

Let the Winds Blow and Thunders Roar: The Great Awakening in America

We have looked at the Pietist movement in Germany and the evangelical revival in England, and now we come to the third part of this international renewal movement that was so prominent in the first part of the eighteenth century.

The first real American hero, a celebrity figure, was not a movie star, nor was he a basketball player. But the first real hero was a preacher. When George Whitefield died in the year 1770, there were people who knew about Whitefield who had never heard of George Washington or Benjamin Franklin. As we come to this topic, I am going to be talking at some length about Whitefield, and we will begin with a prayer from George Whitefield, taken from his journals. Let us pray.

*“My life, my blood, I here present,
If for Thy cause they may be spent,
Fulfill Thy sovereign counsel, Lord,
Thy will be done, Thy name adored.
Give me Thy strength, O God of power;
Then let winds blow, or thunders roar,
Thy faithful witness will I be;
‘Tis fixed: I can do all for Thee!” Amen.*

When we come to the early 1700s in America, we are now in the third or fourth generation of the settlers who first came to these shores. And strangely enough, sadly enough, at that time—not too many generations, just three or four—there was a kind of spiritual decline, or deadness, that had set in and was affecting the American churches. It was a time of what we could call dead Orthodoxy, or, as Jonathan Edwards put it, dullness. There was dullness, deep-seated boredom with the Gospel on the part of many people, and in the stony soil of that boredom, all matter of sin sprang up.

When Edwards arrived in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1727 to assist his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as pastor of a church, he was affected by what he saw happening, particularly with the young people in that congregation. They were not at all committed to the Lord and to His service, but were given, as Edwards put it, rather quaintly, to “night-walking and tavern haunting.” Something had gone wrong in the church and in American Christianity.

I think we see a very important indication of this in the famous Half-Way Covenant that was adopted in 1662 by the Congregational churches of New England. That Half-Way Covenant was a retreat, because the churches by the Half-Way Covenant introduced into their membership and admitted to the Lord’s Supper those who lived a decent and respectable life but made no profession of a change of heart. They had been baptized, they were encouraged to bring their own children for baptism even though they did not make a credible profession themselves of the new birth, and they were encouraged to come to the Lord’s Table, which was viewed more and more as a converting ordinance rather than as a time of fellowship for the Lord’s people.

Not only was there a spiritual deadness in the churches, but there was also the beginnings of a theological liberalism such as affected the churches of England. That theological liberalism was growing in certain circles, particularly in Boston and Cambridge where Harvard was located. In 1701 the trustees at Yale College ordered that the Westminster Confession of Faith and William Ames’ theology be studied at Yale in order to prevent the same thing from happening at Yale that was already happening at

Harvard. That was done, although it was not to stay the tide of liberalism at Yale either. One modern historian has put it this way: “By the third decade of the eighteenth century, Calvinism had lost its thunder. Its vision of human existence as a great and awesome drama was beclouded by the idea that nature is benign, man is reasonable, salvation is moral virtue and good works, and God is universal benevolence.” This sounds very much like what we heard about in England being taught by the Deists.

There were some people who tried to do something about this falling away. One was Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. In his congregation there had been a number of revivals, renewals, or harvests, as he put it. And there were people like the Mathers, especially the impossibly productive Cotton Mather, who published more books than all New England ministers before him, 388 titles in all. And these people attempted to bring renewal to the church through organizational reform, a church union of the fragmented elements from American Puritanism and interdenominational benevolence societies.

But Solomon Stoddard and the Mathers were like voices crying out in the wilderness, until something remarkable began to happen in the second and third and fourth decades of the new century, first in the middle colonies and then in New England. There were a number of young preachers who were preaching the old Gospel but preaching it with a new urgency and a new fire and zeal. The first that we know about was Theodore Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Calvinist strongly touched by the Dutch Second Reformation and now living in the Raritan Valley in New Jersey. And as Frelinghuysen preached the Gospel to his gathered congregations, revival broke out in the 1720s. He had a friend nearby, Gilbert Tennent, a graduate of his father’s Log College in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. Tennent and Frelinghuysen spent considerable time together, and before long the revival that was sweeping the Raritan valley was moving to New Brunswick, where Tennent was a Presbyterian pastor.

And then Jonathan Edwards was preaching the same Gospel with the same power up in New England. By 1729 he was pastor of a Congregational church in Northampton, succeeding his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, and revival broke out in Edwards’ church in Northampton in 1734 and 1735. And so with the preaching of these zealous, young, determined ministers in New Jersey and Massachusetts, there were places where the flames of revival were being felt, warming people’s hearts and bringing them into an understanding of the Gospel of grace. But there was no Great Awakening until the coming of Whitefield.

George Whitefield linked these various revivals and produced, by God’s help and grace, what we call in American history the Great Awakening. It is really remarkable to think about how God used these human instruments, particularly because they were all so young. Frelinghuysen was about 30 years old when revival came to his churches. Tennent was in his late twenties. Edwards was just 30, and Whitefield was very young when he made his second and great trip to America—he made seven in all, but that second visit in 1739 to 1741 was perhaps the most significant of all his journeys to America. When he came over that time he was only 24 years old. I hope at some point you can read all of the writings from Whitefield’s journals, especially his writings from his second visit to America.

He came first to Bethesda in Georgia. Actually, Whitefield arrived in Georgia and founded Bethesda Orphanage in Savannah in the very early days of the colony. Stout, in his new book on George Whitefield, *The Divine Dramatist*, says that George Whitefield did almost more than anybody else in establishing the colony of Georgia. His first trip to America was in 1738. There he founded the famous orphan house, Bethesda. He hoped to make Bethesda into an evangelical college for the South, modeled after Princeton. That never developed, but that was Whitefield’s dream. But he was able to begin an orphanage there. In his journeys throughout the colonies and back to England he raised money for the

work of the orphanage at Bethesda. In fact, he raised more money for charity than anyone in America up to that time. But he used it well and used it wisely; no one ever accused Whitefield of taking the money for himself. He used it exactly the way he said that he would use it.

His life was spent preaching, as we saw last time, in Scotland and Wales and England and America—“Gospel ranging” is the way he put it. He crossed the Atlantic 13 times at a point in history when it took a long time to do that. He spent 732 days on the ocean going back and forth between England and America. He preached from Georgia all the way up to northern New England and even for a month on the islands of Bermuda.

It is a little hard for us to imagine the impact that a visit from Whitefield had. I will try to capture some of that by talking about Nathan Cole, his testimony of what happened in his life when Whitefield came to his area of Connecticut. Nathan Cole was a 29-year-old Connecticut farmer, and in that narrative, which you can read, he rode double on his horse with his wife 12 miles in little over an hour to hear Whitefield preach in 1740. It is an exciting story of horsemanship as well as earnest desire to hear the Gospel from this famous man. Cole closes that exciting account with these words: “By God’s blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.” You can also read Whitefield’s preaching in the sermon “Come, Poor, Lost, Undone Sinner.” I think the power of Whitefield’s preaching does not really come through so much as we read his sermons. I wish that tape recorders were in use back then, or even better, video cameras, so that we could hear and see Whitefield as he preached. He possessed a powerful speaking voice that was melodious and captivating. “I would give a hundred guineas,” said the actor David Garrett, “to be able to say ‘oh’ like George Whitefield.”

On one occasion the philosopher David Hume heard Whitefield preach. In fact, Hume was observed hurrying to hear Whitefield preach, and somebody was surprised that David Hume would go to hear Whitefield. This person said, “Surely you do not believe what he says, do you?” And David Hume replied, “No, but he does.” And Hume went on to hear Whitefield. On this occasion he heard these words from the mouth of George Whitefield: “The attended angel is about to leave us and to ascend to heaven. Shall he ascend and not bear with him the news of one sinner reclaimed from the error of his way?” Then Hume said that Whitefield stamped with his foot, and lifting up his hands and eyes to heaven he cried, “Stop, Gabriel! Stop. Come back, until you can bear news to heaven that one sinner here has repented.” As far as I know, David Hume did not repent, but he never forgot that message. Whitefield was certainly a great orator, a “divine dramatist,” as Harry Stout calls him in his new biography of Whitefield, but he was more than that. He was a mighty instrument for the transformation of lives.

He died in Massachusetts in 1770, after wearing himself out through years of itinerant evangelism. That day he was ill, but he preached at Exeter. He preached for two hours in the open air, and he knew that he did not have long to live. In that sermon he said, “I go. I go to a rest prepared; my sun has arisen, and by aid from heaven has given light to many. It is now about to set—no, it is about to rise to the zenith of immortal glory. Many may outlive me on earth, but they cannot outlive me in heaven.” And he went on to Newburyport to stay in the Presbyterian manse of his friend, the Reverend Jonathan Parsons, but people followed him, as they often did. And as he entered the manse, there were people waiting to speak to him and to hear him preach again, if he would. Whitefield was always ready to preach again, even though he was not well at all. He took a candle, according to the story, and walked up the steps to a landing and spoke to the people crowded below in the manse. And he preached the Gospel to them one more time, and as he preached, the candle burned down and finally went out. And Whitefield went up to his room, read his Bible, read Watts’ psalms, knelt down by his bed to pray, went to sleep, woke up the next morning at six o’clock, and then died.

His impact was momentous. There was comment from the entire colonial press. One of the most impressive tributes to Whitefield, I think, came from a 17-year-old African woman, a slave, in Boston. Her name was Phillis Wheatley. She became a very important early American poet, and the first poem that she wrote was about George Whitefield. It was reprinted some years ago in *Decision Magazine* with the title “He had a dream”:

“Take him, my dear Americans,” he said,
 “Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid;
 Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
 ‘Impartial Savior’ is his title due”

Let me talk a little bit now about the results of the Great Awakening, epitomized so wonderfully by Whitefield’s life and his preaching in America. First, many people were born again. Conversions occurred by the hundreds, almost certainly by the thousands, in the American colonies. The evangelical message was “You must be born again.” Whitefield preached that everywhere he went. That message was preached in the theological context of Calvinism. Something would happen later to Calvinism that would remove it from the mainstream of American church history and theology, but that is not until the Second Great Awakening. Whitefield was a Calvinist. Edwards preached Calvinism, and so did Frelinghuysen and Tennent. This was a Calvinistic awakening.

I was amazed to read this sentence the other day in a Catholic magazine, in which the writer stated that the First Great Awakening in America weakened the doctrine of predestination. Here is the quote: “By recognizing the possibility that even sinners may be predestined for salvation”—well who else is there? It is amazing how often the doctrine of predestination gets made into something that has no resemblance to what it actually is. Sinners are predestined; that is why we are here. And the message of Calvinism was heard throughout the land.

But there was a new alliance in American Christianity, created, I think, by the First Great Awakening and largely by the preaching of George Whitefield. And that is something we could call “evangelicalism.” Let me illustrate it by a selection of one of Whitefield’s sermons. He was preaching in Philadelphia, and the divine dramatist liked to dramatize his sermons, and on this occasion he was speaking to father Abraham in heaven. He said,

“Father Abraham, who do you have in heaven? Any Episcopalians up there?”

“No. No Episcopalians.”

“Do you have any Presbyterians up there?”

“No Presbyterians.”

“Do you have any Independents or any Seceders?”

“No, we do not have any of those.” [Remember, George Whitefield really considered himself a Methodist.]

“Have any Methodists up there?”

“No, no, no.”

“Well who do you have up there then?”

“We do not know those names up here. All who are here are Christians, believers in Christ, men and women who have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.”

“Oh, is that so? Is that the case? Then God help us. God help us to forget all party names and to be Christians in deed and truth.”

You see how that kind of preaching is going to eliminate a bit of emphasis on denominations. And through the First Great Awakening there was the creation of evangelicalism, people who were born again and felt that that was more important than the identity of themselves as members of the different churches. But at the same time that that was taking place, at the same time that Christians were united as evangelical believers in God's salvation through Christ, churches were being divided over the revival, particularly the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. The Congregationalists divided into new-ites and old-ites, and the Presbyterians into New Side and Old Side. That Presbyterian schism lasted for 17 years, from 1741 to 1758. And there was also much debate and controversy over the role of the revival. Was it good or bad? Was it from God or the devil? And we will let Jonathan Edwards answer that question in the next lesson.

There was also, as an important result of the First Great Awakening, the creation of what one historian has called a "spiritual democracy." Harry Stout has written that Benjamin Franklin respected Whitefield because he was a man who did not hesitate to throw in his lot with slaves, women, Indians, and orphans, and emphasize that in Christ we are all one, a spiritual democracy. Unfortunately Whitefield did not go on to argue for a political democracy, and in contrast to his friend John Wesley, Whitefield supported slavery. He did not attack it, but he did preach the Gospel to the slaves.

Once when he was gravely ill, Whitefield said, a poor black woman visited him and "sat down upon the ground looking earnestly in my face, and said, 'Master, you just go to heaven's gate, but Jesus Christ said get you down, get you down. You must not come up here yet. Go first and call more poor negroes.'" Many of the slaves were converted through the preaching of Whitefield, as we will see later when we come to the history of the black church in America. That quotation is an interesting one because it comes from Benjamin Franklin. I suppose there are no more unlikely friends than Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield. Near the end of Whitefield's life, Franklin wrote, "He is a good man, and I love him." On the face of it, it is hard for us to imagine that friendship, the creed-despising Franklin and the Deist-despising Whitefield. But they loved and respected each other. In the end, Franklin became Whitefield's best American friend, and Whitefield was Franklin's only evangelical friend.

And then, as a result of the First Great Awakening, schools were founded. This was not a revival movement that was anti-intellectual. The revivalists were also the professors and teachers, founders of schools. Princeton began in 1746, founded by New Side Presbyterians. The tradition says that Princeton was founded because David Brainerd was expelled from Yale for criticizing one of his teachers. I do not have time to tell you that story, but it is an interesting one. The first five presidents of the College of New Jersey were revival men, including Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies. Dartmouth was founded in 1754 by the Great Awakening preacher Eleazar Wheelock. It was founded as a training school for Native Americans and supported by pro-revival Congregationalists. Rutgers began in 1766, founded by the Dutch Reformed, and Brown in 1764 was founded by the Baptists.

The First Great Awakening, and especially the life and ministry of Jonathan Edwards—we will look at Edwards in the next lesson—preserved the influence of Calvinism for another hundred years in American life.

"Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).