

MBC Equipping Hour 2019

Church History

Week 6: The Late 18th Century and Beyond

Introduction

The end of the 18th century saw the rise and leveling of The Great Awakening. This was a monumental event in the life of the church, one which should not be missed. From this revival sprung up dozens and dozens of churches, cities were changed from places of debauchery to morally sound places and the advent of seminary came about. This time in history was one of great bliss and excitement for the church and some were sad to see it fade into the distance.

The Great Awakening occurred with no strategic planning or man-centered teaching. It was simply men of God, teaching the Word of God and the church living out what they heard in the midst of the world; it truly was a revival. But what happens when the revival ends? What happens when the excitement and emotional high is gone? The church is left with normal, everyday Christianity and church life.

In this final teaching, we are going to look at three major events which took place that are still affecting us today in the church. First of all, the advent of seminaries and why they came into existence. Secondly, what the Christian world looked like on North America after The Great Awakening. Lastly, the explosion of missions work around the world and the toll it took on men and women to take the gospel where it had never been.

Post-Great Awakening Protestant Seminaries

At the conclusion of The Great Awakening revival and the Revolutionary War and the Age of Enlightenment, the need to properly train men for ministry arose.¹ One of the reasons was that because people no longer 'trusted' the church, they sought to be trained outside the local church. Harvard College was already around since 1636 but was known as a Puritan/Congregationalist institution. In 1806, Harvard College appointed a well known theological liberal, Henry Ware², to oversee its divinity school. This was a result of the Enlightenment's push to man's own power to reason and free will. This would become Harvard Divinity School and no longer adhere to any denominational reference.

¹ This had always been the mission of the church, not set aside for a school to officially do. Men like Luther and Calvin were both pastors of local churches and seminary teachers. The scope of this paper is not to discuss the transition from church to outside learning. This is also concentrated to North America, not looking at seminary training worldwide.

² He believed and taught Unitarianism, this is a non-Trinitarian view of God, and Arminianism.

When this happened, the Calvinists withdrew and formed their own seminary in Andover, MA, called Andover Theological Seminary. At the time, this was known as the “Old Calvinist” seminary. As all this was taking place, the Presbyterians were also looking to start their own place of study. In 1812, Archibald Alexander founded Princeton Theological Seminary to train Presbyterian men for ministry. This is the second oldest seminary in the U.S. behind Andover. Though Princeton Theological Seminary would go on to produce some of the greatest minds in church history, they too were not immune from liberalism.

After returning from The War, J. Gresham Machen would continue to teach at Princeton as the head of New Testament studies. He was known for debating the modernists and those who held to a liberal interpretation of the Scriptures. In the mid-1920's, Princeton Seminary was starting to take on liberal and modernistic belief's herself. Seeing this shift, Machen would plead that the seminary would stay the course and not cave to cultural pressure. Unfortunately, his cries went unheard and he left the seminary he loved and started Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. Just as Harvard had left the conservative path resulting in Princeton, so now Westminster was birthed from Princeton's fall into liberalism.

The Second Great Awakening

After the conclusion of the First Great Awakening in the mid-1700's, from 1800-? came The Second Great Awakening. To be sure, this started as a good thing from the Lord. It differed from the First Great Awakening as it was 100x bigger. The first saw localized revivals for about 3-5 years, the second was from Canada to Georgia and from Maine to Kentucky and lasted for up to 40 years. The first did not see a rise in church membership, while the second literally saw hundreds of thousands coming to faith and joining churches.

There is no real record as to where this started, but many trace it back to a small town, Cane Ridge, Kentucky. So not only did revival come to the ivy-covered walls of New England's colleges, revival also came to America's wild frontier. It was a massive revival in one week in August 1801. The Scotch-Irish who settled along these frontier lines brought with them the practice of the “communion season” or “Holy Faire.” These were intense, soul-searching weeks packed with sermons and culminating in the taking of the Lord's Supper.

One of these Holy Faires, of sorts, in Cane Ridge literally ignited waves of revival with hundreds of conversions. This may very well be the origin of the week of revival of sermons, now commonplace in American Christianity. These revivals led to a whole new focus on religion on the frontier.

The Stone-Campbell Movement was born there. Soon Methodism would also spread as circuit-riding preachers carried sermons from church to church in their saddlebags.

Charles G. Finney^{3 4}

Charles Finney (1792-1875) ministered in the wake of the "Second Awakening," as it has been called. A Presbyterian layover, Finney one day experienced "a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost" which "like a wave of electricity going through and through me ... seemed to come in waves of liquid love." The next morning, he informed his first client of the day, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause and I cannot plead yours." Refusing to attend Princeton Seminary (or any seminary, for that matter). Finney began conducting revivals in upstate New York. One of his most popular sermons was "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts." This was a reaction against the pervasive Calvinism of the Great Awakening, the successors of that great movement of God's Spirit turned from God to humans, from the preaching of objective content (namely, Christ and him crucified) to the emphasis on getting a person to "make a decision."

Finney's one question for any given teaching was, "Is it fit to convert sinners with?" One result of Finney's revivalism was the division of Presbyterians in Philadelphia and New York into Arminian and Calvinistic factions. In his practice of revivals and in his writings on revivals, Finney gave to American Christianity the "New Measures." These include prolonged meetings, dramatic if not theatrical elements, naming people publicly for their sins and calling them publicly for repentance, and the "anxious bench."

The Puritans spoke of someone under conviction of sin as being in a state of anxiety; that person was soul anxious. Before Finney, if sinners felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit during a sermon, they would notify the pastor after the sermon, usually waiting a few days. The minister would then pay a pastoral call and counsel the sinner. Finney's new measure of the anxious bench changed all that.

Finney instituted the altar call, pleading during that prolonged service for sinners to come forward, kneel at the bench before the platform, confess their sins, and be saved. The New Measures were necessarily bound to Finney's theology, which was also not only new but an intentional and decided departure from the Calvinism and from the doctrine of the sovereignty of God that dominated the First Great Awakening. Perhaps Benjamin B. Warfield best summed up Finney's deficient theology when he observed that ***you could remove God from it and it would not change much of anything.***

Finney starts off *Lectures on Revivals and Religion* with a stunning declaration: "Religion is the work of man. It is something for man to do." When man acts, God responds, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, brings revival. It is not only incumbent on the sinner to make the

³ <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2019/05/second-great-awakening/>

⁴ <https://www.monergism.com/disturbing-legacy-charles-finney>

first move, but it is also incumbent on the revival preacher to set the right conditions. In other words, Finney told would-be revival preachers to use means, to use techniques. Now we understand why these were not only new measures but wrong measures, and measures that sent American Christianity and revivalism off in a dangerous and heretical trajectory.

Finney believed that the doctrine of the sovereignty of God served only to send people to hell. In fact, at one point he claimed, "More than five thousand millions have gone down to hell" on account of emphasizing that true religion, the salvation of a soul, is the exclusive work of God alone.

Finney's Doctrinal Errors

This certainly is not an exhaustive list, but an attempt to show how there are no new ideas or movements under the sun. The same issues which were fought a thousand years ago were fought 200 years ago and are still being fought today.

Finney's doctrine of justification rests upon a denial of the doctrine of original sin. Held by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, this biblical teaching insists that we are all born into this world inheriting Adam's guilt and corruption. We are, therefore, in bondage to a sinful nature. As someone has said, "We sin because we're sinners": the condition of sin determines the acts of sin, rather than vice versa. ***But Finney followed Pelagius***, the fifth-century heretic, who was condemned by more church councils than any other person in church history, in denying this doctrine.

Finney believed that human beings could choose whether they would be corrupt by nature or redeemed, referring to original sin as an "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma". In clear terms, Finney denied the notion that human beings possess a sinful nature. Therefore, if Adam leads us into sin, not by our inheriting his guilt and corruption, but by following his poor example, this leads logically to the view of Christ, the Second Adam, as saving by example. This is precisely where Finney takes it, in his explanation of the atonement.

Having nothing to do with original sin, a substitutionary atonement, and the supernatural character of the new birth, Finney proceeds to attack "the article by which the church stands or falls" — justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Finney states "The doctrine of imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption." After all, Christ's righteousness "could do no more than justify himself. It can never be imputed to us ... it was naturally impossible, then, for him to obey in our behalf " This "representing of the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many".

The view that faith is the sole condition of justification is "the antinomian view," Finney asserts. "We shall see that perseverance in obedience to the end of life is also a condition of justification. Some theologians have made justification a condition of sanctification, instead of making sanctification a condition of justification. But this we shall see is an erroneous view of the subject."

Finney also held to Christian perfectionism, that one would no longer sin after they said they were saved. He was frustrated that those people who came forward for his alter calls were not living their confession. He thought he was going to usher in the Millennium reign of Christ and that the church had to be perfect for Christ to come back.

Finney's Mark on Evangelicalism Today⁵

In many ways Charles Finney led a wave of theological and practical innovation that has become the bane and the hallmark of American evangelicalism. That a person whose teachings were heretical by classical Christian standards is somewhat of a hero to popular evangelicalism says much about the problems in the contemporary church. This is at least partly due to the fact that American evangelicals are so impressed with success and results. Finney is credited as being the developer of planned mass evangelism. As is the case today, if a mass evangelist is highly successful, it is considered inappropriate to question his teaching. Finney's successful revival meetings created credence for his teachings.

Jerry Falwell calls him "one of my heroes and a hero to many evangelicals, including Billy Graham." I recall wandering through the Billy Graham Center some years ago, observing the place of honor given to Charles Finney in the evangelical tradition, reinforced by the first class in theology I had at a Christian college, where Finney's work was required reading. The New York revivalist was the oft-quoted and celebrated champion of the Christian singer Keith Green and the Youth With A Mission organization. He is particularly esteemed among the leaders of the Christian Right and the Christian Left, by both Jerry Falwell and Jim Wallis (Sojourners' magazine), and his imprint can be seen in movements that appear to be diverse, but in reality are merely heirs to Finney's legacy. From the Vineyard movement and the Church Growth Movement to the political and social crusades, televangelism, and the Promise Keepers movement, as a former Wheaton College president rather glowingly cheered, "Finney, lives on!"⁶

⁵ <https://cicministry.org/commentary/issue53.htm>

⁶ <https://www.monergism.com/disturbing-legacy-charles-finney>

Word of Faith Movement

In a sense, one could say that Finney was the fore-runner of the modern "Word of Faith" movement as well. I believe this because of the similar emphasis on the ability of man to cause his own spiritual effects by the right use of means. The "Faith" movement, as characterized by Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland is well known for claiming that there are "laws" built into the universe that can be tapped into by those who have the right "revelation knowledge" and put it to use to create the desired spiritual effects. The similarity with Finney is the unbridled optimism that humans with the right spiritual knowledge can solve every important problem and create their own desired results by the right use of means.

Finney believed that the power to produce the desired results are in the hands of humans whose minds are enlightened by the right spiritual principles. This "can do" attitude, which is so American, has permeated modern evangelicalism. Finney certainly deserves some "credit" for first articulating and popularizing it, but it is also American evangelicalism's worse shame. The errors and excesses of revivalists and evangelists whose "success" in finding followers has served as cover for their false teachings has roots that go all the way back to Charles Finney.

Modern Church Growth Movement

I hope that just by reading his own theology, practices and beliefs, you can trace some lines from him to what we do today. Finney and his theology has not and will never go away. He appealed to two major aspects of humanity...success and emotions. If you can make people feel good *and* be successful to gain the praises of your fellow man, you are not going to stop. As Rick Warren has stated "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart...It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs."

Finney's theology was the seedbed of many issues we face today, but one of the most widespread issues was that of the church growth movement. Since the advent of the modern church growth movement which dates from the 1950's, pastors and local churches have been under massive pressure to do something to facilitate church growth. The movement was founded primarily by two people, independently. Those people are Donald McGavran and Robert Schuller. Donald McGavran wrote *The Bridges of God* in 1955. C. Peter Wagner claims that this book, "launched the Church Growth Movement."⁷

Rick Warren cites McGavran's book as being influential early in his ministry. About that same time Robert Schuller started his ministry in California which became the Crystal Cathedral. Later, in 1970, Schuller founded the Robert Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership,

⁷ <https://cicministry.org/commentary/issue89.htm>

where he has trained many key leaders in the Church Growth Movement including Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. It is accurate to say the McGavran is the intellectual founder of the movement and Schuller the most visible popularizer of the movement.

The movement has spawned some highly visible “successes” such as Willow Creek Church and Saddleback Church. Nevertheless, in spite of fifty years of training thousands of pastors, weekly church attendance in America has not risen in terms of the percentage of the population. Church growth advocates often cite the figure that 80% of churches are declining or are in a state of plateau. Seminaries use that figure to support the need to learn church growth principles. Since the movement has yet to reverse the trends, another way of interpreting these figures is to know that if you accept the definitions of the Church Growth Movement, 80% of all those going into the ministry are failing. Teaching Church Growth in seminaries has yet to reverse the trend.⁸

Whatever else the Church Growth Movement has done, it has convinced the majority of church leaders that if their local organization is not growing, this is a sure sign they are “unhealthy” and failing. Rick Warren says, “Forget church growth, Church health is the key to church growth. All living things grow if they’re healthy. You don’t have to make them grow -- it’s just natural for living organisms.” So, according to this thinking, failure to grow is a sign of disease or sickness. Having convinced pastors and other church leaders that they are failing, Warren and others leave them desperate for a solution.

*I do not want to get bogged down with Charles Finney, but the amount of influence his teachings and beliefs still have on the church today are innumerable. There is almost no corner of modern evangelicalism that he has not touched or influenced.

From Finney to Pentecostalism

With Finney’s emphasis on holiness, emotions, the Holy Spirit, signs and wonders, one can easily see how the Pentecostal church looks to him as their forefather. From Hillsong to Bethel and the Assembly of God, these churches have taken on much of what he has taught as to be from God Himself.

Most trace modern Pentecostalism to begin in 1901 in Topeka, Kansas at a Bible school conducted by Charles Fox Parham, a holiness teacher and former Methodist pastor. In January 1901, Parham asked the students at the Bible school to study the Bible to find out the scriptural evidence for receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Using the Pentecost account in Acts 2 they concluded that speaking in tongues was the confirmation of receiving the Holy Spirit. Subsequently, the Pentecostal movement began during the first days of 1901 just as the world

⁸ Almost all major seminaries teach modern church growth techniques at some level.

entered the Twentieth Century. The first person to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit was Agnes Ozman, one of Parham's Bible School students; she spoke in tongues on the very first day of the new century, January 1st, 1901. According to J. Roswell Flower, the founding Secretary of the Assemblies of God, Ozman's experience was the "touch felt round the world," an event which "made the Pentecostal Movement of the Twentieth Century."

Though it was not until 1906 that Pentecostalism achieved worldwide attention through the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles led by the African American preacher William Joseph Seymour. He learned about the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a Bible school that Parham conducted in Houston, Texas in 1905. Invited to pastor a black holiness church in Los Angeles in 1906, Seymour opened the historic meeting in April of 1906 in a former African Methodist Episcopal church building at 312 Azusa Street in downtown Los Angeles.

What happened at Azusa Street has fascinated church historians for decades and has yet to be fully understood and explained. For over three years, the Azusa Street "Apostolic Faith Mission" conducted three services a day, seven days a week, where thousands of seekers received the Holy Spirit. Word of the revival was spread abroad through 'The Apostolic Faith', a paper that Seymour sent free of charge to some 50,000 subscribers. From Azusa Street the revival spread throughout the United States. Holiness leaders from the Church of God in Christ (Memphis, Tennessee), the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Pentecostal Holiness Church (Georgia and the Carolinas), were present at Azusa and carried its message back to their churches.

For most early Pentecostals, speaking in tongues was associated with spiritual power and with an anointing to serve rather than spiritual perfection. Although diversity characterized their beliefs and theology (Pentecostals ranged from Wesleyan-holiness, to Reformed, and Unitarian), Pentecostals were centered on soul-winning and perceived politics and national events to be dangerous diversions. But early Pentecostals were also both prohibitionists and pacifists (many chose Conscientious Objector status during WWI), and the early Pentecostal churches often stood in opposition to the prevailing contemporary attitudes toward wealth, recreation, and dress.

Missions Movements

With all the chaos going on during the end of the 18th and through the 19th century, there was still some very good things happening. Known as the *First Era of Missions*, from late 1700's – the early 1900's. At the close of the 18th century, Christianity had made inroads and existed on 6 of the 7 continents⁹.

William Carey (1761-1834)

It is often difficult for us to believe that in the late 18th century the majority of Protestant churches had very little interest in missionary outreach. Jesus' command to go to all nations was for the generation of apostles, they thought. The Moravians had launched many courageous missionary efforts. Inspired by these, William Carey urged his fellow Baptist ministers in England to form a missionary society. At first there was little interest. On one occasion an older pastor sneered at his appeal, saying, "**Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he'll do it without consulting you or me.**" What inspired Carey? His readings of Captain James Cook, the English Naval explorer. Carey read about people out there that needed the gospel and he wanted to take it to them.

In 1792 he wrote his "***Inquiry Into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen***" that became almost a charter for modern missions. A society was formed to send missionaries abroad. Carey was appointed one of the first. He would go to India for the next 40 years, not returning home even once.

Carey's writings and example would go on to inspire tens of thousands to take the gospel to the most remote places around the world. *There are two very bright notes about the First Era. One is the astonishing demonstration of love and sacrifice on the part of those who went out. Africa, especially, was a forbidding continent. All mission outreach to Africa prior to 1775 had totally failed. Of all Catholic efforts, all Moravian efforts, nothing remained. Not one missionary of any kind existed on the continent on the eve of the First Era. The gruesome statistics of almost inevitable sickness and death that haunted, yet did not daunt, the decades of truly valiant missionaries who went out after 1790 in virtually a suicidal stream cannot be matched by any other era or by any other cause. Very few missionaries to Africa in the first 60 years of the First Era survived more than two years. As I have reflected on this measure of devotion I have been humbled to tears, for I wonder—if I or my people today could or would match that record. Can you imagine our Urbana students today going out into missionary work if they knew that for decade after decade 19 out of 20 of those before them had died almost on arrival on the field?*¹⁰

⁹ Only missing Antarctica

¹⁰ Ralph D. Winter, *Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions: Modern Missions*