

## STUDY PAK 17

### THE GREAT AWAKENING

“What historians call ‘the first Great Awakening’ can best be described as a revitalization of religious piety that swept through the American colonies between the 1730’s and 1770’s. That revival was part of a much broader movement, an evangelical upsurge taking place simultaneously on the other side of the Atlantic, most notable in England, Scotland, and Germany. In all of these Protestant cultures during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, a new age of Faith rose to counter the currents of the age of Enlightenment...”

~~Christine Leigh Heyrman, *The First Great Awakening*~~

#### I. A SURVEY OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

The religious revival known as the Great Awakening was an unprecedented 50-year revival. This revival would incredibly change life within the western world. The influence of the Christian religion, church attendance and membership, and literacy had been at a low ebb. In England, the ministries of John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield called people back \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. Large numbers of people professed salvation. This made the Church of England uncomfortable with the new movement.

John Wesley’s involvement began shortly after his return from an unsuccessful stint as a missionary in the colonies. He had travelled to the colony of Georgia preaching to the people a pure works salvation. Wesley’s method was to keep a book for recording everyone’s sins and to visit each home about once a month. During his visit Wesley would point out that family’s sins so they might abandon them and achieve salvation. Of course, this is what a preacher should do if he really believed salvation was by works. As can be imagined, though, people were not warmly receptive of Wesley’s methods. Before long, Governor Oglethorpe could no longer keep him there and Wesley left to pursue mission work among the Indians. There is not much record of what happened to Wesley during that time frame, but soon the chief of the Indian tribe brought Wesley back to

Oglethorpe refusing responsibility for Wesley's safety if he ever returned to the Indians. Wesley then travelled back to England, defeated and broken as a missionary.

By his own account, Wesley was in a cabin and a group of Moravian people were in the cabin next to him. Wesley could hear one man reading aloud Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Galatians. When the man began to read Luther's commentary at the point of "the just shall live by faith", the message broke through and John Wesley put his trust and faith in Christ as Savior.

Wesley did not teach the theology that a Christian loses their sin nature, as is taught in some of the Wesleyan churches, today. Within his journal Wesley has recorded an account which documents his belief. In that account, he was in a coach with a man on either side of him. The men, though, did not know it was John Wesley sitting between them. These men actually began to get into an argument about John Wesley and what he believes. Naturally, Wesley listened with great interest. The men were arguing about whether or not Wesley believed a person loses his sin nature when he gets saved. After letting them argue for a while, Wesley finally told them, "I can say with great authority that John Wesley does not teach that you lose your sin nature." One asked, "Well, how do you know?" Wesley said, "Because I am John Wesley, and because my sin nature is here with me today." They certainly could not argue past that point. Though Wesley did not explain grace as well as I wish he had; he surely helped to \_\_\_\_\_, respect for the Bible, and church attendance on the hearts of a great many people. Through the teaching of John Wesley, a large number of people expressed salvation.

Many people who were converted during the Great Awakening left the Church of England and formed new churches called Methodist churches. There were other non-conformist groups in England which also gained in attendance and influence. The revival movement soon spread to the colonies. In the colonies, Dutch Reformed preacher Theodore Frelinghuysen, and Presbyterian preachers William and Gilbert Tennant greatly influenced a new call to personal salvation, and church attendance.

In 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached the most famous sermon in American history, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” A great revival movement sprang from the preaching of this one sermon. Soon churches were reacting to the new movement. In every group “The Great Awakening” had \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. To this day, old buildings can be found in the south labeled as “New Light” and “Old Light” indicating their theology. New Lights were people who believed in a conversion experience. Old Lights were people who basically believed in salvation by a process of works over a period of time.

George Whitefield, the sponsor of an orphanage in Georgia, also preached in the colonies. His voice was so strong that he was able to preach to open-air crowds of 20,000 at one time. In fact, it was also said that when George Whitefield would stand outside and preach, everyone in the town could hear him in their homes, whether they were coming out to listen or not. Though George Whitefield was a Methodist, he later spoke of how a great many people saved through his preaching actually ended up becoming Baptist. (Whitefield expressed it by saying that many \_\_\_\_\_.) Whitefield had explained the Gospel well in his preaching and many of those he reached were drawn to Baptist churches.

The Great Awakening included a missionary emphasis to the Indians. Jonathan Edwards went to minister to the Indians, as did David Brainerd. Brainerd became one of the most famous missionaries of all time, winning hundreds of Indians to Christ, though he only lived to be 29.

Benjamin Franklin described the incredible influence of the Great Awakening,

“It seemed as if all the world were growing religious. One could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung by different families on every street.”

Even Benjamin Franklin, an unbeliever, recognized the impact of this Great Awakening. Just imagine walking through the town and hearing Gospel songs resonating from one

home, then another, and another! In the colonies, the Great Awakening led to a new respect for the Scriptures and evangelicalism. New religious organizations and denominations were formed. There were tens of thousands of conversions and a dramatic increase in church attendance.

Deism was almost swept away from the American religious landscape, though it had strength in America at one time. By the time the colonies became a nation, Deism had faded. At the time of the founding of the United States, the entire nation had been dramatically moved by revival.

## **II. JONATHAN EDWARD'S DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT AWAKENING IN HIS TOWN**

“Ever since the great work of God that was wrought here about nine years ago, there has been a great abiding alteration in this town in many respects. There has been vastly more religion kept up in town, among all sorts of persons, in religious exercises and in common conversation than used to be before. There has remained a more general seriousness and decency in attending the public worship. There has been a very great alteration among the youth of the town with respect to reveling, frolicking, profane and unclean conversation, and lewd songs.”

Who among us has ever seen anything like that? There were not merely individuals in a youth group being transformed; this was a religious experience which transformed the young people of an entire town! No longer were they singing the worldly songs which have always appealed to young people in every period of history. This was a revival like nothing today's generation has ever known! It is true that there are times when a revival may grip a church and influence a youth group, but who among us has ever seen a revival grip a town? There is extensive historical record, though, that God was doing an incredible work during this period. This was a magnitude of revival which today's generation has never yet witnessed.

“Instances of fornication have been very rare. There has also been a great alteration among both old and young with respect to tavern haunting.”

Tavern haunting was also a target of Billy Sunday's revivals in the early 1900's. Tavern owners would come together and fight to keep Billy Sunday from coming to town

because, after his meeting, there would not be enough business to keep all the taverns open. It would be wonderful to see a revival like that, again!

“I suppose the town has been in no measure so free of vice in these respects for any long time together for this sixty years as it has been this nine years past.”

### III. THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT AWAKENING IN ENGLAND

Famed French historian Merle d’Aubigne described the development of a Christian culture in England:

“I have been in England; I have seen in her great manufacturing cities, the miracles of that activity which covers the whole world with the productions of a petty island in Europe...”

England does not have great natural resources. They did have economic freedom, though, which caused their economy to boom. English products were being sold all over the world.

The large crowds in London attending the church which Charles Haddon Spurgeon pastored, were also learning history and its lessons. Spurgeon arranged to have a two week history lecture series each year for his church. He would invite different lecturers in to speak on history and church history. The historian, Merle d’Aubigne, was one of his favored speakers. Spurgeon’s church grew to become the largest church in the world at that time.

“...In the ports of London, of Liverpool, and other places, I have gazed upon those floating isles, those thousands of masts which bear afar over every sea the riches and power of the nation. I have admired in Scotland a simple, energetic, and active people, ready to sacrifice everything \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_...”

It would be wonderful to be able to say that about any nation today.

“I have been present at the debates of the Parliament of the three kingdoms, and I have admired that eloquence which, not content with words, goes right to the heart of the matter, and impels the nation onwards in its great destinies...”

Merle d'Aubigne was even stirred by the spiritual character demonstrated \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. This bears no comparison to the debates in  
Parliament, today. There are currently no rules for speaking as there are with the  
American Congress. Members of Parliament today yell, scream, and talk over one  
another, maintaining little dignity.

“...I have found everywhere, from the lower classes of the people to the exalted  
stations of nobles and princes, an enthusiastic love of liberty. I have wandered  
through those halls from which are conveyed to the four quarters of the world  
Bibles printed in every known language. I have prayed in the churches, and at the  
religious meetings have been transported by the powerful eloquence of the  
speakers and the acclamations of the audience. I have found in the families a  
morality comparatively greater than in other countries; and pious customs, both  
private and public, more generally prevalent. I have been struck with admiration  
at beholding the people of those islands, encompassing the globe, bearing  
everywhere civilization and Christianity, commanding in the most distant seas,  
and filling the earth with the power and the Word of God.”

What a description of a country! It should be noted that this is not the biased description  
of an Englishman; d'Aubigne was a Frenchman.

#### **IV. WILLIAM WILBERFORCE AND THE END OF SLAVERY IN ENGLAND**

When people remark that the United States was founded on Christian principles or  
England had a Christian culture, the slavery practices of these nations raises questions.  
Unquestionably, slavery is inconsistent with the concept of a Christian culture. England  
and the United States both, eventually did away with their own inconsistency. The United  
States ended slavery with \_\_\_\_\_. England's story, though, is a  
different one.

William Wilberforce, at the age of 21, was considering entering the clergy. He was  
friends with 24-year old William Pitt, Britain's youngest prime minister. Pitt urged him  
to run for office. Having a reluctance to pursue politics, Wilberforce sought the counsel  
of his childhood pastor, John Newton.

John Newton, before his conversion had made his living as a slave ship captain. As a  
slaver, he would buy slaves from African tribes and bring them to England to sell. Slave

trade was a horrible, inhumane, and ungodly profession from every perspective. Amidst this wickedness, Newton was converted and wrote the lyrics to the hymn “Amazing grace”. In reflection, Newton penned the words, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...” Leaving the slave trade, Newton went on to become a pastor and, losing his eyesight, eventually became a blind pastor.

This was the man who Wilberforce came to for advice of how he could best serve God. He had wanted to become a preacher, but had now been asked to run for Parliament. Newton, suffering guilt for having participated in the slave trade, convinced Wilberforce that he could best serve his God by devoting himself to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. There is an excellent movie available which portrays this story, entitled “Amazing Grace”.

Once in Parliament, Wilberforce met with a great deal of opposition in his fight against slavery. The Earl of Abington declared, “Christianity is a private feeling \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.” Lord Melbourne stated, “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life.” Such statements may be likened to almost any prominent politician in America, today. It has become the politically correct position in America that religion should not invade public life. This has become the excuse for abortion because its opposition is seen as the result of religion. American politics, like Parliament, has determined that people have no right to impose their personal beliefs on anyone else. In response to this argument, however, I will say that I am not only opposed to the murder of the unborn, I am also opposed to anyone murdering you. That is my religious position, but I do not believe killing you should become legal just because it reflects my religious position. It is also my religious position that no one should molest a child. However, the fact that I hold that religious position should not justify legalizing child molestation. The argument is a nonsense argument, but this was also the argument of the day in England. The government had declared that blacks were not humans and did not have souls. Because the government had declared it, some people determined that the issue was settled and could not be debated because it was a religious issue. This is exactly the same argument being dealt with today. The

government does not have the right of deciding who qualifies as a human being. When God starts a human heart beating, government does not have the right to decide that is not a person, ever. Any government which is permitted to decide who is and is not a person, is far too powerful.

The campaign over this slavery debate continued in England for years. After nineteen years of struggle, Wilberforce was able to lead a clear majority of the English people to demand the outlawing of slavery. Once he had obtained the support of the people, politicians, who had previously been critical, also quickly began to favor it. Wilberforce was fighting the very same argument that people have to battle today. Unfortunately, no one has risen to the level of a champion, in America, able to move a country against the atrocity of abortion in the way that Wilberforce did slavery. Though Wilberforce's campaign may tend to sound glamorous to those reading the story, it actually was a lonely, rocky road. For nineteen years Wilberforce was attacked, criticized, and belittled for his position. During his campaign to end slavery, Wilberforce was constantly accused \_\_\_\_\_ who was trying to \_\_\_\_\_. He was treated as a pariah and politicians did not want to be seen with him or associated with him.

The immediate effects of ending slavery in England were difficult, as expected. The transition created temporary economic problems. The freed slaves needed a place to live. They also needed a method of provision for themselves and their families. There was a price tag to pay in ending slavery which disrupted the economy for about 20 years. Yet, compare that to the alternative. England was spared the horror of the Civil War of the United States. The war in the United States was completely devastating and one half million people were killed. The economic devastation of the Civil War was much worse than the economic disruption setting the slaves free in America would have been. In addition, sectional hatred was developed in America which still exists to this day. Many people of the South still resent the North and many Northern people still belittle the South. One hundred and fifty years later, America has not completely recovered from the Civil War. If America had set the slaves free, the nation could have recovered in

twenty years. The transition would have held a price tag, but it would have been much less than the price tag America eventually paid.

## V. LATER GREAT AWAKENINGS

It is generally thought that the United States experienced two more Great Awakenings. The second Great Awakening refers to the national revival that took place in the 1820's and 1830's. The third Great Awakening refers to a national revival that took place in the 1880's and 1890's. Some would even say there was a fourth Great Awakening in the early 1900's, though a revival did not really sweep the entire nation. A snapshot in time can offer understanding to the world as we know it now. In the 1700's, the United States and England were in the same place as a result of the revivals of the Great Awakening. In the 1800's both nations were in the same place. For example, in the 1800's virtually every Christian missionary came from England or the United States. These were the two great missionary nations of the world. However, in this present generation, England no longer is sending out many missionaries. Evangelical churches in England, today, are extremely rare. Christian influence is virtually non-existent. While Christianity within the United States has also weakened considerably, there still remains a Christian influence and its impact continues to be evident. The United States has ventured \_\_\_\_\_ since experiencing a national revival, though, and it has surely suffered tremendous erosion of Christianity. England, however, has not experienced a national revival \_\_\_\_\_ and today there is virtually no trace of Christian influence remaining.