

Sunday, October 16, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 41 Deism, Pietism, Methodism, and the First Great Awakening

Deism

- “Empiricist and Rationalist thought first entered the church in the form of Deism, the belief that a supreme, intelligent being (commonly referred to as God) set the universe and its natural laws in motion but that he assumes no control over its daily activities.” (Price and Collins, 157)
- “Deists viewed God as distant from humanity, so that their chief interest lay, not in the study of God, but in identifying and defining the exact laws God had applied to his creation for its independent operation.” (Price and Collins, 157)
- “John Locke was a Christian with strong Deist leanings who tried to synthesize the essence of faith into two basic truths: that Jesus was the Messiah, and that Christians must live in harmony with his teachings. His religious convictions were spelled out in two works, *An Essay on Religious Toleration* (1667) and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). Together these two publications reveal Locke’s determination that liberty should extend to the practice of one’s religious beliefs and his conviction that revelation enhances, and never contradicts, what reason imparts. Although he tried to defend Christian beliefs, his theology did more to inspire Deists than Christians.” (Price and Collins, 157)
- “Newton’s discoveries provided the foundation that Enlightenment thinkers employed to construct a new way of thinking. The old world of unseen spirits and unruly fate was fading. In its place, Enlightenment thinkers began to mold a new vision: The universe was a self-maintaining machine, endowed by a divine creator with forces that forever followed the unvarying laws of nature.” (Jones, 141)
- “The work of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), famous for his tremendous contribution to the understanding of science and mathematics, did much to promote Deism. Although Newton, a member of the Church of England, believed that Jesus was the redeemer sent by God for humanity’s salvation, he did not believe in Christ’s divinity. For Newton, observation and experience were the only paths to true knowledge. His views on natural law were a great influence on the Deistic philosophers who followed him.” (Price and Collins, 157)
- In many cases, Deists rejected every belief that reason could not confirm (miracles, the trinity, divinity of Jesus, Christ’s resurrection, etc.) For such Deists, to be Christian was simply to live according to Christ’s ethical teachings. Creation was the first and last meaningful act for the Deists’ so-called God. (Jones, 141)
- “Deist ideas spread in Europe through Masonic brotherhoods. . . Influenced by Deism, many churches embraced ‘Unitarianism,’ the belief that God is not a Trinity.” (Jones, 141)

Pietism and Early Revival

- “When he was 18, an American colonist named Jonathan Edwards wrote in his diary, ‘Resolved: That all men should live to the glory of God. Resolved, secondly: That whether or not anyone else does, I will.’” (Jones, 142)
- “Yet Jonathan Edwards wasn’t the type who could naturally move people’s souls. . . His sermons sometimes lasted two hours. He served as pastor of Northampton Congregational Church for five years with few visible results.” (Jones, 142)
- “Nevertheless, in 1734, flashes of revival began to pierce the Northampton church’s spiritual darkness. The Holy Spirit convicted and converted 300 church members. What they once believed in their heads became embedded in their hearts. ‘The Town,’ Jonathan Edwards wrote, ‘was never so full of Love, nor of Joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then.’ This first wave of revival lasted only three years. Had it not been for a new movement in Europe, the Northampton revival might never have developed into a ‘Great Awakening.’” (Jones, 142)
- “God used a European movement known as Pietism to bring about a spiritual awakening that would reach around the world. Pietism began with a booklet entitled *Pious Desires* by a man named Jacob Spener. The book urged Christians to pursue a personal relationship with Christ through intense meditation on the Scriptures.” (Jones, 142)
- Pietism developed in response to mechanistic rituals and rote formalism that had come to mark worship services of the now fully established Lutheran church. After serving a Lutheran congregation in Strasbourg, Germany, Jacob Spener became a teacher and preacher in Frankfurt. Influenced by a congregation known as the Labadists, Spener developed a burning desire to revive the Lutheran church. (Price and Collins, 161)
- “Spener began preaching a message that called for self-discipline, the need for a personal relationship with Christ, and the importance of daily prayer and reflection on the Scriptures. Although he adhered to the Lutheran form of church government, he also believed in the priesthood of all believers and held twice-weekly Bible studies in his home. As these groups became more popular and spread to other churches, they came to be known as the *Collegia Pietatis* - from which the name Pietism was derived. However, the animosity Spener received from his peers was such that he was forced to resign his position in Frankfurt and move to Dresden.” (Price and Collins, 161)
- In Dresden, the Pietist cause was supported by Count Nikolaus Zinzendorf, a wealthy noble. In 1722, Zinzendorf agreed to shelter a community of persecuted and displaced Moravian Brethren on the grounds of his estate outside of Dresden. The Count joined the Moravians in 1727. His Pietism infused the Moravians with a passion for prayer, inspiring them to meet for round-the-clock prayer meetings. (Jones, 143)
- In 1731, Zinzendorf traveled to Denmark for an imperial meeting where he encountered Hans Egede, a Lutheran missionary who had led the Eskimos to Christ. The count returned to Dresden with a passion for missions. In less than a century, the Pietist Moravians would send 300 missionaries throughout the world and baptize more than 3,000 converts. (Jones, 143)

- “So how did Pietism affect the Great Awakening? In 1736 an Anglican priest was sailing to the colony of Georgia to witness to Native Americans. Suddenly, a storm struck the ship. Most passengers screamed in terror. Yet a band of Moravian Pietists calmly sang psalms. The English priest was amazed. ‘This was,’ he wrote, ‘the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen.’ The priest’s name? John Wesley.” (Jones, 143)

The Conversion of John Wesley

- “John and Charles Wesley were born to Samuel Wesley, a priest in the Church of England who ran the rural parish of Epworth. John went to the Charterhouse School in London and thence to Christ Church in Oxford. Although not profoundly philosophical, he was a diligent and able student. . . Eventually he became adept in several languages, ancient and modern. . . He was ordained deacon (1725) and priest (1728) in the Church of England. He was a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. At intervals for a few years after he was given the appointment, he had leave from its duties to help his father in the latter’s parish.” (Latourette, 1023)
- “While John was away, Charles came to Oxford, also as a member of Christ Church, and formed with two others (1729) a little club to aid one another in their studies, to read books, and to participate in frequent communion. When, in November, 1729, he returned to Oxford, John became the leader of the group. They attracted other students, but probably not more than twenty-five. John later considered this as the first rise of Methodism. The group was called the Holy Club and for its disciplined ways was given the nickname of Methodist, a term which had been in use in the seventeenth century. It was the name which stuck and became the official designation of what was eventually a world-wide movement.” (Latourette, 1023)
- The Holy Club performed good works in and around London’s orphanages, jails, and schools, but they were so driven that even William Law, the morally uncompromising author of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728), told John and Charles to practice a faith that was less burdened by rules and more devoted to joyfully loving others. (Prince and Collins, 164)
- “In 1735 the Wesley brothers embarked on a voyage to America. It was a journey that made a strong impression on both of them. John suffered from depression over his spiritual state. Despite his work among the poor, his daily Bible reading and weekly fasts, he felt nothing but dissatisfaction with the direction his life was taking and his Christian walk.” (Price and Collins, 164)
- It was during this voyage that John first encountered the Moravian Pietists. Timothy Paul Jones, author of *Christian History Made Easy*, reports the following exchange between John Wesley and the Moravian leader:

A Moravian leader asked John, “Do you know Jesus Christ?”
 “I know he is the Saviour of the world,” John answered.
 “But do you know he has saved you?”
 John stammered, “I . . . I hope he has saved me.” (Jones, 144)
- Moravian Pastor Augustus Spangenberg befriended Wesley and encouraged him to look to Jesus as the personal savior who desired an indwelling presence in the lives of his

believers. His friend's encouragement was not enough, however, to subdue John's inner turmoil. (Prince and Collins, 164)

- After two years of unfruitful ministry in the American colonies, John Wesley returned to England. Reflecting on his time in America, Wesley wrote, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?" (Jones, 144)
- "On May 17, 1738, Charles Wesley and a friend began reading together Luther's commentary on the Book of Galatians. They found the volume 'nobly full of faith.' Four days later, Charles Wesley could finally say, 'I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.'" (Noll, 225)
- On May, 24, 1738, just a week after his brother had begun reading Luther on Galatians; John Wesley was also given a new sense of God's grace. Here are the memorable words from his journal: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle of Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." (Noll, 226)
- "From the time of that experience, the message of God's grace formed the heart of the Wesleys' ministry. In an era when Britain enjoyed virtually no reliable roads, John Wesley traveled constantly to spread the good news of grace in Christ. After Aldersgate in 1738, his preaching tours took him about a quarter of a million miles (mostly on horseback), and he delivered forty thousand sermons (that is, an average of more than two a day). For many years, until Wesley at last won the reluctant admiration of all Britain, he preached these sermons in unfavorable conditions and often in the face of raucous opposition—sometimes outdoors, usually very early in the morning or at twilight, frequently while being heckled by the mob or harassed by the elite. Only in his seventies did Wesley abandon his horse for a carriage. Only in his mid-eighties did Wesley give up preaching before dawn." (Noll, 226-227)
- "Charles Wesley, though not equal to his brother in ability as a preacher, fully shared his labors. His greatest and lasting service to the Church is in the hymns he wrote: they exceed six thousand in number . . . The Wesleys, finding that most people take their theology from hymns rather than from Scripture, wrote hymns with the definite purpose of teaching doctrine by them." (Broadbent, 301)
- "As John Wesley preached diligently in many of the London churches 'free salvation by faith in the blood of Christ,' he was officially informed in one after another that this was the last time he would be allowed to preach there." (Broadbent, 301) "In eighteenth-century Britain, conventions for every area of life were strict. They were most strict for the churches. The local Anglican rectors were supposed to be in complete control of all spiritual activity in their parishes. Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians needed special licenses simply to hold worship services. . . The Anglican Church and the British state worked hand in glove to guide the population. One of the most absolute religious conventions was that preaching took place on Sundays, and it was done in the churches. Anything else was incendiary and fanatical. To preach out of doors was virtually unheard of. If it did occur, it was considered seditious." (Noll, 223)

- On Monday, April 2, 1739 in the city of Bristol, John Wesley broke ecclesiastical protocols and preached out of doors for the first time. He recorded the following in his journal:
 - “At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent Me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’” (Noll, 223)

The Ministry of George Whitfield

- “The most popular Methodist preacher was George Whitefield. Whitefield had been a servant at Oxford University working to pay his tuition. ... Charles Wesley recruited the cross-eyed young servant.” (Jones, 145) Whitefield knew the Wesley brothers from their days at Oxford in the “Holy Club.” (Broadbent, 300)
- “Whitefield was born at Bell Inn, Gloucester. Some time after, his mother became a widow and was much reduced in circumstances, so that her youngest son’s ambition to become a clergyman was only fulfilled with difficulty by the help of friends, who enabled him to get a post as servitor at Pembroke College and so to study. . . He joined the ‘Holy Club,’ and by fasting and mortifying of the flesh reduced himself to serious weakness. He then became a student of the Scriptures and records: ‘I got more true knowledge from reading the Book of God in one month than I could ever have acquired from all the writings of men.’” (Broadbent, 302)
- Whitefield first visited America in 1738. In 1740, as part of a preaching tour in North America, Whitefield came to preach in Northampton, Massachusetts, the hometown of Jonathan Edwards. (Hill, 329-330) “Whitefield preached in Northampton soon after the initial spiritual awakening in Jonathan Edwards’ congregation. When Edwards heard Whitefield’s message. Jonathan Edwards wept for joy. The response to Whitefield’s message was so amazing it was dubbed the “Great Awakening.” (Jones, 145)
- “By the time his preaching tours throughout the colonies ended, eight out of every ten American colonists had heard a message from George Whitefield. Thousands of people responded positively to Whitefield’s emotional pleas to accept Christ.” (Jones, 145) “Vast crowds followed him everywhere he went, and his final sermon, in Boston, was preached to a congregation of 20,000.” (Hill, 332)
- “For a few years, Whitefield and the Wesleys split over the doctrine of predestination. Whitefield was a Calvinist. The Wesleys’ theology was closer to Arminianism than Calvinism.” (Jones, 145) Price and Collins report that Whitefield remained a staunch defender of Reformed theology and stayed within the Church of England. (Price and Collins, 166)

- According to E.H. Broadbent, “Wesley and Whitefield diverged early in doctrine, Whitefield holding Calvinistic views with regard to election, which Wesley strongly repudiated . . . These differences did not personally alienate Wesley and Whitefield, and it is noticeable that the preaching of justification by faith, whether by the one or the other, was equally effective in the conversion of sinners. The styles of preaching, too, of Wesley and Whitefield were entirely different. . . Whitefield’s preaching was eloquent, impassioned . . . Wesley was clear and logical, his preaching largely expository, yet he captured the attention of the roughest audiences.” (Broadbent, 305)

Methodism

- Broadbent reports that early on, Wesley desired to remain within the Church of England. “Wesley’s determined adherence to the Established Church prevented him from seeing those principles which are taught in Scripture regarding the churches of God, and he never attempted to follow up his gospel preaching by forming churches of those who believed, on the New Testament pattern.” (Broadbent, 306)
- “He organized what seemed to him practical methods of giving permanence to his work; his ‘Bands’ and ‘Societies’ did not profess to be companies of believers, but rather of seekers. Their basis of fellowship was experimental more than doctrinal, the condition of admittance was a desire to flee from the wrath to come and be saved. Members were free to attend such places of worship as they preferred and to hold their own opinions on different points, but they were not allowed to make of them subjects of contention.” (Broadbent, 306)
- “As long as he lived, he controlled the organization, and the ‘Conference’ which he established to take control after him was an entirely clerical body. His efforts to keep the movement within the Church of England failed, partly because the Established Church disowned and systematically opposed it, and partly because it was not possible for the new life and energy to be confined to such bonds. The time inevitably came when formal separation had to take place.” (Broadbent, 306)
- “The Conference was not able to hold the Wesleyan Methodist Societies together. Being a clerical body, it was—like all such bodies—jealous of privilege, and its resistance to an effort to bring in lay representation led to the formation of the Methodist New Connection. Later, its attempt to control open-air preaching and its expulsion of some who held ‘camp meetings’ without its permission, gave rise to that very active and devoted body, the Primitive Methodists. In the course of further conflicts and divisions, the Conference gradually came to accept some of the innovations it had at first resisted.” (Broadbent, 306)
- “The Methodism that Wesley and his followers preached and practiced was characterized by an Arminian theology, which emphasized that Christ died for all humankind, not just the elect. Wesley viewed his mission as spreading spiritual holiness across the land, first in the human heart and then in the wider society. He believed it was possible to attain ‘perfect love’ before death, a belief that was repudiated by almost all other eighteenth-century religious traditions, but which accounts for the passionate desire for entire sanctification, which was one of the distinctive hallmarks of early Methodist spirituality.” (Hill, 336)

- “Wesley’s message proved appealing to the English lower classes. Methodism made its fastest gain in those areas least amenable to the paternalistic influence of squires and parsons, including freehold parishes, proto-industrial villages, mining communities, market towns, and seaports. Methodism recruited more women – especially single or widowed women than men, a pattern that repeated itself wherever Methodism took root in the British Isles, North America, and beyond.” (Hill, 336)
- “Although Methodism arose as a predominately English movement with roots in High Church spirituality and continental Pietism, it was also part of an international ‘great awakening’ from the Urals in the east to the Appalachians in the west. Methodism soon spread into parts of Wales and Ireland, but it was in the United States that the movement made its most spectacular gains, emerging as the national largest Christian denomination on the eve of the American Civil War.” (Hill, 336)
- “Methodism’s flexible and exportable structure and its egalitarian message was a good fit for a nation of free markets and democratic political aspirations. First establishing itself in the eastern seaboard cities, Methodism soon spread south and west with remarkable speed, even managing to make a substantial impact on African slaves despite the fact that preaching to slaves was discouraged by slave-owners and many church authorities at this time.” (Hill, 336)
- “How then should Methodism be interpreted and what is its place in the Christian tradition? Methodism arose as a voluntary society within the Church of England at a time when the established churches of western Europe were finding it hard to retain their traditional status and control. Next to its great hymns, the Methodist class ticket – a token of voluntary commitment and a highly prized badge of membership – is probably Methodism’s most recognizable symbol.” (Hill, 336)
- “Finally then, what was it about Methodism that attracted the loyalty and commitment of so many people across the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? More specifically, is there a single compelling idea at the heart and center of the Methodist component of the international Great Awakening? One answer would be its belief in the achievability of personal and social holiness on earth as in heaven. In that respect Methodism, by propagating religion as a means and a way to a better life for individuals and communities could be regarded as a Protestant parallel to the Enlightenment.” (Hill, 336)
- “Crucial to the holiness experiment was the notion that pure religion was a self-adopted choice, not a state-sponsored obligation. The deceptively simple idea propagated in word and song by John and Charles Wesley was this: notwithstanding the political corruption and pastoral lethargy they identified in Hanoverian England, it was possible through divine initiative, human cooperation, and empowerment of the Spirit to promote personal and social holiness of such quality that it dared hope for perfection in the life of the believer and purification of the wider society.” (Hill, 336)
- “What was striking about Methodism is how successfully it appealed to a wide range of social groups and people of different levels of education. It inspired trade unionists, charities, temperance advocates, anti-slavery advocates, Sunday school teachers, educational pioneers, philanthropists, and civic reformers. It crossed national boundaries and adapted to new environments. Its growth from a small society within the Church of

England to a major international church is one of the most remarkable stories in the history of Christianity.” (Hill, 337)

Impact of Religious Revival

- The impact of the “Great Awakening” can be seen in the stirring of large numbers of people to devote themselves to removing abuses, to working righteousness, and delivering the oppressed. It gave an impetus to better legislation, liberty of conscience, abolition of slavery, prison reform, and missionary activity. (Broadbent, 306)
- “The Established Church also gained greatly by it, becoming the scene of evangelical and other revivals in which the gross evils that had so long prevailed disappeared. The churches, whether Baptist or Congregational, also derived benefit from the general reviving, and their activities were enlarged.” (Broadbent, 307)
- “In America in particular, the First Great Awakening produced many great schools, including Rutgers and Dartmouth colleges, and what would later become Princeton, Brown, and Columbia universities. Important social programs were created by Christians who wanted to live out their faith by helping others, and both Enlightenment thinkers and Christian reformers had a dramatic impact through their promotion of democratic ideals.” (Price and Collins, 169)
- “In England, innumerable mission and charitable organizations were formed to spread the message of hope and salvation at home and abroad. These ministries, and stalwart individuals who dedicated their lives to serving others, together helped bring relief and aid to poor children, widows, and homeless, the unemployed, prisoners, and those suffering from alcohol and gambling addictions.” (Price and Collins, 169)

Works Cited

Broadbent, E.H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press, 1931.

Hill, Jonathan. *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Jones, Timothy Paul. *Christian History Made Easy*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2009.

Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity: Volume II, Reformation to the Present*. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953.

Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.