

Heirs of a Haystack

By David L McKenna

They huddled under a haystack. Ordinarily the five college students met under the protective branches of a large maple tree and under the cover of night to read the Word of God, confess their sins, sing a song of forgiveness and pray for revival on their campus. Even the minutes of their meetings were kept in secret.

Tonight was different. The small, beleaguered company had been driven from their secret sanctuary by thunder that drowned out their prayers, lightning that crackled around them and rain that drenched them to the skin. An old barn with the comfort of a haystack became their refuge. There, with the storm symbolizing the hostility of their campus against them and their faith, they intuitively knew that their moment had come. God would answer their prayers. With the mysterious wind of his Holy Spirit, he would bring convicting and cleansing power to Williams College, a school founded through spiritual revival but now a seedbed for sin and skepticism. A Great Awakening was on the way!

The time was 1806, when our American ancestors struggled to establish the democracy that had been won in the War of Independence. The place was Williams College in Massachusetts, where Christian students had to meet in secret in order to avoid public ridicule. The people were a non-descript band of five students, who seemed to be too serious for their own good. As unlikely as the time, place and people may seem, one of the Great Awakenings in American history can be traced back to 1806 at Williams College when a thunderstorm drove five students to prayer while huddled under a haystack. In fact: American history can be written through its Great Awakenings.

The First Great Awakening:
Fueling Our Freedom

Whether they knew it or not, the students under the haystack were the heirs of an earlier awakening in our history before independence from England. Although the colonies of New England had been founded by Puritans, who led a disciplined life and shared a biblical vision for their new homeland, the natural erosion of sin and self-interest took its toll. Spiritually, the oncoming generation assumed that their salvation was secure no matter how they lived. Socially, a combination of political oppression, personal degradation and philosophical skepticism led the nation into a wilderness of despair. Notes of hope had a hollow ring, and the future boded worse than the tormented past.

Out of that wilderness came a prophetic voice. The Reverend Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan preacher in the tradition of John the Baptist, put out a call to personal repentance which eventually cost him his pulpit. Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God," preached at Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741, still serves not only as a model of empowered preaching but also as a turning point in the history of Great Awakenings. With an eloquence honed by the Holy Spirit, Edwards depicted hell so vividly for his hearers that sinners, by

eyewitness report, hung onto the pews with whitened knuckles for fear of sliding into the flames of hell that very moment! Revival followed, not just on the confession of sin, but on the promise of joy that Edwards also preached. He reported hundreds of conversions sealed by public confession among the churches of New England.

Awakening spread, however, under the impetus of a 23-year-old itinerant preacher from England named George Whitefield. Fresh from the experience of the Evangelical Awakening in England where he had convinced John Wesley to take the open fields for his preaching, Whitefield traversed the colonies - against the opposition of the Anglican clergy - to take the gospel to unchurched people. Benjamin Franklin, though an avowed deist, became a fast friend of Whitefield. Almost in awe, Franklin estimated that Whitefield's voice had the volume and the resonance to reach 30,000 people in the open fields. More amazingly, Benjamin Franklin built Whitefield a "preaching house" in Philadelphia, which gave him a pulpit for evangelism outside the Anglican Church. The "preaching house" later became the first building for the University of Pennsylvania.

For us, however, it is even more notable that Whitefield had been a member, with John and Charles Wesley, of the Holy Club at Oxford University in the early 1730s. And although the Holy Club never left England, it is fair to say that this small group of Christian students had a share in the beginnings of the First Great Awakening in American history through the agency of its alumnus George Whitefield. Thousands were converted under his preaching. He became identified with Jonathan Edwards as one of the New Lights, who spoke prophetically of political freedom from the oppression of England, as well as the spiritual freedom from the slavery of sin.

The First Great Awakening came to its culmination when religion served as the vehicle for a moral consensus which could not tolerate the heavy hand of George II, king of England. A Great Awakening fueled our freedom, and the revolution that followed forever changed the course of our history.

The Second Great Awakening: Ensuring Our Democracy

Spiritual awakenings usually take a full generation to work themselves through to a new moral consensus out of which social transformation is born. Likewise, the turn of just one generation under the catalyst of speeding social change can undo the moral consensus and kill the vitality created by a spiritual awakening.

The worst happened after we won our independence in 1776 and wrote our Constitution in 1787. In the aftermath of revolution, our forefathers forgot the spiritual roots from which their freedom sprang. Instead of returning to the biblical vision of the moral community which Governor Winthrop proclaimed to the Pilgrim band in a sermon just before they left the Mayflower, the new generation of Americans identified with the seething caldron of infidelity and deism in prerevolutionary France. To say the least, the future of American democracy teetered in the balance, with the scales tipped toward anarchy.

Colonial colleges, in particular, took the brunt of moral corruption and philosophical despair. Harvard, Princeton and Yale, schools which were founded to prepare Christian leaders in religion, government and medicine, became seedbeds of atheism and anarchy. One historian of American higher education likened the climate of the college dormitories to "secret nurseries of every vice and the cages of unclean birds."

Blasphemy followed heresy. In one college, students performed a mock communion with a parody of the sacred ritual at the chapel altar. In another, a deck of playing cards fell out of a hole cut in the pages of the president's Bible as he stood to address the students. In still another college, the students organized a drinking society with the name H.E.O.T.T. in parody of Isaiah's promise, "Ho, everyone that thirsteth." No wonder that any student who professed to be a Christian became the target for open ridicule and subtle discrimination. Quite in contrast with the evangelistic beginnings of the colleges, small bands of Christians now met in secret to pray.

Into this climate of corruption God called Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards, to be the president of Yale in 1795. Fearlessly, Dwight chose his first baccalaureate sermon to invite all students to an open forum on the Christian faith. After hearing their attacks, he followed with a chapel series in which he spoke the "truth with love" - so much so that one-half of the Yale student body professed Christ before the year was out. One by one, spontaneous stirrings of the Spirit took place on college campuses.

Williams College, however, remained a hard-core center for heresy, blasphemy and ridicule - until the five students prayed under a haystack in 1806. With the mystery of the wind, the Spirit of God swept over the campus bringing repentance and redemption to scores of students who, in turn, took the witness of revival from campus to campus, church to church and city to city until "Awakening" became the watchword for the struggling nation. No one contests the genuine nature of that movement as infidelity gave way to vigorous faith and deism when bankrupt against the revelation of a personal God who loves and redeems all humankind.

Francis Asbury stands in rugged contrast to the image of the scholarly president of Yale or one of the cultured priests of the Anglican Church. Sent to America by John Wesley with the mandate "Offer them Christ," Asbury took his charge seriously by becoming a traveling Methodist preacher on the fast and ever-moving Western frontier. Enlisting impassioned and unusually unlearned men, he created a mobile system of circuit-riders. Pastors on horseback, these men made the frontier their parish, establishing evangelistic outposts with camp meetings that reached thousands of people at a time.

Although Francis Asbury died in 1816, the momentum of his ministry was carried on by such a rough-and-tumble circuit rider as Peter Cartwright. In the book *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan Hatch describes the genius of Asbury on the frontier as leading a "military mission of short-term agents" - itinerant preachers armed with the gospel. Critics of Asbury scoffed when he built a church for Methodists, saying that the movement could be "contained in a corncrib." Late they had to eat their words. Between 1820 and 1830 alone, Methodism doubled in size to become one of the most formidable forces for spiritual

regeneration and social reform on the American frontier.

Once again, the ideals and morals of the American people were turned upside-down. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian who chronicled our history in his classical work *Democracy in America*, expressed serious doubts that democracy could survive in the American experiment because freedom requires a moral base. He observed what we must not forget: Democracy depends on a moral foundation of revealed truth mediated through religious institutions.

In 1831 de Tocqueville visited the United States to observe first-hand our experiment in democracy. He found a transformed nation. The moral foundations of revealed truth were strong and the religious institutions were vigorous - evidence of a Great Awakening. At a barn-raising in Pennsylvania de Tocqueville saw the symbol of transformation. Neighbors from far and near voluntarily came to help another neighbor build a barn in one day. In the evening, they celebrated their achievement with supper and song. To de Tocqueville, the event represented democracy at its best. He went home to write, "America is a nation with the soul of a church." What began on a college campus became the energizing force that transformed a nation. It took a Great Awakening to ensure our democracy.

The Prayer Revival of 1858

After the Great Awakening at the turn of the nineteenth century, another generation passed and America was in trouble again. As the new nation grew by spreading south and west, the unity of the 1820s was torn apart by the deepening hostility between the industrial North and the agricultural South. Slavery became the issue of freedom on which our democracy would again rise or fall. Not since the tumultuous days preceding the Great Awakening of the 1740s had the division been deeper and the conflict more volatile. The threat of secession by the southern states in the nineteenth century more than matched the threat of those who sided with the English king in the eighteenth century.

An expanding network of intercessory prayer among businessmen, particularly in cities such as Philadelphia and New York, is usually cited as the source of the 1858 revival. Skeptics, of course, suggest that the fervency of the prayers equaled the panic over a crumbling economy which threatened to bankrupt their businesses and lower their quality of life. Such skeptics fail to recognize the extension of those prayers beyond individual self-interest. Out of those prayer groups came the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), an organization founded to take the gospel to the campuses of the developing system of state universities and to serve the social, educational and spiritual needs of young men in the burgeoning cities of the nation.

Again, the stir of awakening on college campuses preceded the revival of 1858. In the 1840s Charles Finney, an educator-evangelist, spoke as the president of Oberlin College, where students were in the midst of a campus revival. President Finney, not unlike Timothy Dwight of Yale, used the chapel platform to condemn the institution of slavery as antithetical to the spiritual freedom that the students found in Christ.

The message and the spirit of revival sped from campus to campus and fueled the abolition

movement with biblical meaning and evangelistic fervor. If a revival requires social reform to qualify as an Awakening, the Emancipation Proclamation leaves no doubt about the lasting impact of the Great Awakening that began on a college campus in the midst of revival. Gilbert Barnes, an historian of the anti-slavery movement, concludes: "In leadership, in method and in objective, the Great Revival and the American Anti-slavery Society now were one."

The World Missions Movement

In the 1890s another turn of the generations brought with it another time of decline and conflict in American culture. While we euphemistically remember the Gay Nineties as a decade of hedonistic happiness, the truth is that we were a troubled people.

A second line of spiritual movement can be drawn from campuses in England to America in the 1890s and on into the twentieth century. In 1882 D.L. Moody spoke at Cambridge University in England. The evangelist might have been disheartened by the ridicule he received from the student body, but out of that meeting seven students responded to the call to give themselves wholly to the will of God.

Gathering together, they called themselves the Cambridge Seven and can rightfully be linked with the Holy Club, the Haystack Prayer Meeting and the YMCA of earlier years. God answered their prayers by a visit of his Spirit, who gave them a vision of the unevangelized world and its multiplied millions. Providentially their vision connected with students at twenty state university campuses in the United States who had also banded together in prayerful submission to the Holy Spirit.

As their forces converged and connected with students on other campuses, the Student Volunteer Movement came into being as the forerunner for such groups as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and the Student Mission Association. The list of student leaders who came out of a revival spirit on those campuses reads like a "Who's Who" of world missions: John R. Mott, E. Stanley Jones, Robert Wilder, Samuel Zwemer and Robert Speer. No one laughed when they spoke of their watchword, "The evangelization of the world in this generation."

Mott himself wrote, "Next to the decision to take Christ as the Leader and Lord of my life, the watchword has had more influence than all other ideals and objectives combined to widen my horizon and enlarge my conception of the kingdom of God." His words were backed by the evidence that the watchword served as a motivating and mobilizing vision. To him and his college friends goes the credit not only for offering Christ to millions of people overseas but also for breaking the protective isolationism of America by the 1890s by making the connections with spiritual awakening around the world.

The Welsh revival in 1904 is the best example. When the Spirit of God moved through the masses of that nation of poor and illiterate miners, the conversions were so complete that the pit-ponies in the mines did not respond when given orders without the profanity of their masters. Even more notable, the Welsh revival illustrates the fact that whenever there is a true spiritual awakening, the leaders and the people become advocates for the poor by

founding institutions to serve them and initiating legislation to protect them.

What conclusion can we draw from this hasty journey through two centuries of awakenings in American history? In the beginning we learned that the history of America can be written through the turning points of spiritual awakenings. Now we know that those awakenings often began and came full cycle among Christian students on college campuses. Especially in the Great Awakenings in the closing decade of each century, college students led the way in moral reform and world evangelism.

Is it too much to expect that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh in the 1990s? Will he begin with Christian students on the college campus? Will he bring the stirrings of the Spirit which we have seen in the last half of the twentieth century into the full cycle of a Great Awakening?

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