

Church History (49): The First Great Awakening

Ian Murray defined a revival as, "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, brought about by the intercession of Christ, resulting in a new degree of life in the churches and a widespread movement of grace among the unconverted."¹ Perhaps we can say, revival is the ordinary work of the Spirit, done in an extraordinary way. In this lesson, we will consider the forerunners, locations, and lasting results of the Great Awakening.

I. The First Great Awakening

1. *Its forerunners.* While the First Great Awakening had its formal start in 1734 (under the ministry of Johnathan Edwards), similar to the Reformation, it was preceded by various forerunners. Foremost among these was, Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691-1747), whom George Whitefield referred to as "a worthy old soldier of Jesus Christ" and "the beginner of the great work which I trust the Lord is carrying on in these parts."² "Frelinghuysen was born in Germany, and converted in his father's congregation at age seventeen. He then studied in the Netherlands, where he mastered the Dutch language and learned to preach in Dutch" (Beeke).³ He was ordained in 1717, and pastored a small church in East Friesland. "After fourteen months, the young minister accepted a position in North Holland, as co-regent of the Latin school. But only a few months after taking that position, he was approached by Classis Amsterdam of the Reformed Church and asked if he was willing to accept a pastorate in Raritan. He responded affirmatively, but thought that Raritan was in one of the adjoining Dutch provinces rather than in America" (Beeke)!⁴ In fact, Frelinghuysen was called by four small Dutch Reformed congregations in New Jersey's Raritan Valley (Raritan, Six Mile Run, Three Mile Run, and North Branch). As he gave his word, he felt obligated, and so a 28-year-old Frelinghuysen sailed to New York and the New World in September of 1719.

Unlike the English Pilgrims and Puritans who came to the New World primarily for religious reasons, the Dutch who settled in North America were largely motivated by economic factors. The chronic shortage of ministers posed a problem for the new Dutch churches in North America. The shortage reflected the short-sightedness of the mother church, which insisted that ministers for the New World be educated and ordained in the Netherlands under the auspices of Classis Amsterdam. Consequently, the spiritual life and moral tone of the colony was adversely affected. Doctrinally these American churches were consistent with their mother church in the Netherlands. Their standards were the Three Forms of Unity adopted by the Synod of Dort. Practically, however, most members lived on a low spiritual plane. Dead orthodoxy had been a serious problem from the beginning and had only grown worse by the eighteenth century. The time was ripe for the waves of revival that would sweep over the Dutch and British colonies. And the minister who played a key role in initiating those revivals was Theodorus Frelinghuysen.⁵

"The Raritan Valley area in New Jersey was settled mostly by Dutch Reformed farmers, who were attracted to its rich soil. Though most of them showed more interest in improving their economic condition than in pursuing spiritual growth, the farmers still looked forward to the arrival of their new

¹ Ian Murray, *Pentecost Today? The Biblical Basis for Understanding Revival*, 1

² Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxviii-xxix

³ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, viii

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, ix

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, x-xi

pastor" (Beeke).⁶ Immediately, Frelinghuysen's preaching was met with opposition. Several within the four churches were offended and complained to influential Reformed ministers in New York whose views differed from those of Frelinghuysen. "These ministers levied serious accusations at Frelinghuysen, who responded in kind. Other pastors supported Frelinghuysen, although they cautioned him not to be too harsh in judging the spiritual lives of the people" (Beeke).⁷ On March 12, 1723, several disgruntled members of Frelinghuysen's church, with support of a few ministers from New York, locked him out of two churches. This led Frelinghuysen to excommunicate several prominent members, which resulted in a prolonged feud. "The controversy raged intermittently until, through the prodding of Classis Amsterdam, they reached a compromise. Frelinghuysen agreed to rescind their excommunication, and the complainants agreed to accept Frelinghuysen as an orthodox Reformed minister and return to the church" (Beeke).⁸

"Despite relentless criticism, Frelinghuysen faithfully carried on his labors. While some people were offended by his searching preaching, others were convicted by it and came to a saving knowledge of Christ. It appears that more than 300 persons were converted under Frelinghuysen's ministry in New Jersey" (Beeke).⁹ Although Frelinghuysen remained within the Dutch Reformed Church, his influence exceeded it. "Among his close associates were clergymen of Presbyterian, German Reformed, and Anglican persuasions. Due to these contacts, he was able to influence the English-speaking community in the Middle Colonies and thereby augment his contribution to the Great Awakening" (Beeke).¹⁰ By 1727, Frelinghuysen was accepting invitations to preach in barns and churches in New York, Staten Island, Long Island, and as far west as Pennsylvania. "The result of his preaching and contacts with ministers and lay people of kindred spirits, was that revivals gradually spread until much of New Jersey and New York was caught up in what was later called 'the Great Awakening'" (Beeke).¹¹ "The ministry of Theodorus Frelinghuysen in the 1720s was a precursor to the greater revival or revivals to come in the 1730s. Several of the mighty preachers of the Great Awakening, such as George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and Jonathan Edwards, appealed to Frelinghuysen's example as a blessed forerunner of their own activities" (Needham).¹²

Frelinghuysen exercised an unrelenting and powerful ministry, covering an extensive area and preaching not only in his meeting houses, but in homes and barns. A man of sound learning, he printed several of his sermons and used them as a declaration of his doctrine. He established schools for the children and also trained several godly young men and used them, though unordained, in the work of evangelism. Because of his stalwart Christian character, powerful evangelism and militant aggressiveness, Frelinghuysen exercised a strong influence on several other ministers of all denominations, and it is to be regretted that so magnificent a life has been so largely overlooked.¹³

Perhaps one of the most important men influenced by Frelinghuysen was Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764), son of William Tennent (1673-1746). "William Tennent was a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania. He was a man of extensive learning and his ministry was marked by vital evangelism and spiritual power. He had four sons, all of whom experienced the call of God to the ministry, and, fearing the harmful influences of the usual places of education, he trained them in his own home. Other young

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xii

⁷ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xvii

⁸ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxiii

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxiv

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxv

¹¹ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxviii

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:351

¹³ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:414-415

men asked for the same training and in order to accommodate them Tennent build a one-room school house which, in contempt, its detractors termed *The log College*" (Dallimore).¹⁴ When William Tennent's oldest son, Gilbert, undertook his pastoral duties in New Brunswick, NJ, in 1726, the work of the *College* largely fell into his hands. He and Frelinghuysen quickly became close friends, and on occasion held joint services in the Dutch and English languages. Gilbert himself confessed to be greatly influenced by the manner of Frelinghuysen's preaching. Gilbert wrote in his journal: "When I came here I had the privilege of seeing much of the fruits of Frelinghuysen's ministry. This, together with a kind letter which he sent me respecting the necessity of dividing the Word aright and giving to every man his portion in due season, through the divine blessing, excited me to great earnestness in ministerial labors."¹⁵

The Awakening within the American Presbyterian Church centered around the Tennent family, headed by the father William Tennent. Although William and his sons were Presbyterian ministers of like Evangelical mind, it was William's oldest son Gilbert Tennent who emerged as the family's foremost preacher. Gilbert was born and raised in Ireland; his father William then took the family across the Atlantic to reside in Philadelphia, chief city in the Colony of Pennsylvania. Gilbert graduated from Yale College in 1725, and the following year was called to the city of New Brunswick (in the Colony of New Jersey), tasked with setting up a new Presbyterian congregation. It was here that Tennent was profoundly affected by the life and ministry of the Dutch Reformed preacher Theodorus Frelinghuysen, who was also stationed in New Jersey. As a result of Frelinghuysen's influence, the young Tennent began increasingly emphasizing, in his own peaching, the futility of a faith that was nothing more than head-knowledge, the importance of conviction of sin, and the sole sufficiency of Christ as Savior of sinners. Tennent's ministry became marked by genuine revival in the early 1730s: the first indisputable green shoots of the Great Awakening.¹⁶

2. *Its locations.* (1) America. Having mentioned that revival had its beginnings in the late 1720s (in the middle colonies), it had its more formal start in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1731. "The first true signs of the Great Awakening in New England came in the early 1730s, in Northampton, Massachusetts, under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)" (Needham).¹⁷ "The immediate occasion of its commencement was a series of sermons by Johnathan Edwards, on the doctrine of Justification by Faith; and among the most efficient means of carrying it on, were his sermons, proving that 'every mouth shall be stopped' at the day of judgment, and that 'nothing, at any one moment, keeps wicked men out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God'" (Tracy).¹⁸ "The revival in Northampton was so community-wide in its impact, it resulted in three hundred of the town's young men and women being received into church membership in a six-month period. The movement spread from Northampton across the Connecticut River valley" (Needham).¹⁹ In 1737, Edwards wrote a formal defense of the revival called, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*.

A great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world, became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees, and all ages.

¹⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:415

¹⁵ Joel Beeke, *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Serons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen*, xxv-xxvi

¹⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:352-353

¹⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:358

¹⁸ Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 1

¹⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:359

The noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things, was soon thrown by; all the conversations, in all companies and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people carrying on their ordinary secular business...The work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town: so that in the spring and summer following, 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house...The doings of God were then seen in His sanctuary, God's day was a delight, and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth.²⁰

The revival intensified in late 1739 with the arrival of George Whitefield (1714-1770). News of his success in England had already arrived in America. Having landed in Delaware, he travelled by land to Philadelphia where he preached every night. He travelled from Philadelphia to New York, south to Charleston (SC), and then to New England. For the next 14 months "more than half of the total population of the Colonies had heard him preach" (Dallimore)²¹ "Multitudes professed conversion, and many new congregations were formed. Whitefield wrote in his journal of his preaching in Boston: 'O how the Word did run! It rejoiced my heart to see such numbers greatly affected, so that some of them, I believe, could scarcely refrain from crying out, that the place was no other than a Bethel and the gate of heaven'" (Needham).²² In October, 1740, Whitefield had the privilege of meeting Edwards. Whitefield wrote in his journal: "Mr. Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian, but at present weak in body. I think I have not seen his fellow in all New England."²³ Edwards described this visit as follows: "Mr. Whitefield preached four sermons in the meeting-house (besides a private lecture at my house). The congregation was extraordinarily melted by each sermon, almost the whole assembly being in tears for a great part of the time."²⁴

"If Whitefield was the dominating preacher of the Awakening, Edwards became its dominating theologian. Indeed, if any person can lay claim to be America's greatest theologian of all time, in terms of intellectual power and influence, it would almost certainly be Edwards" (Needham).²⁵ In addition to his *Faithful Narrative*, Edwards published several treatises on the Revival. Perhaps his fullest treatment was written in 1742, and called: *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*. His goal was stated at the outset, "To show that the extraordinary work which has of late been going on in this land, is a glorious work of God." He began with three general exhortations: "We should not judge of this work by the supposed causes, but by the effects; we should judge by the rule of Scripture; and we should distinguish the good from the bad, and not judge of the whole by a part."²⁶

Whatever imprudences there have been, and whatever sinful irregularities; whatever vehemence of the passions, and heats of the imagination, transports, and ecstasies: whatever error in judgment, and indiscreet seal; and whatever outcries, faintings, and agitations of body; yet, it is manifest and notorious, that there has been of late a very uncommon influence upon the minds of a very great part of the inhabitants of New England,

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:348

²¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:415

²² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:361

²³ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:537

²⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:538

²⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:361

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:366-374

attended with the best effects. There has been a great increase of seriousness, and sober consideration of eternal things; a disposition to hearken to what is said of such things, with attention and affection; a disposition to treat matters of religion with solemnity, and as of great importance; to make these things subject of conversation; to hear the word of God preached, and to take all opportunities in order to it; to attend on the public worship of God, and all external duties of religion, in a more solemn and decent manner; so that there is a remarkable and general alternation in the face of New England in these respects.²⁷

(2) England. In a narrow sense, the Awakening began in England under the ministry of Whitefield in 1737. Refused the use of the churches he preached in the open fields. "Whitefield's preaching on the new birth was not at all received by the Anglican clergy in England, and churches began to be barred to him" (Haykin).²⁸ "My preaching in the fields may displease some timorous, bigoted men, but I am thoroughly persuaded it pleases God, and why should I fear anything else."²⁹ "From this point on, Whitefield would relish and delight in his calling as an open-air preacher. He would preach in fields and foundries, in shops, cemeteries, and pubs, atop horses and even a hangman's scaffold, from stone walls and balconies, staircases and windmills" (Haykin).³⁰ John Wesley (1703-1791) began assisting Whitefield in March of 1739, and then his brother, Charles Wesley (1707-1788), began to assist a few years later. "In addition to his preaching throughout the length and breadth of England, Whitefield regularly itinerated throughout Wales, visited Ireland twice, and journeyed fourteen times to Scotland. He crossed the Atlantic thirteen times, stopping once in Bermuda for eleven weeks, and preached in virtually every major town on the eastern seaboard of America. What is so remarkable about all of this is Whitefield lived at a time when travel to a town but twenty miles away was a significant undertaking" (Haykin).³¹

(3) Wales. "The Evangelical Revivals in England and Wales were not isolated from each other; they permeated each other, sometimes involving the same figures, notably George Whitefield and Howell Harris. Like England, the form in which Wales experienced its share of the Revival was within a declining Anglican Church" (Needham).³² Howell Harris (1714-1773) was the founder of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism, and was preaching to large crowds in open fields, three years before Whitefield. "Whitefield's idea of preaching in the open air did not originate with himself. It had been put into his mind by his exchange of letters with a fearless, tireless, dynamic Welshman, Howell Harris. For three years this man had been exhorting immense throngs of his fellow-countrymen out of doors and had been used of God in the awaking of hundreds" (Dallimore).³³ Other Awakening preachers joined forces with Harris such as Daniel Rowland (1711-1790), William Williams (1717-1791), and Howell Davies (1716-1770). Unfortunately, later in his ministry Howell Harris, fell prey to some extremes, and eventually, in 1750, Whitefield and the other Welsh Calvinistic Methodists broke fellowship with him. "The Harris of latter years may seem a faint copy of the earlier dynamic, effectual preacher and brilliant organizer of converts into Societies; but no one questions the central role he played in the Evangelical Revival both in Wales and England. His aberrant conduct over this period has been attributed to

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:366-374

²⁸ Michael Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 27-28

²⁹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:538

³⁰ Michael Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 30

³¹ Michael Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 32-33

³² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:201

³³ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:233

extreme physical and mental exhaustion, and the effects of a severe head-wound received from a heckler while he was preaching" (Needham).³⁴

(4) Scotland. "Through the instrumentality of Whitefield, the great religious movement that began in England and Wales in the mid-to-late 1730s rapidly penetrated north into Scotland too" (Needham).³⁵ The revival spread through Scotland through men such as Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and William M'Culloch (1691-1771). M'Culloch pastored the church in Cambuslang for forty years (1731-1771). Cambuslang was a small suburb of Glasgow. The church was spiritually dead when he arrived, and he refused to administer the Supper for the first three years. Whitefield came to Glasgow in 1741 preaching ten times in five days. "M'Culloch and several of his people were at the meetings, and in January 1742, M'Culloch preached to his own people on 'the abundance of divine consolation with 2Corinthians 1:3-4 as his text. In his closing paragraph, he declared: 'When I look around me, blessed be God, I see marks of more apparent concern about salvation, then in times past, among some of you. Beware of a noisy or showy religion; and, at the same time, take heed that you run not to the opposite extreme, by endeavoring to stifle the convictions you may feel. Follow on to know the Lord, and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth'" (Fawcett).³⁶ In February he preached on John 3:5, "Unless you are born again," and a number of people were converted. This led him to preach every evening, while meeting with those awakened during the day. "Crowds of people began to flock to Cambuslang from all quarter, and sermons had to be provided for them almost daily" (Fawcett). A few weeks later M'Culloch wrote, "I go on to preach every Day. I daily see new instances of conviction and conversion." M'Culloch wrote Whitefield in April: "I believe that in less than three months past, about 300 souls have been awakened. More than 200 of these, I think, are hopefully converted. We continue to have a sermon every day. I long much to see you here. Let me know by the first opportunity when you think to be with us."³⁷ On Tuesday July 6, 1742, Whitefield came to Cambuslang at midday, and preached at two, six, and nine o'clock at night. "Such a commotion surely never was heard of, especially at eleven at night. It far out-did all that I ever saw in America" (Whitefield).³⁸ The following Lord's Day the Supper was served. "On this second sacramental occasion, the crowds were enormous, greater than ever. 'None ever saw the like since the Revolution in Scotland, or even any where else, at any Sacrament occasion; there were between thirty and fifty thousand present. It represented the high-water mark of the revival. Of these unforgettable days, Whitefield wrote: 'Such a Pass-over has not been heard of.' He had spent his days among revivals, yet he testified that this was the greatest he had ever witnessed – 'Our Savior loves to let us see yet greater things'" (Fawcett).³⁹

3. *Its lasting results.* While some of the effects of the Great Awakening were negative, most were positive. Sinners were saved, saints were strengthened, churches were formed, and missionaries were sent. "The revival with its injection of spiritual life into the religious scene in the American colonies gave tremendous impetus to evangelism and church growth in America" (Waldron).⁴⁰ There were 33 Particular Baptist Churches at the beginning of the 18th century, 457 by its end. Congregational and Presbyterian churches also multiplied. "It must be remembered, that the revival was not commenced by the labors of itinerants, but of settled pastors; of Edwards and others in New England, and of the Tennents in New Jersey and Pennsylvania" (Tracy).⁴¹

³⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:211

³⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 5:284

³⁶ Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, 10

³⁷ Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, 10

³⁸ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:125

³⁹ Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, 10

⁴⁰ Samuel Waldron, *Baptist Roots in America*, 4-5

⁴¹ Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 1