

## Church History: “The Reformation” 1500-1900

(Part 8)

The Age of the Reformation proved again that faith and power are a potent brew. As long as Christians had access to power, they used to compel conformity to the truth: Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed. So men died for their faith, tens of thousands of them, until something general but very deep in man awoke to revolt.

We call that revolt the Age of Reason – or as some prefer, the Enlightenment. . . The spirit of the Age of Reason was nothing less than an intellectual revolution, a whole new way looking at God, the world, and oneself. It was the birth of secularism.

The differences in the Reformation and the Renaissance lie in the view of man. The Reformers preached the original sin of man and looked upon the world as fallen from God’s intended place. The Renaissance had a positive estimate of human nature and the universe itself. Their confidence in man and his powers filled the air during the Enlightenment. . . the fundamental idea, that man has the ability to find the truth by the use of his senses and reason, gave rise to the label Age of Reason. Now, intellectuals were arguing that man is no sinner. He is a reasonable creature. Now he seemed to need common sense more than God’s grace.

At first, during the closing years of the seventeenth century, some believers, especially in England, tried to harmonize reason and faith. They argued that Christianity is totally reasonable but some truths come by reason and some by revelation. In time, however, after the beginning of the eighteenth century, the climate changed. In France confidence in reason soared and Christians found that many intellectuals dismissed all appeals to revealed Scriptures as superstitious nonsense.

In Paris, a group of thinkers and writers. . . aimed to spread knowledge and emancipate the human spirit. Curiously enough, most of the prominent “infidels” who ridiculed Christianity during the eighteenth century believed in a supreme being but regarded it superstitious to hold that he interfered with the world. This belief is called **Deism**: one could keep the idea of God and dismiss the concept that God would engage or interfere with the world. In the end, Deism collapsed from its own weaknesses. It was based on a false optimism. It had no explanation for the evils and disasters of life.

Even in the Age of Reason the thirst of the soul could not be ignored. An important new movement called **Pietism** arose as a reminder of the fact. Out of the depths of his own experience, Luther had proclaimed a robust doctrine of justifying faith. In the seventeenth century, however, his dedicated followers, under the spell of the intellect, turned faith into a mental

exercise. No longer an act of surrender to the mercy of God revealed in Christ, faith was now a formal assent to doctrinal truths set forth by scholars. The Christian life was less a personal relation to Christ and more a matter of membership in the state church. Faithful attendance at public worship and reception of the sacraments offered by orthodox ministers were the essential marks of a good Christian.

The aims of the **Pietists** (some of which were known as Moravians) were: First, they stressed the importance of personal faith – a personal experience of God’s grace in the believer’s heart. Second, to shift the center of the Christian life from the state churches, in which a person was born and brought up, to intimate fellowships of those who had a living faith in God. **Pietism** shifted what was essential to Christianity – the new birth and the spiritual life – It lives on in evangelical Christianity at large, the spiritual descendants of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

“Church History” Bruce L Shelley pp.323-346

“By and large, the first part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of spiritual decay. Despite the existence in sundry places of “live” ministries, there was truth in the saying ‘Puritanism was dead’. In the Church of England bishops and parish clergy alike were often given up to worldliness. Sports, politics, entertainments, held their chief interest. Ease rather than labor characterized them. Much of the preaching of the period was remote from gospel truth, and it almost seemed as if true religion would die out altogether. It has been said, probably with a large measure of truth, that the Established Church was little better than ‘a useful branch of the Civil Service’, maintaining loyalty to the government and the crown, but showing minimum of care for the welfare of men’s souls.

“As for the people at large, drunkenness, immorality, cruel and pernicious sports, unbelief, and complete indifference to the divine message, Accompanied by an almost complete ignorance of the way of salvation, replaced ‘belief to the saving of the soul’ which was characteristic of Puritanism.”

“Sketches from Church History” S.M Houghton p.187

The Age of Reason saw a dramatic spiritual renewal in Western Christianity called the Evangelical Awakening. . . three regions were significantly changed: Germany by the rise of Pietism, the British isles by the preaching of the Methodists, and the American colonies by the impact of the Great Awakening.

**John Wesley** (1703 – 1791) From "methodists" to Methodism.

Wesley did not intend to found a new denomination, but historical circumstances and his organizational genius conspired against his desire to remain in the Church of England.

Wesley's followers first met in private home "societies." When these societies became too large for members to care for one another, Wesley organized "classes," each with 11 members and a leader. Classes met weekly to pray, read the Bible, discuss their spiritual lives, and to collect money for charity. Men and women met separately, but anyone could become a class leader.

The moral and spiritual fervor of the meetings is expressed in one of Wesley's most famous aphorisms: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

The movement grew rapidly, as did its critics, who called Wesley and his followers "methodists," a label they wore proudly. It got worse than name calling at times: methodists were frequently met with violence as paid ruffians broke up meetings and threatened Wesley's life.

Though Wesley scheduled his itinerant preaching so it wouldn't disrupt local Anglican services, the bishop of Bristol still objected. Wesley responded, "The world is my parish"—a phrase that later became a slogan of Methodist missionaries. Wesley, in fact, never slowed down, and during his ministry he traveled over 4,000 miles annually, preaching some 40,000 sermons in his lifetime.

A few Anglican priests, such as his hymn-writing brother Charles, joined these Methodists, but the bulk of the preaching burden rested on John. He was eventually forced to employ lay preachers, who were not allowed to serve Communion but merely served to complement the ordained ministry of the Church of England.

Wesley then organized his followers into a "connection," and a number of societies into a "circuit" under the leadership of a "superintendent." Periodic meetings of Methodist clergy and lay preachers eventually evolved into the "annual conference," where those who were to serve each circuit were appointed, usually for three-year terms.

In 1787, Wesley was required to register his lay preachers as non-Anglicans. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the American Revolution isolated Yankee Methodists from their Anglican connections. To support the American movement, Wesley independently ordained two lay preachers and appointed Thomas Coke as superintendent. With these and other actions, Methodism gradually moved out of the Church of England—though Wesley himself remained an Anglican until his death.

An indication of his organizational genius, we know exactly how many followers Wesley had when he died: 294 preachers, 71,668 British members, 19 missionaries (5 in mission stations), and 43,265 American members with 198 preachers. Today Methodists number about 30 million worldwide.

**George Whitefield** (1714-1770)

Whitefield was born to a poor and widowed inn-keeper in 1714 in Gloucester, England. He was educated at Pembroke College at the University of Oxford where he participated in, and even led, the "holy club" of Charles and John Wesley. The members of this club were known as methodists. At the age of 22, Whitefield was ordained a deacon in the Church of England. His first visit to America followed two years later when he traveled to Savannah, Georgia to help start Bethesda Orphanage.

Upon returning to England and being ordained as a priest, Whitefield discovered that their congregations were unwelcoming of his preaching style. Consequently, Whitefield was driven outside to preach in the open air, which better suited his powerful speaking voice. He held people's attention with expressive mannerisms and dramatic body language. He also always focused on the audience as he never used notes.

The Great Awakening

Whitefield sailed back to America and in February, 1739, he preached to coal miners near Bristol, Connecticut. He later said he could see "white gutters made by their tears" as they rolled down their blackened faces. By the time Whitefield was preaching in America, the Great Awakening had already broken out. The revival of evangelical Christianity in American colonies, initiated by Jonathan Edwards, overcame the lack of zeal that characterized most American congregations. What Edwards inaugurated, Whitefield reinforced.

Crowds followed Whitefield as he spoke. During one stretch of time, Whitefield spoke to crowds that averaged 8,000 people daily for almost a month. One time he even spoke to 30,000 people at a single event in Boston, Massachusetts

While he couldn't find a church in England to let him speak, in America he couldn't find a church that could contain his audience. At his busiest during this three-year tour, Whitefield preached three sermons a day. Some speculate that Whitefield needed the frequent sailing times to and from England (he visited America seven times) to rest from his hectic pace otherwise he would have died.

In 1741 Whitefield traveled back to England to preach. At this time, he cordially separated from John Wesley over the matter of predestination. Then from the middle 1740's to early 1750's, Whitefield preached throughout Great Britain, Ireland, and America.

Whitefield died while on a preaching tour in America in a parsonage belonging to the Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts in September, 1770. He was buried in a crypt under the pulpit of the church where his body remains to this day. Whitefield's old friend, John Wesley, with whom he had reconciled, praised him at his memorial service.

## Jonathan Edwards

(1703-1758)

Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, and he received his master's degree from Yale in 1722. He apprenticed for his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, for two years before he became, in 1729, the sole preacher of the Northampton, Massachusetts, parish.

In the meantime, when he was 20, he had met Sarah Pierrepont. Their wedding followed four years of often agonizing courtship for the gawky and intense Edwards, but in the end, their marriage proved deeply satisfying to both. Edwards described it as an "uncommon union," and in a sermon on Genesis 2:21–25, he said, "When Adam rose from his deep sleep, God brought woman to him from near his heart." They eventually had 11 children.

In 1734 Edwards's preaching on justification by faith sparked a different sort of devotion: a spiritual revival broke out in his parish. In December there were six sudden conversions. By spring there were about thirty a week. It was not due to theatrics. One observer wrote, "He scarcely gestured or even moved, and he made no attempt by the elegance of his style or the beauty of his pictures to gratify the taste and fascinate the imagination." Instead he convinced "with overwhelming weight of argument and with such intensesness of feeling."

Edwards kept a careful written account of his observations and noted them in [A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God](#) (1737), and his most effective sermons were published as [Justification by Faith](#) (1738), which were widely read in America and England. These works helped fuel

the Great Awakening a few years later (1739–1741), during which thousands were moved by the preaching of Britain's George Whitefield. Whitefield had read Edwards's book and made it a point to visit him when he came to America. Edwards invited Whitefield to preach at his church and reported, "The congregation was extraordinarily melted ... almost the whole assembly being in tears for a great part of the time." The "whole assembly" included Edwards himself.

During the Great Awakening, Edwards contributed perhaps the most famous sermon in American history, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Unfortunately it has since cast Edwards as an emotional and judgmental revivalist, when in fact he preached it as dispassionately as any of his sermons.

Edwards regarded personal conversion as critical, so he insisted that only persons who had made a profession of faith, which included a description of their conversion experience, could receive Communion. This reversed the policy of his grandfather and alienated his congregation, which ousted him in 1750.

For the next few years, he was a missionary pastor to Native Americans in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and wrote, among other theological treatises, [Freedom of the Will](#) (1754), a brilliant defense of divine sovereignty. In it he argued that we are free to do whatever we want, but we will never want to do God's will without a vision of his divine nature imparted by the Spirit.

The College of New Jersey (later Princeton) called him as president in 1758. But soon after his arrival, Edwards died of the new smallpox vaccination. He was 55.

