

# Ordinary People, Extraordinary Things

How God Brings Revival

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## INTRODUCTION

The following conversation is a composite of those taking place in hundreds of churches in this country. A group of leaders in this particular congregation was called to a meeting to discuss the future of the church. Their pastor of 9 years had recently gone to another congregation to serve, and this team of people was charged with defining what qualities the church should seek in the next leader. Then they were to conduct a search to find the person who met the profile.

As part of their conversation one member came with a graph that demonstrated a continuous decline in membership for the past twenty years (experts estimate that 80% or more of the churches in our country are on a membership plateau or declining). A sanctuary that once was full has many empty pews. An educational building that once resounded with the noise of children and young people has only a few rooms used. Gray heads predominate on Sunday mornings. The decline happened so gradually, however, that people didn't really notice it.

There were a few moments of stunned silence after the graph and the accompanying table were explained. One elder finally broke the silence: "We've got to turn this church around somehow, or there won't be a church much longer, at this rate."

The chairman of the search committee responded, "I guess this says something about the kind of person we need as our next pastor.

Someone who can help us grow the congregation."

"What does that mean?" asked the leader of the women's ministry. "I mean, are we looking for someone like Bill Hybels, an effective CEO type leader?"

"I'm not sure what I meant," the chairman answered. "What kinds of people help churches like ours get growing?"

"I think we just look for someone who preaches the Word faithfully," a charter member chimed in. "If the Word is preached faithfully, then if God wants us to grow, we'll grow."

"That's a nice sentiment," a businessman who had joined the church two years earlier added, "But if I saw my business beginning to decline, I'd be crazy not to try to do something about it. I'd be looking for the best people around to help me get things turned around. I think God would want us to use some good business sense when we see something like this. We need to try to fix the problem."

"In the Old Testament there were several times when only a remnant of believers was left," responded the charter member. "Maybe that's what God is calling us to be—a faithful remnant that preaches the Word."

"That might be true," the chairman said. "But we also have to keep in mind that our city is growing. Many of the people who have moved into our area don't go to church and likely aren't

saved. I think God would want us to do something about that, don't you? And if we're going to do something about it, we're going to need a pastor to lead us in the effort."

"It might be helpful if we defined what we'd like the pastor to lead us to do," a younger deacon said. "What do those churches in our community that are growing do different from what we do?"

The chairman of the evangelism committee quickly said, "The Pentecostal churches have tent services every year. Maybe we should plan a series of tent meetings out in the parking lot in the summer."

The chairman got up and wrote this suggestion on the board. "Okay, we could look for a pastor who is good at planning big events like a tent meeting."

"The Mormons are at my door a couple of times a year," added another member. "They continue to grow because of their door-to-door calling. We used to do that sort of thing, but really haven't done a thorough canvass of the neighborhood in several years."

"In that case, we'll need someone who can lead us and train us in door-to-door calling," the chairman said as he added this thought to the board.

"What we need is a dynamic youth program," said another member who had three teenagers. "Just look at the New Life Community Church and what they've done with an effective youth pastor."

"So we may want to consider getting a younger pastor, one who can relate to the youth of the church and community," the chairman summarized as he was writing this suggestion on the board as well.

"I think we've really got to get an effective advertising campaign going," the businessman said. "I think we should look for a pastor who has had some experience in the day-to-day world of business, maybe someone who went into the pastorate later."

This suggestion was added to the list: expert in marketing.

"Maybe we should get a new sign out front," a member of the building committee suggested. "We can do that without a new pastor, can't we?"

The discussion went on for some time until the board was filled with suggestions that ranged from a person who was a great evangelist to someone who could lead the church to relocate to one of the growing suburbs. During a lull in the conversation one older woman in the group asked a question that would change the course of the meeting as well as the course of the church. "I wonder why the church grew in the past? My grandfather used to tell me about the tremendous revival that happened when he was a child. Why did that revival happen? What kind of people did God use to turn things around in the past? Maybe we ought to find out how God worked in the past before we make plans for our future," she suggested.

The committee agreed that it was a good suggestion: How did God work in the past? What kinds of people were used to bring about the revival that they wanted for their church? They decided to spend the next month reading on the subject. One member agreed to do an internet search of relevant articles and email them to the members. They would then meet again to discuss what they had found.

One month later they were back in the same room. "What did you find?" the chairman of the committee inquired.

The charter member spoke first. "It was just like I said it was. All they did during revival times was to preach the Word, and things happened. If God wants us to grow, we'll grow, as long as we continue to preach the Word faithfully."

"That's not what I found in the material we read," responded the businessman. "In every revival in this country there seemed to be a leader who did a great deal of organizing, and the organization seemed to contribute to the Holy Spirit making the church grow."

The chairman interjected, “Well, one thing we can agree on after reading this material: there have been some extraordinary times in our history when God caused revivals, and some extraordinary men who were part of it. Churches grew, and the world was affected. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have that kind of excitement in the church again?”

The older woman who had started this conversation by referring to earlier revivals said, “I noticed that the leaders came after revivals were already started for the most part. I think what we need to find out is what the church did prior to the revival. Maybe there’s something that church members were doing that made the Holy Spirit come. If we can find out what that is, maybe we’ll get some direction for our own church, and then God will send us the right pastor to lead us to further growth.”

## When Revivals Come

The history of the United States, in one sense, is a history of periods of a revival, when spiritual interest intensified and the churches in our country grew. “If only God would do that again!” many of us say. “If only the churches in our country could have the vitality that they had during those periods!” But will God do it again?

Some think it’s happening now. I think of a church that I attended in the Northeastern part of the United States. After the service, I had a delightful time interacting with people and asking about the ministry of this lively congregation. With joy one man I talked to reported the growth of their membership, the increasing involvement of the members, and the new programs that were being developed to reach into the community. As we reflected on this, he continued to say that New England has been in the spiritual doldrums for a long time, but now “a revival is happening.” He was convinced that a new “Great Awakening” was dawning, and part of the reason was the arrival of a new pastor a few years prior.

Evangelical Christians have been praying for revival now for years. A quick search of an internet site listing sermons on 2 Chronicles 7:14 indicate that this is a very popular subject: 54 different sermons from a variety of well-known to unknown preachers in America. It’s a good subject for preaching. The spiritual and moral decline in our country is alarming. Charles Colson, a modern-day prophet, reflects in his books on the decline of the influence of the church. Legal action, in the name of separation of church and state, has severely limited Christian influence in the schools and in public life. (1) Our politicians openly claim that they can be good members of Christian churches, yet support legislation that opposes the values of the church. That is why, some observers say, we can have the phenomenon of the 1980s and early 1990s: church membership going up while the morality of the nation as evaluated by crime rates and moral issues, or declined.

So revival is a good topic for preaching, and many have said that revival is near. Some years ago David McKenna even said, in the introduction to his book, *The Coming Great Awakening* (2), “There are stirrings of the Spirit in all sectors of the globe, which are converging with earth-shaking force.”

My focus in this book is going to be on two things: 1) How does revival happen? What does the local church have to do to be the channel of God’s power to bring about revival? And 2) What kind of people does God use in the church to provide leadership to revival? of our history. God was at work. This will be a study of the means and the people that God uses to work to bring about revival. A second thing about myself that you should be aware of is this: I am a pastor. I work in a local church that has sought, since its beginning in 1969, to bring salvation to its community and world, and to have a positive impact on the world around it.

The people of Calvary Church have taught me much during the past 20 years that I have been

their pastor. Their love for the lost has inspired me to investigate more fully how that love can be expressed in a world where so many seem to be wandering in darkness.

This book will be divided into six sections. Each of the first five will deal with one of the historical periods of revival. We will look at the events leading up to the renewal of the church, the prominent men that God used as channels of His power, and at the effects that the revival of religion had on the society at large. Section six will look ahead rather than back. I will be seeking, in this last section, to draw some conclusions from this study— lessons that the church of Jesus Christ can apply to its ministry today to be a more effective channel of the reviving power of God and where to look for leadership in the process. We will see that God, over and over again, uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things when it comes to the revival of the church.

It was in an effort to satisfy my own curiosity about these questions, and my desire to see the church that I pastor experience the power of the Holy Spirit, that I decided to study how God has worked in the past to bring about revival. It is my conviction that when we understand how God has worked in the past, we will be better able to provide the leadership that the church needs today and in the future.

Since the place one begins such a study will have a huge impact on the conclusions, there are some things you, the reader, should know about me, the writer. First of all, I write as a person who is theologically conservative, which means I believe in the inspiration of Scripture, in the Divinity of Jesus Christ, and in the presence of God through His Holy Spirit. This is important to know about me, because in defining what a revival is, I have found that it is possible to discuss them in a strictly sociological sense. For example, it is possible to say that the enthusiasm for religion during one period of revival was simply the response of people going through the industrial revolution with its accompanying uncertainties. That is not how I approach this study. I have found that I prefer the definition given by J. Edwin Orr. He writes in the introduction to his volumes on revival that,

An Evangelical Awakening is a movement of the Holy Spirit bringing about a revival of New Testament Christianity in the church of Christ and its related community. (3)

In other words, something supernatural was going on in the revivals hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Notes:

1. Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Against the Night* (Servant Publications, 1999).
2. David McKenna, *The Coming Great Awakening* (Intervarsity Press, 1991), p. 14.
3. J. Edwin Orr, *The Eager Feet* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. vii.
4. If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

# **Part I: The Great Awakening**

## CHAPTER 1: THE DREAM

The Great Awakening, the first revival to occur in the United States, is rooted in the very beginning of our country. In the year 1630 a ship named the Arbella sailed from England on March 29 for the New World. On board were the future leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, setting out on a grand experiment. It had been 10 years since the Mayflower had deposited the Pilgrims at Plymouth, and many of the leaders of this new colony felt that the beginning of a city in Massachusetts Bay was the continuation of the dream that they had: to live in a place where they could live and worship the way they wanted. This group became known as the Puritans, and an understanding of the Great Awakening requires an understanding of these “Separatists.”

Ever since the Reformation period in the middle of the 16th century, the church of England had been the official church of the nation. The head of that church was the king of England, James I, at the time of the migration to the New World. In other words, the church was subject to the state. This fact, as we shall see in a few moments, made many people in the church uncomfortable, for they felt it was not a biblical order of responsibility.

Another issue that caused dissatisfaction was the organization of the church of England. It was an Episcopal church. In other words, there were bishops and archbishops who made decisions about what the church was to believe and what it was going to do. These leaders of the church were appointed by the king.

Another aspect of this denomination that resulted in disillusionment was the fact that the membership in this church was inclusive--everyone in the entire nation of England, regardless of his or her beliefs or moral life, was a member.

Because of these three things (the state controlling the church, a structure for the church that was not found in the Bible, and the inclusive church membership), there arose a group that came to be known as Puritans because of their desire to purify, or reform the Church of England.

The reforms that this group pressed for directly related to the areas where they felt the church had drifted from the directives of Scripture. First, they felt that the Bible required a ministry of equals, not the hierarchical structure presently in place. Secondly, they wanted to change the rituals and liturgy of the church, moving away from the vestiges of Catholicism that they saw in the vestments of the priests, the kneeling for communion administered by the priest, and the Book of Common Prayer. The relationship between the church and state was a third bone of contention for these early travelers to America. They desired equality between church and state, or at least a separation. The history of the Church of England demonstrated many times that the control of the church by the state led to corruption by politically motivated bishops.

The greatest area of dissatisfaction, however, was with the practice of inclusive membership.

The Puritans wanted to raise the standards for church membership. They wanted members to be only those who could give a clear testimony about their salvation.

With this agenda, the Puritans had several strategies to bring about the change. They appealed to the Sovereign (Elizabeth I and Charles I) to mandate the changes. Each time they tried this route they were denied. The next strategy was to attempt to work through the Parliament. During the late 16th century several bills were introduced to bring about the changes, but each time they died in the House of Commons. The most successful strategy was to work for reform at the local level. Since the local gentry (rulers of an area) appointed the priests, those who were sympathetic to the Puritan ideas appointed priests who were graduates of Emmanuel College, a training ground for clergymen in the Puritan mold.

A final means used to deal with their dissatisfaction was to become what was known as a “Separatist.” Separatists did just what their name implies: because, in their opinion, the church of England had become so corrupt that it was beyond any hope of purifying it, they abandoned it and formed new, unconnected churches. This was a dangerous course of action, since rejection of the church of England was also a rejection of the authority of the King or Queen. Therefore, some of these groups left England and moved to the Netherlands or other more religiously tolerant countries. Among those who left were the Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 aboard the “Mayflower.” They came with the dream of being the purified church in a new land.

Other Separatists did not follow the trail to America in great numbers until the 1630s. That decade became known as “The Great Migration,” as Puritans began to move in large numbers to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. What caused the change in strategy from working locally to giving up and moving to America? The primary cause was the appointment of a man named William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud began a campaign to do away with the local reforms that had kept Puritans happy enough to stay in the fold of the church of England. With their limited freedoms threatened, thousands decided to go to America to establish a new kind of church, and a new kind of church-state relationship. John Winthrop, future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, stated their perceived mission clearly. In a sermon on board the Arbella, he said,

“Wee shall be as a city upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deal falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.” (1)

This was the mission: to demonstrate to the world the beauty and wisdom of a place where people lived pure, godly, pious, spiritual lives. The people who came to America in the 1630s came with a sense of destiny and purpose. They, in their special relationship to God, His Church, and to one another, would be the means by which salvation would extend to the world.

## What Happened?

The dream of a pure community of believers was lived out in the beginning years of the Massachusetts Bay and surrounding colonies. To join the church in what was becoming known as New England, you had to: 1) be able to give clear testimony about how God had worked His miracle of grace in your heart; 2) be willing to enter into a covenant with your fellow church members to look out for one another’s spiritual life; 3) commit to living a “good” life, one that is based upon the law of God; and 4) demonstrate that you have knowledge of theology. As you can see, the desire to keep the church pure was paramount for people who were attempting to reinstate what they believed to be the Biblical church.

By the early part of the 18th century, however, there was a need for and an experience of



what was called “revival” in this pure church. The word revival means to reanimate, to awaken new life. What happened that a church that began with a mission to remain vital, to become the Kingdom of God on earth, could become so dead as to need reanimation? There were several things that contributed to the decline of the Puritan vision for America.

## **Internal Stressors**

### **The Antinomian Controversy**

It was not long after the arrival in Massachusetts Bay in June of 1630 before the concept of the “pure” Church was tested. In the middle of that decade there arose a controversy over some of the foundational teachings of the Calvinistic Church of New England. The first major challenge was a movement that became known as “The Antinomian Controversy.” The leader of this movement was a woman named Anne Hutchinson. This pious daughter of a Puritan minister began a Bible study in her home which was attended by over sixty women of the colony. As they searched the Scriptures together, these mothers and daughters came to the conclusion that some of what they were being taught by their church was not true to the Bible. They accused the clergy of teaching a legalism that was a throwback to the Old Testament emphasis on law over against that of grace. Such an emphasis, they said, was nothing less than a covenant of works. This group, then, which soon included men among its adherents, received the title of “The Antinomians,” or “anti-law” group. Instead of the law, the Antinomians emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing assurance of salvation.

How would the leaders of the purified community handle someone who was going against the grain, challenging the leadership of the clergymen who had learning and tradition on their side? They dealt with it by having a series of meetings in Cambridge in 1637. The magistrates and clergymen examined the beliefs of Anne Hutchinson and other Antinomians. They concluded that they had made 82 errors in their interpretation of the Bible. Twenty-nine of these errors were attributed to Anne. She was ordered to recant her error or be banished from the colony. She chose banishment. Mary Dyer, a Quaker who had become connected with the movement, was also banished. Unlike Anne, however, she returned to Boston to test the leaders’ threat of death to her and Anne, should they return. The threat was carried out when she was hung from a tree on Boston Common. Today there are statues of both of these women on the grounds of the Massachusetts State House, with plaques that glorify the commitment of these women to religious freedom. It was all too clear at the time, however, that religious freedom was not going to be tolerated in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The reaction of those who disagreed with the established church was predictable: the dissent went underground. Most of the people who had been part of the Antinomian controversy stayed in Boston, but now kept their beliefs about the Holy Spirit and legalism to themselves. Thus, the first experience of a totally united colony began to disintegrate very early. The decline had begun.

### **The Witchcraft Trials**

It was not long before other controversial actions by the leaders in the area began to cause a decline in the Puritan influence. In the later part of the 17th century (the 1670s and 1680s) the witch trials in Salem were the focus of attention. A total of 20 people were put to death during this period for practicing witchcraft. Nineteen of these were hanged as confessed witches, and one died while going through “pressing”--having increasing weight put on him in an effort to get him to confess. When one reads the accounts of the trials of the accused witches from a modern

perspective, it seems obvious that petty desires for revenge was the motivation behind many of the accusations, and much of the evidence is suspect. (2) However, for a time, the accusations and trials raptly held the attention of the purified church.

After this period of irrationality there was a time of confession of error on the part of the leaders in the community, and prayers were offered, asking forgiveness. Rational people began to think that the Purified community had gone a little crazy, and the authority of the church had become suspect.

### **The Half-Way Covenant**

There was another force that contributed to the decline of the dream of a purified church. Church membership was decreasing. This was especially seen in the declining numbers of people who were taking communion. Apparently the expectation was so high for church members, and the emphasis on guilt so all-pervasive, that few felt pure enough to partake. They had been taught to take the warning of Paul very seriously: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). These verses were emphasized every time communion was celebrated. People feared sickness in that day and age when medical knowledge was limited, and any illness was seen as a visitation of the Lord. Therefore, it was considered wiser to keep away from the Supper than to risk illness. It has been estimated that only 20% of the people in the colonies were taking communion. (3)

In addition to the decreasing numbers of people taking communion, it was noticed that the other sacrament, baptism, was being ignored by a growing number of people. Parents were not having their children baptized. The second and third generation, the children and grandchildren of the original settlers, did not have the same spiritual commitment to the church and its teachings that their parents had. Therefore, they were less willing to fulfill the requirement for church membership of being able to give a testimony of how God had worked grace in their lives. Since they were not officially members of the church, they could not have their children baptized. The numbers of unbaptized children, then, was becoming large, and this was of great concern to grandparents in particular.

How would the church respond to this difficulty? A synod of ministers met in 1662 to address the problem. They produced a compromise that became known as "The Half-Way Covenant." In essence, this statement said that baptized, but unconverted adults were still connected to the church. Since they could not give a testimony of their own experience with God, it was decided, they could still have their children baptized if they would "own the covenant." This meant that they had to demonstrate an understanding of Christian doctrine, give assent to the creed of the church (the Westminster Confession), and acknowledge that there was an obligation on them because of their own baptism. If they owned this covenant, they could proceed with baptism of their children.

There were, of course, many opponents to this plan, those who still had the dream of a church that was made up of committed and converted people. There were fears that allowing members who were only 'half-way' committed would dilute the character of the church. Nevertheless, this plan became practice in most of the Congregational Churches in New England.

Once the Half-Way covenant became accepted and established, the next logical step was to allow the half-way committed to partake of the Lord's Supper. Solomon Stoddard, pastor in

Northampton, Connecticut, was among the first to encourage his congregation to see the Lord's Supper as a means to conversion, not as a celebration for the converted. Therefore, sometime in the 1670s, he began the practice of admitting to the communion table those who had "hopes" of salvation alongside of those who were able to testify of saving grace.

### **External Pressures**

Up to this point, we have looked at pressures within the church that contributed to the decline of spirituality in the New World. There were also external pressures. Toward the end of the 17th century there were repeated crop failures. Smallpox and other epidemics took lives. Disastrous fires had destroyed cities. Even Boston, the most advanced city in the colonies at that time, was swept by flames several times. The destruction of many towns, properties and homes in a great earthquake in 1727 left many people thinking that the end of the world was near and that they were experiencing the judgment of the covenant God.

In addition to all these natural disasters, there were the Indian Wars, most disastrous of which was what has become known as King Phillip's War. The picture that was used by the Massachusetts Bay Trading Company as its seal was of a half-naked Indian with a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, with this announcement coming from his mouth: "Come over and help us." The goal of many who were recruited with this picture was to convert the Indians. Instead of conversion, though, one disagreement led to another between Indian and Colonist. Diseases brought by the whites decimated many tribes, leaving them mistrustful. The result was war. Several different tribes rallied around King Phillip and attempted to force the whites out of the area. All through 1675 to 1676 Indians raided local towns and villages. The colonists were poorly prepared for these attacks, since the original plan and hope had been to convert the Indians, not fight them.

By the end of the war, which concluded with King Phillip's being shot and beheaded by a man from Plymouth, one-tenth of the adult males of Massachusetts had been killed or captured, and two-thirds of the villages had suffered raids. (4)

All of these disasters led the Christians to ask why God was afflicting His people. Another Synod was convened in 1679 in Boston that came to be known as "The Reforming Synod." The delegates to this synod came up with a list of 13 evils that they claimed had provoked the Lord to bring judgment on New England. They were:

1. A decreasing godliness among Christians
2. Extravagant dress, exhibiting pride
3. The neglect of baptism and the fellowship of the church, along with a failure to testify against heretics like the Quakers and the Baptists
4. Profanity and irreverent behavior in the sanctuary
5. A lack of observance of the Sabbath
6. A decline in family worship
7. Legal litigations between church members, along with backbiting and censures of each other
8. Tavern haunting, giving liquor to the Indians, adultery, mixed dancing, suggestive dress and behavior
9. Dishonesty
10. A love of the things of the world
11. An opposition to do something about the sins
12. A lack of what was called the "public spirit," with a resulting languishing of the schools
13. A lack of a will to repent and an "unfruitfulness under the means of grace."

Whether or not you agree that these were grievous transgressions or minor sins, whether you picture God as bringing judgment upon a people for such sins or not, it was obvious that the influence of the church was diminished.

The leaders of the churches sought to address these perceived evils by preaching what have become known as “jeremiads.” A jeremiad is a sermon or speech that gets its name from the weeping prophet, Jeremiah. Doom, gloom and judgment were the themes preached in the churches of the area.

However, people did not turn back to the Lord in ever increasing numbers as the clergy had hoped. In fact, the decline continued, until it reached a point described by Jonathan Edwards, a person we will get to know more personally in a few pages. In a letter to a Dr. Benjamin Colmon, pastor of the Brattle Street Church in Boston, he described life in Northampton, Connecticut prior to the Great Awakening. He wrote that his grandfather, Rev. Solomon Stoddard, had seen five periods of renewal in the congregation and surrounding area over his near sixty years of ministry. After the last one, eighteen years before the Great Awakening, nothing much seemed to stop the declension or decline of religion. As Edwards put it:

After the last of these came a far more degenerate time (at least among the young people) than ever before. The greater part seemed to be at that time very insensible of the things of religion. Just after my grandfather’s death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion; licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town. They were addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, without any regard to order in the families they belonged to. Family government did too much fail in the town.(5)

Men had tried and done their best to revitalize the church and renew the dream, and they had failed miserably. Now God began to work to bring new life to His Church in the New World. He did so primarily through two men: Jonathan Edwards and the English itinerant evangelist, George Whitefield. We’ll meet them in the next chapter.

#### Notes:

1. Quoted in Daniel J. Boorstein, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 1.
2. See David D. Hall ed., *Witchhunting in New England*
3. Cedrick B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971), p. 42.
4. For a further description of these wars by those participating in them, see Charles H. Lincoln, *Narratives of the Indian Wars* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), pp. 21-106.
5. Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” in a collection edited by Carl Wolf, *Jonathan Edwards on Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 18.

## **CHAPTER 2: EDWARDS, WHITEFIELD AND THE GREAT AWAKENING**

It is not possible to consider the revivals that God has brought about in our country without looking at people who were equipped with a special power of the Spirit and deployed to bring about the revival of religion. The first of these, the man to whom history has attributed the beginning of the Great Awakening, was Jonathan Edwards.

It was about 1640 that Edwards' ancestors came from England to the New World. They settled in Connecticut, where Timothy Edwards, Jonathan's father, became the pastor of a church in East Windsor, Connecticut. Jonathan's mother, Esther, was the daughter of a man mentioned in the last chapter, the Rev. Solomon Stoddard. Jonathan was born into this family on October 5, 1703. He was the fifth child out of eleven born to Timothy and Esther, and the only son.

As the only son in the family, there were expectations that he would follow in the father's footsteps and become a pastor. To that end Timothy began to train his son in the necessary skills at an early age, and Jonathan proved to be an able, if not precocious child. At the age of 6 he was studying Latin. When he was 10 years old he wrote and published an essay that contributed to a theological discussion that was prevalent at that time: where is the soul in the body--is it material, part of the physical? Edwards argued that the soul was not material or physical, but spiritual in nature.

It was also at the age of 10 that he had a spiritual experience during one of his father's annual revival campaigns at the church. He describes going down to the "booth in the swamp," a wooden shed that had become a favorite play place for children. There he poured out his soul to God, and first felt the assurance of salvation. At the age of 13 he entered Yale college. His course of study there included subjects like Greek, Latin, Hebrew, rhetoric, logic, physics, theology and philosophy. It was the last of these that became his love, and his abilities in this area earned him the reputation of being the finest mind produced by the Colonies. His theology, too, reflected a deep devotion to philosophy, and his stated desire was to unite the two.

Edwards graduated from Yale with highest honors before his seventeenth birthday. He continued his education, however, choosing to spend the next two years doing graduate studies in theology rather than immediately entering the ministry. During those two years of study he had another spiritual experience, the one that he more closely associated with conversion. Edwards never fully explained what happened or how this experience changed his outlook toward life, but

we know that sometime in 1721 he read I Timothy 1:17, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever.” In some way the Holy Spirit used these words to give Jonathan a new appreciation for the sovereignty of God. He said that he had a “new sense of things,” and wanted to be “swallowed up by God.” In his diary he wrote: “Resolved: That every man should live to the glory of God. Resolved second: That whether others do this or not, I will.”(1)

In August, 1722, Edwards accepted the call to be the pastor of a small group of people that had broken off from the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. He was there only a short time before he moved to Bolton, Connecticut in, April, 1723, to take up the pastorate of a church in that town. Again, his stay was very brief. After just over a year he left this church to become a tutor in Yale College, a post he assumed on May 21, 1724. He held this position somewhat unhappily, since he didn’t enjoy his responsibilities, until September, 1725, when he became ill with an undiagnosed fever. This, of course, was in the days before antibiotics, and the battle with the illness left him with a tendency toward sickness the rest of his life. In the fall of 1726 he was called to a new position. His grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was growing old and beginning to look to retirement. He planned to get someone to assist him for a while, and then take over for him as pastor of the church. Who was better suited than his own grandson? Jonathan was asked to come and take the new position, and accepted.

Five months later he married Sarah Pierrepont, who became an extremely valuable helpmate to him. In fact, it was the peaceful home life of the Edwards that caused George Whitefield to begin to think about taking a wife.

Solomon Stoddard died on February 11, 1729, and Jonathan was appointed the pastor. It was in this church, in this town of Northampton, that the revival began.

Revival took some time, however. Edwards preached in Northampton on themes like the sovereignty of God, justification by faith alone, and the coming judgment for a full four years, without any noticeable change in the character of the town or society. Toward the end of **1733**, however, a change in spiritual climate was felt. Edwards wrote,

There appeared a very unusual flexibleness and yielding to advice in our young people. It had been too long their manner to make the evening after the Sabbath, and after our public lecture, to be especially the time of their company-keeping.... A sermon was now preached on the Sabbath, before the lecture, to show the evil tendency of this practice. (2)

### **The Great Awakening Begins**

The willingness on the part of young people to listen and heed such advice was new, and Edwards took this as the beginning of an awakening to spiritual things. This awakening was deepened in 1734, when the community reacted to two deaths. The first was of a young man who died two days after coming down with an unexplained illness. Edwards preached at the funeral and used the occasion to remind his hearers that one must always be ready to meet the Judge. The second death, of a young woman, came a short time later. This death resulted in many feeling a call to salvation. Edwards described the events that led up to her conversion and translation to glory:

This was followed with another death of a young married woman who had been considerably exercised in mind about the salvation of her soul before she was ill; but she seemed to have satisfying evidences of God’s saving mercy to her before her death. She died, warning and counseling others. There began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people’s minds.

In the ensuing months Edwards preached about justification by faith alone, and that apparently prepared the ground for the Spirit. People began to seek peace with their creator. What happened next is well described by Edwards. In his letter to Dr. Colmon he gave this account of the beginning of revival:

Then, in the latter part of December, the Spirit of God began to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us. There were, very suddenly, five or six persons who were, to all appearance, savingly converted. Particularly I was surprised with a young woman who had been one of the greatest company-keepers in town. It appeared to me that God had given her a new heart, truly broken and sanctified. (4)

From that point on, people in the town of Northampton and the surrounding towns increasingly became interested in the way of salvation. After six months Edwards estimated that three hundred people had been converted in that town and area, and they joined the church in droves. Church records show that more than one hundred people were received into the church before the Lord's Supper on one Sunday. A short time later eighty more were accepted, and sixty more joined prior to the next celebration of the Lord's Supper. The growth was so great that a new church was built in Northampton in 1737 to accommodate the increasing crowds who came to take part in the presence and power of God.

The events in Northampton were not limited to that area, however. From that village the movement spread throughout the countryside, as well as to such far-away places as New York, New Jersey, and the rest of New England. It spread primarily by word of mouth, as many came to Northampton to see the work that God was doing and went away with something of the Spirit in their story. But much credit also goes to faithful preachers who saw what God was doing and participated in it by calling people to salvation.

### **George Whitefield and the Countrywide Revival**

Unfortunately, the heightened excitement did not last very long. Within a few years, the number of converts began to decline, and the sense of excitement began to wane. In other words, the revival had not yet become what we call "The Great Awakening." That was to wait until 1740 and the arrival of George Whitefield in the United States.

Whitefield was a priest in the Anglican Church who had committed to ministry as an itinerant evangelist. He is the second major character that was especially used by God in this first renewal of religion in the United States.

George Whitefield was born in an inn that was owned by his parents in Gloucester, England, on December 16, 1714. His father died when he was 2 years old, leaving the future of the family in financial jeopardy. His mother, however, was determined that he should receive an education, and so she scrimped to provide him with the best. At the age of 18 he entered Oxford College, where he joined what was known then as the "Holy Club," the first name given to the Methodists in England. It was their commitment to a serious study of the Scripture and discipline in spiritual things that Whitefield adopted and which consequently led to his conversion.

He was ordained on June 20, 1736. Immediately he became known as a preacher of extraordinary ability, able to move audiences through his use of words and imagery. In fact, a complaint was brought to his bishop that his first sermon had driven fifteen people mad.

While still a student at Oxford he had heard of the mission of John and Charles Wesley to the infant colony of Georgia, and since he felt called to missions, he decided to go to work in America. This decision was made in spite of several lucrative positions that he was offered in England. Therefore, 1738 found him traveling to Georgia. Disappointment was the result of his

stay there, however-there just weren't enough people to convert. So Whitefield used his abundant energy to begin an orphanage, a cause that he would gather funds for throughout his ministry in both England and America. Three months later he was back in England.

In an attempt to solicit funds for his orphanage, he traveled from place to place preaching. Many Church of England priests were uncomfortable with Whitefield's preaching, however, because he constantly pressed people to make a commitment to Jesus Christ. When not allowed in the village or city churches, Whitefield adopted the Methodist practice of preaching in the open field.

In October, 1739, he returned to America to raise funds for his orphanage and to preach in places other than Georgia. The spiritual fervor that had begun through the ministry of Jonathan Edwards was still glowing, and people were therefore interested in hearing the gifted preacher from England. Crowds gathered wherever he went, and increased as his reputation grew. At times the number of people was so large no building would hold them, so preaching was often done from a hill, in the town commons, or from the balcony of a large building.

On this trip to America, Whitefield traveled throughout the colonies, even preaching in Jonathan Edwards' church four times during the weekend of October 17-20, 1740. He stayed at the parsonage, and, as mentioned earlier, was so impressed with the peaceful life of the Edwards family that he determined he needed a wife.

The significance of Whitefield in the Great Awakening cannot be overestimated. Though the revival began with Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, it was Whitefield who reignited the flickering flame of the renewal, and spread it throughout the colonies. Benjamin Franklin summarized the effect that Whitefield had on Philadelphia in this way:

The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation with me to observe the influence of his oratory on his hearers and how much they respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, assuring them that they were naturally half beasts and half devils. It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless and indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world was growing religious; so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families in every street. (5)

Philadelphia was not the only city that had such a response. Throughout the colonies there was talk of spiritual things, and the awakening that occurred became truly Great! George Whitefield made a total of seven trips to America. Each time he came, he was an instrument of revival, though the number of people making commitments once again began to decline already by 1742. Whitefield died in 1770 while in America on a preaching tour.

## **The End of the Great Awakening**

Church historians believe that the peak of the revival occurred in the summer of 1741. On July 8 of that year Edwards preached probably the best remembered sermon of the time. At Enfield, Connecticut he preached a sermon with the title, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Literature classes still study this sermon as an example of the kind of preaching that was fairly typical of the time. Below, you will find a part of it. However, most preachers who today quote it and teachers who read it do so with dramatic descriptions and angry tones. This was not Edwards' style of preaching. He typically read his sermons, word for word from a manuscript. He used no gestures and provided no dramatics. There was no eye-contact with his audience. This was in contrast to Whitefield, who spoke extemporaneously and with great drama. God saw fit to



use both men and both styles. Consider these words, read from behind a plain pulpit, and know that they caused, under the power of the Holy Spirit, people to fall down and cry for mercy.

There are black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm. The sovereign pleasure of God for the present stays the rough wind, otherwise your destruction would come like a whirlwind. The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed up for the present. The bow of God's wrath is bent; and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow; and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that keeps the arrow. Thus are all you that never passed under a great change of heart by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls, all that were never born again and made new creatures (however you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have religious affections, and may keep a form of religion, and may be strict in it). The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider over the fire, is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire. It is nothing but his hand that keeps you from falling into the fire every moment. O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: you hang by a slender thread with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have nothing you have ever done to induce God to spare you one moment. (6)

This inducement to fear by calling people to consider God's judgment upon them was characteristic of the time. Edwards, Whitefield, and other preachers sought to help people see the danger of hell, and consistently pointed to the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

The tide of revival, however, was not to last. By the end of 1742, the signs of the ebbing were already there, and controversy began to capture the attention of the church as opponents of the revival and critics of the excesses of some revival practitioners began to drain the energies of the church away from evangelism.

As energies turned to squabbling, the attitude of the church toward many of the leaders of the revival changed. Especially tragic is the end of the career of Jonathan Edwards. From 1744 to 1748 not one candidate applied for membership in his church. By 1750 opponents in his own congregation had gained a majority. These opponents were unhappy with Edwards' insistence on a conversion experience to participate in communion. You will remember that Solomon Stoddard had opened communion to the unsaved as the extension of the Half-way covenant. Edwards had sought to change that practice, seeing it as one of the signs of decline in the church. However, even during the days of revival, the strong Stoddard faction in the church remained.

When the revival waned, so did Edwards' strong position in the congregation. He was ousted from the pastorate on June 22, 1750. After his dismissal, Edwards devoted himself to writing and study. In the fall of 1757, however, he received a call to become the president of the College of New Jersey, which would become Princeton University. He arrived in New Jersey to take up his responsibilities on February 16, 1758. He hardly had time to order his office, however, for on February 23 he was inoculated for smallpox, and complications of that inoculation resulted in his death on March 22 of that year.

### **Effects of the Great Awakening**

The effects of the Awakening were significant. First of all, the churches were renewed and built up. The New England churches were the most organized, and therefore our best statistics come from that area of the country. These estimates, however, will demonstrate how powerful this work of God was, and what a great impact it had on the churches and the society around them. Conservative estimates put the number of new church members in New England at

between 25,000 and 50,000. (7) The smaller number represents seven percent of the population of the country at that time. If a revival of the same magnitude occurred nationwide in the United States today, if seven percent of the population were to enter the churches that exist, the influx would number more than 17,500,000 people, assuming a rounded off U.S. population of 250,000,000. Can you imagine the impact that would have on the country?

The number of ministers and churches multiplied as another result of the Great Awakening. The Presbyterian Church reported an increase in ministers in the American Colonies from 45 to over 100 in the years from 1740 to 1760. The Baptist churches in New England increased from 21 to 79.

Another aspect of the impact on the churches was the fact that “revivalism” became a dividing issue among many church leaders. Schisms and divisions occurred in many denominations as the proponents of revivalism argued that the benefits of people experiencing conversion was worth any of the problems that arose. Detractors of the revivals pointed to excesses like the writhing on the floor, weeping and groaning, etc. that some taught were the evidence of true conversion. Eventually these disagreements led to divisions among Congregationalists and Presbyterians.

This division among churches had an impact on the education of America. Princeton College began as a direct result of these schisms, as theologically conservative, revival supporting Christians decided they needed a school of their own. Other colleges were begun for the same reason in other denominations.

An emphasis on education in general was another result of the Great Awakening. People who had been converted wanted to read the Scriptures for themselves, and so sought the learning that would allow them to continue growth in their faith.

There were also social effects on the towns and villages of the country because of the revival. People who were converted changed their behavior. Edwards gives this report of the effect the renewal of religion had on Northampton:

This work of God, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, A.D. 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. Our public assemblies were beautiful; the congregation was alive in God’s service, very earnestly intent on the public worship. In all companies, on whatever occasions persons met together, Christ was to be heard of and seen in the midst of them. (8)

Other towns reported the closing of taverns and a sharp decline in crime as the numbers of people in worship increased.

Finally, there was a political impact of the Awakening. It has been argued by several historians that the resulting political activism of the evangelical Christians in all the colonies was a factor in the push for political freedom that occurred a couple of decades later. The joy and vitality of the religious experience, some have argued, led people to get involved in the fight for justice. Thus it was that Christians were among the first to argue that the English Acts of Parliament should be resisted. (9)

In short, the entire society of the American Colonies was impacted by the fact that great numbers of people were coming to the point of confessing their sin and claiming the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the solution for those sins.

Notes:

1. Jonathan Edwards, “On Revival,” Carl Wolf, ed., *Jonathan Edwards On Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) p. ix.
2. Jonathan Edwards, “Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” Carl Wolf, ed.,

- Jonathan Edwards On Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 19.
3. Ibid.
  4. Ibid, p. 20.
  5. Quoted in A.S. Billingsley's classic work, *Life of George Whitefield* (1889) p. 152.
  6. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in Sister Ann Carol, *The Beginnings of American Literature* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 37.
  7. Frank G. Beardsley, *History of American Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1912), p. 64.
  8. Jonathan Edwards, "Faithful Narrative," p. 21.
  9. For a further discussion of this important link between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, see Cedrick B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution: Colonial Thought in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971).