

Church History

Lesson 38 - The American and French Revolutions and the Second Great Awakening (Chapters 26-28)

Introduction

- The American and French Revolutions, which happened only about a decade apart at the end of the 18th century, brought about new forms of government and a new epoch in history. They also had great effects on the church in Europe and America.
- The Second Great Awakening, which happened in the first decades of the 19th century, also brought about great changes in the church and culture in America.
- What happened in these events? What are the major things we should understand about them?

1. The American Revolution and the American Experience

- 1.1. The American Revolution was important for our study for four reasons.
 - 1.1.1. First, the American Revolution started a move towards democracy and other forms of government and away from monarchy.
 - 1.1.2. Second, due to its unique circumstances, America represented a new epoch of the relationship between Church and state.
 - 1.1.3. Third, due to its future influence in world affairs and economic prosperity, the American church came to have an outsized influence around much of the rest of the world.
 - 1.1.4. Fourth, because we are American's, this is our own context where we live out our faith.
- 1.2. Causes for the American Revolution
 - 1.2.1. There were many causes for the American Revolution. Dissatisfaction with British rule began in the middle of the 18th century as the British government began to desire and attempt to exercise more direct control over the colonies in North America. This had not been possible during the convolutions of the 17th century, but now that the situation was more stable at home, the government looked to exert its powers. This was resented by the colonists and began to break down the relationship. Three main things exacerbated this problem.
 - 1.2.1.1. First, the British quartered 17 regiments in the Colonies. This was largely done because of continuing struggles with the French on the frontiers, but since the colonists did not need this presence, it was viewed as oppressive.
 - 1.2.1.2. Second, taxes were a constant source of friction. The Crown wanted the colonies to pay for their governance - including the cost of keeping so many troops on colonial soil! This all bothered the colonists, not only because of the economic burden, but because they viewed themselves as Englishmen, and therefore of having the right of representation - which they felt was being violated.
 - 1.2.1.3. Third, there were conflicts over Indian lands. For a variety of reasons, the British government had decreed no further expansion beyond the Appalachian Mountains. However, the economic development of the

colonies depended upon continued expansion, so this was a source of great friction.

1.2.2. All of this led to the increasing friction represented by the so-called “Boston Massacre”, the Boston tea party, and the battles of Lexington and Concord.

1.2.3. Finally, in July 1776, the Colonists declared themselves independent of England, a new sovereign country. This was obviously not recognized and accepted by the British crown, and so war ensued. Through many ups and downs, and in part due to an alliance with France, the Colonists eventually won their independence.

1.3. The Effect of the American Revolution and Experience on the Church

1.3.1. First, the Anglican Church in America obviously had to establish itself as a new body within the Anglican communion. Thus was born the Episcopal church. The Anglican Church had been powerful before the war, but for obvious reasons it was viewed with suspicion by many, since even the Episcopal church had the King of England as its head. But the Methodist Church was also affected. John Wesley did not approve of the Revolution, and at the outbreak of hostilities, most Methodist leaders in America returned to England. However, Francis Asbury stayed, and proved to be an amazing leader. Thus, the Methodist Church only grew in numbers and influence as the years passed.

1.3.2. Second, many combined the struggle for independence with a rationalist form of the faith. Many of the founding fathers approached the faith this way. The Christian faith was seen in almost Deistic terms, and the Revolution was seen as the guiding hand of Providence working out the inevitable Progress of humanity. However, such men were in no way orthodox Christians. They were not hostile to religion, and in fact often thought it was essential for a nation, but the religion they encouraged was not orthodox, evangelical, biblical Christianity. This strain ultimately led to the formation of two movements, which were eventually joined together: Unitarianism (which denied the Trinity and other doctrines and was man-centered highly rationalistic and man-centered) and Universalism (which claimed that everyone will eventually be saved.) This became the modern Unitarian Universalist Church of today.

1.3.3. Third, America enshrined the principle of religious liberty and pluralism in its constitution. Despite their many differences, all European nations basically had an “official” Church that was united to the government. Other groups were either persecuted or at best barely tolerated. In America, however, the government and the Church were separate, which allowed groups to flourish or shrink on their own. Since they could not count on government support in laws or money, churches were left to their own resources. This led to a variety of outcomes, as we will see below. It also led to a level of entrepreneurial spirit and practice in the American church not seen before.

1.3.4. Fourth, the idea of democracy was strongly in the air in America, so groups that tended to stress equality and human freedom flourished, while those that tended to stress the sovereignty of God and who were more hierarchical suffered. Thus, the Baptists and the Methodists, who stressed human freedom and were more populist in their approach and less hierarchical in

structure flourished. On the other hand, groups like the Presbyterians, who stressed divine sovereignty, and Episcopalians, who were very hierarchical in their structure, also suffered. Furthermore, the Presbyterians and Episcopalians tended to stress education and were far less populist in their appeal, while the Baptists and Methodists were much more populist in their approach to preaching and the faith.

- 1.3.5. Fifth, as the new country continued to spread Westward, those denominations that tended to require highly educated leaders did not fare nearly as well as those who were willing to license men to preach with less education and formal training. Once again, this tended to hurt Presbyterians and Episcopalians and to help Baptists and Methodists.
- 1.3.6. Sixth, the flood of immigrants to America brought many different expressions of the faith into a single country. As waves of Germans, Irish, Italians, Swedes, and others came into the country, they not only brought their language and culture - they brought their own "home" churches with them. Consequently, America became home to virtually every branch of Christendom within a single country.
- 1.3.7. Seventh, America brought to the fore the idea of Christian denominations. Rather than viewing any single branch of Christendom as the "true" Church, denominations were seen as different forms of the One True Church. This was inevitable in a religiously pluralistic land such as America. Some adherents of the various denominations continued to strongly believe their group was the True Church, but many weakened in the doctrinal devotion to their own group. This was further entrenched by the Second Great Awakening (see below).
- 1.3.8. Eighth, the propensity to denominations coupled with the freedom to simply move to a new area, allowed many new groups, both orthodox and heretical, to flourish. It is not unrelated to America to observe that in the first 1800 years of the church the number of "denominations" could almost be counted on two hands, and after the American Revolution the number blossomed to an estimated 23,000 denominations! Furthermore, it is in America that groups such as the Mormons and the Jehovah Witnesses came in to being.
- 1.3.9. Ninth, as all of these disparate groups settled into their life in America, much mingling began to happen. For this reason, sometimes major issues which divided the church no longer divided along denominational lines. Instead, they often brought division within each denomination. This was true with the issue of slavery, but also with approaches to new challenges to the faith such as Darwinism and modernity.
- 1.3.10. Tenth, despite all of the marks of unity noted above, there continued to be a strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the country. This was both doctrinal and cultural, since many of the Catholics coming into the country were from distinct cultures that made the current Americans feel threatened. This was exacerbated by the response of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to modernity and democracy. All of this led to difficulties and suspicion for Roman Catholics that continued well into the 20th century.

2. The French Revolution

- 2.1. Though the French and American's were allies in the American Revolution, and despite the proximity in time, the nature of the two revolutions were quite distinct. The French Revolution was much more radical, and its relationship to the Church was much more hostile and its effect was to make society much more secular.
- 2.2. The French Revolution was more radical and bloody. It included the execution of the King and Queen, but also the execution of leaders in various waves. Over time it became more and more extreme and radical, led to war with other nations, and ended with the dictatorship of Napoleon, which was necessary to simply restore order.
- 2.3. The leaders of the Revolution became increasingly hostile to the Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Those who eventually led the Revolution viewed Christianity as a mere superstition of the past, which must now give way to the force of new ideas and progress. Their faith was in reason, not revelation from God, and they wanted Christianity to be overthrown. For a time they created their own new religion called "The Cult of Reason" and later "The Cult of the Supreme Being." So thorough was their desire to remove the vestiges of the old faith that they even created a new calendar, based on a ten day week and complete with new names for months. Temples to Reason were built, and new rites were created for weddings, to dedicate children to Freedom, and for funerals. The American "Revolution" had really been more of a reformation, making adjustments and corrections to the existing order - this was a true "Revolution" overthrowing what had existed before and attempting to build from scratch.
- 2.4. Although their words as enshrined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* should have allowed religious freedom, in practice this was not the case. Those who did not get in line with the new Revolution were deemed to be counter-revolutionaries, and ended up at the guillotine. The Roman Catholic Church suffered many martyrs, while the Protestant church in France was utterly compromised and almost ceased to exist as a force within France.
- 2.5. These ideas were exported as France defeated other countries in war. In fact, France eventually invaded the Papal lands, and took Pope Pius VI into captivity, where he died. Eventually Napoleon came to power, and he decided for practical reasons to establish new relations with the Roman Catholic church, and so a Concordat was signed in 1801 which was deemed mutually beneficial to both. Napoleon was eventually even crowned as emperor by Pope Pius VII. Oddly, all of this served to increase the power of the Pope over the French Roman Catholic Church, which had long prized its sense of freedom from Roman control. However, this eventually unraveled as Napoleon and Pius clashed, and so France again invaded and took the Pope captive, which he remained until Napoleon was defeated.
- 2.6. The greatest effect of the French Revolution in Europe was two-fold, both of which affected the Church, especially in Europe.
 - 2.6.1. First, the French Revolution eventually led to a whole series of revolutions and attempted revolutions in other countries. The old system of kings and emperors was slowly dying. Of course, since the church in many of these countries was closely allied with the current government, it left the church in a

- precarious place. Even if the church aligned with the revolutionary movements, at a minimum the church found itself in a radically new situation.
- 2.6.2. Second, the French Revolution not only brought about political changes - its radical philosophical ideas also spread throughout Europe. This was in many ways a continuation and strengthening of the effects of the Enlightenment, which had already been very strong in France. All of this led to an increasing secularity in Europe. Even though many Churches remained the official church of their country, supported by taxes and given official status, they became increasingly weak, compromised, and irrelevant. In response to this, many of them began to increasingly adopt the latest philosophical, cultural, and moral ideas, and thus became increasingly unorthodox.
- 2.7. These changes were widespread in Europe. They did spread to other areas as well, but the influence in both churches established in colonies around the world and also in America was much later and more muted. Thus European society became much more secular than American society and that in colonial lands, and the church in Europe became much more compromised theologically than the church in American and European colonies.

3. The Second Great Awakening

3.1. Introduction

- 3.1.1. The Second Great Awakening refers to a series of revivals and awakenings throughout the United States during the early years of the 18th century. Though it is referred to as the Second Great Awakening, there were real distinctions between it and the First Great Awakening.
- 3.1.1.1. First, while the First Great Awakening affected both the Colonies and England, the Second Great Awakening was restricted to the United States, and especially flourished in the frontier regions.
- 3.1.1.2. Second, while the First Great Awakening was generally led by men of solid education and theological acumen such as Jonathan Edwards (and to a lesser extent Whitefield and Wesley), the Second Great Awakening in general was led by people of far less intellectual abilities and theological acumen (and even orthodoxy). This was especially true as the Second Great Awakening continued and spread. For example, Charles Finney was no Jonathan Edwards, either in theology or ability!
- 3.1.1.3. Third, because of point two, the Second Great Awakening was driven more by methodology rather than theology. This effect also increased as the Awakening continued and spread.
- 3.1.2. This movement renewed and strengthened the church in many ways, and spread the faith westward as the new nation expanded. It also caused some groups to flourish while others shrank in influence. Finally, it had a major effect on the relationship between various denominations and groups as we shall see.

3.2. The Earliest Signs - Timothy Dwight and Yale

- 3.2.1. The first signs of revival and awakening broke out at Yale in the early years of the 19th century. The President of Yale was Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, and under his leadership there was a general move of the

Spirit to awaken young students at the school to their sin and need for Christ. Those who had formerly scoffed at the faith - even among many who were training for ministry! - was replaced with a sudden devotion to the faith and commitment to Christ and the doctrines of His faith. Unsurprisingly, this initial movement was not anti-intellectual, but in many respects resembled the First Great Awakening, though without the outward physical manifestations that had caused such controversy in the First Great Awakening.

- 3.2.2. This initial awakening led to the formation of several societies for the propagation of the faith, including the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (founded in 1810) and the American Bible Society (founded in 1816). These organizations were not within a single denomination, but rather were comprised of people from across denominations, and worked with different denominations. This tendency was a new feature, and became very pronounced within American Evangelicalism.
- 3.3. The Second Great Awakening Moves West
 - 3.3.1. The Cane Ridge Revival of 1801 marked a new step in the Awakening. As opposed to Yale, the revival on the frontier was populist and often almost anti-intellectual in its temperament.
 - 3.3.2. In 1801 in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, the local Presbyterian minister announced a great assembly (known as a camp meeting). This idea was met with huge enthusiasm, as frontier people had little chance to gather for anything. When the appointed date arrived, thousands of people showed up. The initial group was there to grow in their faith. However, others took the opportunity for less spiritual concerns - which led to gambling and carousing as well. Due to the size of the crowd, other ministers also began to attend and teach, including a number of Baptists and Methodists.
 - 3.3.3. Despite this mixed multitude, the Spirit took hold of the meetings, and many were revived in faith and many were also converted. On the frontier many of the external physical manifestations that had been part of the First Great Awakening returned.
 - 3.3.4. The fame of the Cane Ridge Revival spread. In fact, over time the words evangelism and revival became inextricably linked with images of Cane Ridge and similar frontier revivals.
 - 3.3.5. Over time, the Presbyterian church began to turn against the movement spawned at Cane Ridge. However, the Baptists and Methodists continued to hold such meetings, so that "revival" came to refer to periodic special meetings held to encourage religious fervor. Since these meetings became a fixed part of the American frontier, groups that used them such as the Baptists and Methodists grew and spread, while groups that did not use such methods tended to be left behind.
 - 3.3.6. Another feature of the frontier part of the Awakening was its anti-intellectual nature. Most people on the frontier were simple folks with little education. Thus, the preaching that appealed to them tended to be simple and much more emotional. Over time this hardened from a tendency to an entrenched spirit that positively shunned education and clear doctrinal thought. This too became a consistent and entrenched part of American evangelicalism.

- 3.3.7. The Awakening on the frontier also tended to blur denominational distinctions. At big meetings like Cane Ridge, many groups were represented and worked together. Furthermore, as immigrants moved into new areas, they often abandoned their historic churches and became part of newer groups like the Baptists and Methodists.
- 3.3.8. Finally, the very spirit of the awakening on the frontier tended to be much more man-centered than God-centered. This was true both in the understanding of revival and awakening, as well as in the preaching, methodology, and what little theology could be discerned among the leaders.
 - 3.3.8.1. Whereas for Edwards revival and awakening were the work of God's Spirit, for leaders such as Charles Finney "Revival is no more a miracle than a crop of wheat." If one employed the right methods, revival was automatic. Edwards would have been horrified at the very thought, but this is the thought that Finney promoted and which came to dominate the Awakening on the frontier, and through it, the future theology of evangelicalism.
 - 3.3.8.2. This man-centered approach is also seen in the preaching and theology of men like Finney. Unshackled from the Calvinistic roots of the First Awakening, Finney and others had full confidence that men needed no divine assistance to turn to God and away from sin. Nor could the leaders blame a lack of revival and awakening on the Spirit's choice to not move in that manner. The only reason it did not happen was because the ministers did not employ the right methods.
 - 3.3.8.3. This led to a huge focus on "new measures" such as the altar call and the anxious bench. These new measures found no support in Scripture itself, but because they "worked" they were widely adopted in the frontier revivals. Over time, the measures and methods that had caused excitement and "revival" previously became less effective, however, and so newer, more exciting measures had to be created to keep up the effect. This pragmatic approach (whatever works must be right) and continuous striving for novelty also became hallmarks of American evangelicalism.
- 3.4. The Second Great Awakening and the Growth of New Denominations and Cults
 - 3.4.1. In the wake of the frontier revivals of the Second Great Awakening, a host of new denominations eventually formed. For example, a new group associated with Thomas and Alexander Campbell (known as the Restorationist movement) formed. This eventually led to denominations such as the Disciples of Christ denomination, and the Churches of Christ.
 - 3.4.2. The Awakening also led to a growing movement of Holiness Churches, which had formerly been part of the Methodist Church.
 - 3.4.3. The Awakening also resulted in the founding of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.
 - 3.4.4. Finally, in its wake the revivals also brought forth or spread cults such as the Shakers and the Mormons. For example, Joseph Smith began the Mormons in Upstate New York, which had been the scene of many of the revivals led by Charles Finney. Such groups often took bits and pieces of theology and

practice from various groups, and then mixed in unorthodox beliefs. But they took root and spread in the general religious fervor incited by the Awakening.

3.5. Assessing the Second Great Awakening

3.5.1. The results of the Second Great Awakening are much more mixed than those of the First Great Awakening. On a positive note we may see the following:

3.5.1.1. Many people were revived in their faith or were converted.

3.5.1.2. The Awakening helped spread the faith Westward with the nation.

3.5.1.3. The Awakening was an important part of social movements to end slavery, which is certainly good.

3.5.1.4. The Awakening captured the American imagination and kept the faith in peoples minds for generations to come.

3.5.2. However, the Awakening also had some bad fruit:

3.5.2.1. The Awakening gave rise to aberrant churches and actual cults.

3.5.2.2. Even within orthodox churches it produced bad tendencies. The quip that the American church is a mile wide and an inch deep is largely due to the anti-intellectual tendencies arising during the Second Great Awakening.

3.5.2.3. The Awakening is responsible for the pragmatic approach to faith that characterizes the American church. Rather than being led theologically and doctrinally, the American church has often been led by what works, even if the practices are hard to defend biblically. This has even been true when the actual theology of the proponents (such as Charles Finney) are actually heretical.

3.5.2.4. The Awakening led to a much more man-centered theology in general, and of revival specifically.

Next Class: The Church and Modernity

Reading: Chapters 31 and 32

Date: September 22