A revival of religious fervor, 1744

Introduction

The Christian History was a revivalist periodical founded by the Boston clergyman Thomas Prince in 1743 to report on the religious revivals sweeping across Europe and the United States. It was the first Christian periodical published in the United States, but lasted only two years. The revivals of that period were ignited by Jonathan Edwards, whose theology sparked renewed enthusiasm and emphasized human depravity, divine omnipotence, and a personal relationship with God. This period is often referred to as the “First Great Awakening,” although the term “Great Awakening” wasn’t broadly used to describe the religious revivals that took place in the American colonies until the 1842 publication of Reverend Joseph Tracy’s book of that title.

As Prince traveled from church to church in New England to preach, he recorded the reactions of the various congregations in his periodical. This June 1744 issue of the journal comments on the evangelical spirit present in Connecticut.

Excerpt

June the 15th, I rode out to Mr. Throop’s a new Society in Norwich, and preach’d one Sermon for him, to a full Assembly. There seem’d to be a great listening to the Word; great Concern appear’d in the Countenances of many; a great Number were in Tears, and several cried out: Some fainted away, and one or two rag’d. After the Sermon was over I took Pains to find out the Spring of that Distress which appeared in many Instances, and I think, they gave Grounds to judge it was from Conviction of Sin; except those Instances that were distress’d with their out-rageous Passions.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image of the actual document, and read the transcribed excerpt. Then apply your knowledge of American history as well as the text of The Christian History to answer the following questions:

1. Who was the author of this account and what was he describing?
2. Describe the reaction of two or three individuals to the sermon.
3. How does the author explain these reactions?

Additional Question: How did the evangelical practices in the church service described here differ from worship in mainline Protestant churches?
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NOW those that could not refrain themselves were generally carried out of the Meeting-House, and a second Sermon was preach'd by Mr. Jesue to others that were able to attend; after which the Assembly was dismiss'd; and my House soon fill'd with wounded Souls: And I took Pains to satisfy my self & others, by inquiring into the Reasons of the trembling, crying, fainting, and other Signs of Fear that were so manifest in the Assembly: And they declar'd, in their own Words, all to this Purpose, viz. that a deep Sense of past Sensualities, and careless Neglects of the Concerns of their Souls; their fighting frequent and solemn Warnings, and withstanding the Calls of the Gospel; together with a deep Sense of their Liableness, every Moment, to be arrest'd and call'd into the Prison of Hell, where those Sinners lay, that related to heaven to the Warnings given by Neb the Preacher of Righteousness, was truly the Spring of all these various Signs of Distress. Some run back upon the Sins of riper Years (for there were several Persons upwards of 40 and some of more than 50 Years old, that discover'd great Concern by their pale Countenances and Tears, and trembling too.) Some cried out of the Hardness of their Hearts, others of their Unbelief; some were crying, God be merciful to me a Sinner; and others intreated Christians to pray for them. Thus they continued, at my House, for several Hours; and after I had taken what Pains with them, I tho't necessary for that Evening, and pray'd with them, they were adviz'd to

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and sovereign Grace; and much exceeded my first Design in preaching. The next laid out in my own Mind was to return Home as fast as I could; but the Rev. Mr. Adams of New-London sent me a Letter, deposing that I would return that Way, and give his People some Exhortations. Having been there before in the Time of the Concern among the People, I was unwilling to deny his Request, because I had found that there were particular Difficulties rising up, and I fear'd my refusal might rather increase them than otherwise. There was a Number of new Converts with a flaming Zeal, and jealous lest the Labourers should not bear a Proportion to the Harvest; and some others, from what Spring I don't say; ( tho' some have imputed it to the Imprudence of these new Converts) who oppos'd themselves to the Work going on among them. Thus the Kingdom seemed to be dividing against itself; and I was the rather inclin'd to gratify the venerable Mr. Adams on that Account, not knowing but that I might be instrumental of some Good in that Respect. Accordingly I went, and on June 16th preach'd two Sermons in that Place; besides using some private Endeavours to make Things more easy, if it should please God to make Use of me for that End: but the Success was not according to my Wishes. I found mutual rising Jealousies, and, as I thought, groundless Surmisings in some Instances, prevailing among them. These Difficulties increas'd afterwards; and for want of Charity and mutual Condescension and Forbearance, they have produc'd an open Separation. I doubt not but there are excellent Christians on both Sides; and there has been a very great Display of divine Grace among them; but they are doubtless to be blamed for the Manner of separating. What Grounds they may have I don't know, but am afraid they have gone off upon a wrong Principle. Unhappy Case, when Christians have such sharp Contentions between them, as to part amiss from one another! Yet so it has sometimes been with the best of Christians. Acts 15. 38, 39.

Perhaps some will think strange that I should be, so many Days, from my particular Charge; at such a critical Season as this was, when a great Number were under distressing Concern, and the Adversary was very busy; but the People were not left without preaching: and we found it of real Service to have our People partake of the various Gifts of Ministers; some to Reaon with them out of the Scriptures, others

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