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The First Great Awakening: Revival and the Birth of a Nation

Abstract

The First Great Awakening left an indelible mark on the development of America. With roots stretching back to the Christian Reformation of the 1500's, the Great Awakening swept the young colonies with the fires of evangelical fervor. The revival shook the very foundations of colonial society. Following in its wake was a rebirth of reformed philosophy and theology that planted the seeds of self-government and political autonomy in the fertile soil of the Americas. By 1776, that seed had blossomed into a vibrant revolutionary movement that questioned the very fabric of Old World society. This article explores the rich Christian heritage of our nation by looking at the movement that inspired the American Revolution; the First Great Awakening. It explores its theological foundations and its philosophical and social repercussions on the birth of the nation. Furthermore, this article examines the distinctly reformed character of the Awakening and the influence this had on the Founding generation.

Keywords

The First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, New Lights, Old Lights, American Revolution, Great Awakening, Colonial History, Founding Fathers, Founding Documents, Declaration of Independence, Jurisdictionalism, Covenantalism, Providentialism, Lesser Magistrates

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my wife Nicole for her support and for helping me to work through the process of writing and thinking about these ideas. I would also like to thank Dr. Samuel Smith and Dr. Roger Schultz for their knowledgeable critiques of this article.

Throughout the course of American history there have been a number of events that have shaped our national identity. The Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights movement are all examples. However, there has been perhaps no greater force directing the current of American history, than religion. Our theology of God and philosophy of man have defined our nation's political, cultural, and social dynamic for over two hundred years. Within that current, no swell has had more lasting impact than the two dynamic periods of revival and renewal, known as the First and Second Great Awakenings.

At the heart of both Awakenings was a vigorous compulsion to evangelize the lost and energize the complacent. In the decades preceding both the First and Second Awakenings there had been a steady decline in church attendance and commitment to Christian values throughout the nation. One Presbyterian minister, lamenting the deplorable state of religion in the pre-revival colonies, wrote that “[r]eligion lay as it were a dying, and ready to expire its last Breath of Life in this Part of the Visible Church.”¹ Again, during the early 1800's Rev. Dr. Timothy Dwight witnessed this same spirit of disbelief.²

Nor was this indifferent posture toward Christian devotion confined to American. Europe experienced a similar spiritual decay during these periods as well. This apathetical attitude toward religion which had spread throughout the world began to gnaw at the heart of a few faithful and intrepid Christian leaders. As faithful stewards of God's word these giants of the church beseeched the Almighty to intercede in the affairs of men. In response, “extraordinary things” began to appear “in the church of God, and appertaining to the state of religion.”³

The coalescence of events that brought about these revivals and the changes they affected, reshaped American forever. Specifically, it was the theology of the Awakenings that inspired two distinct generations of Americans to irrevocably transform the future of their nation. The theological and philosophical ramifications of the First Great Awakening on the struggle for American independence is indisputable. Likewise, the Second Great Awakening set the stage for the Civil War which in turn lead to the decline of American Protestantism at the turn of the century. The scope of this article however, is limited to the later.

The First Great Awakening left an indelible mark on the United States. A greater understanding of that theological wellspring is necessary to fully appreciate where we are as a nation and how we got here. A people without history is no people at all. Thus, if the legacy of the First Great Awakening is overlooked, we are left with little context to understand our own history.

¹ Samuel Blair, “A Short and Faithful Narrative, Of the late Remarkable Revival of Religion In the Congregation of New-Londonderry, and other Parts of Pennsylvania,” *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*,” editor Richard L. Bushman, (Atheneum, NY: Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, 1969), 72; Samuel Blair, a Presbyterian minister and one of William Tennet's “Log College Men” addressed the transformative work of the Holy Spirit during the First Great Awakening in a letter to Rev. Prince of Boston entitled *A Short and Faithful Narrative, Of the Late Remarkable Revival of Religion In the Congregation of New-Londonderry, and Other Parts of Pennsylvania*. He contrasted this miraculous work of the Holy Spirit against the colonies pre-revival disinterest toward religion.

² “Youths, particularly, who had been liberally educated, and who, with strong passions and feeble principles, were votaries of sensuality and ambition, delighted in the prospect of unrestrained gratification, and, panting to be enrolled with men of fashion and splendor, became enamored with the new doctrines.” Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time*, (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2009), 315.

³ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great awakening to the Revolution*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 66.

REFORMATION TO COLONIZATION

No work on American religion, let alone the First Great Awakening, would be complete without first examining the Christian Reformation of the 1500's. From its outset, American Protestantism took on a particularly Reformed flavor. By far, the theology of John Calvin⁴ exerted the greatest influence of any reformer on the Puritans. Jonathan Edwards,⁵ George Whitefield,⁶ Samuel Rutherford,⁷ Solomon Stoddard,⁸ John Winthrop,⁹ William Brewster,¹⁰ John Knox,¹¹ and John Bunyan¹² are just a few of the pivotal Puritan figures responsible for the development of American Protestantism. All of these giants of the faith were the theological decedents of John Calvin. With that in mind, it is necessary to briefly explore the theological construct developed by Calvin as well as its ramifications.

Reformed Theology

⁴ John Calvin (1509-1564) was a French theologian and reformer. His magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as well as his efforts in the Swiss city-state of Geneva, laid the groundwork for the Reformed tradition.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a New England preacher, philosopher, theologian and President of Princeton. The Grandson of the American minister Solomon Stoddard, Edwards led the Northampton congregation during most of his life. He was also a primary figure during the First Great Awakening and the author of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

⁶ George Whitefield (1714-1770) was a renowned English preacher and evangelist. In England he befriended the Wesley brothers with whom began preaching street revivals. In 1740 Whitefield brought his revivals to America. His evangelistic tour of the colonies sparked the mass revival known as the First Great Awakening.

⁷ Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) studied theology at Edinburgh in Scotland and was the pastor to Anwoth kirk by the Solway in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland. Among his works are *The Covenant Life Opened*, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication*, *The Due Right of Presbyteries*. However, few books have had as monumental an effect on the current of history as his infamous *Lex Rex* in which he probes the depths of natural rights, civil law, Christian obedience, Christian ethics and calls into question the divine right of kings. He was also one of the six Scottish ministers invited to attend the Westminster Assembly in 1643.

⁸ Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) was the pastor of the Northampton Congregationalists in Massachusetts and the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards.

⁹ John Winthrop (1588-1649) was elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony twelve times from 1629-1649. He was the author of *A Model of Christian Charity* in which he stated that Puritan America would be "as a City on a Hill," with "the eyes of all people" upon her.

¹⁰ William Brewster (1566-1644) was an elder in the Scrooby Congregation which was a Separatist church in England. Brewster and his family moved with the congregation first to Leiden, Holland and then to America. In the Massachusetts Bay colony, Brewster was the congregation's highest ranking elder. He remained with the Puritans at Plymouth Plantation for the rest of his life.

¹¹ John Knox (1514-1572) was the founder and leader of Presbyterianism in Scotland and a close friend of John Calvin's. Knox is considered to be one of the reformations fieriest preachers. His work *The Reformation in Scotland* is a thorough catalogue of the reformations history in Scotland. The *Scottish Confession of Faith* of 1560 as well as his collected writings on the Biblical model of civil disobedience, collected in *John Knox: On Rebellion*, are among his most influential works.

John Bunyan (1628-1688) is author of *The Pilgrims Progress* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, two of the most influence Puritan works of all time.

Calvin adhered to the principle of *sola scriptura*,¹³ or “scripture alone.” By this, he and other reformers meant that the scriptural teachings of the Bible are the authentic and absolute word of God and “the only rule of faith and obedience.”¹⁴ Reformed theology, synonymous with Calvinism, focuses on the absolute sovereignty of God. And, that through His omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, He is willing and able to do whatever He pleases with His creation. It also maintains that within the Bible are the following teachings: That God, by His sovereign grace predestines people into salvation; that Jesus died only for those predestined; that God regenerates the individual where he is then able and wants to choose God; and that it is impossible for those who are redeemed to lose their salvation.¹⁵

These teachings shook the very foundation of Medieval Europe with cataclysmic effect. Incorporated in this Reformed faith were the principles of Covenantalism,¹⁶ Providentialism,¹⁷

¹³ One of the five *solas* of the reformation. These affirmations of Biblical doctrine are as follows: *Sola Scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”), *Sola Fide* (“by faith alone”), *Sola Gratia* (“by grace alone”), *Solus Christus* or *Solo Christo* (“Christ alone or through Christ alone”), and *Sola Deo Gloria* (“glory to God alone”).

¹⁴ “Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 3, A. 3,” *Orthodox Presbyterian Church*.

¹⁵ Matthew J. Slick, “The Five Points of Calvinism,” *The Calvinist Corner*.

¹⁶ The concept of Covenantalism includes not only Covert Theology (referring to the three overarching theological covenants of redemption, works, and grace identified by John Calvin and other Christian reformers) but also the integration of a covenant structure into the three spheres of jurisdiction: Church, State and Family. Jerald Brauer summarizes the concept of Covenantalism stating that, “[t]hree things are essential for the Puritan understanding of covenant. First, it is absolutely clear that all initiative in the creation and sustenance of covenant is in God’s hands...On the other hand, the covenant is, in the second place, conditional...A third thing to note about the covenant is its communal nature. Though it is grounded in the relationship between God and the individual, its purpose is not simply the salvation of individuals but rather the creation of a people. Individuals are not covenanted to God singly, in a lonely relationship. Though the relationship between God and the soul is highly individual and subjective, it occurs only in the context of a community, the church. Churches are collections of individuals covenanted with each other to form a congregation of fellow believers. There is no true manifestation of the church apart from fellow believers owning a covenant with God and with each other. Jerald C. Brauer, “Puritanism, Revivalism, and the Revolution,” *Religion and the American Revolution*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 7-8.

¹⁷ Regarding the doctrine of Providence Calvin states, “there is no random power, or agency, or motion in the creatures, who are so governed by the secret counsel of God, that nothing happens but what he has knowingly and willingly decreed.” He goes on to say “that the providence we mean is not one by which the Deity, sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, but one by which he, as it were, holds the helm, and overrules all events. Hence his providence extends no less to the hand than to the eye...Hence it appears that providence consists in action.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book First, Ch. 16*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 116.

Jurisdictionalism,¹⁸ and Divine Sovereignty.¹⁹ These key concepts, coupled with a firm adherence to the Cultural Mandate²⁰ and the Dominion Mandate²¹ drove the reformers and their followers to usher in what they saw as Christ's New Millennium.²²

From Calvin to Edwards

¹⁸ The Reformed understanding of Jurisdictionalism holds that “[t]he legitimacy of any claim of right to rule rest[s] upon an examination of God’s Word and God’s will.” Herbert Titus, *God, Man, and Law: The Biblical Principles*, (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994), 67. Samuel Rutherford explained “[t]hat power of government in general must be from God...because Rom. 13:1. ‘there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God.’” Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex Q. 1*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Portage Publications, Inc., 2009), 1. Therefore, if civil government derives its legitimacy from God directly, then the authority of civil government is directly limited by God. In *Politics of Guilt and Pity*, R. J. Rushdoony summarizes Calvin’s understanding of Jurisdictionalism. He writes: “the state has its jurisdiction; the church its realm; art, economics, the university, the family, all have their respective jurisdictions; and the key to the life of each is the Word of God in the heart of man.” R. J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity*, (Portland, OR: Thoburn Press, 1970), 280. This then ties to the theologians of the First Great Awakening through the Puritans and to the Puritans through the Scottish Confession of Faith of 1560. In Arts 18, 19 and 20, Knox insisted “that neither historical primacy, a majority rule, the rule of the elect, apostolic succession, nor any other authority carried any weight, but only the Word of God...Thus no institution can claim jurisdiction where none is granted.” Ibid.

¹⁹ John Piper has stated that “Sovereignty means that God has the right and the power to do whatever he pleases.” John Piper, *Passion Conference*, 2014. Without this principle firmly established, we will assuredly have a lower view of God and a higher view of mankind than is due either. “[F]or I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose[.]’” Isaiah 46: 9-10. In his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul illustrates God’s complete sovereignty with the example of Christ; “For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:16-17. Here, Paul explains that God created and sustains the universe by His sovereign will and assigns the rulers, kingdoms, and principalities their powers on earth. The sovereignty of God is not confined to those who are believers, to heaven, spiritual things, or any other limitations. Rather, God is sovereign over all. His dominion over the universe is total. This means that no event can occur that is outside the will of the Almighty.

²⁰ “Reformed theology also emphasizes the cultural mandate, or the obligation of Christians to live actively in society and work for the transformation of the world and its cultures....First we are called to be in the world and not to withdraw from it...Second, we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoner. But the chief needs of people are still spiritual, and social work is no adequate substitute for evangelism. In fact, efforts to help people will only be truly effective as their hearts and minds are changed by the gospel. This sets reformed believers apart from, mere humanitarianism. James M. Boice, “Reformed Theology,” *The Reformed Reader*. It is doubtful whether the reforms themselves ever spoke in terms of a “Cultural Mandate” and it seems as though they did not write about it, at least not directly. However, their actions certainly evidence an understanding of this concept. From Calvin’s work in Geneva to Rutherford’s denouncement of the “divine right of kings” in *Lex Rex* the actions of the reforms spoke louder than any writing on the cultural mandate could have.

²¹ The Dominion Mandate originates from Genesis 1:8. “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Genesis 1:28. From the beginning God intended man to work. We are stewards of the Creator’s creation. That is we are to care for the creation, manage the creation, and prosper the creation. All of these functions are good and necessary for us to carry out. As with the Culture Mandate, it is doubtful whether the reforms themselves ever spoke or wrote in terms of a “Dominion Mandate”. Once again their actions certainly evidence an understanding of this concept.

²² The New Millennium refers to the second coming of Christ ushering in of God’s heavenly kingdom on earth.

Over the next three centuries the Reformation grew exponentially. Beginning with the fearlessness of John Knox, Calvin's reformatory theology was transferred and translated throughout the English countryside. It was Knox's ministry to the Scotts that laid the foundation for the English Puritans. Finally, the Scrooby Congregation,²³ under the tutelage of John Robinson,²⁴ so cherished their doctrinal integrity that they chose to brave the long and treacherous journey across the mid-Atlantic.

The Puritans carried their Reformed faith with them to the New World. It was John Winthrop's belief in Providentialism that inspired him to write *A Model of Christian Charity* in which he stated that Puritan America would be "as a City on a Hill," with "the eyes of all people" upon her.²⁵ The concept of Jurisdictionalism laid the foundation for the American political system. Most importantly, it was the Puritans' commitment to Covenantalism that bound their understanding of Providentialism and jurisdiction to each individual, bound each individual to God and the Church body, and finally bound the Church body to the greater body of peoples within their society.

However, by the early 1700's New England's faith in their reformation heritage had begun to wane. The old Puritan's were dying off and with them their commitment to upholding Christian orthodoxy as well. Protestant ministers in America watched this trend with fear. By the 1720's many of the old guard Puritan's began preaching warnings against the declining interest in Christian doctrine and godly living among the colonists. Six years before his death, Solomon Stoddard delivered a sermon to his Northampton congregation warning of the dismal results of ineffectual preaching:

To teach that *there is no need of a work of Humiliation to prepare them for Christ*; and that *Faith is nothing else but a Perswasion that the Gospel is true*, is the very way to make many Carnal Men hope that they are Converted. It makes other Preaching very ineffectual: It makes them think that it is needless to strive for Conversion. Such Preaching

²³ The Scrooby Congregation were English Protestant separatists who lived near Scrooby, England. Richard Clyfton, William Bradford, and John Robinson were all elders in the congregation. From 1606 the congregation around Clyfton met in the house of William Brewster. In 1607 the Congregation emigrated to the Netherlands in search of the freedom to worship as they chose. They founded the "English separatist church at Leiden", one of several English separatist groups in the Netherlands at the time. From Leiden, the Scrooby congregation crossed the Atlantic to found Plymouth Plantation.

²⁴ John Robinson (1576-1625) was the pastor of the Scrooby Congregation first in England and later in Leiden, Holland. Robinson whole heartedly believed that the Separatists could no longer remain under the authority of the English Church. In a manuscript found after his death, Robinson had written that, "[I] cannot communicate with or submit unto the [English] church-order and ordinances there established, either in state or act, without being condemned of mine own heart, and therein provoking God, who is greater than my heart, to condemn me much more." Frederick J. Powicke, "John Robinson and the Beginnings of the Pilgrim Movement," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3, (Jul., 1920), 279. However, in the same manuscript Robinson also stated that, "For myself...I esteem so many in that Church of what State or Order so ever, as are truly partakers of that faith, as I account many thousands to be, for my Christian brethren, and myself a fellow-member with them of that one mystical body and Christ scattered far and wide throughout the world..." Ibid. The balance between these statements reflects Robinson's awareness of the danger inherent in the Pilgrim's separatist attitudes. Further wisdom aimed at tempering the Pilgrims' separatism is revealed in Robinson's pastoral admonishment "for civil tolerance of error, 'considering that neither God is pleased with unwilling worshippers, nor Christian societies bettered nor the persons themselves . . . neither good intents nor events, which are casual, can justify unreasonable violence.'" Ibid., 286. Robinson's legacy can be seen in the religious tolerance which permeated the American colonies; a legacy which greatly aided the dissemination of revivalism during the First Great Awakening.

²⁵ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," (1630), *The Winthrop Society*.

hardens men in their Sins: The want of dealing plainly with men is the reason, why there is seldom noise among the *Dry Bones*.²⁶

A mere five years after Stoddard's death, his grandson Jonathan Edwards would strike the match of the single largest revival this side of the Reformation.

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

In 1727, Edwards picked up his grandfather's mantle. Finding the spiritual life of his Northampton congregation wanting, he began preaching a series of convicting sermons. While some close friends attempted to dissuade him from this course of action, Edwards was unshaken in his resolve. His desire to launch a revival in this sleepy Massachusetts town was born out of the general decline of Christian behavior that he observed among its populace. "A worldly spirit prevailed; the young people absented themselves from public worship and the restraints of family influence; licentiousness grossly abounded, and the Sabbath was turned into a day of amusement" and there was a "prevailing laxity in morals, discipline, and doctrine."²⁷

Sometime in 1734 he began directing his efforts towards the young people of Northampton. In a letter to the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman, Edwards relates that during the winter of 1734 "there appeared to be a strange flexibleness in the young people of the town, and an unusual disposition to hearken to counsel."²⁸ Evincing this "flexibleness" he reveals how it had been common practice among the towns youth "...to make Sabbath-day nights and lecture day's to be especially times of diversion and company keeping. I then preached a sermon on the Sabbath before the lecture, to show them the unsuitableness and inconvenience of the practice, and to persuade them to reform it."²⁹

He recalls that he "urged it on the heads of families" to uphold this practice among their children. However, he states that "the parents had little or no occasion for the exercise of government in the case; for the young people declared themselves convinced by what they had heard, and willing of themselves to comply with the counsel given them...and it was almost universally complied with thence forward."³⁰ Shortly after, there were a number of deaths in the small town of Northampton which caused a general introspection among the residents. Resulting from those deaths, Edwards recollected that, "a concern about the great things of religion began...to prevail abundantly in the town, till in a very little time it became universal throughout the town, among old and young, and from the highest to the lowest."³¹

New Light Theology

The power of the First Great Awakening was rooted in its distinctly reformed theological foundations. Its primary progenitors, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, were strongly Calvinist in their theology. Both preached messages heavily influenced by Reformed principles. However, their individual styles of communicating were different. Edwards was the prototypical

²⁶ Solomon Stoddard, "Defects of Preachers Reproved," (1723), *The Great Awakening*, 15.

²⁷ Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States*, 140-141.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "Unpublished Letter of May 30, 1735," *The Great Awakening (WJE Online Vol. 4)*, 100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Puritan: reserved, some-what stoic, methodical, and cloistered.³² Whitefield on the other hand broke the norms of 17th century preachers. He was theatrical, charismatic, and extremely passionate in his preaching.³³

These differences aside, the alignment of their theologies brought homogeneity to the Awakening. There were certain like characteristics held in common; characteristics which they shared with their Puritan forefathers, namely the doctrines of Covenantalism, Providentialism, Jurisdictionalism, and Divine Sovereignty. Their revival of these key concepts, as well as their fervent appeal for sinners to come to repentance, and the sometimes outlandish (for the day) methods employed in ministry earned them the moniker the New Lights.

In, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, Jonathan Edwards lays out the providential story of God's redemptive plan for the human race. As it is in the Reformed tradition, the Edwardsian understanding of the doctrine of providence is inseparably intertwined with the sovereignty of God. Nowhere is this better displayed than in his book *The End for Which God Created the World*. Kenneth Samples summarizes Edwards' thesis: "God foreordains and perfectly controls all things, which can by no means be frustrated by the will of the creature. The world exists in complete and utter dependence upon God, and God's sovereign purposes extend to His acts in creation, providence, and redemption."³⁴

Likewise, the concept of Covenantalism pervaded the landscape of the New England mind. Perry Miller discusses this ubiquitous devotion in *The Marrow of Puritan Divinity* in which he traces the origins of the concept back to Calvin and the Reformation. By the time of American colonization the covenant had become "one of the most basic and pervasive [systems] in Puritan society."³⁵

The Congregational, or "New England Way" denomination, in which Jonathan Edwards was a minister, was developed out of the Puritan conception of covenant. John Cotton, the founder of the Congregationalist church described the operation of this system in a 1636 sermon delivered

³² Daniel Dorchester writes in *Christianity and the United States* that: "Edwards was...a man of rare intellectual power, the ablest preacher of his time, who subsequently acquired the reputation of being the 'most distinguished metaphysician from Leibnitz to Kant.' He was acute in analysis and intense in thought. From early childhood he was deeply religious. Somewhat phlegmatic in temperament, trained up to Puritanical primness, scrupulously precise in ministerial dignity, an absorbed student, solitary, and even ascetical in his habits, he was, nevertheless, a man of delicate sensibility, of fine esthetic taste, of rapt contemplation, and deep enthusiasm. Strong of will, of lofty temper, and large moral consciousness, he was earnest even in his most deliberate actions; and, however wanting in practical qualities and knowledge of men, he nevertheless possessed some very important qualifications for a religious reformer. His religious character was his most notable trait. His whole existence was a conscious longing after the Divine, springing from a profound conviction of the painful reality of sin and the glorious reality of redemption." Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States*, 140.

³³ Mark Noll describes Whitefield's preaching style in *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. "Whitefield... [knew] how to address plain people in plain language...and did so with a new appreciation for the dynamics of the market place. As a youth Whitefield had been drawn to the stage, an aspiration he renounced after his conversion. But he remained an actor nonetheless, with an unusual sensitivity of what it takes to secure an audience. He appealed to the heart, he knew how to play on emotions, and he was casual in the extreme about denominational differences. He also knew to exploit the rising tide of newsprint and he even engaged in what would today be called "publicity stunts." Besides these innovations, Whitefield also preached his sermons *ex tempore*, speaking directly without notes on the strength of his own charisma and the force of his message." Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 92-93.

³⁴ Kenneth R. Samples, "Jonathan Edwards: An Awakening of the Heart and Mind, Part 1." *Reasons to Believe*, (July 16th, 2013).

³⁵ Brauer, "Puritanism, Revivalism, and the Revolution," 7.

in Salem, Massachusetts. He envisioned, “people covenanting themselves to each other and pledging to obey the word of God [that they] might become a self-governing church.”³⁶ Functioning as check to ensure the purity of the church and its members he anticipated “members testify to their experience of grace and the election of church officials to ensure the appropriate distribution of power.”³⁷ This system of “interlocking covenants” binding households to “each other and to their ministers in an autonomous, self-ruling congregation” would be mirrored in the organization of towns.³⁸

Cotton’s Congregationalism merely revived the Scottish Covenantor theology which was transplanted to America on the *Mayflower*. Winthrop, Brewster and the Pilgrims had already grafted Covenantalism and Jurisdictionalism into the American social structure through *The Mayflower Compact*. These concepts combined with the Edwardsian revival of Providentialism and Divine Sovereignty caused the Awakening to take on an eschatological focus unique to reformed theology. Specifically, that focus was on the providential direction of the growth of the Kingdom of God through the spread of the gospel and the freedom of the church.

As itinerants like Whitefield sowed seeds of revival across the American countryside, Reformed theology was taking root in a new generation of the American mind. Mark Noll states that “the Great Awakening...was Americans first truly national event” and that “the revivals...served as something of a melting pot, giving immigrant communities more contact with other colonists. The process that would lead to European immigrants identifying themselves as ‘Americans’ had begun.”³⁹ There was however, another theory imbedded in the eschatology of the reformed theology then pervading the colonies; that is, the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate. The generation of the First Great Awakening could scarcely perceive that the repercussions of this philosophy would forever change the course of history.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The seed of the Awakening produced many kinds of fruit. First, the theology of the First Great Awakening had a direct impact on the American War for Independence. The founding generation’s aversion to tyranny and their theory of resistance to such tyranny was a product of the Awakenings reformed theology. Second, reformed theology and philosophy further influenced the creation of America’s republican form of government and its civil institutions.

Esteemed historian of the First Great Awakening Thomas Kidd argues that “a direct connection between these two movements (the First Great Awakening and the American Revolution) remains elusive.”⁴⁰ Despite this assertion however, he acknowledges that the experiences of the Awakening helped the Founders “articulate two key tenets of the revolutionary age: the freedom of private judgment, and the liberty to separate from established powers.”⁴¹ To that end, it is necessary to understand that the First Great Awakening was a revival of reformation principals and theology.

³⁶ Donna M. Campbell, “Puritanism in New England,” *Literary Movements*. (July 04, 2013).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 110-111.

⁴⁰ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 288 (2007).

Reformed scholar Loraine Boettner estimates that “about two-thirds of the colonial population had been trained in the school of Calvin.”⁴² This suggests that at the time of the Revolution the overwhelming majority of Americans professed some type of reformed doctrine. Since orthodox Christianity was on steady decline in the colonies before the revival of the 1700’s it seems probable that the First Great Awakening is at least partly responsible for this shift.⁴³ In fact, one scholar noted that “If we call the American statesmen of the late eighteenth century the Founding Fathers of the United States, then the Pilgrims and Puritans were the grandfathers and Calvin the great-grandfather.”⁴⁴

Among the many philosophies promulgated by the Reformation, and revived in the Great Awakening, is the theory of the Lesser (or Inferior) Magistrate. This doctrine originated with Martin Luther and John Calvin. In Calvin’s view, which was based on Romans 13, the governmental duties of “inferior magistrates” (government officials, such as mayor or governors, in an intermediate level between the king and the people) required them to protect the people against oppression from above. Calvinism readily adopted the Lutheran theory of resistance by such magistrates.⁴⁵

The doctrine is rooted in the principle that God ordained the outlines of civil government’s just jurisdiction in Romans 13.⁴⁶ The English reformer Christopher Goodman wrote that the doctrine of the inferior magistrate “appertains not only to the magistrates...but to the common people also.”⁴⁷ Goodman believed that if an inferior magistrate failed to protect the rights of the people from infringement by higher authorities, “it is lawful for the people, yea, it is their duty” to revolt against such tyranny.⁴⁸ He asserts that the command in *Romans* 13 for “Christians to be

⁴² Boettner estimates that out of the nearly “3,000,000 Americans at the time of the American Revolution, 900,000 were of Scotch or Scotch-Irish origin, 600,000 were Puritan English, and 400,000 were German or Dutch Reformed. In addition to this the Episcopalians had a Calvinistic confession in their Thirty-nine Articles; and many French Huguenots also had come to this western world.” Loraine Boettner, *Calvinism in America*.

⁴³ “The churches of the Calvinistic tradition were predominant supporters of the cause of independence. A very important contribution to the shaping of the revolutionary spirit was made by those strongly influenced by Calvinistic political philosophy. With its stress on obedience to God rather than man, the political teaching of Calvinistic leaders justified the right to resistance to tyranny, especially by the lesser magistrates as guardians of the liberties of the people. ... It was against this background that the Congregational (and Presbyterian) clergy of New England preached and wrote voluminously on behalf of the rebellion. A major source of ideas and attitudes of the Revolutionary generation stemmed ultimately from the political and social theories of New England Puritanism, and particularly from the ideas associated with the covenant theology.” Robert T Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139.

⁴⁴ David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding*, Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 417 (2005).

⁴⁵ Dave Kopel, “The Calvinist Connection,” *Liberty Magazine*, (October, 2008), 27-31.

⁴⁶ “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” Romans 13: 1-8.

⁴⁷ Kopel, “The Calvinist Connection.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

obedient to government” applies only to those that “are orderly and lawfully instituted by God.” “Tyrannical government came from Satan,” he says, “not from God. To obey a tyrant was to rebel against God.”⁴⁹

Rutherford echoed this doctrine when he rejected the notion of the “divine right of kings” in his monumental work *Lex Rex*. It was then transported to the American colonies by way of the Puritans, revived by the theology of the First Great Awakening, and finally, came into full fruition with the Declaration of Independence. In fact, the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, adopted as his personal seal the motto “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God” which is specifically associated with the concepts suggested by Samuel Rutherford in *Lex Rex*.

The Impact of the Great Awakening on the Founding Fathers

Critics of this line of reasoning claim that the fires of revival had begun to wane by the 1740’s. Thus, they assert, that the theology of Great Awakening had little to no effect on the American Founders. However, this ignores the substance of Founder’s actions, as well as their own admissions. Furthermore, it ignores the social context in which the Founders were born. Puritan society itself, exclusive of outside forces such as the Enlightenment, had “within its theory and its practice forces which, under the proper historical circumstances, could become highly critical if not revolutionary.”⁵⁰

There are numerous examples of the Revival’s lasting imprint on the founders. One such example is the “Father of the American Revolution” himself; Samuel Adams. John Eidsmoe writes that, “Adams never forgot those stirring days during the Great Awakening” and that the “glimpse Adams caught of ‘Puritanism’ in 1740 had profound influence upon his later career.”⁵¹ In *The Rights of the Colonists*, Samuel Adams pivots the Puritanical theologies expounded by the Awakening into the sphere of the colonial political crises of the 1770’s. There he states that, “[j]ust and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty,” in matters spiritual and temporal, is a thing that all men are clearly entitled to by the eternal and immutable laws of God and nature. . . .⁵² In so doing, Adams harkens back to the doctrine of Jurisdictionalism embedded within the Awakenings theological underpinnings. He continues this argument proclaiming that, “[t]he Legislative has no right to absolute, arbitrary power over the lives and fortunes of the people; nor can mortals assume a prerogative not only too high for men, but for angels, and therefore reserved for the exercise of the Deity alone.”⁵³

Nor was Adams alone extrapolating the theology of the Awakening into political philosophy. James Madison, architect of the United States Constitution, “Father of the Bill of Rights,” and the fourth American President, was also deeply motivated by the tensions created by revival. Specifically, his witness of the repressive effects of the state’s domination over the church had convinced Madison of the necessity of political liberty and the freedom of conscience. Madison saw firsthand the repetition in America the main evils of the marriage of the church and state so evident in the Anglican Church in England. The very thing that caused many to flee from

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Brauer, 12.

⁵¹ John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 248.

⁵² Samuel Adams, “The Rights of the Colonists: The Report of the Committee of Correspondence to the Boston Town Meeting, Nov. 20, 1772” *Old South Leaflets no. 173* (Boston, MA: Directors of the Old South Work, 1906) 7: 417.

⁵³ Ibid., 421.

England was being reproduced in Virginia. The Great Awakening magnified this tension and made it clear to Madison that the institutions of the church and state should never be joined. It was Madison's view that, most of all, the church needed to be protected from the government. This is the underlying reason for Madison's consistent push for freedom of religion and the separating of church and state. He took his stand to ensure that all were allowed to worship as they chose because of the discrimination he saw during the southern revivals.⁵⁴

Theology Foundations of the Founding Documents

We may observe the effects that the revival had on the Founders indirectly as well. By examining the form and substance of the American Republic we can discern the philosophical belief system of its creators. The Declaration of Independence shall serve as an appropriate case study for this examination. In it we shall see that the American founding documents are squarely rooted in Calvinist philosophy as interpreted by the New Light revivalists.

The Founder's appeal to the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God"⁵⁵ in the Declaration of Independence has often been dismissed either as flowery language, the Founders appeasement of their political base, or perhaps as an allusion to Enlightenment political theory. However, none of these attempts at dismissal are sufficient to overcome the legal and historical context of the idiom. "The phrase 'the laws of nature and nature's God' had a fixed meaning in eighteenth century England and America. The famed English jurist Sir William Blackstone wrote in 1765 that the law of nature was the will of God immutably impressed upon the world when it was created."⁵⁶ Blackstone distinguished this "law of nature" from what was commonly referred to as "natural law." "Undoubtedly," he writes, "the revealed law is...of infinitely more authority than what we generally call the natural law, because one is the law of nature expressly declared so to be by God Himself. The other is only what by the assistance of human reason we imagine to be that law."⁵⁷

While "the Law of Nature and of Nature's God" was not the exact term used by Blackstone it closely "parallels what he called the revealed or divine law"⁵⁸ and was therefore a substitute of comparable legal, theology, and philosophical import. Thus, the foundation stone of the American Republic was a firm adherence to revealed Biblical law and the Sovereign authority of God. This is not to say that the Founders were not influenced by other philosophies in this pursuit. As Frank Lambert states, "An analysis of the Declaration of Independence within historical context features Americans who were greatly influenced by Enlightenment thought..."⁵⁹ However, within the language of the Declaration of Independence are a number of distinctly reformed themes.

On such theme is evidenced by the fact that the revolutionaries pursued their goal of independence through their "lesser magistrates," a clearly reformed position built on the concept of Jurisdictionalism. Before organizing the temporary government of the Continental Congress, the Founders exhausted their complaint before the colonial Governors and even King George III. Through this representative body the Founders presented their case to the world before severing their political ties to the Old World. Stating that they had "Petitioned for Redress in the most

⁵⁴ Daniel A. Scriber, *The Impact of the Great Awakening on the Founding Fathers*, 14.

⁵⁵ *The Declaration of Independence*.

⁵⁶ Herbert W. Titus and Gerald R. Thompson, "America's Heritage: Constitutional Liberty," electronic ed., *LONANG Institute*, (2006), 5-6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹ Frank Lambert, *Separation of Church and State: Founding Principles of Religious Liberty*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 133 (2014).

humble terms,” the Continental Congress explained that “Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”⁶⁰

This same “olive branch” was extended by the Founders to their fellow Englishmen. As the Continental Congress explained in the *Declaration of Independence*, “We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an *unwarrantable jurisdiction* over us...We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity...to disavow these usurpations...”⁶¹ By continuing to attempt reconciliation before plunging the colonies into outright revolution, the Founders reaffirmed their commitment to the doctrine of the “lesser magistrate.”

Finally, the Puritan understanding of Covenantalism is evidenced in the language of the *Declaration* as well. There are a number of references to political and social covenants. In the first instance, Thomas Jefferson explains that there are certain circumstances in which it becomes “necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have *connected them with another*.”⁶² Here we see an indication of the covenant framework.

A further annunciation of this covenantal framework is given in explanation for the purpose of civil government; namely to secure a people in their God ordained rights. In order “to secure [those] rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁶³ Covenant principles again surface in the Founders understanding of the Lockean theory of “the social contract.”⁶⁴ That is, the Founders believed that a government and its citizens are in covenant with each other. The government is to abide by the laws set by its citizens, and the citizens are to submit a portion of their sovereignty to the civil government for the benefit of all.

The American revolutionaries were compelled to re-covenant with their own political bodies after severing ties with England. As such, they covenanted together as “these United

⁶⁰ *The Declaration of Independence*.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

⁶² *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

⁶³ *Ibid*.

⁶⁴ It must be noted that the Founders conception of Covenantalism as applied to civil government and civil society derives at root from a theological understanding of covenant rather than from the philosophical creation of the social contract. However, they certainly understood and applied the philosophical methodology of Lockean political theory. That is, while covenant and social contract existed in tandem in the minds of the American Founders, Covenantalism stood exclusive of the social contract, but the social contract did not stand exclusive of Covenantalism. Samuel Adams clearly recognized this subtlety when he wrote that “...it is the greatest absurdity to suppose it in the power of one, or any number of men, at the entering into society, to renounce their essential natural rights, or the means of preserving those rights; when the grand end of civil government, from the very nature of its institution, is for the support, protection, and defence of those very rights; the principal of which, as is before observed, are Life, Liberty, and Property. If men, through fear, fraud, or mistake, should in terms renounce or give up any essential natural right, the eternal law of reason and the grand end of society would absolutely vacate such renunciation. The right to freedom being the gift of God Almighty, it is not in the power of man to alienate this gift and voluntarily become a slave.” Adams, “The Rights of the Colonists: The Report of the Committee of Correspondence to the Boston Town Meeting, Nov. 20, 1772,” 7: 419. The implication of Adams’ assertion is that in so much as any social contract falls outside the parameters of Man’s ordained jurisdiction, then it is null and void. Said another way, when Man attempts to take some power not give by God or relinquish some right that is given by God, then those actions are without justification. Therefore, if a social contract approves of action not enumerated by Man’s covenant with God than, to quote Adams’, the “eternal law of reason and the grand end of society would absolutely vacate” the agreement. However, a covenant based on biblical precepts can function to bind together a people without the influence of the philosophical concept of the social contract.

Colonies” for the preservation of their “future security.”⁶⁵ Lastly, the Founders and the people covenanted amongst themselves. Nowhere is this clearer than in the final line of the Declaration of Independence in which the signatories declared: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”⁶⁶

Revolution and the Church

Providentialism played a central role in the heart and mind of the Revolutionary age church. The revolution was, in their view, a step closer to the realization of the coming kingdom of God. It was not an end unto itself, but rather a single effect amongst a long chain of effects all anchored to the eternal plan of God. Edwards imbued the First Great Awakening with this millennial kingdom eschatology. “The end of God’s creating the world,” he writes, “was to prepare a kingdom for his Son...which should remain to all eternity...So far as the *kingdom of Christ* is set up in the world, so *far* is the world brought to its end, and...all the great changes and revolutions in the world brought to their ultimate period.”⁶⁷

H. Richard Niebuhr explains that this millennial eschatology of the coming kingdom of Christ anticipated and foreshadowed the political thought of the then coming American Revolution. He clarifies that this faith in Providentialism was “...not due to...rationalism or political idealism.”⁶⁸ Rather, he states, “it arose out of the Christian movement which had begun with the conviction of divine sovereignty, been led thence to the realization of Christ’s kingdom and now saw clearly that the latter led toward the realization of man’s everlasting hope.”⁶⁹

From the vantage point of this millennial vision, the war took on a different meaning. Preachers of the revolution conveyed this vision to their congregations and it was further disseminated throughout the American populace. By “picturing the struggle of liberty versus tyranny as nothing less than the conflict between heaven and hell, the clergy found their political commitments energized with the force of a divine imperative and their political goals translated into the very principles which would initiate the kingdom of God on earth.”⁷⁰

THE LEGACY OF REVIVAL

The First Great Awakening revived the spirit of Puritanism in colonial American. It caused a renaissance of Reformation thought. And from this wellspring of spiritual knowledge flowed the theological and philosophical principles of Covenant, Jurisdiction, Providence and Divine Sovereignty. The degree of influence that these principles exerted over the rising tide of American political independence during the mid-1700 is a question of great import. One which has been overlooked to the detriment of the American people. As stated at the outset, overlooking the theological legacy of the Great Awakening leaves little ability to understand our history as well as our future.

⁶⁵ *The Declaration of Independence.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Richard H. Niebuhr, “Toward the Kingdom of God,” *The Great Awakening: Event and Exegesis*, ed., Darrett B. Rutman, (Huntington, NY: Krieger Publishing Co., 1977), 113.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 54.

America's Republicanism did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor did it singularly emerge from the so-called rationalism of the European Enlightenment. It was, at least in part, the theological revival of the Great Awakening that prepared the hearts and minds of the founding generation for the trials of revolution and nation building. As Perry Miller has observed, "'pure rationalism' might have declared the independence of the American people, 'but it could never have inspired them to fight for it.'"⁷¹

The convergence of revival and revolution created a spiritual fervor amongst the population. With the belief that God's providential hand was at the tiller of history, America charged forward toward freedom and liberty that Winthrop's "City on a Hill" might forever be established as a beacon and a symbol to all the world. Thus, it was that the theology and eschatology proceeding out of the Great Awakening, caused many to view the cause of independence and the pursuit of man's freedom as part of a spiritual crusade which would usher in the New Millennium. In the final passages of Joseph Bellamy's sermon, *The Millennium*, we are given a glimpse of the spiritual zeal revived by the Great Awakening.

...if the powers of darkness should rally all their forces, and a general battle through all the Christian world come on; o, love not your lives to the death! Sacrifice ever earthly comfort in the glorious cause! Sing the triumphs of your victorious general in prisons and at the stake! And die courageously, firmly believing the cause of truth and righteousness will finally prevail.⁷²

This zeal was exuded throughout the Revolution, and propelled the nation forward into the future with a new sense of righteous destiny.

⁷¹ Rutman, *The Great Awakening: Event and Exegesis*, 136.

⁷² Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, (New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 632-634.