

# The First Great Awakening

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – The pietistic movement from Europe resulting in the First Great Awakening in the colonies
2. aim – To cause us to understand the heritage of the First Great Awakening in the modern church

### b. outline

1. The Pietistic Movement
2. The Great Awakening in America
3. The Effects of the Great Awakening

### c. overview

1. the **Post-Reformation** Church – the history of the W church *in the stream of Protestantism*
  - a. we continue in the movement of Christianity within the “stream” of Protestantism leading us *out of Europe* into the Thirteen American colonies, and **out of the medieval period into modernity**
  - b. **IOW:** the “church” that straddles the Reformation of the 16-17<sup>th</sup> C. and what will arise in the *modern era* (i.e. starting about the mid-1800’s [mid-19<sup>th</sup> C.] and continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> C.)
  - c. **last week:** a discussion of the movement of Christianity into N America – i.e. a *geographical* movement of the Protestant Church out of England into the original thirteen colonies
  - d. **this week:** a discussion of a series of “awakenings” that occurred around the time of the establishment of the United States, one *before* and one *after* the Revolutionary War
    1. or ... more specifically, the events that *shook* the foundations of the religious life of the various countries of Britain and (especially) of its American colonies
    2. or ... more specifically, the advent of **evangelicalism**
2. the **Evangelical Church** – a movement within Protestant Christianity beginning in the mid-1730s in which an entirely different *religious focus* came into being, a focus on the *personal experience of the individual* as the “center” of the gospel proclamation (i.e. evangelical = from the “gospel”); a *gospel-centeredness* to every aspect of both *communal* and *personal* religious activity
  - a. **conversionism** = having a direct and personal experience of conversion, under the conviction of sin, guilt, repentance, faith, relief of guilt, etc. marking the *distinction* of a true Christian
    1. **IOW:** a *continuation* of the Pietist spirit that had come earlier into W Christianity with an emphasis on the *personal* nature of salvation (i.e. the “personal Savior” mentality; **see below**)
      - a. **note:** the Pietist movement began in Germany in the late 17<sup>th</sup> C as a reaction to rigid *dogmatism* present in much of Protestantism at the time, with an emphasis on personal devotion and religious experience (over against simple religious practice)
      - b. **e.g.** John Wesley’s “strangely warmed” experience at Aldersgate in 1738
  - b. **activism** = seeking the conversion of others; and, attending meetings for prayer, mutual edification, and worship; and participating in charity, good works, social and moral causes in society, etc.
  - c. **biblicism** = strongly promoting the private study and practical application of Scripture; to raise in emphasis biblical authority over ecclesiastical leadership, tradition, reason; i.e. *sola Scriptura*
  - d. **crucicentricism** = making all theology, preaching, and the devotional life return incessantly to the theme of the cross; the cross as *central* because it is the location of salvation; the focal point of conversion, the motivation for activism, and the hermeneutical key of the Bible
    1. or ... **Christocentrism:** putting the person and work of Christ (i.e. life and death) at the center of the Christian life; that all things are *centered* upon him as Lord of the individual
  - e. it is these **characteristics** that would come to the forefront, particularly in America ...

## I. The Pietistic movement

### Content

#### a. the early Pietistic movement

1. piety = the connection of theological belief to religious practice; the quality of *being* religious, including religious devotion or spirituality – pietism = the *movement* of this reality within the church
2. Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705) is generally accepted as the “father” of Pietism
  - a. born in Alsace, Germany in an aristocratic family with deep Lutheran convictions
  - b. studied theology, received a doctorate and became a pastor in Frankfurt

- c. Spener believed that his role as a pastor was *far more* than to simply preach and perform the sacraments – he saw himself fostering the *personal faith* of his parishioners
- d. so, he founding groups of Bible study and devotion, called “colleges of piety
- e. in 1675, he published *Pia desideria* = a handbook for the development of personal piety
  - 1. specifically, he embraced the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of believers – with less emphasis on the *differences* between the laity and the clergy, and more on the *common* responsibility of *all* Christians to devotion and study of Scripture
  - 2. he insisted that pastors and theologians should only be “true Christians” of deep *personal* faith
  - 3. and ... he called on preachers to set aside the “polemical” and academic tone of their sermons for the purpose of preaching which calls believers to obedience to the Word of God *in all of life*
  - 4. **LOW:** Spener saw this as a “new reformation” – the *completion* of what had begun in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. and had been overshadowed by doctrinal debates

## b. the Pietistic movement in England

- 1. John Wesley (1703-1791)
  - a. educated at Oxford, Wesley was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1728
    - 1. his father, Samuel, was also an Anglican priest, and his mother was the daughter of another
    - 2. Susanna had led John carefully in religious and moral instruction – when a fire broke out in the parsonage, the five-year-old John was miraculously saved, and his mother considered him “a brand plucked from the burning” with a holy set of plans from God over his life
  - b. at Oxford, he led the “Holy Club” = a society of Anglicans formed for the purpose of study and the pursuit of a devout Christian life (it had been formed by his brother Charles, with George Whitefield as a member; **see below**)
    - 1. note: Charles was a *younger* brother of John, and went on to become a prolific hymn writer – he disagreed in many ways with his brother, especially on Calvinism and the Anglican church  
*And Can It Be; Christ the Lord is Risen Today; Hark! The Herald Angels Sing; Love Divine, All Loves Excelling; O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*
  - c. in 1735-36, Wesley sailed to Savannah, Georgia, with the hope of preaching to the Indians
    - 1. during the voyage, the weather turned nasty and the ship nearly broke up
    - 2. the Moravians aboard with him sang throughout the ordeal, and this caused Wesley to begin to question his own faith – they did not fear death, but he felt more concerned about himself
    - 3. **i.e.** his upbringing was brought into question, and he began to doubt his own salvation
  - d. in Georgia, his pastorate failed miserably – he expected his congregants to behave like the “Holy Club”, but they expected him to simply be content with their worship attendance
    - 1. he was driven out of the church when a young woman he had courted married another, and he denied communion to her, and was sued for defamation
    - 2. so, he left the church and returned to England
  - e. back in England, his doubts increased about his salvation, but his mentor (Peter Boehler) advised him to continue preaching faith until he had it – on May 24, 1738, he had it:  
“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”
    - 1. he continued to preach and teach as an Anglican, but began to establish various *societies* that would meet in private homes for reading Scripture, prayer, and discussion of religious matters
    - 2. these would eventually become organized into the Methodist church (**note:** the influence upon John by his mother made women prominent figures in the early Methodist church)
- 2. George Whitefield (1714-1770)
  - a. he was also a member of the “Holy Club” at Oxford, and had also had a religious experience similar to Wesley’s a few years earlier
  - b. he, too, sailed to Georgia to preach, and divided his time between there and Bristol, England
    - 1. he found great success, and was considered a tremendous preacher – his preaching was *emotional*, and he often preached in the open air wherever he could gather an audience
  - c. Whitefield invited Wesley to join him in Bristol when he returned to England
    - 1. but ... Wesley and Whitefield were not compatible – Wesley objected to Whitefield’s open air preaching (**i.e.** not in the church) and the *responses* that were coming from it:
      - a. some people would weep and loudly bemoan their sins, other would collapse in anguish
      - b. then, they would express great joy, feeling cleansed from their sin as Whitefield continued
    - 2. they worked together for a while, but they eventually departed, with Wesley becoming the primary leader of the newfound Methodist movement
  - d. Whitefield continued to be a strong Calvinist, but Wesley moved away from it, preferring the Arminian understanding of predestination – Whitefield established the Calvinist Methodist Church, predominantly in Wales

## II. The Great Awakening in America

### Content

#### a. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

- born to Timothy and Esther Edwards, a minister in E Windsor, CT, the fifth of eleven children
- he entered Yale in 1716, and became deeply interested in natural history and the sciences
- from 1722-23 was a “supply” pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City, but he refused to take a permanent call there, and spent several years tutoring at Yale afterwards
- between 1720 and 1726, young Jonathan struggled (like Wesley) with his own conversion, until (in his last year of college) he finally overcame his loathing of the doctrine of election
  - he now found the doctrine to be “exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet”
  - he wrote in his *Resolutions* about a new eagerness to live earnestly and soberly, to waste no time, and to maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking
- Edwards was ordained 1727, and (over time) became the pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts
  - he “inherited” the position from his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who died in 1729, taking the sole ministerial charge of one of the *largest* and *wealthiest* churches in the colonies
- Edwards was *not* an exceptional preacher – he was not particularly emotive; he typically read his messages from a manuscript in a relatively monotone delivery
  - but, for six months in 1733-34, a great revival broke out in the town – people began responding to his sermons with emotional outbursts, resulting in remarkable changes of life, and an increased devotional life and practice – nearly 300 youths were added to the church, and the revival even threatened the business of the town
  - and so it spread – by 1735, the revival had reached New Jersey, and it had fostered a “dark” side: some were shaken by the revivals *but not converted* and became convinced of their damnation, even to the point of suicide (including his uncle, Joseph Hawley)
  - and so it waned – by 1737, the initial revival had faded
- but ... in 1739-40, George Whitefield was traveling through the Colonies on a revival tour, and Edwards became acquainted with him – they disagreed on some things, but essentially agreed on the need for preaching the gospel
  - Edwards helped organize Whitefield’s travels through Boston to Northampton – when Whitefield preached at Edward’s church, the pastor silently wept through the entire service
- so, in 1741, revival began to spring up again – it started from Edwards preaching his most *famous* sermon “*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*”
  - (again)** his style was not “fire and brimstone”, but a methodical point-by-point examination of being lost without the grace of God
  - (and again)** the revival was accompanied by a series of “bodily effects” where people swooned, had convulsions and made outcries of both grief and joy
  - however ... Edwards made it clear (in a number of ways) that his intention was not *explicitly* emotional, but doctrinal – that the high experience of conversion should not eclipse the need for right doctrine and rational worship
    - he often stopped preaching and asked the audience to get hold of themselves to hear rightly
    - Edwards was a *staunch* Calvinist, and he believed that sound doctrine *should* lead to greater devotion of life and more conscientious study of Scripture

## III. The Effects of the Great Awakening

### Content

#### a. the embrace of the Great Awakening

- interestingly, the Baptists (at first) opposed the Great Awakening and its emotional components
  - ironically, the Awakening led many to conclusions favorable to Baptists – **i.e.** if an *experience* of conversion was so important in the Christian life, this raised *serious* doubts about infant baptism
  - the result: many Congregationalist and Presbyterian congregations *rejected* infant baptism and became Baptists
  - and ... it was the Baptists and the Methodist who (then) took the gospel to the W frontier
    - thus, the two groups became the most numerous in the newly settled territories
- the Great Awakening was also the first movement that embraced *all* of the thirteen colonies
  - the sense of commonality developing would “coalesce” ideas of human rights and the nature of government that would lead to the Revolutionary War