

Revival and Revivalism: The Second Great Awakening in America

The prayer that I will open with comes from Archibald Alexander, the first teacher and president at Princeton Seminary. Alexander was a Virginian who was converted in the context of the Second Great Awakening when he was 17 years old. His thoughts on religious experience from which this prayer is taken does for the Second Great Awakening what Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* did for the First Great Awakening. It helped to set the Awakening in context and explain it in a theologically accurate way. So, we will turn to this prayer. It is a rather long prayer, longer than we usually use. It is a very wonderful prayer that we can join in praying in our hearts today. Let us pray.

“O most merciful God, I rejoice that thou dost reign over the universe with a sovereign sway so that Thou dost according to Thy will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. Thou art the maker of my body and the father of my spirit. Thou hast a perfect right to dispose of me in that manner which will most effectually promote Thy glory. I know that whatever Thou dost is right and wise and just and good. Grant, gracious God, that the rich blessings of the New Covenant may be freely bestowed on Thy unworthy servant. And now righteous Lord God Almighty, I would not attempt to conceal any of my actual transgressions however vial and shameful they are but would penitently confess them before Thee and would plead in my defense nothing but the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died the just for the unjust to bring us near to God. And grant, O Lord, that as long as I am in the body that I may make it my constant study and chief aim to glorify Thy name both with soul and body which are no longer mine but Thine, for I am bought with a price, not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. Enable me to let my light so shine that others, seeing my good works, may glorify Thy name. Make use of me as a humble instrument of advancing Thy kingdom on earth and promoting the salvation of immortal souls. And when my spirit leaves this clay tenement, Lord Jesus, receive it. Send some of the blessed angels to convoy my inexperienced soul to the mansion which Thy love has prepared. And let me be so situated, though in the lowest rank, that I may behold Thy glory. May I have an abundant entrance administered unto me into the kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for whose sake and in whose name I ask these things. Amen.”

In that last lesson we looked at what we call the First Great Awakening. Today we come to the Second Great Awakening. Some years passed between those two awakenings. First, I would like to describe what happened between the two Awakenings. After a few years of revival in the 1730s and 40s, the First Great Awakening began to fade. It did not entirely disappear because there were revivals that continued in various places in the American Colonies, particularly in Virginia. There was a revival in Virginia in the 1760s led by Baptist itinerant preachers and New Side Presbyterians such as Samuel Davies, often considered the apostle of Southern Presbyterianism, and Devero Jerrot, an evangelical Anglican who was preaching in the west of Virginia. George Whitfield returned to the northern neck of Virginia in 1764 and found enthusiasm for the Word of God and revival similar to the days of Philadelphia and Boston, when the Lord had moved in such mighty power.

Despite that continuing revival in Virginia, there was a lull, a falling away between the two Awakenings, caused by a number of things. We could note, first of all, the disruption and distraction of the Revolutionary War. Also, there was the influence of the deism of Thomas Paine, whose writings made some impact on the American colonists, so much so that ministers and others used to speak of the world, the devil, and Thomas Paine as being the three great enemies of the Christian church. Then there was the dislocation that was beginning to occur due to western migration as people left the settled East for the frontier—an area that some people refer to as “the land beyond the Sabbath.” As people began to

go further and further west, they got further and further away from the churches and from the influences of Christian society. All of this took its toll on American religious life. We know that just after the Revolutionary War the percentage of people who were church members in America was very, very low—perhaps 10% or 15%, which is astoundingly low, even compared to figures today. That could be explained in various ways, and perhaps the situation was not quite as drab as I have depicted it. Many people were not near churches. They lived at great distances from churches and could not consistently attend church or be church members.

When all is taken into account, the time between the Awakenings was a time of religious decline and growing spiritual lethargy. But then, just when things began to look bleak again in American culture and life, there was a stirring that was felt in various places, particularly in Virginia, as the beginnings of the Second Great Awakening were noted. There were Baptist and Methodist movements in Virginia coupled with Presbyterian revivals in western Pennsylvania and in Virginia. All of that led to the Hampden-Sydney College revival in 1787. It was a Presbyterian college on the south side of Virginia. Archibald Alexander later became president of that college and served there for eight years before he went to a church in Philadelphia and then finally to Princeton Seminary. So, Hampden-Sydney is one of the places where the second revival or Second Awakening began to develop.

There was a man named James McGreedy who was born in Pennsylvania but raised in North Carolina. He went back to Pennsylvania to be trained under John McMillan, a Presbyterian missionary and church planter in western Pennsylvania. Then he returned to North Carolina via Hampden-Sydney while the revival was going on there. He was stirred by that revival. Soon his congregations in North Carolina became a center of revival among Presbyterians as had already happened in western Pennsylvania and in southern Virginia. James McGreedy moved in 1796 to Logan County, Kentucky on the frontier. You can look on the map and see the location of Logan County, Kentucky. It is on the Tennessee/Kentucky border. (Hampden-Sydney College and Cannonsburg in western Pennsylvania were centers for revival, particularly among Presbyterians.) James McGreedy, who was a pastor in North Carolina, moved with a number of his people to Logan County in 1796. Revival broke out there in his churches in southern Kentucky. The revival connected with the preaching of James McGreedy in southern Kentucky was borne of great communion occasions. This was a Scottish, Scotch-Irish, and American Presbyterian tradition for people to meet for several days of communion services. McGreedy continued that tradition in his far-flung parish in the West. The climax of those meetings was always the communion service. It was outdoors with many people gathered and seated at tables.

The revival in Logan County spread to the eastern part of Kentucky to Cambridge in Bourbon County near Lexington. One of the most famous of the western revivals took place at Cane Ridge in 1801. Now, the revival is not very connected with the sacramental occasions but is a “camp meeting,” which became the common expression for these western revivals. At Cane Ridge in 1801, it was not only a great meeting with thousands of people gathered in the wilderness, but it was also marked by some of the excesses similar to some of the revival excesses that Jonathan Edwards had experienced in the 1730s and 40s in New England. The problems at Cane Ridge as well as the earlier problems were due to preachers whose zeal was far in excess of their understanding. Many things happened that caused people to pull back, particularly Presbyterians, from the camp meetings. Presbyterians like to do things decently and in order. Since the camp meetings were anything but that, the Presbyterians who actually had a lot to do with starting the camp meetings began to abandon them. A Kentucky minister said, “The pious are very busy singing, praying, conversing, falling down in ecstasies, and fainting with joy.” So, something unusual was happening on the frontier. As I said, most Presbyterians abandoned the camp meetings, which became increasingly a Methodist institution.

The Methodist camp meeting and the circuit writing preachers became important elements of life on the frontier. Instead of waiting for the people to call the preacher, the Methodist circuit riders would go out as soon as the people were there and call the people. With that kind of spirit, zeal, and strategy it was not long before the Methodists were the denomination that began winning the frontier. It was not the Presbyterians who were concerned with the excesses of the revival and having properly trained ministers available for the planting of churches in the West. The circuit riders were tough, dedicated, zealous preachers who covered the West on horseback in all kinds of weather. In fact, there was an expression that was used often on the frontier. On a really bad, rainy, stormy day people would say, "There is nothing out today except for crows and Methodist preachers." But it worked. There were people like Bishop Francis Asbury who out-rote John Wesley traveling 270 miles on horseback throughout America preaching the Gospel. It was perhaps the greatest mileage completed by a horseman. Another man was Peter Cartwright, a two-fisted circuit-rider who traveled through Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois, leaving behind a trail of tall tales and repentant sinners. Cartwright was a very tough and strong preacher. It was tough preaching in those days. People would often make disturbances in meetings, but if Cartwright sensed a disturbance he would take his coat off, go down and thrash whoever was causing the problem, and then put his coat back on and finish his sermon. After that, his meetings were generally quiet until he moved onto the next town. Peter Cartwright, as he thought about his career, said, "We could not, many of us, conjugate a verb or parse a sentence, and we have murdered the king's English at every lick. But there was a divine unction that attended the Word preached, and thousands fell under the mighty power of God." This does not sound like a Presbyterian or Princeton Seminary graduate but a frontier Methodist preacher who preached and fought his way across the West.

With the Presbyterians and the Methodists came the Baptists. They were generally farmers who preached on Sunday and then worked in their fields the rest of the time. There were men like James Taylor who was a farmer who cleared 400 acres of Kentucky farmland by his own hands and preached on Sundays. These Baptists were often poorly educated. They had no powerful organization like the Methodists or Presbyterians, but they made up for these handicaps by pure zeal. So, things were happening in the early years of the nineteenth century in the South and in the West.

At about the same time that the revival began to move across the frontier, revival began to come to the East as well—to New England and to the middle colonies where the First Great Awakening had been so notable. In the East, the revival centered at first on the colleges. The preachers were often college presidents. One of the best known was Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards who became the president of Yale in 1795. When he became president of Yale in 1795, the student body was almost entirely non-Christian. There were only several hundred students but perhaps not even a Christian in the whole student body. It is amazing for us to think about that Christian school, which had become totally a center of unbelief. But Timothy Dwight slowly, consistently, and powerfully preached in chapel until suddenly in the spring of 1802 a revival came to the college, and about 25 of Yale's 200 students were converted and united to the churches. A little later, revival came to Princeton College, the Presbyterian college in New Jersey. The revival did not come from the president's efforts this time, although Ashbel Green was very concerned to see a revival come to his school. Revival came through the work of a student—a man named Daniel Baker from Georgia. He entered Princeton in the year 1813, and, according to his account, there were only four professing Christians among the 145 students at Princeton College. Baker and those three friends of his—four Christians in that student body—prayed and quietly shared their faith until, in 1815, revival came to the Princeton campus. There were 40 to 50 people who were soundly converted, and 20 to 30 of those students became ministers of the Gospel, including young Charles Hodge, who was a student at Princeton College at that time. Daniel Baker went on to be a great preacher in the South. He preached across the South and served pastorates for generally short periods of time until revival would come to that church. Then he would move on to another church. His longest

pastorate was at Holly Springs in Mississippi. Then he went to Texas and became the Presbyterian pioneer there. He was in Texas in 1840—five years before Texas was admitted to the Union. He was buried in Texas, and his epitaph on his cemetery monument says, “Daniel Baker, preacher of the Gospel, a sinner saved by grace.” He wrote those words himself, and he insisted that his son be sure that those were the words that would be placed on his tombstone. And he said, “Remember, ‘a sinner saved by grace.’” And, sure enough, that is what we read on the tombstone of this Presbyterian evangelist.

One of the great preachers and evangelists in the North was the New England Congregationalist, Asahel Nettleton. Of all the evangelists whose sermons I have read, Nettleton is the best at preaching the Reformed faith in a revival context. Lyman Beecher, his close friend (although Beecher later went over to the Charles Finney side of things), said that Nettleton’s revivals often commenced with the church in confessions of sin and reformation. He introduced the doctrine of depravity and made direct assaults on the conscience of sinners. He explained regeneration and cut off self-righteousness and enforced immediate repentance and faith. He did that for years in New England and throughout the middle colonies with his style of evangelism. Nettleton remained in a single church for several months, giving personal attention to those who attended. He was active in preaching, counseling, and teaching. The result was a large number of converts who persevered to the end. However, the more famous man, by far, was Charles Finney. He was a lawyer turned evangelist. The day after his conversion a certain deacon came into Finney’s law office and reminded him that his case was to be tried at ten o’clock that morning in the courthouse. Mr. Finney replied to the deacon, “I now have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead His cause, and I cannot plead yours.” This man made very definite decisions all throughout his life, and he turned quickly from law to preaching the Gospel. Apparently that deacon was so startled by that announcement that he abandoned his law case and went into the ministry himself. Charles Finney had that kind of impact on people.

With Charles Finney there was an important shift in the history of revivals. The First Great Awakening and the first part of the Second Great Awakening had some important connections and similarities, but with Finney, things began to move in another direction, first of all, because of Finney’s new measures. This is where revivalism as a technique and organized program began to come into American history. People could plan and announce revivals. Finney, in his lectures on revivals of religion, wrote, “The connection between the right use of means for a revival and a revival is as scientifically sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat. A farmer who knows what he is doing knows how to raise wheat. If he does it right, he will get wheat. A Christian or a preacher who knows what he is doing and does it right will get a revival. The connection is that precise and scientific.” That is quite different from how Jonathan Edwards viewed revivals. Edwards viewed them as a surprising work of God, as a result of God’s grace, and as happening sometimes without any warning. Finney said that revivals could be planned and organized.

The other shift that comes with Finney is that the Reformed and Calvinistic theology that undergirded the First Great Awakening and part of the Second Great Awakening was abandoned for an Arminian theology. Some people would even say it was a Pelagian theology. Finney, in his autobiography, said, “Instead of telling sinners to use the means of grace and to pray for a new heart, I call on them to make themselves a new heart and press the duty of immediate surrender to God.” So, Finney did not have much use for Calvinism or Calvinist preaching. He felt that the important thing was to tell sinners that they can do what they must do. Not only did he press for the duty of immediate surrender to God in his meetings, but he also combined decisions related to social reform. For instance, the immediate abolition of slavery was one of the causes Finney promoted in his meetings. Another cause he promoted was total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. You can see how, for Finney, things were in black and white. Social reform must become immediate and be an important part of the life of a Christian. I am not

saying that this was a bad part on Finney's message by any means. Revivals after the time of Finney were organized meetings promoted by Arminian theology with great emphasis on social reform activities.

Let me sum all of this up by talking for a few minutes about the results of the Great Awakening. The first is certainly the rise of revivalism. Iain Murray has a new book called *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858*. That is a helpful title and certainly a very fine book to describe this whole period that I am talking about. The book has several hundred pages, but I will try to summarize it in a minute or two. (At some time you ought to read it.) Iain Murray saw the change coming in the 1820s from the older order of revival as a surprising work of God (in Edwards' words) undergirded by solid Calvinistic theology to the new view of revivals and revivalism as the organized series of meetings supported by emotional appeals and generally Arminian theology. From that time on almost up to the present, American religious life focused on revivals. Revival was viewed as what is needed at any point and at any time to clear the church of whatever is wrong with it.

There is another result of the Second Great Awakening, which I call the Christianization of America. The fact that America became a "Christian" nation was due to the Second Great Awakening, not to the Puritan founders or even the First Great Awakening, which was limited in scope to New England and the eastern seaboard. As the frontier shaped American life, it also shaped American thought. As the nation saw the challenge and opportunity of the frontier, it set for itself the task of making this country Christian. By now we are talking about the United States and not the American colonies. Religion had been disestablished in the separation of church and state. People in Europe predicted that without the state officially adopting and supporting religion it would disappear, but that is not what happened. In the Second Great Awakening, through the efforts of American Christians, the country was evangelized and taught, and it became Christian, in at least some sense of that word. As the frontier shaped American life and Christian thought, we also see the democratization of American Christianity. That is the name of a book by Nathan Hatch, a professor and provost at the University of Notre Dame and Jim Hatch's brother. It is a very fine book that Nathan wrote 10 years ago in which he describes how the western movement influenced American Christianity away from creeds and confessions so that every man became his own theologian. The West was self-reliant and forceful, not given to looking to tradition but creating a new world in the wilderness. The idea was that American religion, too, would be democratic, not with inherited structures, creeds, and confessions but something new and American. At about the same time, we had the creation of the Evangelical and Interdenominational Societies, scores of what we would call parachurch organizations, and benevolent or voluntary societies created to serve the Christian cause in America and in the world. These were organizations such as the American Tract Society, the American Sunday School Union, the American Bible Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and societies for every imaginable social cause from the outlawing of slavery to the outlawing of dueling, to the restitution of prostitutes to the care of orphans, and on and on as the American church interdenominationally organized to support a great reform movement.

While that was going on, we also had the decline of Calvinism. Calvinism had seen its heyday in American society. The Puritan period had come to an end in the Second Great Awakening, not to be replaced by secularism but by an Arminian evangelicalism. The decline of Calvinism was caused in part by the growth of Methodism. The Methodists conducted a kind of anti-Calvinistic crusade illustrated by Methodist hymns. One of them says, "When I was blind, I could not see. The Calvinist deceived me." Methodists were taught to sing those hymns. Peter Cartwright, the fighting preacher on the frontier, would often preach sermons on John Calvin and the devil, and it was not very easy to tell them apart.

The Baptists had a long confessional history. Most of the Baptists had been Calvinists although there were general Baptists who were not. The Baptists during this period largely abandoned their confessional heritage and moved to a non-confessional position away from the London and Philadelphia Confessions, which, as we have seen, were modifications of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

In the midst of all of this, new denominations began further weakening Calvinism. In fact, the Presbyterian Church split on the frontier, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was formed by those frontier Presbyterians who did not want to wait for trained ministers from seminaries but also wanted to change and revise the Westminster Confession of Faith to take out the doctrine of election. The Cumberland Presbyterians spoke of their medium theology, which they thought fell between the extremes of Calvinism and Arminianism but really ended up being Arminian theology with no Calvinism in it at all. Then on the frontier there arose new denominations and new churches. The Restoration Movement focused on Christian unity and the desire to get beyond denominations that were always feuding, fighting, and competing, to a Christian church that would not be denominational. Pretty soon, though, that church became another denomination. Those Restoration Movements wanted to do away with all creeds and confessions and focus on the Bible as the only authority. So, we have the Christian Church of Barton Stone and the Disciples of Christ. (Thomas and Alexander Campbell, sometimes called the Campbellites, joined in 1832 to make up the denomination known as the Disciples of Christ.) One of the mottos of this Restoration Movement was “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where it is silent, we are silent.”

I have certainly sketched some problems with the Second Great Awakening. Despite all of its faults, I will end on a positive note. This revival, which went on for several decades, delayed by at least 100 years the descent of paganism upon America. Had it not been for the Second Great Awakening, we would be far further along in America in an anti-Christian and pagan direction than we are today. These words were on a tombstone of a preacher during the time of revival. These words followed a description of his birth, death, and other facts about him: “I have found redemption through the blood of the Lamb.” I do not think I should end a lesson on the Second Great Awakening without asking the question, “Are you born again? Do you know Christ as your savior? Have you been saved through his death, through the blood of the Lamb?”

“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).

I have been asked what the time frame was of the Second Great Awakening. It is very hard to date that because we ease into it and then sort of ease out of it in a way. I would say it occurred from the 1790s to about the 1840s. I do not know if I will have occasion to speak about the prayer revival of 1857 to 1859. It is sometimes called the Third Great Awakening but generally not. The prayer revival was a very important revival in American history. It began in a prayer meeting in a Dutch Reformed Church in New York City. From that prayer meeting, organized largely by laymen, it began to spread throughout the city and then throughout the country and then throughout the world. Bishop Hanley Moore in Durham, England talks about ships arriving with a revival on board. They were ships that left New York, and in the process of making their way across the Atlantic a revival took place on the ship. So, by the time the ship docked in England there was a revival on board. We could talk about D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and a whole tradition of revivals that followed the time of the Second Great Awakening. Each one of those preachers has to be looked at in his own right. Moody was not the same as Finney. Sunday was not like anybody else. He was a baseball player who would usually illustrate his sermons by running across the stage and sliding into an imaginary second base in order to wake up the crowd. Billy

Graham is the preacher whose career is now coming to a close, but he has had tremendous influence in this country and around the world.