

The Great Awakening: Cause, Course and Consequence

The Great Awakening of 1740 was, in reality, a spiritual revival that spread through the colonies in America beginning as early as 1720 and continuing until 1775. Of great interest to this revival is the fact that it was not one continuous event, but rather a series of events that began simultaneously in a variety of locations. There were, in fact, times during this fifty year period that the fire of revival seemed to die down in one area, only to begin to be fanned in another. Through this paper an overview of the Great Awakening will be provided as an avenue to open the window into some of the historical events which set the stage for this revival in early America. The general course of the Awakening will be followed and the consequences resulting from this great revival given.

The cause of revival can be elusive; however there were many unique factors that preceded the events of the Great Awakening in America. One notable factor was the inability of the parish system, as established and utilized in England, to function adequately in the rugged wilderness that existed in the colonies. Neither the Anglicans in Virginia nor the Puritans in Massachusetts had been very successful in achieving levels of church membership and participation necessary to fully establish the church in those regions. People often lived great distances from the Parish and often theological issues faded due to the issues of daily survival. Ecclesiastical discipline and the communication network needed to support this style of church

leadership was not available, nor was the general public concerned with the thoughts and wishes of a church or church leader that was seeking to govern them from far away. Because of the large disconnect in society, many fell out of membership with the church entirely. Throughout the colonies the landscape was littered with the dry tender of un-churched settlers.

The disconnect from the church and cessation in religious thinking led much of society further away from many of the puritanical ideas that many in the church had sought. Therefore, religious leaders were becoming alarmed at the secular state of the colonies and church congregations were listening intently for something that would change the negative dynamics in society. Some colonists were aware that a spark was needed to ignite the flame of revival and change.

The Middle Colonies began revival under the preaching of Theodore J. Frelinghuysen who arrived in America in 1720 at the call of three congregations that had been forming among Dutch settlers in New Jersey. His first sermon was a call to an inner religion in contrast to conformity of outward religious duties. Converts continued to stream in and the height of this revival was reached in 1726 when the number of new converts grew particularly large. The Frelinghuysen revival among the Dutch in New Jersey was highly significant in preparing the way for the next phase in middle colony revival. The most known figures of this phase of revival being the graduates of William Tennant's "Log College" in Pennsylvania.

The classical training received at the "Log College" was by no means of light quality. The chief distinction of the graduates was their evangelical zeal. Gradually Log College graduates were spreading over central Jersey and they were preaching a

militant revivalism that was, in turn, sweeping the region. Gilbert Tennant (son of William Tennant and graduate of “Log College”) was at the heart of the Presbyterian revival movement. When he was called to the Presbyterian church at New Brunswick, Domine Frelinghuysen gave him a hearty welcome and encouraged his members to do the same. Soon after, the Presbyterian ministers in New Jersey divided into two parties known as the “New Side” and the “Old Side”.

George Whitefield appeared in America landing at Lewes, Delaware in August 1739 Where he began his first American evangelistic tour. The preaching ability of this man and his ability to move the masses cannot be exaggerated as countless sources reflect on his historical importance during the Great Awakening. Great multitudes flocked to hear him and many in the colonies were deeply changed through his evangelistic message.

1740 marks the high point of revival for the middle colonies. Gilbert Tennant preached his famous sermon titled “Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” as Whitefield continued to touch all classes of people with his dynamic preaching.

The Great Awakening in New England was led by the minister of the church at Northampton named Jonathan Edwards. From the beginning, Edwards preached sermons on justification by faith, the justice of God, the damnation of sinners and the Excellency of Christ. Notably Edwards’ method of presentation differed from that of other revivalists. He always prepared and utilized a pre-written sermon and never spoke extemporaneously. While delivering the message, his eye rarely strayed from the paper and he never seemed to look at the audience. In fact, it is said that when he did look up, it was to make eye contact with the back wall of the sanctuary. His

preaching, however, was notably powerful and was responsible for more than three hundred conversions in his first year at Northampton.

In 1735, the revival ebbed in New England although in 1740 the revival reappeared not only in the vicinity of Northampton, but throughout the churches of New England. George Whitefield traveled to Northampton in this year and met with Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was delighted to have Whitefield visit and it is noted that Edwards sat in his own pulpit weeping like a child as Whitefield brought the message. The revival in New England ebbed with great success in numerical terms. Between 1740 and 1742, there were between 25,000 to 30,000 out of a total population of 300,000 added to the church.

Revival in the southern colonies began later than those in the preceding regions and is notable that it was brought to the forefront by laymen. At Hanover in 1743, Mr. Samuel Morris came into possession of a small volume of Whitefield's sermons. As he began reading these sermons to his friends and neighbors in his home, the group began to grow until a special "Morris Reading House" was built to accommodate the throngs. Eventually, visits from Rev. William Robinson (a graduate of William Tennant's Log College) continued to fuel the revival. From time to time visits were made by Gilbert Tennant, Samuel Blair and George Whitfield who also supported the southern awakening. These men were highly respected and their visits were followed by the reception of many new converts.

Other southern influences to revival were the preaching of Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall. While both men lacked formal education, each was passionate and gifted with good common sense and natural ability. They were convinced of the

validity of the Baptist view. Sandy Creek became the center of this movement as Hanover had become the focal point of the Presbyterian revival in the southern colonies. From a church of sixteen members formed by the families of Stearns and Marshall, the congregation grew to a membership of more than six hundred in a relatively short time. In 1771, at the First Baptist Association in Virginia, there were fourteen churches and 1,335 members. Two years later, there were an even greater number of churches that contained a membership of more than four thousand.

Another phase of Southern revivalism was the Methodist phase. Known to have centered on the preaching of Deveroux Jarratt, due to his cooperation with many Methodist ministers in the south, Methodism grew more quickly in this region than anywhere else in America. In 1775, Thomas Rankin, Wesley's assistant in America, toured the southern colonies. He preached to great crowds, almost to the point of total exhaustion. The results of this revival can be seen in the growth of the circuits. In 1774, there were only two circuits in the region with a combined membership of 294. While in 1776, the circuits had increased tremendously with one circuit alone reporting 1,611 members. Such was the rise of Methodism in Virginia.

One of the major consequences of the Great Awakening was the unification of 4/5ths of the American people, who now shared a common understanding of Christian faith and life. Church membership was greatly increased and the practical influences of evangelical Christianity were shared by Americans in a common fashion from north to south in the colonies. Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterian denominations took root in this fertile field and grew. Regardless of the

denominational lines that divided these groups they did share a common evangelical voice.

Great emphasis was also placed on theological education and education in general. The college of New Jersey and the Theological Seminary at Princeton sprang from William Tennant's Log College at Neshaming. George Whitefield founded the school that would later become the university of Pennsylvania and UNC was at its inception a Presbyterian effort. Harvard and Yale received large increases in enrollment and financial gifts due to the revival, though initially they were opposed to it. Dartmouth college, in New Hampshire, was a direct result of the Great Awakening as was Brown University, at Providence, which was the parent of Baptist colleges.

A third consequence was a greater sense of responsibility for the improved treatment of Indians and slaves. George Whitefield, for instance, was among the first to preach to blacks. This led most evangelicals to denounce slavery as a sinful act, and at the first general conference of Methodism, slave holding was viewed as grounds for immediate expulsion from society.

Finally, the theocracy of the parish system was dissolved, ministers no longer had the authority to control the direction of religious life. Religion had been democratized and made accessible to the people. The Awakening in the end had long lasting social effects as a more tolerant and democratic spirit was held by the general population of the colonies. This new spirit directly carried over into the social and political thought of the day.

The Great Awakening brought about a dramatic change in values that effected both politics and daily life of the American people. These attitudes were the beginnings of a sense of independence and equality that would set the stage for the American Revolution. As this spirit of independence was proclaimed in the colonies through the Declaration of Independence, it was often the local clergy who stood to read this document to their evangelical congregations for the first time, what a Great Awakening Indeed!