Like the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening was a series of revivals that occurred off and on during the first third of the nineteenth century. The earliest revivals were at Yale College in the late 1790s. President Timothy Dwight, a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, preached on the need for revival during Yale’s chapel services, eventually leading to revival at the college. Dwight was the pioneer of the New Divinity, a movement that sought to soften Calvinism in an effort to usher in revival and counteract the growing influence of Unitarianism in New England. Dwight’s protégé Lyman Beecher became the leading revival-minded pastor in the North, often wedding revival preaching with a commitment to social justice; he opposed alcohol consumption, child labor, and slavery.

The second outbreak of revival occurred at a camp meeting at Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1801. As many as 20,000 people camped at Cane Ridge, where they listened to preaching from Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist speakers. The camp meetings were modeled after mass communion seasons in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, but in America they became most popular among the Methodists. In the years after Cane Ridge, revival-friendly Protestants spread all over the “Old West” of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio. Several heterodox sects were also birthed out of the frontier revivals, including the Disciples of Christ, the Millerites, the Shakers, and the Mormons. Each of these denominations and sects competed with each other and claimed they were either the true church or the tradition closest to the apostolic faith.

The third revival outbreak occurred in 1825 in Upstate New York under the preaching of Charles Finney, a converted lawyer. Finney adopted the practices of camp meeting Methodists and introduced them to East Coast Congregationalists and Presbyterians. These “new measures” included nightly revival meetings, public testimonies (both men and women), advertising, and the so-called anxious bench. During the height of his revival ministry from 1825–1835, Finney rejected several mainstream Protestant doctrines such as original sin, justification by faith, and penal substitutionary atonement. He also adopted the belief that believers can experience a second baptism of the Holy Spirit and stop intentionally sinning, another idea he picked up from the Methodists. Finney was opposed by Asahel Nettleton, an older evangelist in New England who was a traditional Calvinistic evangelist in the vein of Edwards or Whitefield.

The Second Great Awakening exercised tremendous influence on American Protestantism. As a general rule, revivalists emphasized methods and means far more than the leaders in the earlier revivals. Calvinism declined noticeably between about 1780 and 1820, with Arminianism and modified forms of Calvinism becoming more acceptable. The South was thoroughly evangelized during this period by Baptists and Methodists; in 1730, the South had been the most unchurched part of America, but by 1830 it had become the Bible Belt. American Protestantism had become far more activist. Northern evangelicals especially formed denominational mission boards, founded parachurch Bible societies, frequently opposed hard drink and slavery, often advocated women’s suffrage, and sent church planters to the South, Midwest, and Southwest.
Revival and Revolt

In August 1857, America entered into a massive economic depression called the Panic of 1857. Many historians consider it to be the first worldwide economic crisis. In September 1857, a New York businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier began hosting an interdenominational lunchtime prayer meeting at a Dutch Reformed church. By the spring of 1858, thousands of similar groups had sprung up all over the country. The “Layman’s Revival” of 1857–1858 resulted in an estimated one million conversions and led to numeric growth in every major denomination. A similar revival occurred simultaneously in the UK, affecting Wales in particular. Unfortunately, the Layman’s Revival didn’t prevent the Civil War, which lasted from 1861–1865.

The Civil War not only divided the nation, but it also divided American believers. Between 1837 and 1846 the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists had all divided along northern-southern lines; in each case, slavery played a decisive role. The Civil War and especially Reconstruction hardened the regional animosity, even within denominations. Christians on both sides “baptized” their cause. Northern Christians tended to see the war as a crusade against slavery. Southerners tended to see the war as a defense of their more thoroughly evangelical culture. Abraham Lincoln, whose own religious views were ambiguous, weighed in on this debate with his Second Inaugural Address, which suggested God might be on neither side and argued for national reconciliation. More positively, armies on both sides experienced revivals among the ranks. For example, a massive revival broke out in 1863–64 in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia; the revival was led by Southern Baptist and Presbyterian chaplains.

The Evangelical Quilt

By the mid-nineteenth century, the default civil religion in America was evangelical Protestantism. Evangelicalism was not so much a movement as it was a patchwork quilt of various groups that all emphasized biblical authority, the importance of conversion, and religious activism such as evangelism and mercy ministries. The intellectual center was Princeton Seminary, where Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield championed biblical inerrancy and traditional Calvinism. A Southern Baptist version of the Princeton tradition was perpetuated at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; founding president James P. Boyce had studied with Hodge at Princeton.

The Holiness movements comprised a second patch on the evangelical quilt. Many of the Wesleyan groups, especially the Nazarenes, perpetuated the “Christian Perfection” understanding of sanctification. The leading perfectionists were Phoebe Palmer, Hannah Whitall Smith, and William Boardman. Charles Finney, though not officially a Wesleyan, helped to popularize this view. Some moderate Calvinists rejected the Wesleyan position and argued instead for gradual fillings of the Holy Spirit that gave temporary victory over besetting sins, furthered one’s sanctification, and helped believers live the “victorious life” or “higher life.” Keswick views were popularized by F.B. Meyer, D.L. Moody, and R.A. Torrey.

A third influential movement was premillennialism, the idea that Christ would return to earth and physically reign over a kingdom that lasts one thousand years. This view had been advocated by some Puritans, but it became extremely popular among evangelicals after the Civil War. A new
A form of premillennialism called dispensationalism was especially popular. Dispensationalism argued for a sharp continuity between the Israel and the Church and claimed the latter would be secretly raptured (caught up to heaven) prior to a Great Tribulation that would last seven years before Christ returned to inaugurate the millennium. Dispensationalism was popularized through prophecy conferences like Moody’s Northfield Conference and books, especially Cyrus Scofield’s Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth and his Scofield Reference Bible. Premillennialism, and especially Dispensationalism, motivated many Americans to enter the foreign mission field and “rescue the perishing” before Jesus comes again.

**Protestant Modernism**

Some Protestant moved in a different direction after the Civil War. Younger scholars studied abroad in Germany, where they imbibed of the historical critical method of interpretation. This approach argued for the importance of the history “behind” the biblical text, often leading to interpretations that contradicted the Bible. Around the same time, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) caught on in America, challenging the biblical understanding of human origins. Early on, these “modernists” were still fairly evangelical when it came to their understanding of sin and salvation, but by the turn of the twentieth century many were downplaying the exclusivity of Christ and biblical miracles such as the virgin birth and resurrection. The leading modernist schools were the University of Chicago (which was then Baptist) and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

The most famous early modernists were Crawford Toy and Charles Briggs. Toy was an Old Testament professor at Southern Seminary who embraced an evolutionary reading of Genesis 1–11 and argued that there were historical errors in the biblical narratives. In 1879, he was forced to resign from Southern over his views. His fiancé also broke off their engagement because of Toy’s views; her name was Lottie Moon. Toy took a post at Harvard Divinity School, where he became a Unitarian. Briggs, who was also an Old Testament scholar, was a Presbyterian on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary. In 1892, Briggs was excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church for arguing against inerrancy, denying Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, arguing for two authors of Isaiah, and downplaying the exclusivity of Christ.

In 1893, Chicago hosted a World’s Parliament of Religions. Most of the attendees were Protestant modernists. They typically embraced an evolutionary view of religion, arguing that Christianity was the most advanced pathway to God, but allowing that there might be other valid ways to God. In addition to Protestant groups, some heretical sects were represented, most notably Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science movement. Eastern religions were also represented; some observers argued that the Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda was the most impressive speaker on the program. While most denominations were represented on some level at the World Parliament, Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics refused to participate. Most scholars consider the World Parliament to mark the beginning of the interfaith dialog movement.

**Foreign Missions**

Throughout the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries spread to Asia, Africa, and South America. By far, the largest mission field was China. Some of the missionaries were part of
denominational mission boards, especially Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Many of the missionaries were single women, including Lottie Moon, who served as a Southern Baptist missionary in China from 1873–1912. After the Civil War, a growing number of missionaries raised their own support and served through interdenominational “faith missions.” The most famous of these missions organizations was China Inland Mission, founded in 1865 by Hudson Taylor. Many of the nondenominational missionaries were premillennialists who hoped that Jesus would return when all nations were evangelized.

In 1886, the Presbyterian pastor A.T. Pierson and D.L. Moody helped launch the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). The SVM was committed to mobilizing recent college graduates for “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” Over four thousand young people became foreign missionaries in the next two decades, many of them serving through faith missions. The SVM accounted for just over half of the American missionaries who were recruited during this time. The key leader of the SVM was John R. Mott, a YMCA executive who also founded the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in 1895. The WSCF was an organization that united Christian collegians in North America and Europe for the purpose of world missions.

In 1910, a World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland. Over 1200 Protestant missions leaders convened, almost all of them from Europe and North America. Mott served as chairman of the conference. The conference took ownership of the SVM’s agenda, sought to unite diverse Protestants for the purpose of missions, and sponsored books related to evangelism, missions strategy, social justice, and Christian cooperation. Historians argue the World Missionary Conference represented the culmination of the nineteenth-century missionary movement and the birth of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Unfortunately, the ecumenical movement almost immediately focused on cooperation and justice and downplayed evangelism and church planting. Though intended for missions, it became the seedbed for much of twentieth-century Protestant liberalism.