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Kerry Irish

George Fox University, kirish@georgefox.edu

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The Second Great Awakening and the Making of Modern America

Origins of the Second Great Awakening

In 1818, Connecticut did away with state funding of the Congregational Church. The famous Christian revival preacher Lyman Beecher was disconsolate. He believed Christianity in America had been dealt a most destructive blow. He later wrote,

“It was as dark a day as ever I saw...The injury done to the cause of Christ, as we then supposed, was irreparable. For several days I suffered what no tongue can tell *for the best thing that ever happened to the state of Connecticut* (italics in the original). It cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources and on God.”¹

In 1833, Massachusetts, other states having shown fears of the death of Christianity due to loss of state funding were wildly exaggerated, was the last state to disestablish such support. Indeed, the demise of state support of religion liberated Christian churches, and unleashed powerful currents of Christian faith and works in America.² The revival that took place from the last decade of the 18th century through the Civil War is termed the Second Great Awakening; the first, of course, occurred in the mid-Eighteenth Century amidst the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, John Wesley and host of God’s lesser lights. Even though state funding of churches withered away amidst the Second Great Awakening, American Christianity blossomed, yielding incredible fruit in both the spiritual and temporal realms.

¹*Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.* ed. Charles Beecher (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1865), Vol., I, 344.

²Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 171.

The Second Great Awakening featured a belief that each new believer experienced an identifiable conversion moment based on a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.³ The evangelists of this era moved away from the doctrine of predestination that was a central tenet of Old School Calvinists to a theology based on human free will. These new preachers generally still asserted the sinfulness of man, but believed that each person could choose to be saved or damned. This was called New School Calvinism. Obviously, if people may choose to accept or reject salvation, there is a role for Christians in bringing human beings to that decision.⁴

The Second Great Awakening began just before the turn of the century in the churches of New England, especially among Baptists and Methodists. Its heart was Yale University where Timothy Dwight was president from 1795 – 1817.⁵ Dwight was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards; one wonders what words of wisdom he heard as a boy from the great old preacher. At Yale, Dwight gave lectures on theology, faith, and church history. Just after the turn of the century he noticed his work was bearing obvious fruit. Students were impassioned and a revival took hold. Dwight was the founder of New Haven Theology, but his student, Nathaniel William Taylor, as is so often the case, “carried his work to completion.”⁶

Nathaniel William Taylor and New Haven Theology

³Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 171.

⁴Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 171.

⁵Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 416-418.

⁶Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 418.

Taylor taught at Yale Divinity school from 1822 to 1858 (his death). He always maintained that he had not departed from the Westminster Confession of 1648, and that his theology was centered on the Reformed tradition. But he embraced the movement of the Holy Spirit in the awakening of the churches, and interpreted the theology of the past in light of the present work of God. As the great historian of the American church Sidney Ahlstrom has argued, he “propounded a plausibly rationalistic ‘revival theology’ for mid-nineteenth century America.”⁷ Taylor’s theology, like so many before, was based on a confession of faith in Jesus Christ that came from a person exercising free will. Mankind, he argued, is not predestined to sin, but may choose faith and to walk away from sin. Original sin was not inherited; original sin meant universal sin, not that mankind had no choice. This theology placed the responsibility for faith on human beings; the choice was theirs. It also fit wonderfully well in the Jacksonian era – the America of the age of Andrew Jackson. This new America, this land of opportunity where a man could make what he would of himself, where a man had choices, where little was predetermined, welcomed a new expression of the old-time gospel religion.⁸ The theology of Jonathan Edwards, of the Old-School Calvinists, was no less based on Faith in Christ, but was more mysterious as to how faith came to the believer. It was seemingly an act of God and less of man’s choice.⁹ Thus Taylor spoke to the people of a burgeoning and bumptious America of the 19th century.

The Second Great Awakening in America

⁷Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 420.

⁸Mark Knoll, *America’s God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University press, 2002), 313, 314. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 420.

⁹Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1937), 137

As significant as the Great Awakening was for the years just prior to the American Revolution, there can be little doubt that the war years and those of the early republic saw a decline of Christian faith and fervor.¹⁰ One cannot reach a mountaintop unless the surrounding valley is crossed. So the fields of evangelism were golden with potential harvest by the turn of the century. Indeed, in these early years of the revival over one hundred and fifty churches experienced “times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.” The new century saw the birth of the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* in which readers could trace the exciting work of the Holy Spirit in New England’s churches.¹¹

Great Leaders of the Second Great Awakening.

Lyman Beecher was one of the most important leaders of the Second Great Awakening. He drank deeply from the spring of free will that Taylor struck open. The son of a blacksmith, Beecher graduated from Yale in 1797 and began his ministerial career at a small church in Connecticut. His sermons passionately proclaimed the saving grace of the risen Son of God, Jesus Christ; and the availability of His salvation to all people regardless of race, gender, or class.¹² “Choose to follow Jesus Christ,” he thundered. Beecher took his message to Boston and later west to Cincinnati. He was tireless in his preaching and expanded his purpose from the saving of souls to the transformation of American culture. He wrote, “The great aim of the Christian church...is not only to

¹⁰Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, volume II: Reformation to the Present* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 1006, 1007.

¹¹Bennet Tyler, *New England Revivals* (Wheaton Illinois: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980), p. v.

¹²Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 166.

renew the individual man, but also to reform human society.”¹³ In this effort, Beecher led in creating several reform organizations; his favorite was temperance – the dramatic reduction in the consumption of alcohol amongst the American people. The American Temperance Society (1826) led the battle against drinking hard liquor. The imbibing of such spirits in America was, by historical standards, prodigious, and came with all of the attending tragedies for the drinkers and their families, not to mention the rest of society. Just as the Second Great Awakening met with remarkable success, so too did the campaign against alcohol. The consumption of liquor dropped precipitously in these years.¹⁴ Voluntary associations intending to reform America, following in the footsteps of the American Temperance Society, became a defining aspect of American culture from this time forward. There was such an association for almost every cause: prisons, education, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery among many others.¹⁵

Lyman Beecher never tired of fighting for the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth. At the age of seventy-five, the old man trumpeted to the Brooklyn congregation of his son Henry, “If God should tell me that I might choose ... whether to die and go to heaven, or to begin my life over again and work once more, I would enlist again in a minute.”¹⁶

Charles Grandison Finney was perhaps the greatest of the nineteenth century American evangelists. In 1821, at the age of twenty-nine, the young lawyer had a Pauline Damascus road experience that changed his life, and eventually the lives of uncountable

¹³ *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.* vol., I, 344, 345.

¹⁴W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic* (New York: Oxford University press, 1979), 8, 14-16, 233.

¹⁵Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 168

¹⁶*The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1961), vol. II, 414.

Americans. Shortly after, he told a prospective client, “I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and I cannot plead yours.”¹⁷ Thus Finney set out to proclaim the gospel. The local St. Lawrence Presbytery licensed him to preach though he had no formal theological training. Indeed, like Abraham Lincoln, and a host of other Americans of that time, he was successfully self-educated.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, Finney emphasized an identifiable conversion moment, the “born again” experience of John 3:3. This focus linked Finney with a host of American preachers, theologians, and influential laymen stretching back through Jonathan Edwards to the Puritans of early New England.¹⁹

But Finney differed with Edwards and even Lyman Beecher over how revival took place. Edwards emphasized the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit; while Finney, in an increasingly scientific and mechanistic world, claimed that revivals could be organized, planned, and created using basic logical principles.²⁰ Men could will revival. It is not too much to say that Finney began the practice of modern revivalism that Billy Graham would later adapt to the twentieth century.²¹ Of course he was criticized for this innovation, but widely copied. Still more controversial was his use of women in his

¹⁷Charles G. Finney, *The Autobiography of Charles G. Finney* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1977), 13-26.

¹⁸Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 171. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 460.

¹⁹Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 171.

²⁰Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McGloughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 13-14.

²¹William G. McGloughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles G. Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: 1959), 10, 11, 455-522.

revivals. The women of the Utica, New York area, heart of the “burned-over district,” helped organize Finney’s meetings, and even spoke and prayed in public.²²

Like Beecher, Finney concerned himself with the moral atmosphere – or lack thereof – in America. He too campaigned against the evils of drink and tobacco, and then added the cause of ending slavery at a time when most Americans were quite comfortable with the peculiar institution.²³

Finney eventually went west to Oberlin College, a center of western anti-slavery agitation, where he took up the podium of a professorship in theology. There he taught the remainder of his life while interspersing trips for well-planned revivals. Oberlin equipped both men and women – it was the first coeducational college in the world – to preach the gospel, and fulminate against the evils of slavery. And, of course, its own example helped prepare America for the radical idea that women might be treated as the equals of men.²⁴

Finney’s theology continued to evolve. Building on each person’s responsibility to choose Jesus Christ for himself, he began to emphasize that a Christian could also choose to follow Jesus in a holy lifestyle. He called this moral walk with Christ sanctification and used the words “Christian perfection” to describe the process. To say this rankled Americans who were steeped in the doctrines of original and inescapable sin would be an understatement, for those Christians believed Finney crossed the line of blasphemy. That said, Finney’s impact on America was profound and lasting. His great

²²Nancy Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Revivalism and Feminism in the Age of Finney* (Brooklyn, 1991), 3-7. The Burned Over District was the area of western New York where the fire of revivalism had burned particularly hot.

²³Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1996), 141, 142, 198-227.

²⁴Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy*, 19

protégé, Timothy Dwight Weld said of him, “I know that Finney is not a perfect man...but yet take him for all in all, when shall we look on his like again?”²⁵ And the esteemed historian of the germane volume of the Oxford History of the United States, Daniel Walker Howe remarked, “For widespread influence, personal integrity, social conscience, and spiritual power, few American evangelists of a later age could equal Charles G. Finney.”²⁶

The revival work of Beecher and Finney was interdenominational and helped unify the various churches of Jesus Christ. There were other revivalists, however, who primarily built their own denominations amidst the Second Great Awakening. The most important of this kind of evangelistic effort was not in the hands of a single man, but the work of many. Indeed, it was a movement, literally, the unceasing movement of the Methodist circuit riding preachers. These men, usually laymen, brought the comforts of the gospel to sparsely populated areas and the frontier. Howe has aptly called these men Christian Lone Rangers, and “among America’s most heroic frontiersmen.”²⁷

As we have seen, women were not idle. Phoebe Palmer was a famous Methodist preacher who rose above the rank and file of Methodist exhorters in spite of her gender. Converted by John Wesley himself, she began her ministry, as women often did, with a prayer meeting in her home. Soon she had opened her “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” to the public and ministered even to open-minded men. Palmer eventually transcended Methodism and had interdenominational impact with her Wesleyan message, like Finney, of Christian perfectionism and entire sanctification.²⁸

²⁵Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 197.

²⁶Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 175, 176.

²⁷Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 176, 177.

²⁸Charles E. White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Revivalist and Feminist*, 1-35.

Richard Allen was one of the most important American church leaders of the nineteenth century. He experienced a New Testament conversion exclaiming “I cried to the Lord both night and day. . . .all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and, Glory to God, I cried. . . .the Lord, for Christ’s sake, had heard my prayers and pardoned all my sins.”²⁹ Allen was a slave who amazingly converted his master and bought his freedom. He founded Philadelphia’s Bethel Church for black Methodists in 1794. In spite of the ideal of brotherly love the name Philadelphia declares, there was discord between the city’s white and black Methodists that led to the creation of the African Methodist Episcopal church; Allen became its first bishop in 1816.³⁰

Christianity powerfully impacted slaves and former slaves in America. Black churchmen like Allen became leaders of the black community at large, and remain an important part of the leadership of that subset of Americans to this day.³¹ A branch of the AME church in Baltimore was instrumental in the Christian conversion of Frederick Douglass, one of the greatest leaders of the abolitionist crusade in America.³²

Impact on America

As we have seen, The Second Great Awakening profoundly shaped American Christianity, which in turn, had a dramatic impact on the culture and politics of the rising nation. It is not too much to say that on the eve of the Civil War, Christianity was one of the pillars of American culture. This was not so evident in the era of the Founding Fathers; and I am not suggesting that the separation of church and state those august figures had erected was in jeopardy. But the great revival had created a well-recognized

²⁹Carol George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches: 1760 1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 26.

³⁰Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 708.

³¹Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 183.

³²Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 644, 645.

Christian ethos in the country, a mindset that moved the nation in important and lasting ways.³³ Indeed, any attempt to understand American culture apart from Christianity must of necessity fail.³⁴

We have shown how the temperance campaign arose from the moral fervor engendered by the Second Great Awakening. That crusade first dramatically reduced the consumption of alcohol amongst Americans, and then culminated in the earnest but ineffective prohibition of alcohol in the early Twentieth century. The Second Great Awakening inspired numerous similar efforts at uplifting the morals, sense of community, and egalitarianism of the American people. Daniel Walker Howe has written:

The most important social consequences of the Awakening in America derived from its trust in the capacities of ordinary people.... the most significant challenge to the traditional assumption that the worth of human beings depended on their race, class, and gender came from the scriptural teachings that all are equal in the sight of God and all are one in Christ. [The revival] taught self respect and demanded that individuals function as moral agents. In this way, the Awakening powered multitudes.³⁵

In the 1840s, the women's rights movement was born in the so-called "burned over district" of western New York, the heart of the Second Great Awakening. Women who had been moved to labor for the Lord, were also moved to labor for their own rights.

³³Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 8.

³⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), xvi.

³⁵Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 187, 188.

Obtaining a constitutional amendment conferring the right to vote took the better part of a century; but Christian women launched the crusade.³⁶

Other reform movements included improvement in literacy – a people who cannot read their Bibles are a people who are more easily misled and misused - financial honesty, advocating a well-developed work ethic, prison reform, the peace movement, anti-prostitution efforts, and a host of others.³⁷

By far the most transformative effort of Awakening era Christians was the abolitionist movement that led to Civil War and the end of slavery in America. There is no major crisis in American history that has been more controversial as to its cause than the Civil War. That said, recent historians have largely returned to the original beliefs of the people who took part in the war: its cause could be found in the slavery conundrum. As Abraham Lincoln said in his *Second Inaugural Address*, “All knew that this interest [the slave interest of the South] was, somehow, the cause of the war.”³⁸

Why had the South’s commitment to slavery become so divisive by the presidential election of 1860? James McPherson, the dean of Civil War historians, has shown that there had been a revolution of thought in the North regarding the morality of African slavery in America.³⁹ It had taken more than a generation, but by 1860 there were enough northerners seeking the end of slavery on moral and economic grounds, that the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected president though he had no support in the slaveholding South. The new Republican party had one essential reason for

³⁶Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 173, 844.

³⁷Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 189-192.

³⁸Abraham Lincoln, The Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. VIII, Roy P. Basler ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1953), 332.

³⁹James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-42.

existence: to see the gradual end of slavery in America by restricting its extension into new territories. These territories, several of them the ill-gotten gains of the Mexican War, would, if the South had its way, become new slave states. If this were to happen there would be no clear path to pass a constitutional amendment ending slavery. The Republicans hoped all those new territories would become non-slave states, otherwise known as free states, with the result that slavery might one day be banned by constitutional amendment.

When Lincoln was elected, Southerners saw the hand-writing on the wall; they seceded from the Union to protect the backbone of their economy and culture, race-based slavery. Lincoln refused to allow this secession. To have permitted secession would have done nothing to free the slaves, and would have consigned the slaves of the South to a fate based on Southern determination to see them permanently enslaved. Furthermore, in establishing the precedent of secession, the experiment in democracy would have been over; if any portion of the electorate can secede when an election does not go its way, then democracies will splinter into a multitude of separate entities over time. Finally, to have allowed the South to secede would not have meant that there would have been no war. Fighting over slavery would have re-erupted in the West between pro and antislavery forces, as it already had in Kansas, and that fighting would have rippled back east. As Lincoln said, in answering this question, “The tug [the struggle over the extension of slavery into the territories] has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰Abraham Lincoln to Lyman Trumbull, December 10, 1860. Lincoln repeated the same sentiment in a letter to William Kellogg written the day after the Trumbull letter, and again in a December 13 letter to Elihu B. Washburn. All of these letters may be found in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, volume IV, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1953), 149-151.

The Second Great Awakening was the single most important element in the gradual change of Northerner's attitude toward slavery.⁴¹ Sidney Ahlstrom has written:

In this hardening of attitudes [over slavery] the churches were a powerful factor. They provided the traditional recourse and appeal to the absolute. They gave moral grandeur to the antislavery cause and divine justification [so Southerners believed] for slavery. In the North, the churches did much to hold the party of Lincoln on its antislavery course ...⁴²

As we have noted, anti-slavery societies and views were part of the revival, the churches often venues of anti-slavery meetings.⁴³ Indeed, the national churches split North from South over the slave issue in the decades before the Civil War – foreshadowing that great conflict. The Presbyterians, for all practical purposes, divided in 1837, while Baptists and Methodists followed in 1844.⁴⁴ Tragically, the war was indeed a crucible in which brother fought brother, Christian brothers killing each other in astonishing numbers. The North had been transformed by the gospel, but most Southerners were unable, even in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, to cast off the powerful shackles of their own culture, let alone those chains of their black brothers and sisters. As Pulitzer and Bancroft prize winning historian Gordon Wood has shown, culture binds human beings in powerful and often imperceptible ways. Change usually comes very slowly, or in the

⁴¹Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 668.

⁴²Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 668.

⁴³Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 648-653.

⁴⁴Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 659, 660, 661, 662, 717, 719

midst of great conflagrations.⁴⁵ Having failed to change in the former manner, the American people changed amidst the flames of the latter.

The Second Great Awakening also had a tremendous impact on the world. Foreign mission societies were created in this era hoping to fulfill Jesus Christ's command to make disciples of "all nations."⁴⁶ It was in this era that several societies dedicated to this purpose were founded: The interdenominational American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1809, the Missionary Board of the Baptist Churches in 1814, the Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1819, and several others. These missionary societies sent evangelists all over the world.⁴⁷

Conclusion

In the decades before the Civil War which began in 1861, the Second Great Awakening was the most powerful social movement in America. It inspired the conversion of millions of Americans to faith in Jesus Christ. And that faith motivated many of those people to attempt to transform the moral habits of the nation. Slavery was ended, consumption of alcohol reduced, women's rights, though often opposed by people of faith, were set on a path that would result in woman's suffrage in the early Twentieth century. A host of other reforms, too many to list, were instigated. It is not too much to say that in this era the American people - though far from morally perfect - were defined by their Christianity. As Timothy Smith, an historian of American Christianity in this period has said, "Common grace, not common sense [a reference to Enlightenment

⁴⁵Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 2-16.

⁴⁶See Mathew 28:19

⁴⁷Robert Baird, *Religion in America, Or, An Account of the Origin, Progress, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1844), 292-317

thought as personified in Thomas Paine] was the keynote of the age."⁴⁸ Many Americans of this period would have agreed with church historian Robert Baird who saw:

Evangelical Protestantism as the legatee of Puritanism, the core of American culture, the source of American democratic institutions, the primary engine of economic and political progress, and ultimately the hope of the world. The American version of evangelical Protestantism represented, for him, what God hath wrought.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, 7.

⁴⁹Howe, *What God Hath Wrought*, 194. Howe summarized Baird's thought in this quotation.

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