

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (16)

The Awakened Church (1648-1789) – America Awakened

A. Introduction

1. After the Reformation was over, the light of the gospel in the churches went out.

In Europe, numerous wars, new freedoms to worship, a dead state church, advances in science, and the enlightenment were factors that led to people revising or rejecting Christianity.

The church needed to be awakened.

The Awakened Church, the period of church history between the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the start of the French Revolution in 1789, tells the story of how this happened.

It was Pietism and then Methodism that God used to bring life back into the church in Europe.

What about on the other side of the Atlantic?

2. In 1620 one hundred English Puritans, accompanied by a military escort, travelled to America and founded the Plymouth Colony.

This was the second successful English settlement, following Jamestown in 1607.

Further colonies would form as other settlers arrived in America or were sent out to new places from existing colonies.

3. Those early years in the colonies were marked by religious devotion.

All the members of each individual colony held the same beliefs – there was no place for religious toleration.

In fact, to be a citizen and able to vote, you needed to be part of the church, which meant confirming that Christ had saved you.

Strict laws were enforced, and harsh punishments were handed out to those who went against the beliefs of the colony. [In some instances, new colonies were formed because members left wanting greater freedom].

4. It wouldn't be long before the colonies started to encounter problems.

The next generation were not as enthusiastic about the Christian faith as the first settlers were, with many never professing faith in Jesus.

Religious devotion was replaced by the desire for material prosperity.

This raised questions over whether Christian laws could still govern society, but also what was required for someone to be a member of the church.

Differing opinions emerged.

Richard Mather said, *"Better we should exclude ten real Christians from the church than admit one non-Christian"*

John Cotton's view was *"Better to let ten non-Christians into the church than to keep one true Christian out."*

5. The response of the church leaders was the "halfway covenant" in 1662.

Under this policy someone who had not professed faith could be a member of the church, have their children baptised and join in the activities of the congregation.

However, they were not permitted to take part in the Lord's Supper.

Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus was now no longer a requirement for church membership.

The light of the gospel was beginning to go out of the church.

6. A further extinguishing of the light came in 1684.

The King issued a new charter changing the way that the colony operated.

They now had a governor, and to vote you no longer needed to be a church member but a property owner.

This reduced the power the church had over the way the colony ran.

7. The Salem Witch Trials in 1692 dealt the final blow bringing an end to the original dream of the Puritan settlers.

Mass hysteria broke out in Massachusetts after a group of young girls claimed to be possessed by the devil, and several local women in Salem Village were accused of witchcraft.

Over the course of the trials lasting a year, 150 people were arrested for witchcraft and 20 were executed.

Concerns were raised about the quality of evidence used in the trials (including by Puritan ministers), and by the end of them, many people began to realise that the role of a minister was not to govern the colony but to lead the church.

The desire for a separation between the church and state increased.

8. By the turn of the 18th century, the Puritan faith that first marked the colonies was no more.

An awakening was needed.

Whereas in Europe it was two movements that God used to awaken the church, in America it was two individuals.

B. Jonathan Edwards

1. Many suggest that Jonathan Edwards is the smartest American to ever have lived.

He was born in 1703 in Connecticut.

His father was Puritan minister.

He attended Yale, because Harvard (which was set up in 1638 to be Calvinist college to train Calvinist ministers) had gone liberal.

Converted as a young man, he was prevented from joining the church because his father was not convinced by his testimony.

2. In 1725 Edwards began to accompany his grandfather in ministry, taking over as minister of his congregation in Northampton a few years later.

For the first five years of his ministry he saw little visible fruit.

In 1733/34 Edwards saw a surprising responsiveness to his preaching, starting with the young people and spreading to the adults, with a large number of conversions.

Edwards described this as being a 'stirring of the Spirit' or 'the beginning of an awakening' and wrote about it in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.

According to Edwards:

"The work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town, so that in the spring and summer, anno 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God. It was never so full of love, nor so full of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house."

"Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God's service, every one intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were from time to time in tears while the Word was preached, some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbours."

3. Edwards would later see fruit from his preaching in other congregations.

One of those was in Enfield in 1741, when he delivered his most famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up."

But Edwards would, from 1744 begin to become unpopular within his own congregation in Northampton because of his dislike for the policy of the halfway covenant, eventually being dismissed by them in 1750.

His last years were spent as a minister of a church in a frontier town called Stockbridge. He died at the age of 54 after being inoculated against smallpox.

C. George Whitefield

1. George Whitefield in 1739 was preaching in England to an estimated 20,000 people per day.

Crowds flocked to hear him.

On June 1, he preached at Mayfair to nearly 80,000 people.

At the height of his popularity in England, he came to New England to preach in 1740 and was determined to do so in the large cities of the colonies.

2. Whitefield's evangelistic campaign in 1740/41 is considered to be the greatest one ever undertaken.

He preached 175 times in 75 days and travelled nearly 6,000 miles.

Thousands of people gather to hear him in places such as Philadelphia and New York City.

It was during this time Jonathan Edwards invited Whitefield to preach in Northampton, which he did four times in October 1740.

"Preached this morning, and good Mr Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise. The people were equally affected."

Whitefield saw a great response to his preaching, with some even crying, screaming and fainting.

Yet his great concern was not the emotional response but that souls were being converted.

The key emphasis of his message was the doctrine of the new birth, proclaiming to people "You must be born again."

"Why, Mr Whitefield," inquired a friend one day, "why do you so often preach on 'Ye must be born again?'" "Because," replied Mr Whitefield, looking solemnly into the face of his questioner, "Ye must be born again!"

In total Whitefield would make seven trips to America, experiencing success on each occasion, even though by 1745 much of the enthusiasm of The Great Awakening had diminished.

His last tour ended with his death, on Sunday morning, September 30, 1770.

He was buried under the next pulpit that he was due to preach as was his request.

"No preacher in England has ever succeeded in arresting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland, and America. No preacher has ever retained his hold on his hearers so entirely as he did for thirty-four years. His popularity never waned." (JC Ryle)

"Jonathan Edwards had already put a match to the fuse, and Whitefield blew it into flame." (Perry Miller)

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. The importance of personal conversion.

For ministry – our message in evangelism is 'You must be born again!'

For church membership – only born-again believers should be allowed into membership.

2. The need for parents to teach their children God's Word.

Christian parents don't automatically produce Christian children.

They need to sow the Word into their children.

Recent research has found that children who remain faithful as young adults are those who as they were growing up regularly read the Bible, prayed, served in the local church, and sang Christian songs.

3. Our hope does not lie in the next great preacher!

Praise God for men like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Beware of thinking we need another one of them.

The means God ordinarily uses to bring people to and build them up in their faith is as followers of Jesus speaking God's Word about Him wherever they go.