

## **Chapter Eight** **Great Awakenings** **(18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

### **John Wesley**

Though there are many significant historical figures between Martin Luther and John Wesley, as well as their contemporaries, the work of Wesley represents a major step in the strategy to restore the Church.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was born in England at a time when the initial surge and expansion of the Protestant reformation had stagnated. The moral and religious condition of England was badly decayed. It was a time of spiritual bareness. The advancement of the faith and the establishment of new churches was virtually non-existent. Religion was a "fashion statement" instead of a practical way of life. Sermons in the churches focused on happiness as the aim of the individual instead of the life sacrificed for Christ. The idea of the Holy Spirit actively working in the souls of men was commonly dismissed by preachers as a first century phenomenon to be unexpected in the eighteenth. Immorality and drunkenness were widespread in the society, and fashionable extravagance resulted in the prisons being filled with debtors who had overstepped their incomes. England was a nation ripe for revival.

Wesley was an ordained priest in the Anglican Church which had, in many ways, become corrupt. Wesley believed deeply in living a life devoted to holy and pure living and became the leader of the Holy Club which was started by his brother, Charles. Although he did the works the Bible spoke of (visiting the sick and the prisoners, helping people, etc.) and accepted the doctrine of justification by faith, he had not yet received that justification and the assurance of his salvation.

On a missionary trip to America, he witnessed a group of fellow Christians known as Moravians, who had a deep inner peace that he did not know. After the missionary trip, which was basically a failure, he returned to England where he again met a group of Moravians who challenged his faith, and it was then, on May 24, 1738, at one of their meetings, that he experienced the assurance of salvation.

### **The Moravians**

The Moravians had their beginnings in the region of central Europe for which they are named through the work of John Hus, who planted seeds for the reformation a century before Martin Luther. The group had a renewal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, who had found the Lutheran Church of his day dry and lacking what he perceived as as a biblical model of New Testament church. He pointed men to the historical Christ and sought to recapture the spirituality of the early Apostolic Church.

By allowing persecuted Protestants from Moravia to live on his land, the community of Herrnhut was formed. Factions developed in Herrnhut and Zinzendorf worked to bring harmony. Then on August 13, 1727, the community experienced a visitation of the Holy Spirit similar to the visitation on Pentecost recorded in Acts chapter two. It is said that they "learned to love one another" that day, and were able to maintain unity and revival continued.

The Moravians established model community that would be reproduced in at least 30 places around the world, sent out hundreds of missionaries around the globe, and formed many hundreds of small renewal groups operating in existing churches that encouraged personal prayer, worship, Bible study, confession of sins, and mutual accountability. One of the most remarkable achievements

of the Moravians was the establishment of a 24hour prayer watch that continued uninterrupted for 100 years!

In 1741, Zinzendorf visited Pennsylvania, thus becoming one of the few 18th century European nobles to have actually set foot in the Americas. In addition to visiting leaders in Philadelphia such as Benjamin Franklin, and also arranged missionary activities with the Iroquois.

### **The Great Awakening**

Soon after his conversion experience with the Moravians, Wesley, his brother Charles, and George Whitfield, who had also had experiences similar to Wesley's own, began a revival campaign that swept England, Scotland, Ireland, and jumped the Atlantic to North America where Jonathan Edwards was a key figure in this outbreak of revivals known as the Great Awakening, which had a large impact upon the founders of the United States.

Being booted from the establishment Anglican Church, Wesley traveled on horseback and often preached outdoors to crowds as large as thirty thousand. Because of his systematic and organized methods, Wesley and those with him were called, Methodists. At the time of his death there were 153,000 adherents to Methodism and over 500 itinerant preachers. An element for which Wesley is well known is his emphasis on sanctification, or holiness.

In the twilight of the 18th century, John Wesley finished his leg of the race and took his place among the cloud of witnesses who are watching us now.

The Great Awakening took place during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, God's plan was already in motion and what is called The Second Great Awakening began as the 18<sup>th</sup> century neared its close and stretched into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Charles Finney**

One of the key figures of The Second Great Awakening was Charles G. Finney, born on August 29, 1792. Finney (1792-1875) was to be a sort of "John the Baptist" who would light revival fires in the northeastern United States and England. As a lawyer at age 29, his interest in Scripture was apparently sparked by references to scripture in Blackstone's law commentaries. After coming under conviction by the power of the Holy Spirit, Charles was gloriously converted while praying in the woods. That night he encountered Jesus in a back room of the place where he was living. He describes the experience.

There was ... no light in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly lit. As I went in and shut the door. ... It seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face ... as I would see any other man. He said nothing but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet. ... [I]t seemed to me a reality that He stood before me and I poured out my soul to Him. I wept like a child ... I bathed His feet with my tears... [He continues describing the events that followed.]

But as I turned and was about to take my seat by the fire I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without expecting it ... the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me body and soul. I could feel the impression like a wave of electricity going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love ... like the very breath of God ... it seemed to fan me like immense wings. No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and ... I bellowed

out the unutterable gushings of my heart. The waves came over me and over me and over me one after the another until I recollected I cried out ... "Lord, I cannot bear any more."<sup>7</sup>

Immediately, people began to come under deep conviction as Finney shared his experience with Jesus. He terminated his law practice and refused to take any more clients saying that he was now on retainer to plead the case of Jesus Christ to a lost world.

In many ways Finney was a pioneer. After his conversion, he was encouraged by some of the local clergy to study theology in the schools of the day. He refused, expressing his firm belief that they had been wrongly educated. He wanted nothing of the training that had taken their zeal from them. His energy and zeal came from the filling of the Holy Spirit. He had an unyielding commitment to prayer and seeking the presence of God. Finney preached repentance from sin, that man must choose to turn from sin to receive God's grace. He reasoned that since God has commanded us to be holy and God would not command us to do something that we could not do, we must therefore be holy.

Finney was indeed a champion for God who not only carried the baton through the middle years of the 19th century, but passed it on to many. He was president of Oberlin College for many years and equipped many for the work of service. Charles Finney finished his leg of the race and joined the cloud of witnesses in August of 1875 having placed the baton in the hands of many.

### **The 1857 Prayer Meeting Revival**

Long before he stopped running himself, Finney passed the baton to others. What is often called the Prayer Meeting Revival of 1857 was directly linked to Finney. It was initiated by the efforts of Jeremiah Lanphier, a 48-year-old business man from New York City who was converted under Finney's ministry about nine years earlier.

Times were difficult. Businesses and banks were failing, factories were shutting down and thousands of people were out of work. In his book on revival, Winkie Pratney describes the beginnings of this revival.

Seeing the terrible need of the city for God, he [Lanphier] gave up his business to be a city street missionary. With social collapse staring the city in the face, Lanphier walked the streets passing out adds for a noonday prayer meeting to be held Wednesdays at the Dutch Church on the corner of Fulton Street in downtown New York. For five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five minutes, he waited alone, his faith tried. But then, at 12:30, six men came in, one after another. By the next week, there were twenty. By the first week in October (just before the stock market crashed) they decided to meet daily instead of weekly. Within six months over ten thousand businessmen were meeting everyday in similar meetings, confessing sin, getting saved, praying for revival.<sup>8</sup>

Within six months, ten thousand business men were gathering daily for prayer in New York, and within two years, a million converts were added to the American churches.

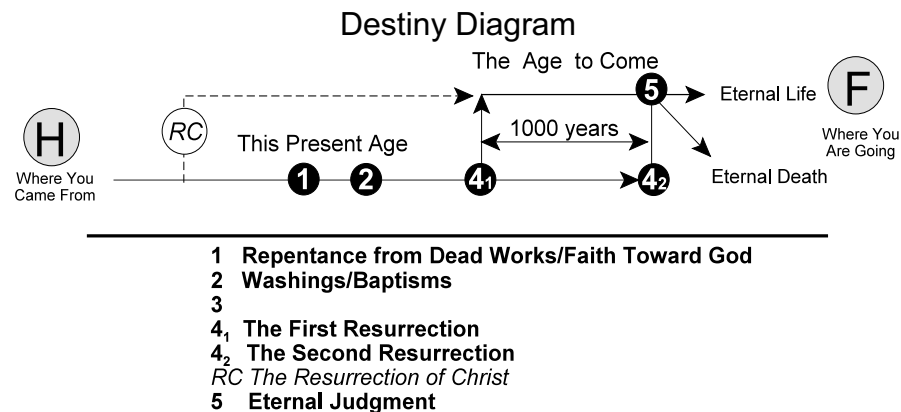
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<sup>7</sup>Miller, *Charles Finney*, Dimension Books, p.23

<sup>8</sup>Pratney, *Revival, Its Principles and Personalities*, Huntington House Pub., p. 108

D. L. Moody was one of the brightest lights carrying the baton to the end of the century. Moody was converted by his Sunday School teacher in Chicago, Illinois. In 1858, when he was barely past the age of 20, he started his own Sunday School in a vacant saloon with street kids that had been rejected by the churches. It grew and eventually became a church. In 1860, Moody gave up his business and devoted himself to ministry. Moody died in 1899, but Moody Bible Institute is still in existence today.

An overview of the life and work of the key figures of the great awakening reveals a common thread that seems to link them all together. Wesley emphasized sanctification, Zinzendorf: Christian practice in community; Whitfield, Edwards and Finney: repentance. Though they all believed that that foundational truth established by the early reformers, that man is justified by faith alone, they taught that true faith would produce repentance and an observable transformation in the life of the believer. Therefore, the two Great Awakenings, which so greatly influenced the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, were marked by the message of repentance and holiness. Thus, this period is seen historically as when the doctrine of Christian sanctification, or holiness, was restored in the Church, which is embodied in the foundational teaching of washings or baptisms. This is reflected in the Destiny Diagram below.



Though we are justified by faith, apart from works, we are not to continue in sin as we did before we believed. True faith and genuine repentance always cause a change in behavior. Paul addressed this issue saying, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6:1-2).

Yes, temptations abound in this world and there are no perfect Christians. But true Christians do not practice or continue in sin. Sin is our enemy. If we stumble and fall into sin, we must confess it, forsake it, and renew our pursuit of holiness because without holiness no one will see the Lord (see Heb 12:14).

There is much more to be said on this pursuit of holiness, but we will get to that later.