

13. THE 1700s: RATIONALISM AND REVIVALS

Psalm 115:1-2

*“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!
Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’
Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”*

1. THE “ENLIGHTENMENT (C.1650-1750)

(a) Rationalism and Autonomy – *not* the “Age of reason”

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.

(Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment*)

(b) The origins of the “Age of Reason”

- A response to the Reformation:
 - Didn’t it cause religious conflict, persecution, excessive zeal?
 - Religious and intellectual toleration followed the Reformation

- A response to Scepticism:
 - Sceptics: We can’t know anything (e.g. Montaigne)...
 - Enlightenment: Try to prove what is true... using reason alone... reject divine revelation
E.g. Descartes (d.1650)
 - Empiricism: use senses to uncover truth... in the universe (e.g. Galileo and Newton)... even in theology (Locke and Hume)

(c) Consequence: theological decay in the church

New theological systems emerge, based on reason and experience:

Minimalistic natural religions emerge:

Latitudinarians

Deism

Unitarianism

Biblical Criticism

“He did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mahomet, or of Christ!”
(J.C. Ryle, *Christian leaders of the 18th century*, p.15. *Writing of the lawyer, Blackstone, and his investigation into London churches in the reign of George III*).

2. THE GREAT REVIVALS

(a) The New World and the Great Awakenings

By 1700 serious spiritual decline

Real revival begins Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734

Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield

[A] great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages; the noise amongst the dry bones waxed louder and louder. All other talk about spiritual and eternal things was soon thrown by; all the conversation in all companies and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people, carrying on their ordinary secular business. Other discourse than of the things of religion would scarcely be tolerated in any company. The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world; it was treated amongst us as a thing of very little consequence. (Jonathan Edwards)

Second Great Awakening begins 1795: many saved... a nation changed... but more Arminian emphasis... suspect methods of Charles Finney

(b) Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

Pioneer church planter... Northampton, MA... expelled for insisting Communion only for Christians... takes Gospel to frontier town of Stockbridge... preaches through interpreter

Powerful sermons, e.g. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".

Wrote about the nature of revival and religious experience

Mainstream Puritan thinker, and original genius. Philosopher. President of Princeton. Killed by experiment with smallpox vaccine.

Classic Augustinian and Calvinist theologian. Crucial works on Original Sin and human freedom.

Utterly God-centred and glory-entranced vision of all things. Maligned for centuries... Mocked by Mark Twain as "a resplendent intellect gone mad" ... revived in 20th century, popularised by John Piper

The great and universal end of God's creating the world was to communicate himself. God is a communicating being. This communication is really only to intelligent beings. The communication of himself to their understandings is his glory, and the communication of himself with respect to their wills (and enjoying faculty) is their happiness. God created this world for the shining forth of his excellency and for the flowing forth of his happiness. It does not make God the happier to be praised, but it is a becoming and condecant and worthy thing for infinite and supreme excellency to shine forth: 'tis not his happiness but his excellency so to do."

(Jonathan Edwards, Miscellany 332)

"By these things it appears that a truly virtuous mind, being as it were under the sovereign dominion of love to God, does above all things seek the glory of God, and makes this his supreme, governing, and ultimate end: consisting in the expression of God's perfections in their proper effects, and in the manifestation of God's glory to created understandings, and the communications of the infinite fullness of God to the creature; in the creature's highest esteem of God, love to God, and joy in God, and in the proper exercises and expressions of these. And so far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature, consisting in its knowledge or view of God's glory and beauty, its union with God, and conformity to him, love to him, and joy in him."

(Jonathan Edwards, True Virtue)

(c) Britain and her revivals

1729 the Oxford University "Holy Club":

John Wesley (1703-91), Charles Wesley (1707-88), George Whitefield, 1714-1770).

Wesleys converted/transformed? in 1738 – Moravians

Wesley: open air preaching, 250 000 miles. Intense doctrinal sermons, and emphasis on personal experience. Technically died an Anglican, but really founded his own denomination: Methodism

George Whitefield: itinerant, open air preaching. Concern for the prisoners, coal miners, marginalised. Chaplain to Selina Countess of Huntingdon.

Other heroes of the revivals: William Grimshaw of Haworth, William Romaine, Daniel Rowlands, John Berridge, Henry Venn, and Augustus Toplady

(d) Some cautions

- the revivals did not create a "Christian England."
By 1851 only 4.4% of the adult population of England were Methodists.
CofE not substantially touched.
- the Methodist Church nowadays now liberal dominated and in terminal decline.
- 1700s evangelical revival movement theologically divided:
Wesley a convinced Arminian, Whitefield a Calvinist.
 - Why bother evangelising? "Preach promiscuously!"
 - Wesley at St Helen's Bishopsgate, May 1738

CONCLUSION

Extraordinary consequences: social change, missions (e.g. David Brainerd, William Carey)

What was it about these men that meant God used them?

Bishop J.C. Ryle – writing a century later in 1885:

They used "the old apostolic weapon of preaching"... everywhere... simply... fervently and directly. They preached the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture... the total corruption of human nature and that Christ's death upon the cross was the only satisfaction for man's sin... the great doctrine of justification by faith, and the necessity of heart conversion and the new birth... the inseparable connection between true faith and personal holiness. Finally, they taught both these doctrines as equally true: God's eternal hatred against sin and God's love towards sinners.

"Say, if you please, that you see nothing grand, striking, new, peculiar about this list of truths. But the fact is undeniable, that God blessed these truths to the reformation of England a hundred years ago." (J.C. Ryle, *Christian leaders of the 18th century*, pp23-29)