

Church History 101

Lesson 27

American Revivals

Key Concepts: Christianity in the United States was shaped by multiple factors such as, the Reformation, a quest for religious freedom, and the inability of major denominations to train enough clergy for a growing nation. But one of the most significant factors was a series of protestant religious revivals often called “The Great Awakenings”.

The Story: In the early colonial period, Christianity was the claimed religion of most of the colonists and was nominally practiced (attending church, Bible reading in the home, etc.). This pattern was due to a lack of churches and clergy as well as a resistance to religion that had been imposed by the state churches in Europe. By 1680 church attendance began to rise but worship tended to be rigidly structured and preaching intellectually driven. Communally shared doctrine/practice was central and individual, experiential faith was not important.

The foundation for the Great Awakenings was the revival (1733-1735) that happened under Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards was a fiery preacher who focused on God’s condemnation of sinners, yet God’s willingness to save. In a period of six months, Edwards increased his church by more than 300 members. His critics accused him of leading people to fanaticism and suicide (several people despondent over their sinfulness killed themselves). Though the enthusiasm quickly waned, the revival caught the attention of George Whitefield in England.

Whitefield (1714-1770) traveled to America seven times and was, by all accounts, the first great itinerant evangelist in America and was the initiator of the First Great Awakening. He was one of the founders of Methodism and the evangelical movement. His desire was to whip up people’s emotions and bring them to a committed faith. He had great charisma and an amazing voice that some said could carry over five-hundred feet. In 1739 Whitefield began a preaching tour of the colonies. He focused on personal faith and moral responsibility, rather than ritual or doctrine. The crowds which came to listen often numbered between fifteen and thirty thousand people. This style of revivalism increased worship attendance among Presbyterians, Dutch and German Reformed Churches and Methodists. Thus it was called the First Great Awakening.

The Second Great Awakening (1790-1850) focused more on converting the unchurched than had the First Great Awakening which had whipped up the fervor of the church. Once again the focus was on preaching that lent itself to an emotional response. This was the movement that led to dramatic increases in churches and membership among the Baptists and Methodists (but not Presbyterians, which is why there are so many more Baptists and Methodists than Presbyterians) on the frontier. It was during this period that “camp-meetings” became part of the American religious landscape. New churches that emerged from this movement include the Churches of Christ, the Disciples of Christ and Seventh Day Adventists.

The two most significant outcomes from the Great Awakenings were 1) that Christianity for many, became an individualistic and experiential faith and 2) this individualism of faith was transferred into the political arena where people saw themselves as individuals deserving of individual rights, thus helping to lay the groundwork for the American Revolution.

Questions:

1. What role do you think emotion ought to play in religion?
2. Which do you see as more important for faith, doctrine or experience? Why?
3. What experiences were central to the creation of your faith?