

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (15)

The Awakened Church (1648-1789) – Europe Awakened

A. Introduction

1. After the high point of the Reformation, the light of the gospel went out.

There were a number of different factors that caused this.

Wars considered to be religious in nature had given people a negative perception of the Christian faith.

The freedom given to different kinds of churches to worship God according to their understanding of Scripture was expanded to give people the right to not worship God at all.

Faith in the state church became mere confessionism and no longer a vibrant trust in the Lord Jesus.

Advances in science and the discovery of natural laws led to people viewing the universe as a machine that did not need the ongoing involvement of God.

The enlightenment changed the place of human reason to above Scripture and the traditions of the church, so that now people looked to themselves to decide how to live and make sense of the world.

These would lead to a revision of Christianity and a rejection of it.

2. A response from the church was necessary.

The church needed to be awakened.

The Awakened Church tells the story of how this happened in parts of the UK and the USA.

It was the period of church history between the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the start of the French Revolution in 1789.

How did the church respond in Europe?

B. Pietism

1. Being a Christian became more about membership in the state church through ascent to various doctrinal truths than personal faith in Jesus.

The zeal for godliness which marked the Puritans seemed to be a thing of the past.

Pietism was the first response of the church to this nominalism.

This, like the Reformation started in Germany, challenging Lutheranism and its influence would spread to England.

2. Pietism began with a booklet by Jacob Spener entitled, Pious Desires.

Spener (1635-1705) was a German pastor, who had been meeting with a small company of believers in his home, twice a week, to read and study the Bible together.

These meetings became known as the 'gatherings of the pious'.

Through these gatherings, Spener wanted to encourage believers to grow in their knowledge and devotion to Jesus, and hoped that gatherings like the one run in his home, would be established within other churches and be a means of renewing them.

Spener wanted six changes to take place within the church which he outlined in his booklet:

- (i) Believers to become more thoroughly acquainted with Scripture by means of private reading and study groups.
- (ii) Believers taking a more active involvement in the life of the church.
- (iii) Believers put into practice their faith.
- (iv) Believers discussing the faith with humility and love, and whenever possible avoiding controversy.
- (v) Attention given to the devotional life as well as the education of pastors.
- (vi) Preaching that was focus on growing faith in ordinary believers (practically, this meant a simpler form).

3. After Spener died, the Pietist movement was continued by a professor named August Francke (1663-1727).

He was taught by Spener, and later founded the University of Halle.

The University of Halle would become a hub for Pietist teaching and activities, which included a wide variety of social ministries.

4. One final key figure in the Pietist movement was a wealthy noble by the name of Count Nicolas Van Zinzendorf (1700-1760).

During the Reformation, there was a group of Christians known as the Brethren which had flourished in Bohemia and Moravia.

However, the Thirty Year War, had almost wiped them out, and what remained of this movement needed a place to live and meet. They found this on Zinzendorf's estate, and in turn would become the Moravian Brethren.

Zinzendorf influence on the Moravian Brethren would infuse them with both a passion for prayer, holding round the clock prayer meetings, and a passion for mission, becoming the first significant Protestant missionary movement.

Some of the first Moravian missionaries that were sent out, headed for Georgia, and on board the ship heading to the Colony, they would meet a man called John Wesley.

5. Summary.

Pietism stressed the importance of preaching the gospel and the conversion not only of the lost outside the church, but also the baptised "Christian" who was born and brought up in the church too.

Pietism was not a denomination or a church, but rather an intimate fellowship within the church (an inner core of the holy).

Pietism encouraged spiritual growth through disciplines like Bible study, prayer, Scripture memory, witnessing, and sharing.

The Pietist movement would in time spread throughout Europe.

C. Methodism

1. The influence of Pietism would spread to England, largely thanks to the man those Moravian missionaries met on their way to Georgia.

John Wesley was a son of an Anglican minister and a godly mother.

He grew up a good confessing Anglican and remained one while studying at Oxford University.

He was ordained as a minister in the Church of England in 1728.

Returning to the university after completion of his curacy, Wesley was concerned by the spread of Deism, so he and his brother Charles, in November 1729, started "The Holy Club" (a term of insult) as a way of taking their religion seriously.

They met for Bible Study and prayer, 3 or 4 evenings a week, and were involved in charitable work such as taking food to poor families, visiting prisoners, and teaching orphans to read.

Included in this group was a notable younger member by the name of George Whitefield.

Critics of "The Holy Club" would recite a ditty that went: *"By rule they eat, by rule they drink, by rule do all things but think. Accuse the priests of loose behaviour, to get more in the laymen's favour. Method alone must guide 'em all, when themselves "Methodists" they call."*

2. An opportunity arose late 1735 for Wesley to go to Savannah, Georgia to evangelise the Native Americans.

When the ship sailing to Georgia got caught in a storm, Wesley was amazed, that while other passengers screamed in terror, the Moravian missionaries present sang Psalms. He was challenged by their faith.

Wesley's time in Georgia was mixed. In terms of evangelising the indigenous Americans it was a failure. But as a minister to European settlers (due to a shortage of clergy), church attendance did increase over the nearly 2 years he served as Savannah's parish priest.

He returned home disappointed, commenting, *"I came to convert the heathen, who will convert me?"*

He was not yet a born again believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remembering those Moravians' he met on the way to Georgia, he sought out the Moravian Peter Bohler who was in London, and was invited along to a meeting at Aldersgate.

In his journal entry for 24 May 1738, Wesley wrote: *"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to 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."*

Wesley couldn't see himself as being a Moravian, but did learn from their system of small groups for spiritual growth.

3. While Wesley was away in America, George Whitefield had begun preaching outdoors in the open air.

This was a practice looked down upon by ministers in the Church of England at the time.

But it needed to be done.

The population was growing in parts of England where churches had yet to be built.

It was to these places, that Whitefield went, with a thriving ministry to coal miners outside Bristol.

Whitefield was an extraordinary preacher. Thousands came to hear him preach and thousands were converted through his preaching.

He invited Wesley to join him in open air preaching.

Wesley was hesitant at first.

"I could scarce reconcile myself to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he [Whitefield] set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life till very lately so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."

"It is no marvel that the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I; I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my soul if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?"

But when Whitefield headed off to Georgia, Wesley would take over his ministry in Bristol from him.

"I look upon all the world as my parish, I judge it my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."

Wesley would preach wherever people gathered both inside and outside church's, travelling the length and breadth of Britain.

It is estimated he travelled 4,500 miles a year on horseback, preaching 40,000 sermons over his lifetime.

He, like Whitefield, saw a great work of Spirit, as people were converted, including many from the working classes.

A revival, an awakening was taking place.

4. One of Wesley's greatest gifts was that of organisation.

He may not have been a better preacher than Whitefield, but he definitely was a better organiser.

He established "Methodist Societies" all over England, Wales, and Ireland, dividing them into smaller "classes" of 12 or so members that met for study, prayer and discipleship.

His brother Charles wrote hymns that would be sung at Methodist meetings.

Most Methodists remained part of the Church of England, and Wesley actively encouraged them to attend their parish church for worship every Sunday. [It wasn't until after Wesley's death that the Methodists would split from the Church of England].

Like the Pietists, the Methodists were an intimate fellowship within the state church.

Wesley remained in the Church of England right up to his death in 1791 at the age of 81 years.

5. The Good and the Bad of Wesley's Methodism.

The good was that people came to faith in the Lord Jesus. Large numbers of people were saved including those from the working classes. Many believe that it was the Methodist revival which prevented Britain from having a violent revolution like what was seen in France in 1789.

The bad was that Wesley's theology was suspect in a couple of areas. He was more Arminian in his understanding of salvation, and this led to him being unable to cooperate with Whitefield when he return from America, because he was too Calvinistic. He also believed it was possible for Christians by faith to become to some degree, perfect in this life.

*Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast;
Let us all in thee inherit,
Let us find that second Rest.
Take away our power of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.*

*Finish then Thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. Nominalism is still rife in the state church (as well as all the other mainline denominations).

While a faithful remnant of local churches remain, history has shown that their presence within is unlikely to bring about renewal.

2. The emphasis of Pietism and Methodism on private Bible reading and prayer and small group Bible studies as means to promote spiritual growth in believers was a welcomed development.

This should continue to be encouraged today - it is certainly something as a local church we encourage.

3. The need to go to place where there is no and or an insufficient gospel presence remains.

Only 2-3% of the UK are evangelical Christians.

Churches need to be reclaimed for the gospel, revitalised and planted.