CHURCH HISTORY
Week Eight: Reason and Revival (1650–1800)

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a period from roughly 1650 to 1800 wherein European intellectuals argued for the superiority of reason over revelation, which they hoped would liberate Western Culture from all alleged superstitions. Many intellectuals considered traditional religion to be more trouble than it’s worth. The Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) and English Civil War (1642–1653) had both led to widespread death and political turmoil, even though all the combatants were various types of professing Christians who believed that they represented the true faith. Some of the leading Enlightenment thinkers included Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Isaac Newton, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant. While the Enlightenment had many positive effects on political theory, for our purposes the movement represented a significant challenge to Christianity because it revised or rejected virtually every cardinal doctrine of the faith.

As a general rule, Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Voltaire ruled out the possibility of miracles, including the incarnation and resurrection. In France, the French Revolution (1789–1799), which was influenced by the Enlightenment, led to widespread repression of Catholicism, which had previously been the state religion. In English-speaking lands, it became fashionable for intellectuals and cultural elites to be either Deists or Unitarians, even if they attended Protestant churches. This was the case in America with Founding Fathers such as John Adams (Congregationalist), Benjamin Franklin (Anglican) and Thomas Jefferson (Anglican). In England, Unitarianism so infiltrated the churches that a majority of the pastors rejected the Trinity and Christ’s deity in denominations such as the General Baptists and the Presbyterians. Even among Trinitarian Protestants in England and North America, Universalism became very popular.

Continental Pietism

In Central Europe, the Holy Roman Empire remained divided between Lutheran and Catholic states. The Lutherans were in the minority, and a growing number of Lutheran pastors were convinced that their tradition was spiritually stagnant—especially those who had been evicted from Catholic states during the Thirty Years’ War. Some Lutherans turned to mysticism for spiritual vitality, but the Pietists sought renewal through focusing on personal holiness, spiritual disciplines, and Christian activism. Philipp Jakob Spener launched the movement in 1675 with a tract called Pia Desideria (pious desires), which argued for personal devotions, small group Bible studies, and congregational polity. Spener believed the only way to renew dead churches were to form “churches within the church”: small groups of like-minded believers.

Spener’s protégé was August Hermann Francke, who in 1695 founded the University of Halle as a Pietist university. Halle became the epicenter of the Pietist movement. In addition to the university, Francke founded an orphanage and a printing press; the latter published Pietist material that was distributed all over the continent. Francke provided two pastors to a group of “underground” Pietists in the Catholic state of Silesia when revival broke out among the Silesians in 1707. The Silesian Revival was widely reported in English and
American newspapers, and many Congregationalists such as Solomon Stoddard in Connecticut and Isaac Watts in London began praying for a similar movement in their contexts.

Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf was another Pietist nobleman whose parents were friends with Spener. Zinzendorf inherited a large estate called Hernhutt, and in 1722 he opened his property to Pietist and other Protestant refugees from Catholic states. Around 1730, revival broke out among the Moravians, a group of Pietists who had sought refuge at Hernhutt. By 1735, Zinzendorf had sent Moravian missionaries to Greenland, the East and West Indies, Georgia, and North Carolina. In 1741, Zinzendorf relocated to Pennsylvania to evangelize the Iroquois and try to persuade Pennsylvania Lutherans to embrace Moravian Pietism; he named his settlement Bethlehem. Zinzendorf was controversial among German-speaking Christians because of some odd theological views and alleged megalomania, but English-speaking evangelicals such as John Wesley and George Whitefield considered him a spiritual role model.

**Early American Awakenings**

What we call the “First Great Awakening” was actually a series of revivals in North America that occurred off and on from 1727 to 1787. The earliest revivals occurred in New Jersey, under the leadership of Gilbert Tennant (Presbyterian) and Theodore Freylinghuysen (Dutch Reformed). Freylinghuysen was influenced by the Dutch Pietists; they had sent him to America to work as a missionary priest. Tennant was a teacher at his father’s “Log College,” an informal school that trained revival-minded Presbyterians for pastoral ministry and was the forerunner to Princeton. Both men were controversial because they assumed that most of the clergy in New Jersey were unconverted and urged revived parishioners to “shop around” for the best church.

In 1734–1735, a Connecticut church pastored by Jonathan Edwards (Congregationalist) experienced revival. His church had a track record for revival; between the 1680s and the 1720s, the congregation experienced five different revivals under Edwards’ grandfather and pastoral predecessor, Solomon Stoddard. In a little over six months, over three hundred converts were added to the membership of Edwards’ church. The revival affected several dozen churches in the Connecticut Valley. At the urging of a pastor in Boston, Edwards wrote about the revival in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, which became a bestseller in England and was translated into German and circulated among the Moravians. Edwards wrote many other works about revival and related themes, including *Thoughts on Revival*, which was a defense of revival, and *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, which was an attempt to discern the difference between authentic conversion and passing spiritual decisions.

Edwards was also a gifted theologian. He wrote a number of important works, including books about sanctification, the Trinity, original sin, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and eschatology. He edited the *Diary of David Brainerd*, which has never gone out of print and has inspired countless believers to become foreign missionaries. Edwards is perhaps best known for preaching one of the two most famous sermons in American history: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” To this day, Edwards is certainly the most influential Reformed theologian in American history and arguably the most important American theologian of any stripe. He died prematurely in 1758 from a smallpox vaccination just one month after becoming the third president of Princeton College.
Early British Awakenings

Around the same time Jonathan Edwards was shepherding his church through revival, a Welshman named Howell Harris (Anglican) was converted and began to preach itinerantly. Before long, his fellow Anglicans Griffith Jones, Daniel Rowland, and William Williams were also preaching all over Wales. Many of the churches in Wales experienced revival during the 1730s. These churches became part of a movement known as Welsh Calvinistic Methodism, which was a renewal movement in the Anglican Church of Wales before becoming a separate denomination in 1811. Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntington, was a wealthy noblewoman who became a financial patron for the Welsh revivalists and many other revival leaders in eighteenth-century Britain.

In 1738, John Wesley (Anglican) had just returned from a failed mission in Savannah, Georgia. Wesley had been raised in the home of a renewal-minded Anglican priest and had been a good student at Oxford. He had also helped to start a “Holy Club” on campus for students who were earnest about pursuing godliness. After his graduation and ordination, he was sent as a missionary to Georgia. During his almost two years in Savannah, Wesley saw almost no converts, struggled with assurance of his own salvation, and was finally run out of the colony for practicing church discipline on a young woman who spurned his affections and married another man. One of his few encouragements during this time came from the Moravian missionaries in Georgia; they kept asking him if he’d experienced the new birth.

Wesley finally received assurance of his salvation on May 24, 1738; he was attending a Moravian Bible study in Aldersgate Street in London. Most Anglican churches refused to allow Wesley to preach because he so stressed repentance and regeneration, so he began to preach evangelistic sermons outdoors. Following the Moravians, Wesley gathered his followers into “bands,” small groups that worked to renew the Church of England from within. The Methodists were committed to evangelism, discipleship, and social justice. Wesley differed from most of the other revival leaders of this era because he advocated Arminianism rather than Calvinism. His brother Charles was also a key revival leader, though he is most famous today for his hymns. Wesley’s followers in America were called Methodists, though in England the term was more generic and was more or less a synonym for evangelicalism.

George Whitefield

In 1740–1742, a second revival broke out in New England and spread all over the Eastern Seaboard. The key catalyst was George Whitefield (Anglican), an itinerant preacher from England who was the most influential figure during the eighteenth-century revivals. Whitefield had grown up wanting to be a stage actor, and after he was converted he used his public speaking skills to great effect as a revivalist. After graduating from Oxford, Whitefield followed Wesley as a missionary priest to Georgia before returning to England in 1737. It was Whitefield who encouraged his friend Wesley to preach outdoors when the Anglican churches refused to allow the revivalists to preach from their pulpits. Whitefield also worked with the aforementioned Welsh revivalists, helping to found the Calvinistic Methodist denomination. Unfortunately, Whitefield and Wesley had a falling out over the doctrine of predestination; Whitefield was closer to Edwards than Wesley when it came to the doctrines of grace.
In 1740, Whitefield returned to American and preached all over the East Coast. He frequently collaborated with Gilbert Tennant and he preached one Sunday in Jonathan Edwards’ pulpit (Edwards wept through the sermon). Whitefield preached in all thirteen colonies and was probably the most well-known man in America in the generation before George Washington. Unfortunately, Whitefield’s popularity and the weird behavior of some lesser revivalists led to a backlash against revival, especially among some New England pastors. This prompted Edwards to write in defense of revival, arguing for a balanced middle between dead orthodoxy and reckless religious fanaticism. Historians estimate that Whitefield preached over 18,000 sermons in his lifetime; sometimes he preached as many as three sermons a day.

After 1740, many denominations in America divided into pro-revival and anti-revival factions. Some of the pro-revival Congregationalists, called the Separates, embraced believer’s baptism in the late-1740s. These Separate Baptists migrated from New England to Virginia before landing in Sandy Creek, North Carolina in 1755. Led by two Whitefield converts named Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall, the Separate Baptists planted dozens of churches all over Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The Separate Baptists eventually merged with the older Baptist groups who predated the revivals. By 1800, virtually all Baptists in the South were pro-revival, broadly Calvinistic, and fiercely committed to evangelism and church planting. These were the very Baptists who formed the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.

The Modern Missions Movement

The revivals led directly to the birth of the modern missions movement. Prior to the eighteenth century, Protestant missions had been relatively hit and miss while Roman Catholics spread rapidly to lands such as South America and Asia. Some of the earliest Protestant intentional missionaries were the Moravians, who established several mission outposts in the 1730s and 1740s. Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley preached frequently about missions, and many denominations were committed to evangelizing Native American tribes. Some persecuted ex-slaves left North America for Jamaica and East Africa, establishing churches in their new lands. Nevertheless, no English-speaking Protestants took the step of intentionally relocating to other nations to serve as missionaries until the end of the eighteenth century.

The first denomination to engage in intentional foreign missions was the British Particular Baptists. For much of the eighteenth century, the Particular Baptists had mostly ignored the revivals because they were influenced by an unevangelistic hyper-Calvinism. In the 1780s, the fog of false doctrine began to lift. Several pastors such as Robert Hall Sr. and Andrew Fuller read Jonathan Edwards’ books and embraced his revival-friendly evangelical Calvinism. In 1792, Fuller and William Carey led a group of Particular Baptists to form the Baptist Missionary Society. The next year, Carey relocated to India, where he spent the next forty years evangelizing, translating Scripture, founding a university, and fighting against social evils. By the 1810s, most Protestant denominations in Britain and America had formed mission societies and sent out missionaries to places such as India, China, and East Africa.