

“Have To” History: The Second Great Awakening

Stuff You Don’t Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. Huge Outdoor Camp Meetings – Big tents, yelling preachers, much emotion. In the more western regions (Kentucky, Tennessee, etc.) there were reports of people roaring like lions, trembling uncontrollably, dancing about wildly, or being “slain in the spirit.” Apparently it could be quite a spectacle – but also a legitimate life-changer, so there’s that.



2. Americanized and Democratized Christianity – The voices of the Second Great Awakening emphasized the power of personal choices and the potential to become a better person. The idea that an individual must accept the limitations of their birth or existing circumstances was being overturned by the “American Dream.” If Christianity were to remain resonant and relevant, it would need less “predestined doom and unavoidable suffering” and more “choose this day who you’ll serve and how to make yourself useful.”

3. Promoted the wave of reform movements by which we typically define the 1820s – 1840s (I’m certain there’s a chapter in your textbook devoted to these). If people can choose to improve themselves personally, professionally, and spiritually, then society can be improved through the combined efforts of committed believers.

Background

The first “Great Awakening” happened in the 1730s and 1740s in England and the American colonies. It was more of a “revival” than its sequel, challenging believers to get back to the basics of their relationship with Jesus and focusing on a passion for holiness rather than being overly concerned with the details of doctrine. If you’ve ever been traumatized by Jonathan Edwards banging the pulpit via transcribed excerpts from “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” you’ve had a tiny little taste of the First Great Awakening.

New Nation, New Mindset, New Faith

Prior to 1800, American Christianity was largely shaped by Calvinism. The world was a harsh and difficult place, and faith reflected this by focusing on the “sin nature” of individuals and the harsh consequences of succumbing to the corruption of the world. Jesus could save a few, sure – but it was unpleasant and unlikely and required being very uptight over a very long period of time. It involved serious study and reflection, and hopefully plenty of personal sacrifice and self-flagellation. Think “Puritans,” but less festive and colorful.

As Americans entered their first real generation as a “free” people (I know, I know – but it was still a huge leap forward in terms of natural rights and government-of-the-by-the-for-the), the ideals of the Enlightenment which had shaped their founding documents were impacting personal worldviews as well. For thousands of years, the circumstances into which you were born largely dictated your life; now, it seemed anything was possible with good choices and hard work. The Second Great Awakening rejected the rationalism and science-driven paradigm of the Enlightenment, but shared its belief in progress and the potential of positive change. (Still, probably best not to tell either movement they resembled the other even in limited ways – they’d both be horrified and pout for decades.)

Science was opening up a world in which physical realities could be better understood and even improved. Political philosophy was clearly trying something way-totes new with the whole “republican” form of government thing. Adam Smith’s missive on the wonders of Capitalism promised unlimited innovation and prosperity via freedom and sustained application. It made sense that Christianity would reflect this more individualized and optimistic view of how the world worked (somehow without contradicting its existing beliefs – at least not the foundational ones).

The Second Great Awakening didn't do away with "Hell" or "Judgement Day;" it merely shifted the focus to "free will." Jesus is calling you, and you may accept or reject. Like a choose-your-own-adventure book, each decision you make leads to different options, and over time you shape your own story for better or for ill. Even with all the warnings against drunkenness, gambling, sloth, or other sins and their consequences, this was a much more optimistic spiritual paradigm than most. It shaped "American Christianity" and dominates still today.

Awakened Impacts

1. Millions of New Christians. Existing churches which already leaned evangelical experienced massive surges in membership, and many new denominations were formed. America was already largely "Protestant," but this led to an explosion of Protestantism which still pretty much dictates the religious life, the social values, and the political choices of the United States almost 200 years later.

2. Reform Movements. It can get a bit "chicken or egg," but the belief that personal improvement was possible combined with a perceived need to clean up society for Jesus's return either *began* or *supported* a variety of reform movements in the early 19th century – temperance, education, prison reform, abolition, women's rights, and general efforts to reduce or eliminate gambling, violence, poverty, etc.

3. Elevation of the Common Man. The Second Great Awakening echoed Revolutionary values of individual commitment and passion over university training or intellectual prowess. Preachers were called by God rather than trained by men, and the quality of the heart was considered far more important than the development of the mind. This was, of course, also the "Age of Jackson" – a time in which the "common man" was revered and elevated. While certainly not eliminating the biases of the times, this Awakening opened up roles for women and African Americans and helped push those ideas along as well. It was far more egalitarian than faith had been since, well... Jesus.

You Wanna Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}

Arminianism – Sometimes (inaccurately) defined as the *opposite* of Calvinism, "Arminianism" established "free will" as part of the divine relationship. God calls man, and makes it possible to be saved – without Grace man is condemned no matter what – but He will not *force* man. Once man chooses faith, God assists and strengthens belief and behavior. "Arminianism" effectively rejects "predestination" as a determining factor in individual salvation.

Charles Grandison Finney – One of the best-known figures of the Second Great Awakening. Finney was convinced that the gospel was meant by God to do more than just get people saved – it was meant to clean up society. He had a vision of a "Christian America," which didn't seem so problematic or out-of-reach in the early 19th century.

{Christians} should set out with a determination to aim at being useful in the highest degree possible... No matter what it may cost them, no matter what danger or what suffering, no matter what change in their outward circumstances, or habits, or employments it may lead to... How else can they be like God? How can they think to bear the image of Jesus Christ, if they are not prepared to do all the good that is in their power? It is for the want of attention to this subject... there are so many useless members in our churches.

They must be taught not to aim at comfort but usefulness in religion. There are a great many spiritual epicures in the churches, who are all the while seeking to be happy in religion, while they take very little pains to be useful. They had much rather spend their time in singing joyful hymns, and pouring out their happy feelings in a gushing tide of exultation and triumph, than to spend it in agonizing prayer for sinners, or in going about pulling dying men out of the fire... But I do not think such Christians show such fruits as to make their example one to be imitated...

{They} must go forward, not calculating so much to be happy as to be useful, not talking about comfort but duty... They will be happy enough in heaven.