THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

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Class information

Date
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History shows that God was directly involved in the development of many nations. Numerous awakenings were the main background in the history of the formation of the United States. The wave of awakening often covered the young nation, and God’s hand guided and developed it. During its short history, this nation experienced three Great Awakenings, which affected not only the religious life of churches, but also society as a whole. It should also be noted that America became not only the biggest super power, but also the largest missionary country. Many American missionaries had a tremendous impact on the spread of Christianity throughout the world. In the XIX century, Christianity was mainly concentrated in Europe and North America. However, at the beginning of the XX century, Christianity began to get its followers in China, India and many African countries.

In America, six out of nine leading colleges in the country were established as a result of awakenings. This also led to changes in society. Awakenings gave the first shocks (impulses) to the greatest social reform in the American history. The movement against slavery, prison reform, child labor laws, women’s rights in America were the main part of the reforms that were generated by awakenings.

The Great Awakening is the movement among North American Protestants aimed at revival and renewal of the religious life. It got its name according to the preaching of Tennent 1735: “Awaken those who sleep ... the lost, deaf; awaken them to new spiritual life.”1 “The first Great Awakening was a series of revivals, which spread throughout England’s colonies in the mid-eighteenth century”.2 The first Great Awakening is associated with the activities of

1 James T. Egan, The Impact of William Tennent, Sr. on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies (Kentucky: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 19.

Presbyterian G. Tennenta, Congregationalist J. Edwards and especially raveling Anglican preacher J. Whitefield. All of them were Calvinists, tried in theology, which contributed to their success. By the end of the XVII century, in the British colonies of New England, the religious situation was complicated by the absence or weakness of parish structures, insufficient number of priests, lack of theological education and sometimes because of the moral uncleanness. In 1690-1700, communities of the Dutch reformed the Church in the colonies of New York and New Jersey; the so-called Dutch evangelical renewal began. Preachers B. Freeman and G. Bertolf, referring to the “religious sentiment” of believers, expelled pastors accused of violations of the principles of Christian ethics and commitment to “deadening” dogma. At the same time, Congregational theologians decided that in the new environment, it was necessary to abandon the principle of complete independence of communities in the doctrinal issues that led to the beginning of transformation of Congregationalism of New England in Presbyterianism and the formation of the first Synod of the Presbyterian Church in America. In this church, a discussion began about whether pastors were obliged to sign the Westminster Confession. Pastors, who were educated in America and who were especially enthusiastic by awakening, insisted on a compromise decision of the issue: signing the most “significant items”. From this point of view, in their sermons, they could avoid the dogma of double (to salvation or damnation in hell) unconditional predestination, which frightened many believers. “In New Jersey, the Great Awakening of the Presbyterians began with sermons of William Tennent, who served in congregations of Philadelphia and its environs.”\(^3\) In 1725, his son Gilbert organized evangelical public worships in New Brunswick and New Jersey that brought different believers of Protestant denominations together. Since 1727, the number of people at the meetings began to grow

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\(^3\) James T. Egan, *The Impact of William Tennent, Sr. on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Kentucky: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 22.
rapidly. In 1726, William Tennent founded in Neshaminy (Bucks County, near Philadelphia), the first Presbyterian seminary in America for training priests.

Soteriology of the first Great Awakening is fully represented by the preaching activity of J. Whitefield and theological thought of J. Edwards. “They were among the leaders in the final years of the movement.” In 1734, the Reverend Jonathan Edwards began to vigorously evangelize in Northampton, where he was pastor, with a cycle of sermons about justification by faith. In December, 1734, “the Spirit of God began to create something unusual among us.” In a short period of time, the whole city was drenched with interest in spiritual things. This awakening was supported by other pastors. It covered about 20 churches in the west of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Observers, who arrived in Northampton, were deeply impressed by what they saw, and they took the lights of awakening to their churches. It was an unusual awakening as never in the history of America such a great number of churches and cities were involved simultaneously. Sermons of Jonathan Edwards exposed the sins, denouncing them with an exceptional force. His most famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is still considered a classic. This sermon caused an unusual response of the Holy Spirit so that people being under the conviction saw the surrounding flames of hell. They gripped the pillars of the church and repented of their sins. In his numerous theological writings, Edwards systematically expounded and explained the views of Augustine and Calvin. In his treatise Free Will, he argued that a will is an expression of a person’s personality as a whole, who in his/her actions is always guided by the strongest of motives, the source of which is in the heart. The essay “Original Sin” focuses on how these motives become selfish and make people turn away from God until the

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grace of God does not transform the human heart. In the essay “Religious Affections”, he argued that a true spirituality is born from an overabundance of the heart rescued by God and not as a result of emotional or volitional efforts. The reviving of Calvinist soteriology was basically the most significant achievement of the first theological awakening. “J. Edwards was less certain than G. Whitefield about the nature of the Great Awakening.” During this time, the awakening spread throughout New England and through the sermons of Whitefield penetrated to the south of the continent.

English Methodist George Whitefield, who arrived in Georgia in 1738, had been preaching for 15 months moving from town to town and collecting hundreds of listeners. His highly emotional style of preaching made listeners weep and repent of their sins. It became a benchmark for the movement of the clergy of the Great Awakening. Sermons of that period were characterized by an emphasis on the need for “a new birth, or being born again as a fact of the subjective religious experience”, which could be witnessed only by believers. Nevertheless, the experience of “revival” was considered as the basis for finding the “assurance of salvation”, although G. Tennent insisted that the main sign of salvation is "constancy in permanently changed life”. Virtually, all members of the Great Awakening in spite of Calvin recognized the possibility of “fall from grace” while Whitefield, sharing the teachings of Arminius, refrained from direct references to it, and Edwards emphatically rejected Arminianism and remained faithful to Calvinism in the interpretation of the canons of the Synod of Dort. In religious practices, Edwards distinguished true and false grace and stated that all cases of falling of Christians were falling away from the false grace. The connection of personal faith with salvation was rather understood in the light of Lutheranism than Calvinism. He also recognized

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the need of some good deeds to achieve salvation. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield had a considerable impact on people, who subsequently met in Philadelphia to adopt the Constitution of the United States of America. Benjamin Franklin and other members of the government were known as admirers of Whitefield. Franklin even participated in the publication of Whitefield’s magazines.

The first Great Awakening affected the Church and society. Under the leadership of Edwards, a great number of Congregationalists of New England and Presbyterians of middle colonies were inspired by the ideal pure Church. They argued that only believers can be admitted to the Table of the Lord and considered full members of the community. This belief that grew out of the sublime notion of purity and holiness upset the “partial agreement” and even liberal ecclesiology of S. Stoddard – Edward’s grandfather, who fought for all members of the community to be involved in the Table of the Lord. The first Great Awakening brought other important results, because it was an incentive to ensure that the “separated Congregationalists” and Baptists established the church completely independent of the provinces of New England. Edwards and other members of the party of the New World, while sharing their ideas, did not find this step necessary. However, Baptists and “separated Congregationalists” were convinced that Edwards called exactly for that in his sermons.

“The first Great Awakening marked the end of the Puritan conception of society as a beneficial and useful union of the church and public life.”7 Leaders of awakening advocated for the purity of the Church series, even if it destroyed the historically established in Puritanism view of the need of a close connection between the Church and State. During the First Great Awakening, the awakening became general among ministers, churches, ordinary people as well

as those, who became members of the first constitutional government. At this time, a great number of colleges were founded, which became centers for the Bible study: Harvard, Yale and Princeton Colleges. The history preserved the evidence that the First Great Awakening affected virtually all sectors of society.
Bibliography


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