



WHAT WAS THE AWAKENING CHURCH?



TO AWAKEN OR revive is to bring a dead person to life or rouse a sleeping person from slumber. You might think that after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there could be no more spiritual death or slumber, right? Unfortunately, human beings—even Christian ones—are not very good at achieving balance. Reformers had called the church to stop abusing its power and correct its doctrinal errors. But after all those theological disputes and wars of religion, some ministers were concerned that Christians had started to identify themselves by which group they belonged to—instead of their individual relationships with God. They feared people had been distracted from whole-heartedly loving God because they were so busy fighting for God. When these ministers began to call sinners back from their spiritual death to cling to the life of the Spirit of God, *revivals* broke out on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. These revivals lasted for decades and are now remembered as the *Great Awakenings*.





ENLIGHTENMENT AND DEISM

The Reformation movements had led to great changes, but also great bloodshed. By the eighteenth century, many people looked back on these wars as the result of religious oppression. They never wanted such tragic events to occur again. So in reaction, a new way of thinking began to develop, an era known as the Enlightenment. These thinkers believed all religion was superstitious, perhaps even a danger to society. As long as human beings imposed books like the Bible on others, they argued, there will always be wars and bloodshed. They said humans should live by the light of reason and nature instead of the Bible or other religious documents.

Some of these Enlightenment thinkers still believed in God. But they rejected the idea that God interfered supernaturally in the world or that by his Spirit he inspired human beings to write down his words. They called themselves *Deists*. They said that to believe in a Bible that can only be properly interpreted by the help of the Holy Spirit would give the person doing the interpreting an advantage over others. Instead, they believed when God created the world, he put in nature everything we needed to know about good and bad, life and liberty. So they set the Bible aside.

A lot of ministers preached against the ideas of the Deists. Some opposed extremes of any kind and called for toleration and middle ground. Others saw this as a compromise of Christian beliefs and called for a return to the Reformation view of justification by faith alone. They hoped for a revival of religion—and they got one. When the *First Great Awakening* occurred, it, like the Reformation, turned the world upside down.

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

The decade of the 1730s was an important one for Protestant Christians in America and Great Britain.

In America, young Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) grew up in a family of preachers. He had been taught that he would





know exactly when he was converted, because all believers went through a process, including a part they called “humiliation” or fear of God’s judgment. But try as he might, Jonathan never felt this way. Instead, when he repented of his sins, he simply trusted in Christ’s righteousness to cover his sins. He discovered that in his trust he had less fear and more joy. The beauty of God and God’s way of salvation by Christ had changed his heart.

By the early 1730s, Jonathan had become a minister at a church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was concerned that many people were trusting in their own godly fear and righteousness for salvation, instead of looking to Christ. So in late 1734 he began preaching a series of sermons on justification by faith alone, telling his congregation about the kind of conversion he had experienced. People responded. A revival broke out that soon spread to surrounding towns. When ministers around the globe heard about it, they hoped for the same thing to happen in their churches.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, two brothers named John (1703-1791) and Charles (1707-1788) Wesley left England and sailed to Savannah, Georgia to minister to Native Americans. John was serving God, but like Jonathan Edwards, he never felt absolutely sure of his salvation. During his sea voyage to America, the weather turned nasty and everyone feared the ship would sink. But some Moravian ministers on board kept singing hymns, telling John they did not fear death because they were certain they would be with God for eternity. John wished he could believe the same about himself.

On May 24, 1738, after he had returned to England, he experienced a remarkable conversion. At a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, he listened to a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to the book of Romans and felt his heart “strangely warmed.” He realized that he needed to trust in justification as the Reformers taught it. Through his preaching, he became the most important leader of the Methodist movement.





By 1740, revivals were happening on both sides of the Atlantic, led by Jonathan Edwards in America, John Wesley in England, and other powerful preachers like George Whitefield (1714-1770), who preached on both continents. These revivals became the First Great Awakening. And out of this widespread change of heart arose a new movement that would be called *Evangelicalism*.

THE EVANGELICALS

Evangelicals are those that preach the “good news” of salvation by Christ. The heirs of the Reformation, Evangelicals of the First Great Awakening called others to embrace the Reformation teaching of salvation by faith in Christ alone. They were members of different denominations who sometimes disagreed with each other on certain points of doctrine. For example, Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinist in the Congregational denomination, and John Wesley was an Arminian in the Anglican Church—meaning they held to different teachings on the ability of the human will to choose God—but they worked together to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world.

Instead of ignoring the new ideas of the Enlightenment as some Christians did, Evangelicals interacted with them, offering a vital Christianity as an alternative to Deism or atheism. Contrary to the Deists, they called everyone to embrace the Bible as the divine and authoritative Word of God.

Their teachings emphasized conversion, and that salvation comes only through Christ and not human works. They believed God’s Spirit could revive the world from the deadness of sin and awaken the church out of its slumber. They believed it was their duty to actively tell others about their beliefs, through evangelism, missions, and charitable works. For these reasons, they continued to seek new revivals. When the fires of the First Great Awakening eventually died down, Evangelicals hoped for another one.





THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

The ideas of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley carried on into the next generation of Evangelicals. In the 1790s, Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), the president of Yale College and a minister in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, led a revival in local churches that spread into New York. It was carried on there by the work of a lawyer-turned-preacher named Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) after his conversion in 1821. That revival led to others, and at the same time, revivals were also breaking out in the Southern United States. These events became known as the *Second Great Awakening*.

As before, the Evangelicals active in these revivals came from diverse backgrounds and locations. But they united around their great emphasis on conversion. Many Evangelicals, especially Methodist followers of John Wesley in England, called for social changes that reflected a renewed Christian life. For example, they were active in ending slavery, improving the conditions of hospitals and prisons, and educating the poor. You will read a lot more about these efforts later in this book.

By the 1850s, the intensity of the Second Great Awakening had faded, but the work of Evangelicals continued on. Today, a large percentage of Christians from many different denominations identify themselves as Evangelicals because they emphasize the same things as their Awakenings ancestors: conversion, the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts, a duty to spread the gospel, and involvement in social reform.

FINDING THE TRUE STORY

The stories in this book, covering the years of 1700 to 1860, chronicle what could be the most unique, diverse, and influential movement in the history of the church. Why did we choose these particular characters instead of the many other Evangelicals of that period? It is not because the characters in these stories always





had correct doctrine or made fewer mistakes than others in their service to God! Like all human beings, sometimes they got it right and sometimes they messed up. That is why it is not wise to think of them as heroes. But God used them anyway, and their efforts became some of the most important in the Evangelical story. They are statesmen (William Wilberforce), philanthropists (Elizabeth Fry), explorers (David Livingstone), former slaves (Sojourner Truth), writers (Harriet Beecher Stowe), pastors (Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Liang Fa), and missionaries (William Carey, Adoniram and Ann Judson, Fidelia Fiske). They are women and men, educated and illiterate, from every ethnicity, class, and age. They were active in the world, willing to engage every trial for the spread of their “good news.”

We have also included the story of Johann Sebastian Bach, who would not have called himself an Evangelical. He was a Lutheran Christian active in the days at the very beginning of the Awakenings, before Evangelicalism came to be. But the work that he did to develop music within a vital Christianity helped make music a more significant part of worship in the church. This would be very important to later Evangelical movements, who used music as a method of preaching the gospel. And his story helps to show that during the Great Awakenings, people who did not agree with all the Evangelical ideals were still active for the gospel. Christians who, for example, thought the revivals were too enthusiastic, still called for renewed dedication to Christ. Christians from every tradition continued to proclaim the gospel during these years in the ways they believed were appropriate.

These are stories of real Christians, taken from their diaries, letters, and books. From them we learn that during the First and Second Great Awakenings, Christians became more and more concerned about living Christianly, not just believing Christianly. God used the tender hearts—and the strong hands—of his people to offer mercy to the world.

