

CH425 (BTh)

Evangelical Church History

**A History of the Revival Story:
The Causes and Effects of
Whitefield's Evangelistic campaigns
in New England.**

Matthew Williams

2008

Abstract

The Whitefieldian New England campaigns merged the revival narrative of New England with Whitefield's own remarkable gifts into a new revival story. The New England campaign, though seeing many 'conversions', did not appear (in the end) to have lasting effects in a great number of people's lives. But the *story* of the New England campaign gave wings to a new set of assumptions about how God works in the world, and that framework has shaped the prayers, hopes, and ministry strategies of millions of Christians ever since.

Discuss the causes and effects of Whitefield's Evangelistic Campaigns in New England.

Introduction

This essay will seek to describe the factors which shaped the reception of Whitefield's New England campaign, and also the outcomes which resulted from it, with a particular focus on tracing the history of the revival *story*.

This approach is taken because the direct effects of the campaign, whatever they were, are dwarfed by the monumental impact of the revival story which, in popular view, it authenticated. The main 'causes' shaping the campaign were two separate stories which came together – the New England story of random revival expectation and the Whitefield story of an itinerant, theatrical, planned and print-promoted celebrity preacher. The 'effects' of the campaign were mostly mediated through the new story thus created: that God worked dramatically in the world through revivals pre-meditated by men. Six heady weeks with Whitefield in New England were enough to propel the acceptance of that story as the theological framework of millions of Christians ever since, whose prayers, hopes and ministry strategies have been formed on its presuppositions.

Shaping Factors

Antecedents of Revival in New England

The expectation of revival in New England did not happen overnight. People rarely accept such dramatic religious narratives without the gradual accumulation of precedent and familiarity, so that by the time Whitefield arrived it seemed right and obvious, even inevitable, that God would work in such a way. Those precedents were both narrational and experienced.

The foundation of revival hope was a prior belief in the *declension* of religion from the pilgrim fathers' intention, which led to a proliferation of Jeremiad sermons during the second half of the 17th century. Samuel Danforth, for instance, asked in a 1670 sermon 'whether we have not in a great measure forgotten our errand into the wilderness', instead choosing the 'honours, pleasures and profits of the world'.¹

This backdrop of despair became severe indeed. As the declension continued unabated the search for answers took preachers, in properly Calvinist fashion, to broken waiting upon God.

Samuel Torrey may have been the first to develop a *revival* narrative as the anticipated solution to such a state. By 1674 he was already proclaiming the need for 'prayer unto God for a dispensation of converting grace' so that conversion and reformation could be 'revived'.² His *Mans Extremity, Gods Opportunity* (1695) argued that the sin of New England had reached such measure as to be beyond hope of ordinary reformation, but that salvation history shows 'there are certain times, and extraordinary cases, wherein

¹ F. Lambert: *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 35.

² T. S. Kidd: 'Prayer for a Saving Issue: Evangelical Development in New England before the Great Awakening' in *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*. Ed. M. Haykin & K. Stewart. (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008) 131.

God... saves his people by Himself.' They could only pray, mourn, and await the day when God would reclaim New England 'by the power of his Spirit, in a general work of Conversion and Reformation, and by a glorious resurrection of religion.'³

If Torrey provided the embryo of revival narrative, the embryo of revival *experience* was set up by the periodic covenant renewals. The 'Halfway Covenant' of 1662 enabled many baptized and moral (but 'unconverted') people to attend church, which meant 'churches would be filled with substantial numbers of pseudo-members waiting for their conversion'.⁴ Particularly fervent occasions could thus arise where large blocks of people were moved to convert simultaneously.⁵

Quite a number of local revivals happened in this way, including no less than six in the remote New England town of Northampton (under Solomon Stoddard),⁶ and again in the mid-1730s under the pastorate of his grandson, Jonathan Edwards. When Isaac Watts published Edwards' account of that revival in 1737, including accounts of specific conversions, obscure Northampton became regarded on both sides of the Atlantic as potentially the first fruits of a work of God more extraordinary than any since the reformation, or even the apostolic era. This narrative would become the standard formula adopted by later revival narratives. Indeed Thomas Prince's formal solicitation of local stories offered a suggested model of report based on Edwards' account.⁷

Solomon Stoddard had emphasised the role of effective preaching in revival. It was not enough to 'pray them down', you had to 'preach them up'. Nonetheless he insisted that God was arbitrary and seasonal in dispensing grace, so ministers had to preach hellfire

³ Kidd, 'Prayer for a Saving Issue', 132.

⁴ Kidd, 'Prayer for a Saving Issue', 133.

⁵ Thomas Prince, Jr. *The Christian History* (4 June 1743), vol. 1, 106-107; Kidd, 'Prayer for a Saving Issue' 133.

⁶ Stoddard saw dramatic 'harvests' in 1679, 1683, 1696, 1712, 1718 and 1727. Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 62.

⁷ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 143-150.

and damnation while being careful to recognise the signs of potential outpouring to 'preach the acceptable year of the Lord'.⁸

Stoddard's *Efficacy of the Fear of Hell* crystallised the method and pattern of revival in considerable detail, with appeal to biblical precedents. His was a particular variant of Calvinism, which not only saw a person's response to the gospel as grounded in their election, but the timing of those conversions as grounded in unpredictable seasons of spiritual blessing in which the conversions would happen *en masse*.⁹ Ministry thus ought to patiently administer the means of grace, praying for a season when they might suddenly be rendered effective.

Thus New England Christians were prepared to accept, even look for, the Whitefieldian revival: the biblical hermeneutic was laid out so God was now expected to work that way; effective preachers were expected to be God's instrument; and dramatic, 'felt' conversions *en masse* were expected to be the result. Colman's publication in Boston of various revival narratives similarly prepared the mindset of those in towns which had not yet experienced revival for themselves.¹⁰

These prior narratives had two key effects: firstly they became the default lens through which those searching for signs of revival then filtered the various realities around them; and secondly they motivated people to undertake actions that might generate and participate in such a story.¹¹ Of course not everyone was thinking this way – but enough *were* to provide momentum. Indeed the only thing preventing such momentum was the local nature of the ministry, which meant that success in one place would pique

⁸ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 46-7.

⁹ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 52-53.

¹⁰ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 70-71.

¹¹ As Susan O'Brien puts it, "the exciting knowledge that clergy and lay people acquired about events elsewhere shaped individual behaviour and individual understanding of what the Lord had 'upon the wheel'". S. O'Brien: 'A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735-1755' *American Historical Review* 91.4 (1986) 832.

interest but not obvious action in another. It was that exact limitation which Whitefield's itinerant revival transcended, for his itinerancy meant that those who heard the story of revival elsewhere knew exactly what to do with their curiosity: show up when Whitefield comes to town!

Whitefield's Unique Ministry

It must be admitted that Whitefield himself was a spectacle. It was on 17 February, 1739 that, having been forbidden use of pulpits in Bath and Bristol, he began to preach out of doors – and soon he would attract bigger crowds than would fit indoors.¹²

Publicity dynamics benefit from both detractors and promoters in generating momentum, and Whitefield had plenty of both. It was this 'shocking departure from Church rules', as Tyerman puts it,¹³ that catapulted Whitefield from popular preacher to internationally sought celebrity. With a pre-conversion background in the theatre, Whitefield had the vocal and theatrical skills to hold an audience, and he used them well.¹⁴

Through a period of campaigning in South England and Wales, Whitefield developed an 'exportable revival'.¹⁵ This was a 'preach and print' method of evangelistic campaigning involving itinerant preaching, newspaper publicity and advertising campaigns styled after the marketing techniques of contemporary merchants. It functioned like a spiritual wind tunnel – generating expectations and mustering those broad energies through a focussed place, thereby whipping it into a much greater intensity. It is not difficult to

¹² M. A. Noll: *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*. (Leicester: IVP, 2004) 94-95.

¹³ Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, 95.

¹⁴ Harry Stout's biography emphasises this aspect of Whitefield's gift. H. S. Stout: *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), esp. 235-48.

¹⁵ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 111.

see that such a method would be an even better cultural fit for American enthusiasm than it was for the Welsh working class.¹⁶

This conscious method, with its planning, execution and repetition, succeeding on the basis of a skilled performer, would erode the 'random' or 'arbitrary' part of the revival narrative of Torrey and Stoddard – the part that simply waited for God – and thus transform revival to be less something one waits for and more something one engineers.¹⁷ Of course as a Calvinist Whitefield did not intend this implication – indeed he rather interpreted things as though God was doing it all. But it was not for nothing that the greatest mimics of Whitefield's ministry in the 19th Century would be comfortably Arminian.

So Whitefield, without quite realising it, took the revival expectations of New England, and turned their story into something which could be controlled by means of planning them in a sequence, and then connected into a broader movement by means of itinerancy and publicity for a celebrity preacher.

¹⁶ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 218: "In ways that Whitefield never fully understood, he had become an American hero whose life and words reflected the yawning ambitions and libertarian rhetoric of the young colonies."

¹⁷ Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 210-11.

Effects

There is no such thing as a truly objective report of an event, and with religious events, where the lenses applied regard perspectives on ‘things not seen’, subjectivity is heightened. But the Whitefieldian New England revivals took place early in the Enlightenment, when documents, to be credible, needed to adopt an air of objectivity, accuracy and method. The result was deeply subjective reports clothed in the style of objective reporting – with arguments on both sides trying to establish their ‘impartiality’ and appealing to the rational sense of the readers.¹⁸

The debate in its day was carried on by the likes of pro-revivalists Thomas Prince and William Cooper and anti-revivalists Benjamin Prescott and Charles Chauncy, who tended to argue about *facts* as a proxy for disagreement about *significance*. Cooper thought the extent of revival ‘truly extraordinary’ while Chauncy thought it a relatively ‘small thing’, at least compared to the claims made for it.¹⁹ Yet by and large history has adopted Cooper’s perspective of viewing the revivals as an enormous unified whole – the very term ‘The Great Awakening’ does this (a nomenclature still vigorously defended by Harry Stout).

The debate about what *really* happened was resurrected by Jon Butler, who in a landmark 1982 article denied that there was a unified widespread awakening at all, seeing instead a ‘short lived Calvinist revival in New England during the 1740s’. He blamed 1840s historian Joseph Tracy, who first gave it the appellation ‘The Great Awakening’, for fudging the scattered revivals which did happen into a single movement

¹⁸ F. Lambert: ‘The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival’ *Church History* 60/2 (1991) 243.

¹⁹ Lambert, *Inventing the ‘Great Awakening’*, 4-5. While this applies more generally to the question of a ‘great awakening’, the Whitefieldian New England revival was the centrepiece or climax of this event.

across the colonies. He argued that historians since Tracy have perpetuated this unwarranted unifying interpretation on the events of the 1740s.²⁰

Joseph Conforti developed Butler's argument, but shifted the blame from Tracy to 1830s revivalists.²¹ But Frank Lambert has marshalled a mountain of evidence against the Butler-Conforti argument, showing beyond doubt that the unified narrative of the various 18th century revivals was already 'invented' by the contemporaries of the revivals themselves.

We can make no great gains by attempting to sift the actual events of the six-week campaign to speculate on the statistics, except to say the crowds were probably less than revivalists claimed and more than detractors admitted. The truth is, the actual numbers are relatively immaterial to the *effects* of the campaign, because the campaign had most of its historical impact mediated through the telling of its story, not through the conversions themselves.

Indeed by 1751, having seen piety ebb away, Edwards wrote of his fear that the results had been overstated in terms of 'true converts' and, in that (Calvinist) sense, he acknowledged a great gap between the actual revival and the reported revival.²² But the story had too much momentum by then to matter. History has remembered the campaign in those 'great' terms. So the effects of the campaign were not primarily mediated through a sober historical assessment, but through a story echoing from the height of the hype.

²⁰ J. Butler: 'Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction.'" *Journal of American History* 59 (1972) 327-340.

²¹ J. Conforti: 'The Invention of the Great Awakening, 1795-1842'. *Early American Literature* 26 (1991) 99-118.

²² Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 256.

And it really was *a* story (singular). Lambert catalogues solid evidence that Edwards' *Faithful Narrative* became the template for talking about revivals elsewhere. So Whitefield's request for an account of the New Jersey revival was provided by Robert Cross in a form intended to 'directly answer the account given by Mr Edwards of the work in Northampton'. Thomas Prince's active solicitations of revival accounts also provided a suggested outline informally based on Edwards' narrative, which those reporting were evidently very happy to follow.²³

This homogeneity was not dishonest. It exemplifies the usual power of a common story: the Edwards story (and its predecessors in Stoddard and Torrey) created the filter through which people worked out which things around them were significant, and how to understand them. It also shaped the actions of those who wished to be involved in this 'Work of God': they would do things that corresponded to the pattern of how God was (apparently) working. So the homogeneity of the narrative fed itself: because the reports were so similar, people could clearly see a unified awakening across the colonies; and because they believed God was doing something widespread, their perception of local events was skewed to focus on the parallels with that widespread report, which in turn caused them to issue more reports of their own along the same lines.

²³ Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*, 143-150.

What cannot be denied is that, as a direct result of Whitefield's New England campaign and the ongoing battle over how to narrate it, religious discourse came to dominate the mainstream press in America in a way reserved for politics across the Atlantic.

Whitefield thus caused a redefinition of the place of religion in America, turning it into the stuff of public and national discourse rather than private and local commitment, an expectation that colours American politics to this day.²⁴ He also made itinerancy a recognised form of ministry, and introduced America to the idea of the celebrity preacher, paving the way for numerous copycat campaigns through the colonies and great itinerants of later years like Finney, Moody and Graham.

²⁴ Lambert, 'Awakening as Artifact', 245.

Conclusion

The critical point is this: whatever ‘really happened’ was enough to propel a story, a view of how God worked in the world. That story was not invented by Whitefield, or for Whitefield, for it had its origins in Puritan declension and the development of revival theology under Torrey and Stoddard. Whitefield’s unique talents rather altered the story by accident, providing a sense that local revivals could be induced and, through itinerancy and advance publicity techniques, connected. But his New England campaign did more than create a rather eccentric and local theology: it gave that theology wings across the colonies and the Atlantic. Indeed the story was given enough propulsion to fly continuously ever since, shaping the prayers, hopes, self-understanding and ministry strategies of millions of Christians for almost three centuries to date. Whitefield’s revival technique would eventually find a more comfortable home amongst Arminian churchmen who did not wait upon but seemed to create, as if at will, ‘the year of the Lord’s favour’ for which Torrey simply prayed.²⁵

²⁵ It will be evident that I have many reservations about revivalist theology and method, but these are beyond the proper scope of a history paper. Suffice to say I do not discount revival evangelism, but would not shape my own ministry around it, having more confidence in the day to day application of the means of grace. If revival techniques are employed, they should be understood in terms of the parable of the sower – they use very human techniques and play on very human motivations to have opportunity to sow the gospel among the people. This produces many false impressions of conversion in the rocky ground and among the weeds, but it is still worth it for the sake of the good soil which goes on to bear fruit.

Bibliography

- Butler, J. 'Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Historical Fiction.' *Journal of American History* 69/2 (1982): 305-325.
- Conforti, J. 'The Invention of the Great Awakening, 1795-1842'. *Early American Literature* 26/2 (1991) 99-118.
- Dallimore, A. *George Whitefield: The life and times of the great evangelist of the 18th-century revival*. London: Banner of Truth, 1970.
- Gaustad, E.S. *A Documentary History of Religion in America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2003.
- Kidd, T.S. 'Prayer for a Saving Issue: Evangelical Development in New England before the Great Awakening' in *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*. Ed. M. Haykin & K. Stewart. Nottingham: Apollos, 2008.
- Kidd, T.S. *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Lambert, F. 'The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival 1739-1745. *Church History* 60/2 (1991): 223-246.
- Lambert, F. *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Mahaffey, J.D. 'George Whitefield's homiletic art: neo-sophism in the Great Awakening'. *Homiletic* 31.1 (2006) 11-22.
- Noll, M.A. *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*. Leicester: IVP, 2004.
- O'Brien, S. 'A transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735-1755.' *American Historical Review* 91/4 (1986) 811-832.
- Pals, D. L. 'Several Christologies of the Great Awakening'. *Anglican Theological Review* 72.4 (1990) 412-427.
- Pollock, J. *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972.
- Stout, H.S. *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Whitefield, G. *Select Sermons of George Whitefield with an account of his life by J.C.Ryle*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958.
- Whitefield, G. *George Whitefield's Journals*. London: Banner of Truth, 1960.