordinary person whom He was preparing to do the extraordinary. Finney was born in Litchfield County, Connecticut, on August 29, 1792. You will notice that a city is not identified as the place of his birth. That is because most of his early life was spent on what was then the frontier of our country. His life began on the western end of Connecticut, in an area that is not very heavily populated even today. When he was two years old, the family moved to Oneida County, New York. This area would become important some years later, when it became the center of an

important migration after the completion of the Erie Canal. However, at the time Finney was first there, it was, as he termed it, "a wilderness." By the time he was 16, the area was settled enough to have a church, but religion apparently played a very small role in the life of the Finney family. During his sixteenth year Finney's father again uprooted the family and moved to Henderson, New York, on the shores of Lake Ontario, effectively taking them once again away from the benefits of the encroaching civilization. Finney describes this area in his memoirs this way: "No religious privileges were enjoyed by the people. Very few religious books were to be had...they had among them very little intelligent preaching of the gospel."(3)

Thus the beginning of Finney's life was without any religious influence whatsoever. His parents professed no faith. He heard little preaching and had no Christian fellowship to serve as an example to him.

The direction of Finney's life began to change because of his desire for an education. Early in his life any formal education was received sporadically in scattered log schools that would eventually find their way into the wilderness. Since he wanted to learn, he decided to return, with his parents' permission and encouragement, to Connecticut to attend high school. He graduated, and still wanted to go to college. His desire was to enter Yale. His school counselor, however, discouraged him from following that course because it would take him four years to get his degree, and if he continued to study with the counselor, he could earn the equivalent of a college degree in two. He thus studied with this "preceptor" for a time, but also began to earn his living as a teacher; he continued in that profession until he was 25. In that time teaching was not something that was seen as a career for a man. Therefore, at the urging of his parents, he decided to pursue the profession of attorney-at-law. He became apprenticed to Judge Benjamin Wright of Adams, in Jefferson County, New York. Two years of study later he took the bar exam and passed it, and then settled down to practice law in partnership with Judge Wright.

By this time in his life, Finney reports, he was still largely ignorant of religious things. Although he had attended religious services occasionally, his evaluation of them was not very positive. The ministers, according to the time-honored practice, read their sermons. The sermons, he felt, were irrelevant, and his conclusion was that they were "probably written years before."(4) No gestures were used by the preachers lest they detract from the message. The result was that sermons were not easy to listen to. Therefore, he felt no attraction to church or to the message of salvation, assuming that the practice of religion was a quaint custom, but hardly necessary for life. He described his spiritual condition upon the beginning of studying law this way:

Thus when I went to Adams to study law, I was almost as ignorant of religion as a heathen. I had been brought up mostly in the woods. I had very little regard to the Sabbath, and had no definite knowledge of religious truth."(5)

All of this began to change when he began to study law with Judge Wright. As he studied the history of jurisprudence, he found that authors often referred to the Scriptures, especially the Mosaic law found early in the Bible. In order to be well-informed, he purchased a Bible and began to read and study it. It was during this period, too, that he began to attend church regularly in Adams, where George Gale was pastor. Finney was not in church because he was convinced of the truth of the Christian message, it should be noted. Quite the opposite was true. In fact, he would have discussions with Gale that criticized perceived faults in the logic of Gale's preaching, as well as flaws in the Calvinistic system that Gale presented in his sermons. In addition to the inconsistencies that he noted in the preaching and doctrine of the church, Finney felt that the prayers of the church people bordered on the ridiculous. They prayed at the weekday prayer meeting, but never saw answers to their prayers. The cynical Finney was asked once if he wanted the prayer group to pray for him. His response was typically caustic. As he reports it,

On one occasion, when I was in one of the prayer-meetings, I was asked if I did not desire

that they should pray for me. I told them, no; because I did not see that God answered their prayers. I said, "I suppose I need to be prayed for, for I am conscious that I am a sinner; but I do not see that it will do any good for you to pray for me; for you are continually asking, but you do not receive. You have been praying for a revival of religion ever since I have been in Adams, and yet you have it not. You have been praying for the Holy Spirit to descend upon yourselves, and yet complaining of your leanness." I recollect having used this expression at that time: "You have prayed enough since I have attended these meetings to have prayed the devil out of Adams, if there is any virtue in your prayers. But here you are praying on, and complaining still."(6)

Imagine such a response from a neighbor or friend! What would be your reaction? A couple of people in Adams reacted by secretly covenanting to pray for the conversion of Charles Finney. The Holy Spirit began to work on the young lawyer. As he read the Bible, he began to be more and more troubled. After two years of intense study of the Scriptures, he came to the conclusion that the Bible was the Word of God. This caused a bit of a crisis in his life. Once he accepted that there was a God who spoke, and that there was a heaven that God was going to bring people to, Finney had to question whether he was going to go there? At this point he knew that the answer to this question was a decided "no," and would remain that way unless there was a major change in his life. Some time was spent in anxiety about these things until one bright day in October of 1821. It was a Tuesday, and after a particularly restless Sunday and Monday, Finney was on the way to the office when he felt he had to find an answer to his questions about his eternal salvation. The question seemed to crowd his mind, "Will you accept it now, today?" His reply was, "Yes; I will accept it today, or I will die in the attempt."(7)

Instead of going to the office, he went to a woods near his home where he knelt to pray between two large trees that had fallen. After agonizing for hours over his pride and inability to pray, he finally found peace as God brought promises to his mind about his gracious acceptance of sinners through the blood of Jesus. Although he still did not feel sure of his salvation, he felt that there was hope that he would find it. As he reports it, it was that evening he was in the law office, determined to pray again, when he had a vision.

There was no fire, and no light, in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. It did not occur to me then, nor did it for some time afterward, that it was wholly a mental state. On the contrary it seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet...I wept aloud like a child, and made such confessions as I could with my choked utterance. It seemed to me that I bathed his feet with my tears."(8)

While kneeling there before Jesus, Finney had what he called a "mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost." It was an experience of the love of God that, he said, "seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love..."(9)

Thus was Finney converted, and felt the call to become a preacher of the good news that he had experienced. The next day a deacon from the church came to the office to remind Finney that he was to plead his case in court at 10 o'clock that morning. Finney's reply was, "Deacon, I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and I cannot plead yours."(10)

He immediately began to share Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen, and even made a few forays as an evangelist, one to nearby Evans Mills and one to Antwerp. However, in order to gain the credentials for ministry, he placed himself under the tutelage of George Gale in preparation for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church. In 1823 the Presbytery passed him after examination, even though they didn't entirely agree with his developing theology. However, his obvious success as an evangelist in several revival meetings convinced them of his call to the

ministry, and they proceeded to ordain him to ministry in the Presbyterian Church. He accepted an appointment as an itinerant evangelist in March of 1824, by the Female Missionary Society of the Western District of New York, and was given a salary of six hundred dollars per year and a challenge to reach many with the good news of salvation. During the next few years he traveled freely throughout the region, honing skills in preaching and attracting growing attention. Whitney Cross, historian of the Burned-Over District, described his success in preaching this way:

Graceful in motion, skilled in vocal music, with a voice of extraordinary clarity, tone, and ranges of power and pitch, he spoke without mannerism in concise, familiar figures. Having been not only a lawyer, but also an accomplished horseman, marksman, and sailor, he could utilize parables meaningful to common folk.(11)

Finney emphasized preaching without a manuscript and without notes in order to better relate to the congregation. This style was a welcome change from ministers who read their sermons. The content was also a refreshing respite from the sermons of the day, which were usually explanations of doctrine. Utilizing natural abilities along with skills gained in his teaching and law careers, Finney became an effective preacher and channel of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Over the next nine years Finney became well-known in the area of Western New York that became known as “The Burned-Over District” because of its recurring revivals. Successes in the cities of Rome, Utica and Troy caused a demand for his services in larger cities. One revival that he remembers as the greatest of this phase of his life occurred in 1830-1831 in Rochester, New York. Of this revival Finney said,

The greatness of the work in Rochester, at that time, attracted so much of the attention of ministers and Christians throughout the State of New York, throughout New England, and in many parts of the United States, that the very fame of it was an efficient instrument in the hands of the Spirit of God in promoting the greatest revival of religion throughout the land, that this country had then ever witnessed.(12)

The revival at Rochester also rocketed Mr. Charles Finney to national fame and prominence.

Here are some highlights of the rest of his career. In 1832 the Eastern Seaboard began to open its doors to the backwoods preacher. In that year he became pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City. The number of people that thronged to hear him was so great that a larger building (The Broadway Tabernacle) was built to handle them in 1834. In 1836 Finney left the Presbyterian Church because of a dispute over several theological issues, but the instigating controversy was over church discipline. After some wrangling over the Calvinist doctrine of the church, Finney decided to become a Congregationalist. In 1835 he accepted the position of professor of Theology at Oberlin College in Ohio. During this period of his life he taught in the summer, but went back to his church in New York for revival meetings and continued preaching during the winter months. In 1837 he became the interim pastor of the college church in Oberlin, and later, after resigning his position in New York, became the pastor in Oberlin. He was now teacher, pastor, and traveling evangelist, with trips throughout the growing United States and England. The Presidency of Oberlin College was added to his list of responsibilities in 1851, a post he retained until 1865, when he resigned due to the health problems that accompanied his advancing age. He remained pastor of the college, however, until 1872, when, in failing health, he resigned that position to devote himself to writing down his experiences, his theology, and his thoughts.

#### Notes:

1. J. Edwin Orr, *The Eager Feet* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 12.
2. Quoted in Frank Beardsley, *A History of Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1912), pp. 95-96.

3. Charles Finney, *An Autobiography* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1886), p. 4.
4. Ibid, p. 7.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid, p. 10.
7. Ibid, p. 14.
8. Ibid, p. 19-20.
9. Ibid, p. 20.
10. Ibid, p. 24.
11. Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 152.
12. Finney, p. 300



## **CHAPTER 5: THE RESULTS OF THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING**

The results of the Second Great Awakening were many, varied, and widespread. Almost all of the various elements of American society life were changed in some way.

### **Impact on the church**

This second major awakening in America took place in waves over many years. After the excitement of 1800 there was a period when the revival's intensity waned. Another peak was reached in 1807 to 1808. During the period of the War of 1812 the excitement ebbed again, only to pick up again thereafter and reach new peaks through the ministry of traveling evangelists such as Charles Finney. Because this revival came as it did, in different chapters over a long period of time, it is difficult to count the numbers of people that became members of churches as a result of spiritual awakening. However, we do have estimates from some of the denominations that figured prominently in the movement. The Baptist Church in Kentucky estimated a growth of ten thousand people.(1) Between 1800 and 1803 the Methodist Episcopal Church took in about forty thousand members.(2) Later, in 1818, the Methodists reported a 16% increase in one year.(3) These two denominations serve as examples of a harvest that was experienced by any church that was proclaiming a gospel of being reconciled to God during this time when the Holy Spirit caused people to be receptive. New members swelled the churches and new congregations were begun. A renewed excitement and vitality on the part of the older members was experienced. It had been, in this sense at least, a Great Awakening.

A second result of the Second Great Awakening was a series of schisms in the church. Ever since the days of the Half-Way Covenant among the Congregationalist, there had been two strains in the church: the one conservative and opposed to having unconverted people as members in the church; the other accepting of the Covenant and more open to the new ideas of science. The relationship between those who held the two views was strained during the Second Great Awakening. In the Presbyterian Church there was a split between what became known as the "New Lights," or the supporters of the revival spirit, and the "Old Lights," or those who were critical of the emphasis on conversion and preferred a more open and liberal stance in the church. In the Congregational Church the split was between the conservatives, who remained orthodox and supportive of an emphasis on conversion, and the liberals, who eventually became the Unitarian Church in New England.

## The New Measures

A third impact on the church was the organizing and standardizing of the techniques of revival. Jonathan Edwards had made observations about the process that the converted in the Great Awakening seemed to go through. It began with an awakening to the fact that they were sinners, in danger of going to hell. Sometimes this would happen suddenly in a meeting and people would be crying out for mercy, and for others it was a gradual process. But whatever the experience, there was a concern for salvation on the part of the sinner. The second stage in the process would be an attempt to find peace, which they would seek by forsaking previous sinful practices and by reading the Bible and going to church services. This, Edwards called, their “time of being under trouble.”<sup>(4)</sup> Finally, they would yield to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, give themselves to God, and would then be converted.

Charles Finney is remembered for the role he played in institutionalizing this process of conversion. It was his conviction that revival was not to be something that just happened whenever the Holy Spirit fell. Rather, it should be the natural course of events for the church. It was possible, he felt, to manipulate events around a revival so that converts would be an assured result. Therefore, he, along with the many other revivalists of his time, began using what were called “new measures” in planning for revival meetings. One “new measure” was a change in the preaching style and practice. Prior to this time the emphasis in preaching had been on a finely crafted speech. In contrast, Finney used short and simple sentences, common examples, and repeated himself frequently. It was his conviction that a common exhorter, one who spoke to peoples’ hearts, would be able to move a congregation toward that feeling of anxiety that was a prelude to conversion. Thus, preaching was extemporaneous, rather than read and focused on what could be understood by the common man or woman.

A second new measure was the institutionalizing of prayer that preceded revival. People were encouraged to pray at sunrise, in the morning, during the day, in the evening, and after sundown for the conversion of people as a prelude to a revival meeting. In addition to the informal gathering of small groups at various times, a formal prayer meeting was held, usually in the evening. At these meetings people would pray in circles for the Holy Spirit to bring about revival.

A third “new measure” had to do with the quality of prayer rather than the quantity. Some historians believe that Finney taught people to pray specifically because he was reacting to his experience with prayer meetings in Adams. There, you remember, he saw people praying much, but with few answers. Whatever the reason, Finney taught that it was offensive to make a request of God that was so obscure that it was not possible to know when it was answered. Requests should be precise; a clear object should be in mind. Also, prayer must be based upon the promises of God as revealed in Scripture. It must be for an unselfish purpose. And faith should expect an answer. This technique for prayer became known as the “prayer of faith.” Many such prayers were prayed for specific people to come to conversion at specific meetings.

Fourthly, the role of women was expanded as one of the “new measures.” Prior to this period there had been a few instances of women being directly involved in the ministry of the churches. Women were encouraged to fulfill their domestic role as helpmeet, and to obey the counsel of Scripture to remain silent in the church. Statistics have shown, though, that women were in the majority in the membership of most of the churches during that time. Finney and the other revivalists of this period capitalized on the presence and involvement of women by allowing them and then encouraging them to pray in mixed groups, to speak up at meetings, and in other ways to take leadership. Using the gifts of women in this way at this time in the flow of revival bore fruit. Many husbands joined the church in direct response to women’s prayers and invitation.

Fifthly, the house-to-house canvass was developed. In preparation for a revival, “holy bands”

of people were encouraged to spend their day between the morning period of devotions and the evening prayer meeting in calling on their friends and neighbors. Similarly, groups of Christians were encouraged to warn sinners on the streets about their lack of salvation. In an attempt to get the necessary man and woman power to accomplish the confrontation of the entire city where the revival was going to be held, Finney would even visit the shopkeepers and encourage them to close their stores during the time of the revival, and many agreed.

A sixth, and more controversial technique that was developed to encourage revival was the Inquiry Meeting. Changes occurred in the use of this technique over the course of the Second Great Awakening. Early on in the ministry of Finney, he encouraged those who were interested in knowing more and exploring their need of salvation to gather at the end of the service to inquire further and to receive counsel from the evangelist and others. Later this was developed into a separate meeting in the morning. The purpose of these meetings was, of course, to confront sinners with their sin and to produce anxiety in them about their soul. Over a period of time this separate meeting was put back into the evening service and developed into the most controversial of all of the “new measures”: the anxious bench. During the meeting, while the preaching and singing were going on, people were encouraged to come up and occupy a bench in front of the congregation if they were experiencing anxiety about their relationship with God. This was the beginning of the practice that continues today of inviting people to come forward in answer to an “invitation” at crusades. The point was to break down the pride of the person so that they would be more receptive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Finney had struggled with this very issue of pride prior to his own conversion; he was not able to pray when he was in the woods because he kept wondering if anyone was near who might hear. Therefore, he told people at the meetings that they had to ignore their pride and be humble before the Lord. They could demonstrate their humility by coming forward and taking a place on the anxious bench. While there the “anxious” person would be the subject of prayers and entreaty on the part of the preacher and the people until they came to the point of being penitent enough for the Holy Spirit to work in their life. In some preaching of that time the anxious bench was pictured as a place where the sinner was suspended figuratively between heaven and hell--awakened to their spiritual condition, but not really part of the kingdom yet. This was a controversial technique, opposed by many theologians and pastors as a manipulation of a person’s emotions. Finney and the other evangelists who used it, and those who have developed the idea further since then, said that it was merely paving the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The “protracted meeting” was another “new measure.” This was a reference to the practice of the revivalists to plan many meetings, and keeping them going for several hours. When a town planned a revival, meetings were planned for every morning, afternoon and evening. Prayer meetings would go through the night on occasion. The purpose, according to proponents of the practice, was to gradually break down the impediments to the working of the Holy Spirit. Opponents said that the protracted meeting was manipulative. Toward the end of the Second Great Awakening evangelists were becoming more and more sensational in an attempt to see revival. The use of these techniques seemed to border on what was later called “brainwashing.” This was a common accusation against the many cults that arose in the 1960s in the United States.

These “new measures,” then, were developed to facilitate the experience of revival. They have survived and are still used today by itinerant evangelists and some tele-evangelists. When you become aware that these methods are being used, know that their roots are here in the Second Great Awakening.

## Sects and Cults

A fourth result of the Second Great Awakening was the beginning of some of the better known sects and cults in America. The religious excitement that was generated during this period sometimes found expression in religions that were offshoots of traditional Christianity. The church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) was begun in these years. Joseph Smith saw his supposed vision of the Father and the Son in 1823, and the first Mormon Church was established on April 6, 1829. The Jehovah's Witnesses began in the 1870s, at the end of the Awakening. William Miller began the movement that became the Seventh-Day Adventist Church when he proclaimed, upon the basis of his study of the Bible, that Jesus was going to return sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 23, 1844. The "Transcendentalists" also became well-known during this period. Ralph Waldo Emerson left the pastorate of a Unitarian Church to focus on the essence of religion. Emerson, Horace Bushnell, and Henry David Thoreau were writers and thinkers who espoused a unity with nature as the way to experiencing peace. Perfectionists also abounded during this time. These people taught that there was a second stage of faith. Once you reached this second stage, sinless perfection was the norm. Believers in this state of grace, they taught, were totally free from the law. One perfectionist, a man named John Humphrey Noyes, began what became the Oneida Community in the 1840s with this idea as its foundation. The best-remembered characteristic of this community was the fact that they were sexually communistic, believing that the sharing of the act of intercourse between adults was the obvious extension of community of goods.

The Second Great Awakening was the soil that produced this crop of religious variety. People became spiritually desirous of finding the perfect church, the perfect group of people, the one truth among the many. Thousands were led into these various sects and cults in a desire to fulfill the spiritual hunger that was awakened during these years.

## Reform Movements

When the spiritual fervor of this time began to wane, the fascinating phenomenon of various reform movements was born. People came to see that if their faith was to be significant, the church must make an impact on the society around it, and so movements began that sought to reform society. The first Temperance Movement was begun in Massachusetts in 1813 and became a nation-wide society in 1826. The American Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1833, and this developed into the first abolitionist group in the United States. The Female Moral Reform Society began in New York in 1834 with an agenda of ending sins against the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment. This group preached morality and marital faithfulness, and it ministered to the prostitute population in New York and elsewhere. Eventually members of this Society went on to become activists for Women's Rights. The American Sunday School Union was formed in 1830 for the purpose of supplying religious instruction to children in the country. These are just a few of the many societies that were formed with an agenda to bring about positive change in the world. Among the ones that have lasted through the years are the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society.

Social action, therefore, was high on the agenda of the converted during this period. Christians were on a mission to bring about a change in the world, and thereby to usher in the kingdom of God.

## Foreign Missions

As mentioned earlier, this Awakening in America also was the beginning of foreign missions. Prior to this time there had been many calls going out in England for workers to come to America to aid in the mission enterprise. In other words, America was the mission field. With the fervor that the Second Great Awakening brought about, America became a sending nation. I have mentioned that the beginning of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1812 was one expression of this newborn interest in foreign missions. In 1819 the Methodist Episcopal Church of the United States of America began a society for outreach to other nations. The year 1821 saw the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Church's first overseas mission project. The Presbyterians, troubled by the division that had occurred between new and old lights, did not form their Board of Foreign Missions until 1837.

This was a time for refocusing of energies outward to the world, and the world responded. This revival spread throughout many countries as the breath of the Spirit blew from the United States to England, Australia, Burma, and elsewhere.

Perhaps the best conclusion that we can draw from this time is that America became a Christian nation. Count Alexis de Tocqueville, a French historian, visited our country in 1831. He was seeking to determine how the experiment in Democracy had worked here in contrast to how it had gone in France. He wrote of his visit in a classic work, *Democracy in America*. His conclusion is worth noting as an end to this chapter. He wrote: In the United States the sovereign authority is religious, and consequently hypocrisy must be common; but there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth.(5)

### Notes:

1. Frank Beardsley, *A History of American Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1912), p. 101.
2. Ibid.
3. Whitney Cross, *The Burned Over District* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 11.
4. Wolf on Edwards, p. 25
5. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans. by Henry Reeve, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), p. 314.