



America's Great Awakenings

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Early American colonists began their life in the "new world" with dreams of religious freedom. Because of their influence on following generations, the United States has been marked by periods of increased spiritual fervor, many of which have transcended denominational, racial, and gender barriers while subsequently impacting the country's social and political climate.

First Great Awakening

The roots of America's First Great Awakening can be traced to European Christians in the early 18th century, particularly among splinter groups that emerged from the Protestant Reformation, such as the Moravians, German Lutherans, and Anabaptists. In England, individuals such as George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley helped initiate the beginnings of the Great Awakening through their emphasis on the deeper spiritual life as outlined in New Testament Christianity. In addition to their message, their effectiveness was due, in part, to their itinerant preaching in fields and other open-air venues, believing that more people would hear the Gospel message and accept Christ outside the confines of a church building than within it. It was a renewal movement that simplified the gospel message and embraced the common man by making the gospel more accessible and applicable to everyday life.

Whitefield and the Wesley Brothers each traveled to America to preach to colonists in the 1700s, which helped plant Europe's Great Awakening in American soil. The spiritual climate was fertile among American colonies, and it was not uncommon for these early meetings to attract tens of thousands participants. The efforts of Whitefield and the Wesley Brothers built on the foundation of American Puritans and Pietists, as well as other European evangelists who had traveled to the American colonies prior to their arrival.

In addition, Jonathan Edwards, an American-born Congregationalist preacher, widely remembered for his fiery sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, emerged as one of the leading voices in America's First Great Awakening. Through his writing and preaching, Edwards offered everyone the choice for redemption and salvation, much to the dismay of religious conservatives of his day.

The First Great Awakening sparked spiritual renewal among American colonists by suggesting that redemption was available to everyone who would accept it, and often relaying this message through passionate preaching that was intensely convicting of personal sin. Consequently, thousands of Americans exchanged sinful practices for lifestyles aligned with Scripture, liberating individuals to share the gospel message with others on a personal level. As a result, the impact of the Great Awakening transformed American culture and life for decades to come.

Second Great Awakening

At the dawn of the 19th century, several Christian denominations in America were experiencing internal unrest concerning what many believed to be a waning spiritual condition within the country and its churches. It was during this time that Charles Finney emerged as a passionate, yet sometimes controversial, preacher whose practices included allowing laity, including women, to take part in worship services. Some considered Finney's practices to be less-orderly because he conducted "protracted" (or long-drawn-out) revival meetings for as long as individuals responded to the preaching.

As the young country expanded westward, the need for spiritual renewal in these areas became evident. Several "protracted" camp meetings were conducted in these frontier areas, with the most well-known being the 1801 Cane Ridge meeting in the Cumberland River Valley of Kentucky. Clergyman Barton Stone organized the revival and was assisted by Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian ministers. Unique to this meeting were numerous physical manifestations, such as men and women falling into trances, dancing, and even trembling uncontrollably as moved upon by the Holy Spirit.

However, the new spiritual fervor was not limited only to such demonstrations of ecstasy and wonderment, for the Second Great Awakening also extended into the more refined religious circles of the Northeast, where the initial Great Awakening had first transformed America's spiritual conscience more than a half-century earlier. In addition, numerous initiatives can be traced to the renewal of the Second Great Awakening, including educational endeavors, such as Sunday schools and seminaries, the temperance movement, the establishment of the American Bible Society, and social services for the underprivileged. The fruit of this awakening period also allowed evangelical churches to rise to a place of prominence in American spirituality and public life.

Holiness Movement

Beginning in the 1830s, Methodism was increasing in America, and it numbered more than one-million members by the 1840s. As a result, Methodists were key contributors to another period of American renewal known as the Holiness Movement. The movement derived its name because of Methodists' emphasis on Christian perfection, or holiness, based on their belief in sanctification as a "second blessing" subsequent to salvation as promoted by John Wesley.

Desiring holiness of heart and lifestyle, which would be manifested through one's love for God and neighbor, the Holiness Movement quickly spread throughout the United States. Popular preachers of this revival period included James Caughey, John S. Inskip, and Dwight L. Moody, as well as numerous prominent women preachers, such as Phoebe Palmer and Amanda Smith, a prominent African-American holiness evangelist. In addition, Charles Finney, who also preached sanctification but from a non-Wesleyan perspective, helped lead individuals from more Reformed traditions into the Holiness Movement.

In 1867 the first holiness camp meeting was conducted in New Jersey and was soon followed by similarly successful meetings in other states. A prominent holiness

association was formed, which helped propel the holiness message into an international movement.

This period of renewal embraced the philosophy that social and political reforms were equally vital to the nation's spiritual condition. As a result, those impacted by this movement promoted a social gospel that included confronting unfair labor conditions of children and women and seeking to prohibit alcohol. In addition to speaking out against societal ills, Christian organizations initiated alternative programs, such as increasing educational opportunities, sponsoring healing homes for recovering addicts and the physically ill, establishing orphanages and soup kitchens, and organizing youth centers, such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The Holiness Movement was characterized by an emphasis on Christian perfection that, they believed, would help usher in the return of Christ by transforming society into a people practicing righteousness, both individually and corporately.

Prayer Movement

In 1857 Jeremiah Lanphier, a layman, was appointed by New York City's North Reformed Protestant Dutch Church to begin an outreach ministry to the unchurched. One of his initiatives was leading a noonday prayer meeting each Wednesday for area residents, including everyone from merchants to businessmen. Beginning on September 23, 1857, attendance increased quickly and the prayer services soon relocated to the Fulton Street Church, where the meetings were held daily. The prayer services were comprised mainly by a diverse group of laity and included singing, impromptu prayers and testimonies, and scripture reading, all of which were conducted in a solemn and orderly manner.

Soon the Fulton Street Church was filled to capacity as some 700 individuals, including men and women of varying socioeconomic status, met to pray. As local newspapers began reporting the prayer services, churches among different denominations began conducting similar meetings. Soon the overflow crowds began to meet in other venues within NYC, including community meeting halls and theaters. Because of the popularity of the prayer meetings, area businesses soon closed for an extended period around the lunch hour. Laity began sharing their faith with others, large numbers of individuals accepted Christ, attendance increased at area churches, and an estimated total of 10,000 individuals attended the services each day. In addition, conversions numbered in the tens of thousands weekly, including students in local schools and even college campuses.

Individuals from other states attended the prayer services and returned home to begin similar prayer meetings in such locations as Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Vermont. The spiritual fervor even spread among slaves in Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas.

This Prayer Revival of 1857-58 was a spontaneous move of the Holy Spirit in which laity played a key role without any one personality dominating the prayer movement. It was a divine work of God that spread through the United States and across the sea as common men and women began to experience spiritual renewal as a result of spending time together in unity and prayer. Its impact on American spirituality was evident for almost fifty years.

Pentecostal Awakening

In the late 1800s, holiness churches began to experience various spiritual manifestations similar to those experienced at the Cane Ridge meeting of the Second Great Awakening. Often holiness adherents referred to their sanctification experience as the “baptism of the Holy Ghost”, according to the biblical term found in the New Testament.

However, because of their deep consecration to God and devotion to spiritual disciplines, holiness adherents saw a reappearance of spiritual gifts, including instantaneous physical healings and individuals’ ability to speak in languages unknown to them. Numerous occurrences are recorded of “sanctified” individuals speaking in these unknown languages, such as in 1891 when Daniel Awrey spoke in tongues in Delaware, Ohio, and his wife experienced tongues-speech in 1899 in Beniah, Tennessee.

Studying the New Testament, these individuals discovered similar spiritual gifts were commonplace among the early Christians. Other instances include a 1901 outpouring at Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, in which the teacher, Charles Fox Parham, and several students began speaking in tongues. Parham then suggested that speaking in other tongues was the Bible evidence of the “baptism of the Holy Ghost” in accordance with the experience of Jesus’ early apostles on the Day of Pentecost, as described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts.

Each of these occurrences was a precursor to the major outpouring in Los Angeles, California, in April 1906. There, William J. Seymour, an African-American holiness evangelist who learned of the Holy Spirit baptism from Parham, led a prayer group of individuals seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a home on Bonnie Brae Street. After individuals began to receive the experience, the services were relocated to a small mission on Azusa Street. News reporters soon began to publish reports of the revival’s happenings in newspapers throughout the world.

From 1906 to 1909, continuous services were held at the Azusa Street mission, where people of various races, social status, and denominational affiliations worshiped together with spiritual fervor and received the Holy Spirit baptism with speaking in tongues. These early Spirit-filled believers considered everyone to be witnesses, and many sailed to foreign lands as missionaries to share the gospel message. What happened at Azusa Street helped renew Christianity, bringing fresh vision and passion to the Great Commission.

Consumed with zeal for God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, individuals have taken the Word of God to diverse villages and races across the globe. As a result many have learned of the love and grace of Christ, ultimately preparing the world for His return.

Charismatic Awakening and the Jesus Movement

In the early years of the modern Pentecostal revival, individuals receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied by tongues-speech were often excommunicated from their denominational churches. Eventually new Pentecostal fellowships were formed, such as the Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleveland), Church of God in Christ, and Pentecostal Holiness Church.

However, beginning in early 1960 (and as early as the 1940s in other parts of the world) some members of the long-established American denominations began to experience the operation of the spiritual gifts as practiced by Pentecostals. Among the first in American was a group of Episcopalians, led by Pastor Dennis Bennett, in Van Nuys, California, who experienced tongues-speech. Other denominations reported similar experiences, including a large number of Roman Catholic students in 1967. By the 1970s virtually every denomination in America had some level of Charismatic or Pentecostal expression, although not all denominational leaders embraced the Charismatic Renewal.

However, new impetus was given to the Charismatic movement when large numbers of counter-culture hippies accepted Christ and various spiritual gifts typical to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. While most Pentecostals and other mainline denominations found the appearance of converted hippies unacceptable, the Charismatic Movement welcomed them into their churches, especially the Calvary Chapel churches. Hundreds of hippies began to accept Christ weekly, bringing with them their unique style of music and worship and becoming known as "Jesus People" or "Jesus Freaks."

Labeled as America's Fourth Great Awakening, the Jesus Movement invigorated the Charismatic Movement and eventually impacted both Pentecostal and many mainline denominations. Today Pentecostal and Charismatic adherents number more than a half billion throughout the world and comprise the fastest-growing segment within Christianity.

Awakening America

Coming soon!

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