

Awakenings in America I

There is a phenomenon that has shaped America in the past more than any other event; they were called The First and Second Great Awakenings. Between them was a massive decline in the Christian faith. This was the waning. The return of the strength of Christianity is made evident by a study of both of these awakenings.

An awakening is another word for a massive Christian revival. However, an awakening is a deeply felt and far reaching phenomenon. To call an awakening merely a revival falls far short of the mark. A revival usually affects those who are already believers. Generally, the progression is revival, movement, awakening. The revival affects the believers. The movement spreads the revival to many churches. An awakening affects entire communities and even an entire nation. An awakening increases interest in matters of faith. An awakening touches people deep inside and causes them to realize that they have a desperate need for God which leads them to experience God in ways that they had not known. Out of an awakening comes whole new religious movements and groups or denominations.

The beginning rumblings of the First Great Awakening began about 1730 and continued for over twenty years. Strangely enough, it began among the Calvinists who were known for their staid and somber attitude towards spiritual matters. The leaders were surprised at the emotional reactions of the people when it came to their relationship with God. Not only were there extreme reactions in public meetings but the emotions continued long after the meetings were over. Furthermore, those who were touched by this strong presence of God began and continued to act like sincere Christian believers.

The First Great Awakening

The First Great Awakening involved the educated elite and was strong in the Northeastern Colonies. The Second Great Awakening was strong in the Northeast but also in the pioneer area of the Midwest. It began in 1790 and continued past 1820. The reforms which came out of the Second Great Awakening involved nearly every area of life.

Some believe that there have been Great Awakenings since the Second one. For instance, there was one between the Civil war until just before World War One in the early 1900's. Still others believe that there was another one later in the 1900's. No doubt there was some revival during those periods but none of it ever approached the power and scope of the first two awakenings.

In the First Great Awakening many cried out, some fell down, or fainted, some seemed to have fits. There was a great concern for the individual's soul. The concern for one's soul seemed to spread from one person to another almost by contact. Just the reports of what was shared in the public meetings brought to the listeners a great concern for their own souls. Sometimes, the Holy

Spirit seemed to work in a calmer way but the personal awareness of the need for salvation was just as deep and long lasting.

It is stressed over and over in the accounts of the time that all sorts of people, young, old, rich, poor, educated, ignorant, whites, blacks, Indians, English, male and female, were strongly convicted of sin and became converted and continued to display their new character for the remainder of their lives. Throughout there appeared a great love for God. This love for God brought about changes as to how people felt about themselves and others and about religious matters in general.

In 1734 the awakening broke out in Massachusetts in the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. There are still hundreds of his sermons in print. He is best remembered for his sermon "Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God." However, most of his sermons did not emphasize the wrath of God. The awakening soon spread throughout New England.

As serious and composed as Edwards was, he learned to put up with the noisiness of the revival. This led him to write a book about emotion in religion entitled Religious Affections. "Affections" was the colonial name for emotions. Edwards concluded that emotions alone could not nullify a spiritual experience nor confirm the validity of a spiritual experience. In short, emotions were not the direct work of God but the human reaction to what God was doing in the lives of people.

Another leader, George Whitefield, came over from England and preached all over the colonies with an enormous effect. Whitefield was a Calvinistic Methodist and he disagreed on several important points with John and Charles Wesley who also preached widely in the colonies and in Britain and were the founders of Methodism which was not Calvinistic.

Methodism stressed free choice on the part of the believer. Calvinism stressed the sovereignty of God which seemed to exclude free choice; one was chosen by God or not chosen and human choice was irrelevant. Whitefield, while being Calvinistic, allowed for human choice in the matter of salvation. God, Whitefield proclaimed, was merciful. Rather than being predestined for damnation, men and women could be saved by repenting of their sins and embracing Christ. Whitefield appealed to the passions of his listeners, showing the joy of salvation and the horrors of damnation. He spread the Great Awakening from New England to Georgia. Benjamin Franklin printed Whitefield's sermons in his paper.

One pastor reported that when Whitefield held a series of meetings, they had not seen such emotions since the earthquake. Apparently, there had been an earthquake in the region earlier which had frightened and upset everyone. The effect of the revival with its conviction of sin was more powerful than the earthquake. The pastor went on to write that the request for God's help in prayer during the earthquake, strong as it had been, was for protection but did not include requests to be saved. But the revival made many people anxious to be sure that their souls were firmly in the hand of God. There was greater fervency during the revival than during the

earthquake. After accepting Jesus the people felt a calmness in their souls. This was because the people admitted their sins instead of arguing with God about them.

The Colonial belief in this modified Calvinism which was the basis for the First Great Awakening in America laid a foundation for the American Revolution. The preachers of the First Great Awakening reviewed God's covenant with America and repudiated the materialistic corruption of a rich colonial society. They reasoned that if the source of the corruption lay in England, a breaking of the ties with the mother country would result in a new America.

The First Great Awakening is credited for preparing the convictions of the people which led to the American Revolution itself. Out of a deep respect for the Golden Rule, citizen Christians became democratic and pressed for a free exchange of ideas including a free press. The movement of the 1740s played a key role in the development of democracy just before the American Revolution by preaching that the Bible taught that all men are equal, that the value of a man lies in his moral behavior and not his social class. By 1773 when battles over taxation without representation erupted, Americans were prepared to defy the British.

Between The Awakenings

After the American Revolution there was a time of great immorality in the United States. Apparently only the institutions survived but not the experience in the hearts of the next generation. Between the awakenings America descended into a pit of self-indulgence and violence. Many believed that Christianity would not survive in America. But the Christian faith would return dramatically. God delights in allowing it to get past, far past, the ability of men to make it successful again. The worse it gets, the better Christianity recovers.

There were about five million people in the newborn United States of America. It is estimated that over 6% were alcoholics and many died each year. Sexual sin was rampant and there was an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. Theft and robbery were rising dramatically. Between the awakenings there was a move for another revolution like the one in France which was based on atheism.

John Adams once said, "I know not what to make of a republic of thirty million atheists." This was because Adams, as a prime designer of the American Republic along with Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, did not see a government "of, by and for the people" as being viable without the Golden Rule. Christian students on college campuses could not let their faith be known for fear of being attacked. Students even burned down buildings. Any rational person would have to admit that Christianity in America was a thing of the past. But God is not impressed with such thoughts.

The Second Great Awakening

The Second Great Awakening began around 1790 and grew rapidly. By 1820 all churches had grown tremendously.

It began in Boston in 1792. This was because the Baptists started an ever-growing prayer initiative. It began with just one day a month. These prayer meetings grew at a steady rate. Often entire congregations were converted. In the New England states, all were affected in every type of church.

During the Second Great Awakening church membership rose sharply and the preachers came from all levels of education and different races. Many new denominations were formed. There was widespread expectation that the second coming of Christ was very near.

The great revival quickly spread to Ohio. By 1800 the awakening was as far as Kentucky. It then crossed the mountains among uneducated people on the frontier. There was trembling and shaking, weeping and shouting. The revival totally changed Kentucky and Tennessee.

At Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1801 as many as 20,000 people participated. This was considered the frontier at that time. The growth in old churches and the creation of new churches stressed salvation as a personal relationship with Christ and not church membership.

It moved into Virginia and North Carolina and South Carolina, and into Georgia. There were large crowds and their buildings were too small. They met in fields in groups of thousands. Many observers were converted in large numbers and joined the churches.

The colleges were revived. As Christianity grew, the students became missionaries and expanded the educational ministry. The Second Great Awakening was partially responsible politically for the Two-Party System. All forms of democracy were encouraged.

We can only conclude from history that no matter how weak Christianity may become as the generations pass, God will move to restore the next generation. And with the restoration comes a deep personal faith which is not dependent on the institutional organization often referred to as the Church. The life is not in the institution, although it is often bolstered by an awakening. The life is in the hearts of the people as the Spirit of Christ moves among them and upon them. The strength of Christianity always returns but perhaps not in the form that we expect. The U.S.A. is not the Kingdom of God. However, America's next great faith is a strong, revitalized, victorious Christianity.