

## **13. The 1700s: rationalism and revivals**

### **Introduction**

Let's read Psalm 115:1-2 and then we'll pray:

“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.”

In our church history story so far we've seen the birth of the early church in the fires of persecution. We've traced a story of truth and error, of sin and grace, all the way down to age of the Puritans.

Our previous session took us to the late 1600s. We learned a little of Puritan pastors and resources – still a blessing to the church to this day. But we learned too of how the English Puritans “lost”: with the restoration of the monarchy they were ejected from the Church of England.

That's one reason why the 1700s – our subject today – began so dreadfully for the cause of Christ. Many of the achievements of the Reformers and Puritans seemed so quickly to be unravelling.

So, today, we're going to consider two topics: first, the intellectual climate of the century – Enlightenment rationalism, scepticism, and theological decay; second, the Great Revivals that the Lord worked, through giants like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.

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### **1. The “Enlightenment” (c.1650-1750)**

#### **(a) Rationalism and autonomy**

This period is sometimes called the “Age of Reason.” It is a misleading title. It implies that previously no-one used their minds in order to understand the truth! “Reason” did not begin in 1650.

Rather, this was the age of “rationalism.” It was not about the *use* of reason, but the *place* of reason. For the first time human reason was promoted above divine revelation. Now, reason was thought sufficient on its own to plumb great depths of truth.

The key word in understanding the Enlightenment project is “autonomy.” Its thinkers believed they were coming of age, casting off of slavish restraints (like Scripture and the church) and self-legislating both intellectually and morally. It was a thorough attempt at independence from God. In 1784 Immanuel Kant famously summed up the project like this:

*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)*

We should regard the title "Enlightenment" as highly misleading. Christian people should prefer to talk of the "En-darkenment." For hundreds of years there had been no alternative to Christian belief in Europe. This marked a huge shift. But how could this happen, and so soon after the Reformation and its great re-discovery of Bible truth?

### **(b) The origins of the "age of reason"**

We'll mention two reasons for the Enlightenment:

Firstly, it was a conscious response to the Reformation and its aftermath. Many Enlightenment thinkers were reacting against what they perceived to be religious-inspired conflict. Germany, France, Netherlands and England had all been gripped by vicious battles perceived by some as purely religious wars (even when they weren't). And there was considerable persecution of those who found themselves on the losing side.

Others simply reacted against the zeal shown by many sincere believers. Others relished the fact that the Reformation generally brought in more religious and intellectual toleration than ever had been known before.

Secondly, it was a response to the new Scepticism. New philosophers (like Montaigne) rejected all the claims of religion. In fact, they doubted everything: they were sceptical about the human senses, they were sceptical about the possibility of true knowledge. "Nothing can be known," was a summary of their position.

The Enlightenment was *not* a religiously sceptical movement. That might surprise us. In fact, it was trying to answer the arguments of the Sceptics. But they did so by trying to produce a strong and demonstrable set of beliefs to which *all people* could have access. This meant rejecting divine revelation, which was available only to some. It had to be based on natural human abilities, which were present in all.

This was the arena of Descartes (d.1650). Is everything an illusion or a dream? No. Why not? *Cogito ergo sum* – "I think, therefore I am." With this as his starting point, he began to reason for the existence of God.

This was the age of Empiricism – the idea that scientific method is the only way of knowing. This was partly a fruit of the great successes in experimental science enjoyed by Galileo (d.1642) and Newton (d.1727). It appeared that the universe was understandable by uncovering laws through using your own senses.

John Locke (d.1704) and David Hume (d.1776) applied these principles to theology, and rejected the truthfulness of Christianity.

### **(c) A consequence: theological decay in the church**

New theological systems emerged, based on reason and experience. A minimalistic natural religions appeared, emphasising the ethical standards of Christianity while rejecting its orthodox foundations.

There were the *Latitudinarians* (late 1600s, early 1700s) – men like Archbishop John Tillotson (d.1694). There was *Deism*, the idea of a creator God who set up the universe like a watchmaker winding a timepiece, before withdrawing and having no input at all as his handiwork. There was *Unitarianism*: just as miracles were denied is impossible (because we cannot empirically prove them), so too the Trinity seemed absurd and the Godhead was collapsed into a new Arianism.

And for the first time there was *Biblical Criticism*. This was a necessary next step if you were a Deist. You believe the miraculous in Scripture is simply wrong, that the disciples invented the resurrection, and Jesus was merely interested in ethics. This was the work of men like Hermann Reimarus (d.1768) and Gotthold Lessing (d.1781). Here are the forefathers of liberal scholarship.

The state of the church in the early and mid-1700s was grim. There were faithful brethren. And it's possible things were not quite as bad as subsequently were reported. But the Puritans had been ejected. And the established church was in a poor state, and increasingly buying into the secular philosophy of the Enlightenment. The lawyer William Blackstone, early in the reign of George III, went to hear every clergyman of note in London. His famous comment, as reported by J.C. Ryle, was that:

*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 18<sup>th</sup> century, p.15).*

This was the context for the Great Revivals.

## **2. The Great Revivals**

### **(a) The New World and the Great Awakenings**

The early English colonies in America were almost all Protestant and Calvinist. But by 1700 there was a serious spiritual decline, under worldly pressures – to do with commerce and trade, warfare and conflict with the French and with Indians.

Seeds of revival were glimpsed in 1720. But real revival began in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734 under the human influence of Jonathan Edwards. Out of a very small population 300 people were converted, sometimes independently of each other. All over New England was a growing spiritual hunger. This was the first Great Awakening.

Jonathan Edwards wrote:

*[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.*

How wonderful! And it was God's work. One chief human agent of the first Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, one of the giants of church history. Another was the English evangelist George

Whitefield, who travelled from England and was mightily used in preaching the Gospel in Pennsylvania and in the southern colonies.

A second Great Awakening followed at the very end of the 1700s. It began in around 1795 and lasted for several years. Thousands were converted. The character of the infant United States was substantially changed. There were concerning elements in this revival: where Whitefield and Edwards were Calvinists who believed that God sovereignly chooses and changes hearts, many in the second Great Awakening were moving in a more Arminian direction. Preachers like Charles Finney sought to manipulate people into a relationship with God. His techniques led eventually to the practice of the “altar call” which in the whole of church history had never been heard of. But despite errors and excesses, the Lord drew astonishing numbers of people to Himself.

### **(b) Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)**

Edwards was a pioneer church planter on the edges of the new world, who when expelled from his church by ungodly people took the Gospel of Christ to the absolute frontier, in the little town of Stockbridge.

He preached powerful sermons, like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” These were the instruments of the revival in America.

But he also wrestled with the nature of revival and of religious experiences. Are all religious experiences authentic? How do you define what is true experience of God? To what extent are your feelings important or determinative in coming to know God? How do you account for apparent conversions and extraordinary testimonies, that later collapse into worldliness and unbelief. All this Edwards experienced, and reflect upon with Bible in hand. He has much to teach us.

Edwards is both a mainstream Puritan thinker, and a man of incredible originality and genius. He’s probably America’s greatest ever philosopher. He was the president of Princeton University, until killed by a smallpox vaccination.

He was a classic Augustinian and Calvinist theologian who wrote crucial works on Original Sin and human freedom.

His is an utterly God-centred and glory-entranced vision of all things. Probably for that reason the sceptical Mark Twain mocked him as “a resplendent intellect gone mad.” Pretty much everything that John Piper has been preaching and writing for the last 40 years is Jonathan Edwards translated into 20<sup>th</sup> century English!

Here are a couple of classic Edwards extracts on God’s purpose and what it means for humans to be truly good:

*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.*"<sup>1</sup>

*"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."*<sup>2</sup>

### **(c) Britain and her Revivals**

At Oxford University in 1729 two brothers formed the Holy Club. They were John Wesley (1703-91) and Charles Wesley (1707-88). There was another student, so poor that he had to act as servant to other students to pay for his tuition. That was the young George Whitefield. They met for Bible study and prayer, and committed themselves to charitable works. All three became ordained in the Church of England.

The Wesleys were actually converted – or at least transformed – in the year 1738, having encountered Moravians, German protestants associated with the Count von Zinzendorf. If you go to the Museum of London you'll see the plaque on the wall at Aldersgate Street where John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed.

John Wesley began preaching in the open air in Bristol, in 1739. Some 3,000 people gathered to hear him. Over his lifetime he covered some 250,000 miles in the course of his gospel preaching. He preached intense doctrinal sermons, but also emphasised personal experience in contrast to some of the arid features of contemporary preaching. He died an Anglican, but left what became the Methodist Church.

George Whitefield pursued a similar pattern of ministry. He was an itinerant, particularly when the Church of England closed the doors of her churches to him. He was particularly concerned for those on the edges of society – prisoners, coal miners, and others. He was chaplain to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. She was a wealthy aristocrat who used her position and her money to support gospel ministry. Whitefield left no structures or denomination as his legacy.

Other heroes of the revivals were preachers like William Grimshaw of Haworth, William Romaine, Daniel Rowlands, John Berridge, Henry Venn, and Augustus Toplady (you'll see three of his hymns in an appendix below).

### **(d) Some cautions**

We need to be realistic about church history – and about its human heroes. We never need to be afraid of the truth. And there are some cautions that we need to note concerning the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 332", in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. T. A. Shaffer, Vol. 13 (YUP, New Haven & London, 1994), p.410.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *True Virtue*, p.559.

*First*, the revivals did not create a “Christian England.” Such an England has never existed. By 1851 only 4.4% of the adult population of England were Methodists. And whilst many of the preachers of the revival were ordained Anglicans, the national church herself was not substantially touched.

*Second*, the Methodist Church nowadays has little resemblance to the Methodism of the late 1700s. It is liberal dominated and in terminal decline.

*Third*, the movement was theologically divided. Wesley was a convinced Arminian, while Whitefield was a Calvinist.

Why do you bother evangelising if God predestines people to salvation? said Wesley. We have no idea *who* God has chosen so “we preach promiscuously”, replied Whitefield in a marvellous turn of phrase.

On one occasion John Wesley found himself preaching at St Helen’s Bishopsgate in the City of London. It was in May 1738, and it was a Tuesday lunchtime. He wrote in his diary that afterwards he was told clearly: “Sir you must preach here no more.” We might therefore presume that St Helen’s was a spiritually dead and graceless church. Except that a little earlier George Whitefield had preached at St Helen’s and had been well received. So, what did Wesley actually say? Lee Gatiss, a church historian and ex-St Helen’s staff member, describes his sermon thus: “From start to finish it is a sustained, emotive, combative, highly prejudiced and somewhat patronizing rant against Reformed doctrine.” Wesley alleged that the doctrine of predestination was “full of blasphemy.” And apparently a discerning pastor or churchwarden took exception and told him not to come back. (Lee Gatiss, *The true profession of the Gospel: Augustus Toplady and reclaiming our reformed foundations*, pp.35-36).

Wesley hated Calvinism, predestination and the doctrine of definite atonement. He really, really did. He was personally very hostile towards Calvinists like Augustus Toplady. His conduct with those he disagree with was far short of godly.

## **Conclusion**

Nonetheless, the revivals that the Lord worked through imperfect men like Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards were extraordinary.

The social consequences were profound – we’ll think about some of them in our next session.

Also, a new missionary zeal swept through both America and the English church. David Brainerd became a missionary to the native Americans. The great baptist missionary William Carey (1761-1834) translated the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Arabic, Marathi, Hindi and Sanskrit.

God worked revival. Salvation is monergistic – it is solely his saving work. But what was it about these men that he chose to use?

Bishop J.C. Ryle – writing a century later – noted several characteristics. Firstly, they used “the old apostolic weapon of preaching.” They preached everywhere. They preached simply. They preached fervently and directly. They preached the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture. They taught constantly the total corruption of human nature and that Christ’s death upon the cross was the only satisfaction for man’s sin. They taught the great doctrine of justification by

faith, and the necessity of heart conversion and the new birth. They taught 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. (Ryle, *Christian leaders of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, pp.23-29).

Ryle, who was writing in 1885, comments in conclusion: "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."

## Appendix: hymns by Augustus Toplady

**A debtor to mercy alone,**  
of covenant mercy I sing;  
nor fear, with thy righteousness on,  
my person and off'ring to bring.  
The terrors of law and of God  
with me can have nothing to do;  
my Savior's obedience and blood  
hide all my transgressions from view.

2 The work which his goodness began,  
the arm of his strength will complete;  
his promise is yea and amen,  
and never was forfeited yet.  
Things future, nor things that are now,  
nor all things below or above,  
can make him his purpose forgo,  
or sever my soul from his love.

3 My name from the palms of his hands  
eternity will not erase;  
impressed on his heart it remains,  
in marks of indelible grace.  
Yes, I to the end shall endure,  
as sure as the earnest is giv'n;  
more happy, but not more secure,  
the glorified spirits in heav'n.

### **From whence this fear and unbelief?**

Hath not the Father put to grief  
His spotless Son for me?  
And will the righteous Judge of men  
Condemn me for that debt of sin  
Which, Lord, was charged on Thee?

2. Complete atonement Thou hast made,  
And to the utmost Thou hast paid  
Whate'er Thy people owed;  
How then can wrath on me take place,  
If sheltered in Thy righteousness,  
And sprinkled with Thy blood?

3. If thou hast my discharge procured,  
And freely in my room endured  
The whole of wrath divine;  
Payment God cannot twice demand,  
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,  
And then again at mine.

4. Turn then, my soul, unto thy rest!  
The merits of thy great High Priest  
Have bought thy liberty;  
Trust in His efficacious blood,  
Nor fear thy banishment from God,  
Since Jesus died for thee.

### **Rock of Ages, cleft for me,**

let me hide myself in thee;  
let the water and the blood,  
from thy wounded side which flowed,  
be of sin the double cure;  
save from wrath and make me pure.

2 Not the labors of my hands  
can fulfill thy law's demands;  
could my zeal no respite know,  
could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone;  
thou must save, and thou alone.

3 Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to the cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly;  
wash me, Savior, or I die.

4 While I draw this fleeting breath,  
when mine eyes shall close in death,  
when I soar to worlds unknown,  
see thee on thy judgment throne,  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee

