

The Second Great Awakening (1799 - 1811)

Most people today do not know that the last decade of the 1700s, following the War for Independence, was a time of great spiritual darkness and pessimism in America. The eighteenth century in America had ended with a whimper, rather than a bang. Although the Great Awakening had swept through the American Colonies, first in North Hampton, Massachusetts in 1734 and throughout the entire colonies from 1736-1740, by the end of the War of Independence a spiritual and moral lethargy had gripped the new nation. The conclusion of the war brought about spiritual decline and disaster for the Church. As one historian observed, America had whipped the British, but appeared to be no match for the Devil. The evangelicalism of the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s had given way to skeptical deism. America's wartime alliance with France had opened the floodgates for radical French skepticism and infidelity, warmly embraced by such social luminaries as Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine. In New England French radicalism had invaded and conquered the Colleges. At Yale College, founded 100 years earlier by Elihu Yale to prepare young men for the reformed ministry, students drank deeply at the well of French skepticism and radicalism, even adopting the names of leading French infidels. When Lyman Beecher entered Yale in 1796 he claimed that he was only professing Christian among a student body of over 200. That low whirring noise heard throughout New England was the sound of Elihu Yale spinning in his grave.

The practical result in the pew and in society was profound. Church membership plunged while public profanity, vulgarity, drunkenness and violence soared. For the first time in the history of the thirteen colonies women did not venture out after dark for fear of their own safety. Bishop Madison, of the diocese of Virginia, shared a belief with U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall (a devout layman) that the church was too far gone to ever be revived. Bishop Provoost of New York considered the condition of the Church so far gone that he quit functioning and sought other employment. The night was dark in America of the 1790s, the great revivals of half-a-century before were only a distant memory, and some, including George Washington, openly questioned whether the new nation would survive its own birth.

Then God did a new work. Beginning in the late 1790s, a wave of such spiritual power fell upon this nation that church historians, such as Kenneth Scott Latourette, now refer to the movement as the "Second Great Awakening" and to the 1800s as "The Great Century" of Christian expansion. No less than four great waves of the Spirit of God broke upon America and the world within a span of roughly 100 years: The first of these visitations came in 1799-1811; the second wave broke in the 1830s and encompassed the evangelistic ministry of Charles Grandison Finney; the third broke in 1857-1859 in the great Prayer Revival in Manhattan and continued in the evangelistic ministry of D.L. Moody, the greatest American evangelist of the 19th century; and the fourth broke in 1904 in what I refer to as the great Welsh Revival. It was as if a spiritual dam had burst, and the river of the Spirit of God of Ezekiel Chapter 47 flowed deep and wide for over 100 years, redeeming millions and launching a world-wide missions movement that continues to this day.

The first wave of this great deluge began in New England, at Yale College of all places. In 1795 Timothy Dwight became President of Yale. He was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards. He began by dismissing all faculty members who espoused the French Rationalistic point of view. Next, He began meeting with students regularly in Connecticut Hall, challenging them to challenge the Scriptures. He listened and he answered their questions. On Sundays in the College Chapel he preached Jesus Christ crucified and risen. This went on for seven years. Then, in the spring of 1802 revival fell on Yale like a thunderstorm. By the time the senior class of 1802 graduated, half of them had committed their lives to Jesus Christ as Savior, and a third of them went on to careers in the ministry. Before his death in 1817, Timothy Dwight personally witnessed the conversion of half of Yale's student body. Dr. Heman Humphrey who would later become President of Amherst College, was a student at Yale when the revival struck. He wrote:

"It came with such power as had never been witnessed within those walls before. It was in the Freshman year of my own class. It was like a mighty rushing wind. The whole college was shaken. It seemed for a time as if the whole mass of the students would press into the kingdom."

This revival or awakening spread throughout New England, especially as graduates from Yale entered the ministry and went out to pastor churches. It had the effect of spreading biblical Christianity and stopping the growth of Unitarianism dead in its tracks.

The Spiritual and moral darkness of the late 1700s was not limited to New England. If the situation in New England and the eastern U.S. was dark, then on the emerging frontier, west of the Alleghenies and Appalachians it was desperate. Criminals of various stripes knew that if they could cross the mountains to the west, they were nearly home-free. A Congressional report stated that *"the immunity to offenders experience attracts as to an asylum, the most vile and abandoned criminals, and at the same time deters useful and virtuous persons from making settlements in such society"*¹

¹Warren A. Candler, *Great Revivals and the Great Republic* (Nashville:Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1904), p. 172-173.

One of the most desperate locations was in Kentucky, which at the close of the 18th century was a hive of villainy that beggars description. Logan County, Kentucky, attracted so many murderers, horse thieves, highway robbers and counterfeiters that it was nicknamed (by the outlaws, of course) "Rogues' Harbor." The situation eventually reached a climax where the decent folk of the county fought a pitched battle with the outlaws, using "guns, pistols, dirks, knives, and clubs." The outlaws won.

Into this "den of thieves" in 1796 rode the Reverend James McGready, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian. On the frontier it was said of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians that they were of such a hardy stock that if their crops should fail, they could always survive on the Shorter Catechism. This was the cloth from which James McGready was cut. Licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Redstone, Pennsylvania in August of 1788, McGready had recently pastored and preached in North Carolina where he became known for a modified Calvinistic theology, and a vivid, plain spoken style of preaching that emphasized the need for a new birth. Beginning in 1791 McGready's ministry was blessed with a local revival which spread across north-central North Carolina. As a result, local churches were strengthened and many young men were encouraged to enter the ministry. But his ministry in North Carolina encountered increasing opposition among the more affluent families who felt threatened by McGready's preaching against materialism and immorality. The opposition culminated in a note, written in blood, which suggested that his ministry might be better appreciated elsewhere. McGready agreed, and left for Logan County Kentucky in August of 1796.

In January of 1797 McGready began pastoring three small congregations in Logan County situated along three small rivers, the Muddy, the Red, and the Gasper. McGready was no "enthusiast." Rather, he was a man given to passionate, biblical preaching, and concerted fasting and prayer. He challenged the members in each of his three congregations to enter into a signed covenant by which they would agree to fast and pray regularly for an out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of sinners. Here is what the covenant said:

"When we consider the word and promises of a compassionate God, to the poor lost family of Adam, we find the strongest encouragement for Christians to pray in faith - to ask in the name of Jesus for the conversion of their fellow-men. None ever went to Christ, when on earth, with the case of their friends that were denied, and although the days of his humiliation are ended, yet for the encouragement of His people, he has left it on record, that when two or three agree upon earth, to ask in prayer, believing, it shall be done. Again whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. With these promises before us we feel encouraged to unite our supplications to a prayer-hearing God, for the out-pouring of his Spirit, that his people may be quickened and comforted, and that our children, and sinners generally, may be converted. Therefore, we bind ourselves to observe the third Saturday of each month, for one year, as a day of fasting and prayer, for the conversion of sinners in Logan County, and throughout the world. We also engage to spend one-half hour every Saturday evening, beginning at the setting of the sun, and one-half hour every Sabbath morning, at the rising of the sun, in pleading with God to revive His work."²

The inhabitants of Kentucky were a simple people who had little understanding of theology, no patience for rational deduction and no tradition of doing things "decently and in order." Their emotions ran close to the surface and they respected physical power. Little did they suspect that they would come face-to-face with the Lord God of Elijah.

McGready and his faithful band of believers covenanted together with prayer and fasting throughout 1797 and into the spring of 1798. The first signs of revival began to appear in the summer of 1798. On the frontier, communion services (or "sacramental meetings") were held quarterly, due to travel distances and the fact that one pastor usually served several congregations. As a result, the quarterly communion service became both a social and religious event spanning several days. A typical service might begin on a Friday with two days of preaching, followed by a Communion Service on Sunday, and another final day of preaching on Monday. During the Communion Service on the 4th Sunday of July, 1798, signs of revival began to break out among the Gasper River congregation. McGready recorded that "the Lord poured out His Spirit in a very remarkable manner." A similar outpouring occurred among the Muddy River congregation on the 1st Sunday of September at the communion service. It quickly spread to the Red River congregation and soon the entire county was pervaded with strong revival influences. Throughout the winter of 1798-99 McGready's congregations continued fasting and praying for God's blessings.

In the summer of 1799, on the last Sunday of July, at the communion service at Red River people began to sense God's dealings. On Monday evening, when the congregation should be dispersing for home, people lingered, unwilling to leave without some resolution to their spiritual hunger. McGready and the ministers assisting him called the congregation back and began another round of preaching and exhortation. The blessing came when "*some of the boldest, most daring sinners in the county covered their faces and wept bitterly.*" According to McGready, "*About this time a remarkable spirit of prayer and supplication was given to Christians, and a sensible, heart-felt burden of the dreadful state of sinners out of Christ: so that it might be said with propriety, that Zion travailed in birth to bring forth her children.*" The following month McGready and a fellow Presbyterian pastor from his North Carolina days named John Rankin conducted a communion service at the Gasper River church with similar results. Word of the budding revival began to spread. It broke out among the Muddy River congregation

²Covenant of Rev. James McGready, James Smith, *History of the Christian Church, Including a History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (1835). Quoted in Catharine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival In The West 1787-1805*. Copyright 1916 University of Chicago. (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1959).

in late September where McGready and Rankin experienced “*the greatest, the most solemn and powerful time of any that had been before.*” As the fall of 1799 turned to winter, Christians reflected on what God had done. McGready himself summarized it best:

“The present summer has been the most glorious time that our guilty eyes have ever beheld. All the blessed displays of Almighty power and grace, all the sweet gales of the divine Spirit, and soul-reviving showers of the blessings of Heaven which we enjoyed before, and which we considered wonderful beyond conception; were but like a few scattering drops before a mighty rain, when compared with the overflowing floods of salvation, which the eternal, gracious Jehovah has poured out like a mighty river, upon this our guilty, unworthy country. The Lord has indeed shewed himself a prayer-hearing God: he has given his people a praying spirit and a lively faith, and then he has answered their prayers far beyond their highest expectations. This wilderness and solitary place has been made glad, this dreary desert now rejoices and blossoms like the rose; yea, it blossoms abundantly, and rejoices even with joy and singing.”³

These events had a profound effect on the congregations involved, and people spent the following months of the winter of 1799-1800 praying that God would do more.

By the summer of 1800 news of what had taken place the previous year had spread far and wide. At the quarterly communion service in June of 1800 at the Red River Church more than five hundred (500) people showed up. Many of them had traveled over a hundred miles to attend. The meetings were scheduled to run from Friday to Monday, with Communion being celebrated on Sunday. McGready was accompanied by three fellow Presbyterian pastors, William Hodge, John Rankin and William McGee, and a Methodist by the name of John McGee. The congregation was attentive and reverent on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Then on Monday, under the preaching of William Hodge, the Spirit of God began to move. Hodge concluded his message and the congregation began to disperse. But William McGee was overcome by the presence of God. He sat down on the floor of the pulpit and began to weep. He was joined by many of the congregation who were now sobbing and seeking after God. William’s brother John, the Methodist, had experience with revivals and realized that God was moving. He ascended the pulpit to preach:

“I exhorted them to let the Lord Omnipotent reign in their hearts and submit to Him, and their soul should live. Many broke silence. The woman in the east end of the house (who had begun sobbing and singing) shouted tremendously. I left the pulpit to go to her . . . Several spoke to me: ‘You know these people. Presbyterians are much for order, they will not bear this confusion, go back and be quiet.’ I turned to go back - and was near falling, the power of God was strong upon me. I turned again and losing sight of fear of man, I went through the house exhorting with all possible ecstasy and energy.”⁴

Another sacramental meeting was scheduled for the last weekend in July at the Gasper River. Word of events at Red River spread throughout the region. In addition McGready sent word to other churches in the area to come prepared with supplies to last the weekend. But despite all of the hopeful preparations not even McGready and his fellow ministers were prepared for what happened next. By Friday morning of that weekend some 10,000 people began arriving. People had traveled for days to be there. The Reverend Barton Stone, converted under McGready’s ministry in North Carolina and now pastoring two small churches in neighboring Bourbon County, Kentucky, came to lend his assistance and to report the proceedings back to his own congregations.

Men cut a clearing in the forest, split rough-hewn log benches and built an eight-foot tall preaching stand. The crowd was so large that several ministers could preach a once without interfering with each other. Baptist and Methodist ministers joined with Presbyterians to preach and exhort. The results were stunning. Barton Stone described the scene:

“There, on the edge of a prairie in Logan County, Kentucky, the multitudes came together and continued a number of days and nights encamped on the ground, during which time the worship was carried on in some part of the encampment. The scene was new to me and passing strange. It baffled description. Many, very many, fell down as men slain in battle, and continued for hours together in an apparently breathless and motionless state, sometimes for a few minutes reviving and exhibiting symptoms of life by a deep groan or a piercing shriek, or by a prayer for mercy fervently uttered. After lying there for hours, they obtained deliverance. The gloomy cloud that had covered their faces seemed gradually and visibly to disappear, and hope in smiles brightened into joy. They would rise, shouting deliverance, and then would address the surrounding multitude in language truly eloquent and impressive. With astonishment did I hear men, women and children declaring the wonderful works

³James McGready, “A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Logan county, in the State of Kentucky, and the adjacent Settlements in the State of Tennessee, from May 1797, until September 1800,” *New York Missionary Magazine* 3 (1802): 74-75, 151-155, 191-197, 234-236, see page 154. Quoted in John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1996, 1972), p. 50.

⁴Letter from John McGee to the Rev. Thomas L. Douglas, June 23, 1820, printed in the *Methodist Magazine* 4(1821), p. 190. Quoted in Boles, *The Great Revival*, p. 54.

of God, and the glorious mysteries of the Gospel.⁵

McGready summarized the meeting:

"The power of God seemed to shake the whole assembly. Towards the close of the sermon, the cries of the distressed arose almost as loud as his voice. After the congregation was dismissed the solemnity increased, till the greater part of the multitude seemed engaged in the most solemn manner. No person seemed to wish to go home - hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody - eternal things were the vast concern. Here awakening and converting work was to be found in every part of the multitude; and even some things strangely and wonderfully new to me."⁶

The Gasper River meeting of July 1800 marked the beginning of The Great Revival, as this phase of the Second Great Awakening came to be known. The Reverend Barton Stone would return to his congregation at Cane Ridge in neighboring Bourbon County, Kentucky and lay plans for a sacramental meeting to be held the following year of 1801. At that meeting, which began on Friday, August 8, 1801, a crowd estimated at between twelve (the low estimate) and twenty-five thousand people made camp for a weekend to listen to no less than 18 Presbyterian and as many Methodist and Baptist ministers proclaim the Gospel. It is the Cane Ridge meeting of 1801 that most people talk about when the Second Great Awakening or The Great Revival is discussed, but Cane Ridge was neither the first nor the largest. From 1801 until 1811 the "camp meeting" revival movement would grow in number and size, with meetings being reported of 20, 30 and 40 thousand people in attendance. In 1811 Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury recorded in his journal that in the year 1811 alone there were some 400 camp meetings going on throughout the south.

The impact of The Great Revival was profound, and is best summarized by one of its original critics. Dr. George Baxter, a Presbyterian, of Washington Academy in Virginia was a skeptical observer of the awakening. Hearing reports of the events in Kentucky during the summer of 1801 he decided to investigate first hand. He traveled to Kentucky and wrote a report which he sent back to a fellow Presbyterian at Princeton College, Dr. Archibald Alexander. The report was subsequently published in the Connecticut Evangelical Magazine.

"The power with which this revival has spread, and its influence in moralizing the people, are difficult for you to conceive, and more so for me to describe. . . . I found Kentucky, to appearance, the most moral place I had ever seen. A profane expression was hardly ever heard. A religious awe seemed to pervade the country. . . . Never in my life have I seen more genuine marks of that humility which . . . looks to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only way of acceptance with God. I was indeed highly pleased to find that Christ was all and in all in their religion . . . and it was truly affecting to hear with what agonizing anxiety awakened sinners inquired for Christ, as the only physician who could give them any help. Those who call these things 'enthusiasm,' ought to tell us what they understand by the Spirit of Christianity. . . . Upon the whole, sir, I think the revival in Kentucky among the most extraordinary that have ever visited the Church of Christ, and all things considered, peculiarly adapted to the circumstances of that country. . . . Something of an extraordinary nature seemed necessary to arrest the attention of a giddy people, who were ready to conclude that Christianity was a fable, and futurity a dream. This revival has done it; it has confounded infidelity, awed vice to silence, and brought numbers beyond calculation under serious impressions."⁷

The Great Revival, which would continue forward through 1811, tamed the frontier, sanctified its inhabitants, and transformed the American south into what is known to this day as "the bible belt."

⁵Quoted in Candler, **Great Revivals and the Great Republic**, p.178-179

⁶McGready, "A Short Narrative of the Revival," p. 193. Quoted by Boles, **The Great Revival**, p. 56-57.

⁷Missionary Society of Connecticut, **The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine**, March, 1802. Quoted in Peter Marshall & David Manuel, **From Sea To Shining Sea** (Tarrytown: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1986), p. 69.