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Reformation & Revival



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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

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Editor's Introduction

John H. Armstrong

Between the years 1725 and 1760 a series of local and widespread visitations of God's Spirit touched the Protestant churches of the American Colonies. Historians refer to this period as The Great Awakening. Some limit the time of this full-scale movement to the years 1735-42, but evidence suggests that the general work came in various movements, both localized and widespread, which cover the course of several decades. There can be no doubt of this—God marvelously added multitudes to the churches, and great spiritual interest came to the fore in these seasons of refreshment.

Historians since the eighteenth century have debated the actual effects and fruit of these effusions. They have concluded differently regarding them, often depending upon their presuppositions regarding revival in general. This was also true in the 1700s. Some theologians opposed the revival for its emotional excesses, while others felt that the normal course of things, developed slowly and gradually over many years, was a healthier and sounder pattern for the church. Others, who gladly embraced the various movements of this time, saw them as the answer for every ill in the church. Some proponents went to extremes in promoting the Spirit's work.

The first revivals of this era seemed to cluster in one area, the Raritan Valley of New Jersey, and among one group of people, the Dutch Reformed congregations. These churches had been greatly influenced by the preaching of Theodore J. Frelinghuysen. By 1726 the early movement reached its peak when Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian in New Brunswick, began to preach in a manner that brought about great conviction, often a mark of such a visitation.

Later, in 1734-35, the revival broke out in Northampton, Massachusetts, under the ministry of the pastor, Jonathan Edwards. Interestingly, Edwards was preaching a series of sermons in the fall of 1734 on the greatest truth of the Protestant Reformation, Justification by faith alone.

Historians may not all agree on details of this period, but

they do agree on this: The one man who linked these various awakenings into a larger movement of God was the British itinerant preacher George Whitefield. Whitefield, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times, was a catalyst for the widespread movement of God in the Colonies as well as in Britain.

Whitefield traveled about in the Colonies, calling upon men and women to repent and lay hold of Christ in saving faith. He preached sound doctrinal sermons that breathed life and urged unbelievers to look to Christ alone. God mightily used his labors.

Presbyterianism in Virginia, as well as Congregationalism in New England, prospered mightily in these times. Baptists and Methodists, both much smaller at this time, were greatly refreshed as well. The history of each of these denominations is deeply rooted in this era.

But as with every great move of God opposition arose. Charles Chauncy, an Anglican clergyman, openly wrote against both the preaching and the practice of the revival. Some of his criticisms had a measure of truth. Some were undoubtedly overreactions. The revival men too often charged the established clergy with being men of "spiritual darkness." (In some cases they were right, but their approach was highly questionable.)

In spite of these and other faults that we consider in this issue, the Great Awakening left a profound mark upon the life of the American Colonies for decades. Even if the fruit of this Awakening is not all that has been claimed, as Charles Hodge suggested rather pointedly in the last century, the facts remain—the churches and the surrounding culture were mightily affected by these seasons of revival.

The Awakening resulted in increased missionary activity. It brought about a deeper commitment to Christ's church. Educational institutions also prospered. Princeton College, the University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers, Brown and Dartmouth

were all created either directly or indirectly, due to the Great Awakening. In fact, fifty-one of our first one hundred colleges in the U. S. were formed for Christian purposes. Publishing houses and literary advances resulted from these influences as well.

Further, a healthier ecumenism arose from the revival and affected the Colonies in coming decades. Some historians, even to this day, insist that both the American Revolution and the ensuing formation of the nation had their roots in the Awakening.

Why then do we study the lives of leaders during this time? And why are we concerned, in the late twentieth century, about issues that flow out of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century?

There can be no doubt that this era was marked by a powerful visitation of God's Spirit. For this reason alone we ought to know this time period better than we do. The true work of Gospel ministry prospered wonderfully. Many sense in our day that this is our great need once again.

Before the Great Awakening morality was breaking down in both church and society. Men were calling upon citizens to recover the higher ground of moral faithfulness, but with little effect. Preaching often had a moralistic tone and failed to move people to the grand eternal realities of the Gospel. But when God came and restored light to the church in the powerful preaching of great truths, more was done in a matter of days than in years under the old ways.

Thousands of new converts entered the churches, and life was fundamentally altered in almost every community. And, as mentioned above, democracy was strengthened in the thinking of many, sowing the seed for another era of great change yet to come.

Benevolent institutions sprang up to serve the needs of many. Issues that were often seen as the domain of politicians alone became the pressing concern of church members who

were now moved to become involved in the lives of fellow citizens.

In the light of these observations historian Gerald R. McDermott has expressed our present situation quite well by writing:

American evangelicals are frustrated because their attempts to transform American culture seem to have failed. After electing three presidents and sending hundreds of legislators to Washington, and despite influencing public policy with tons of mail and armies of lobbyists, evangelicals cannot point to a transformed America....

A history lesson might provide perspective. Evangelicals in America and England felt a similar frustration in 1730. They, too, had failed to reform their societies after decades of political and social effort. Preaching endlessly for moral reformation elicited boredom and contempt; reducing standards for church membership brought in more people but few conversions; and political leaders paid lip service to evangelical religion while furthering the secularization of society.

Yet within a decade the greatest evangelical awakening since the Reformation broke out across America, England and the Continent. By the time it subsided, the political and social cultures of the Anglo-American world had been forever changed. Christian values had left their mark on the world beyond the church.¹

McDermott, in writing on the Great Awakening, draws out ten common characteristics of this period of history that provide a worthwhile introduction to the theme of this present issue. He lists these characteristics as:

- 1) Revivals were preceded by corporate prayer.
- 2) Revivals had strong leaders.
- 3) Revivals were sparked and sustained by the preaching of Reformation doctrines.
- 4) Revivals included the preaching of the Reformation

message in a new and powerful manner.

5) Revival leaders preached at nontraditional times and places.

6) Music was important.

7) Fierce opposition met the leaders of these revivals.

8) The accounts of revival helped to spread the revival.

9) The presence of the Holy Spirit was cultivated and believed to be manifestly felt and known when He came upon His people.

10) Concern for the poor and unfortunate sprang from the movement.

McDermott concludes his helpful piece by suggesting that we moderns may well have forgotten the power of the simple, doctrinally sound Gospel of the Scriptures. He observes:

A renewal cannot be engineered by a committee or even a team of preachers. If the 18th-century evangelicals were right, revival comes only by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. We can do nothing to ensure such a work, but we can, and should, join with others to pray for an outpouring of the Spirit of God.

Cal Thomas is right: The answer lies not in a resuscitated Moral Majority, but in having preachers attract "new members to a life, and a kingdom not of this world." We should not retreat from this world's struggles for peace and justice, but neither should we forget that it is "not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord.²

The conviction of this publication, as expressed in our stated goal, is that "awakening of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* is needed in our generation."

We prayerfully publish this issue in hope that it might contribute in some measure to this purpose. We agree with

Jonathan Edwards, who in the 1730s began a sermon saying, "It is the manner of God before He bestows any special mercy on people first to prepare them for it." May God prepare a new generation of leaders for a fresh, true, vital outpouring of His Spirit in true reformation and awakening.

Endnotes

- 1 "The 18th-Century Awakening: A Reminder for American Evangelicals in the 1990s," *National & International Religion Report*, Roanoke, Virginia, n.d., 1.
- 2 Ibid., 1-4.