

Church History (55): The Second Great Awakening

Within this lesson (and likely the next few weeks), it is my desire to consider what's been historically called the *Second Great Awakening*.

I. The Second Great Awakening

1. *Its early setting.* The *Second Great Awakening* began in the early 1790s and lasted through the 1840s. In his book, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, J.F. Thornbury, suggested three differences between the First and Second Awakenings. "For one thing, the Second was longer. Whereas the First ended abruptly almost like switching off an electric light, the second faded gradually like the coming of the night."¹ According to Ian Murray, "the duration of the Second was not less than a quarter of a century, and, in the opinion of most, several years longer" (Murray).² "Furthermore, the Second had no truly outstanding personalities involved in it. Whereas the First featured the intellectual giant Jonathan Edwards and the masterful orator George Whitefield, the Second came about through the coordinated labors of many men of smaller stature."³ This led Thornbury to suggest a final difference: "In some respects, many felt that because the Second Awakening was not dominated by a few strong figures, it was a purer and sounder movement. It was carried on by 'settled pastors' who lived in the communities where the revivals took place and stayed to attend to them."⁴

In the opinion of many who lived at the time, the revivals of the Second Awakening, though just as powerful as those under Edwards and Whitefield, were attended with fewer extremes, such as visions, trances, and violent bodily movements. They had fewer superficial converts and were more lasting in their results. The universal testimony of the preachers of the period is that the overwhelming majority of converts were true to their profession and provided a framework of strength and stability in the churches and communities.⁵

(1) The decline of Evangelical religion. The Awakening began in the early 1790s in the midst of darkness and decay. "From the standpoint of evangelical piety, the years between the two awakenings were years of decline and spiritual deadness" (Thornbury).⁶ This was in part the result of the Enlightenment (sometimes called the Age of Reason). "The Enlightenment was characterized by a Europe-wide philosophical questioning (at best) and skeptical rejection (at worst) of traditional Christian faith, as incompatible with reason – or at least requiring new rational and philosophical foundations, if some version of Christianity was to be worthy of Enlightened Man's belief" (Needham).⁷ "French support for the emancipation of Britain's Thirteen Colonies opened the way for a wider hearing of her philosophers of the so-called Enlightenment, who treated Christianity as a fable imposed on oppressed people" (Murray).⁸ Books such as *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine (1737-1809), had become immensely popular. "While a number of churches continued to grow slowly, Christians commonly spoke of 'dark times', of 'low conditions', and of a 'falling off.' It was universally believed that there had

¹ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 22

² Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 118

³ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 22

⁴ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 22

⁵ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 22

⁶ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 23

⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:17

⁸ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 113

been no general awakening since the 1740s. A further indication of the low spiritual condition lies in the extent to which controversies occupied the attention of churches" (Murray).⁹

(2) The growth of Evangelical religion. The latter part of the eighteenth-century also saw a steady growth of churches, especially among the Baptist in the South. "In 1760 churches of Baptist persuasion, which were very few in number and of slight influence in Virginia, saw the first in a succession of events which, within thirty years, was to make them one of the largest Christian groups in the state" (Murray).¹⁰ By "events" Murray meant the establishment of various churches throughout Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Kentucky. "The great success and rapid increase of the Baptists in Virginia must be ascribed primarily to the power of God working with them" (Murray).¹¹ And yet, there were also strong Presbyterian churches that sweetened the soil from which the *Second Awakening* would grow. While the end of the War of Independence had a negative impact upon some churches (especially the Church of England), following the War, many churches began to experience revival. "It was among Baptist Churches on the James River that the first signs of a coming change were seen in 1785. From that date, revival spread as fire among stubble, continuing for several years in different parts. It appears that this work began among Baptists" (Murray).¹² This revival would soon spread to Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. In his book, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*, Ian Murray provides numerous testimonies of the spread of revival throughout the South-eastern states. For example, he quotes from a pastor named Jesse Lee describing the year 1787: "There was a remarkable revival of religion in the town of Petersburg (NY), and many of the inhabitants were savingly converted; and the old Christians greatly revived. That town never witnessed before or since such wonderful displays of the presence and love of God in the salvation of immortal souls. Prayer meetings were frequently held both in the town and in the country, and souls were frequently converted at those meetings."¹³ Thus, while it's impossible to identify the exact time and place the *Second Great Awakening* began, its origin is related to churches located in Kentucky, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York (this doesn't deny, as we shall see, the revival eventually spread to states in the Northeast).

This transformation was also attended by a new unity among the evangelical denominations. Some divisions and heartaches there indeed were, but, on the whole, Christians of different persuasions on church matters recognized that they were receivers in common of the abundant grace of God. Unity had now a higher priority. Regular and Separate Baptists settled their differences and became one. New relationships were forged across denominational boundaries. Being a Christian was seen to be more important than being a Baptist or a Methodist or a Presbyterian. So buildings were frequently shared and a common witness engaged in where such co-operation had been scarcely known.¹⁴

2. *Its major players.* While the revival continued throughout southern states such as Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, within the nineteenth-century, it also moved north into New England. (1) Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844). Without doubt, Nettleton was the most central figure of the *Second Great Awakening*. While I've already asserted, the *Second Awakening* had no dominant figure as Whitefield in the *First*, Nettleton comes the closest. Ordained in 1812 as a Congregational minister, Nettleton

⁹ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 115-116

¹⁰ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 65

¹¹ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 68

¹² Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 78

¹³ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 79

¹⁴ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 87-88

began preaching in the "waste places" of Connecticut and Rhode Island. These were filled with churches void of ministers "many of which had long been overrun by fanatical groups of various descriptions" (Tyler).¹⁵ He labored throughout southern and northern states until 1832, when poor health forced him to slow down. He relocated to Connecticut in 1838, when the Theological Institute of Connecticut was founded. While refusing the office of president because of his poor health, he taught subjects such as "evangelism, revivals, and other topics with which he was conversant." At his death, Nettleton left several unpublished manuscripts among his possessions, some of which later were published, including *Miscellaneous Remarks on Various Subjects*. Among these are *Thoughts on Revivals*, wherein objections to religious revivals are answered.¹⁶ "Against revivals many objections are urged. It is said they are mere excitements which have in them nothing of the nature of true religion, and that they ought not to be ascribed to the Spirit of God. In support of these allegations is alleged: 1. Their suddenness, and the fact that such numbers profess to be converted in so short a time. *Answer*. The influences of the Spirit are compared in the Scriptures to the rain. Would you object to the rain, and say it cannot be rain, because it sometimes comes suddenly, and in so many drops?" "2. The great distress which exists in revivals is urged as an objection against them. *Answer*. It is not religion, which causes the distress, but a conviction of the want of it. Is it surprising that sinners should be distressed, when they are brought to realize that they are exposed to eternal destruction?"

"3. It is said that persons are only terrified by alarming preaching. *Answer*. Why were they not terrified before? They have often heard the same truths. They have heard, perhaps for years, the most alarming preaching, and remained unmoved. Why are they alarmed now, if they are under no influence from on high?" "4. It is said that it is all enthusiasm. *Answer*. If the distress of sinners is greater than the case demands, then call it enthusiasm. But if the sinner is in danger of losing his soul; not to be distressed, is blockish stupidity." "5. It is said, the sudden joy manifested in revivals, is irrational, and cannot be the effect of divine influence. *Answer*. What shall we find to answer these expressions in the Bible? 'The peace of God that passes all understanding;' 'Rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory;' 'All joy and peace in believing;' 'called out of darkness into marvelous light;' Would not a criminal, who should be pardoned on his way to the gallows, rejoice?" "6. It is said many who are zealous for a season, turn back, and become worse than before. *Answer*. True. And so it was in the time of Christ. 'Many went back and walked no more with Him.' Does this prove that Christ had no true disciples? It was so likewise in the days of the apostles. John says, 'They went out from us, but they were not of us.'" "7. The question is sometimes asked, if revivals are the work of God, why do they not exist among other denominations, and why am not I taken? *Answer*. This objection lies with equal force against the Christian religion. Not more than one-fifth part of the world is evangelized. Jews, Mohamedans, and Pagans might say, if yours is the true religion, why does not God convince us of its truth? But revivals do exist in other denominations. All evangelical denominations have been favored with them in a greater or less degree. Revivals are doubtless the work of God, or the work of the devil. If they are the work of the devil, I believe all will acknowledge that there is more praying, and more apparent religion in the devil's kingdom, than there is out of it. To all who oppose revivals, I would say, beware lest you be found fighting against God."

(2) Archibald Alexander (1772-1851). Archibald Alexander was born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, in April 1772. He was converted in 1789 while tutoring a family of four small children. "In the autumn of 1789 he made public profession of his faith. Books were rare in those days, but he read and was greatly helped by works of Flavel, Owen, Alleine, the Erskines, Doddridge, and Whitefield. In 1790 he began his preparations for the ministry, and in October, he presented himself before the

¹⁵ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 55

¹⁶ Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 475-479

Presbytery of Lexington, Virginia. He was licensed in October, 1791" (Grier).¹⁷ In 1794 he was given charge over a number of smaller congregations in Virginia. "In 1806 he received a unanimous call to the Third Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, which he accepted. Coming to the central city of the land at thirty-four years of age, his mind and character were already moulded and matured" (Grier).¹⁸ In 1811, Princeton Seminary (NJ), the first Presbyterian Seminary in America was founded, and in 1812 Alexander was called as its first professor (Samuel Miller would join him in 1813). Having labored through the revival and taught theology for decades, the cream of his knowledge was published in 1844 as, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*. This volume described various aspects of Christian experience, both in its beginning (regeneration) and continuation (spiritual warfare). What Jonathan Edwards was to the First Awakening, Archibald Alexander was to the Second (as both wrote on experience through their respective awakenings).

(3) Edward Payson (1783-1827). Payson was born in New Hampshire. "After he graduated from Harvard, he entered the teaching profession at Portland, Maine, but soon answered a call to the ministry and, for the twenty years from 1807-1827, served the Second Church of Portland" (Murray).¹⁹ Revival came to Portland in 1816. He wrote his mother on April 1. "Our revival increases slowly. I have conversed with about forty who entertain hopes, and with about sixty more who are inquiring. Twenty-three have joined the church since the year commenced. The work is evidently not over; but whether it will prove general, is still doubtful."²⁰ "After 1816 there were further revivals in 1822 and in 1827, the year of his death. Over the period of his ministry the average increase in membership was more than thirty-five a year; in 1827 the figure was seventy-nine" (Murray).²¹ He told his mother in a letter on February 26, 1822: "The revival has been advancing, and there now seems to be every reason to hope, that God has begun a great work among us."²² He wrote on March 17: "The revival goes on. Fifteen, we hope, are converted; and four times that number under deep impressions. But in the midst of it I am laid aside. My lungs have been failing for several weeks, and I can preach no longer."²³ But Payton not only knew revival, but prolonged sickness and severe temptations. He wrote on December 5, 1823: "I have been sick, and laid by from preaching on Thanksgiving Day and two Sabbaths, but am now able to resume my labors. But O the temptations which have harassed me for the last three months! I have met with nothing like them in books. It seems to me, that my state has been far worse than that of Mansoul when Diabolus and his legions broke into the town. They could not get into the castle, the heart; but my castle was full of them. But do not be troubled for me; I am now better. Let me, then, try to comfort my mother."²⁴

3. *Its new measures*. Beginning in the 1820s, various practices associated with the Awakening, became a concern. These practices became known as *new measures* in contrast to the older and time-tested ways. Eventually, Charles Finney (1792-1875) rose as the leader of the *new measures*. After being born on August 29, in Connecticut, Finney and his family moved to New York. "Neither of my parents were professing Christians, and among our neighbors there were very few religious people" (Finney).²⁵ After pursuing a career as a lawyer, Finney had a religious experience in 1821. "Almost immediately after this experience, Finney felt a desire to preach. He was marvelously equipped to be a

¹⁷ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, viii

¹⁸ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, x

¹⁹ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 194

²⁰ Edward Payson, *The Complete Works of Edward Payson*, 1:366

²¹ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 205

²² Edward Payson, *The Complete Works of Edward Payson*, 1:376

²³ Edward Payson, *The Complete Works of Edward Payson*, 1:377

²⁴ Edward Payson, *The Complete Works of Edward Payson*, 1:379

²⁵ Charles Finney, *Autobiography*, 6

public speaker. Tall and handsome, he had hawk-like eyes which could nearly hypnotize those upon whom his gaze fell while speaking. He had a mellow, wise-ranging voice and showed poise and self-assurance. Almost from the beginning of his public ministry, all who heard him were captivated by his stage presence" (Thornbury).²⁶ Finney was trained under his pastor for two years and was eventually ordained in 1824. "A part of his ordination vows included an affirmation of his belief in the Westminster Confession of Faith, but, amazingly, he later acknowledged that at the time of his induction into the ministry he had not even read it" (Thornbury).²⁷ By 1826, Finney's ministry grew, as he preached to packed churches and large crowds all over New England. But concern grew about his theology and practice.

(1) His theology. Although a Presbyterian minister to the end of his life, Finney took serious issue with the Westminster Confession. "He rejected man's depravity through the fall, the imputation of Adam's sin, the satisfaction theory of the atonement, and the inward and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. As soon as he was exposed to these ideas, he rejected them as being contrary to reason" (Thornbury).²⁸ "Regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference; or in changing from selfishness to love or benevolence; or, in other words, in turning from the supreme choice of self-gratification, to the supreme love of God and the equal love of his neighbor. Of course, the subject of regeneration must be an agent in the work" (Finney).²⁹ Finney despised imputation in any form. "The doctrine of a literal imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, of the literal imputation of all the sins of the elect to Christ, and of his suffering for them the exact amount due to the transgressors, of the literal imputation of Christ's righteousness or obedience to the elect, and the consequent perpetual justification of all that are converted from the first exercise of faith, whatever their subsequent life may be—I say I regard these dogmas as fabulous, and better befitting a romance than a system of theology."³⁰ Finney also believed in a second-work of the Spirit (he referred to as the baptism of the Spirit), subsequent to conversion, which equipped ministers (and Christians) to minister effectively. Without receiving this second-work of the Spirit, a man's ministry would lack power. Finney said of his pastor: "If he had ever been converted to Christ, he had failed to receive that divine anointing of the Holy Spirit that would make him a power in the pulpit and in society for the conversion of souls. He had fallen short of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is indispensable to ministerial success."³¹

After my conversion, I began my studies under the care of my pastor, but these were little else than controversy. I could not receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will, or any of the kindred doctrines. But of these views he was quite tenacious, and he seemed sometimes not a little impatient because I did not receive them without question. He used to tell me that if I insisted on reasoning on these subjects, I would probably land in infidelity. He furthermore warned me repeatedly, and very feelingly, that as a minister I would never be useful unless I embraced the truth, meaning the truth as he believed and taught it.³²

(2) His view of preaching. In 1835, Finney preached a series of sermons on revival, that were later printed as, *Finney's Lectures on Revivals* (1868). In sermon fourteen, *Measures to Promote Revivals*, Finney expressly denied God in any way regulates NT worship. His basic premise is, any and all means

²⁶ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 158

²⁷ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 160

²⁸ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 160

²⁹ Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 224

³⁰ Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 333

³¹ Charles Finney, *Autobiography*, 51

³² Charles Finney, *Autobiography*, 47

that work should be employed. He said: "In the NT it was left to the discretion of the church to determine, from time to time, what measures shall be adopted, and what forms pursued, in giving the gospel its power."³³ This made room for what Finney called, "the new measures." The most controversial of these, Finney called "the anxious seat." "By this I mean the appointment of some particular seat in the place of meeting, where the anxious may come and be addressed particularly, and be made subjects of prayer, and sometimes be conversed with individually."³⁴ For Finney, this allowed the sinner to make a public decision. "If you say to the sinner, 'There is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side,' and if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything, and there he is, brought out before his own conscience. It uncovers the delusion of the human heart, and prevents a great many spurious conversions, by showing those who might otherwise imagine themselves willing to do anything for Christ, that in fact they are willing to do nothing."³⁵ Thus, for Finney, ministerial success was all about creating the proper atmosphere. It was emotionalism. "It is evident that we must have more exciting preaching, to meet the character and wants of the age. Ministers are generally beginning to find this out. And some of them complain of it, and suppose it to be owing to new measures, as they call them. But this is not the difficulty. The character of the age is changed, and these men have not conformed to it, but retain the same stiff, dry, prosing style of preaching that answered half a century ago."³⁶

Finney himself was deeply conscious of the radical contrast between his own preaching and the orthodoxy of his day. By 1835 he was ready to tell his hearers that he was presenting what was virtually a new theology of conversion. 'The truth is, that very little of the Gospel has come out upon the world, for these hundreds of years, without being clogged and obscured by false theology.' If conversion was the result of the sinner's decision, and if the inducing of that decision was the responsibility of a preacher, then any measure that would bring the unconverted 'right up to the point of instant and absolute submission' had to be good.³⁷

(3) His view of local churches. Finney viewed every minister who rejected his new measures as apostate. He believed anyone who opposed him was of the devil and must be resisted. "Finney defended the new measures as if the very essence of revival. If the measures were inseparable from the work of the Spirit, then to oppose them, or their defenders, was to oppose revivals, indeed, to oppose God" (Murray).³⁸ Such behavior split churches and created great division. "Finney was himself often responsible for the division of congregations, not only because of his general criticism of ministers, but because of the very nature of his teaching on revival. If, as he taught, all faithful men were able to secure revivals, only one conclusion could be drawn on preachers who failed to do so" (Murray).³⁹ Finney often openly anathematized local pastors who opposed him, urging Christians to leave such churches. "As Finney went from place to place, building all the while a large following, he considered it essential, in moving into a community or church, to crush whatever strongholds there might be of people who held to the old views. Many pastors and laymen, found him too formidable an adversary and yielded to his verbal hammer strokes. Finney soon came to regard himself as a crusader against the status quo, a prosecuting attorney bent on convicting and sentencing systems opposed to his own" (Thornbury).⁴⁰

³³ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 185

³⁴ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 197

³⁵ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 197-198

³⁶ Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 201

³⁷ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 246

³⁸ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 240-241

³⁹ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 264

⁴⁰ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 161-162