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DEMANDING
LIBERTY

Isaac Backus

*An UNTOLD
STORY of AMERICAN
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*

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ONE

“FILLED UP WITH SIN”

WHY AMERICA NEEDED A REVIVAL



My soul yielded all into His hands, fell at His feet, and was silent and calm before Him. . . . My heavy burden was gone, tormenting fears were fled, and my joy was unspeakable.

ISAAC BACKUS'S ACCOUNT OF HIS CONVERSION

It's nearly impossible for me to imagine colonial New England without a religious image springing to mind. I start thinking about the English settlers who journeyed to the New World to pioneer a new life, and soon my head is filled with images of Pilgrims in black buckled hats giving thanks to God for the bounty of a new world. If it's not the Pilgrims, it's someone like John Winthrop, rocking gently on the good ship *Arbella* and articulating his ambition that he and his fellow settlers will be a "city on a hill" in the new wilderness of testing. Even when the mental image of the colonial era is negative, it is often religious—

like the dark, dour Puritans of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and other stories. Google "colonial America" and the first few pictures that appear depict people preaching or praying.

These images can overstate the piety of the first American colonists. The truth is the colonies were unevenly devout. Faith was arguably a more fundamental aspect of life in New England than it was in some Southern colonies. In New England, villages were often constructed with a church, or "meetinghouse," at the center, and the rest of civilization radiating from it like spokes on a wheel. But just because the meetinghouse was the central feature of the New England village doesn't mean the Christian faith was the driving beat of every citizen's heart. America before the Revolution was not as religious as many imagine.

The first generation of New Englanders, those who colonized Plymouth beginning in 1620 and who established Massachusetts Bay Colony beginning in 1630, had a clear sense of their calling and purpose in the New World and had made the journey to America at great personal cost and risk. But religious commitment is difficult to transmit from one generation to the next. Already by the second generation many lamented the decline of the people's commitment to God and to the founding vision of the Christian commonwealth.

Benjamin Tompson's 1676 poem "New England's Crisis" gives some idea of the kinds of changes the older faithful found troubling. The subtitle sets the tone. His poem told the tale "Of New England's Lamentable Estate at Present, Compared with the

Former (but Few) Years of Prosperity." Tompson reminisces (in meter) about an age when people were happy as songbirds with simple diets and modest clothes—"When flesh was food and hairy skins made coats / And men as well as birds had chirping notes." In his generation, backbiting and gossip were common. The earlier golden years, by contrast, were made up of days "When honest sisters met to pray not prate / About their own and not their neighbor's state."

Alas, these "golden times (too fortunate to hold) / Were quickly signed away for love of gold." The modest fashion of New England's founding fathers was gradually replaced by new trends from Europe. No longer satisfied with a simple diet, the colony began importing chocolate and French wine and exotic fruits. People couldn't delay gratifying their new and sophisticated palates long enough to pray over their meal. They were unkind to one another on the streets. Materially, the colony experienced a season of prosperity. Spiritually, in Tompson's view, the colony was increasingly impoverished. Tompson grieved the loss of simpler times, when "New England's beauties, which still seemed to me / Illustrious in their own simplicity."

Growing materialism was an external symptom, men like Tompson believed, of New England's internal spiritual problems. The children of churchgoers showed little interest in their parents' faith. A series of debates about baptism and the Lord's Supper divided Christians. Frequent bloody conflicts with Native Americans led many leaders in the 1660s and beyond to believe God was punishing his people for their disobedience. The

Puritans, those pioneers who established Massachusetts Bay Colony (which ultimately absorbed Plymouth Plantation), believed they were in a special covenant with God. Keeping that covenant was a group effort. And now, because the group was failing just a generation after the covenant was forged, it was showing signs of breaking.

Pastors developed a style of sermon called the “jeremiad” as a response to spiritual decline. The format gets its name from the biblical “weeping prophet,” Jeremiah, who lamented the sins of his people Israel and warned them of God’s impending judgment. Many New England preachers, who considered New Englanders a new Israel, took up the same task and called the populace to repentance.

In some places, congregations got the message and repented. Over the next seventy or eighty years, seasons of spiritual renewal and rededication known as “awakenings” became a common feature of the New England religious experience. One type of revival service was the covenant renewal service, which started becoming popular in the 1670s. These were essentially seasons in which pastors reminded their congregations of their duties to God and each other. The events gave church members opportunity to assess their personal relationship with God and provided an opportunity for people who were considering joining the church to convert and become full members. During covenant renewal seasons, preaching focused on salvation, and conversions were frequent. As a result of these events, congregations here and there experienced seasons of spiritual revival.

But a wholesale, wide-scale return to holiness remained out of reach. Church attendance remained low. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have estimated that in 1776, only 17 percent of American colonists were religiously affiliated. That number must have been even lower the generation before. A meetinghouse may have sat in the center of town, but some villages boasted more taverns than churches. In the first half of the eighteenth century, young people were postponing marriage until their late twenties. The result was a "well-developed youth culture" that brought a range of sins—from simple idleness and disrespect to sexual immorality. Roughly a third of babies in New England were conceived out of wedlock. Religious leaders committed to a vision of a Christian commonwealth in the New World saw that vision evaporating. Their society was losing its moorings, and New England was becoming less faithful. For decades many Christians prayed for an act of God to rekindle the spiritual life of New England.

In the 1740s it appeared to many that their prayers were answered. A generation of backsliders and spiritual sluggards was yanked to its feet by fiery preachers who delivered simple, passionate messages in a new theatrical style in a movement that came to be called the Great Awakening.

The Divine Dramatist

The Great Awakening (sometimes called "the Awakening") had no single champion or representative, but it did have one singular luminary. No revival preacher at the time had more

influence than George Whitefield. He was a superstar, America's first celebrity. Imagine Beatlemania or Bieber Fever in an age of periwigs and petticoats.

In the mid-1700s, Whitefield traveled from England to America thirteen times and logged some eighty thousand miles crisscrossing the colonies. Benjamin Franklin, the famous newspaperman from Philadelphia, was a contemporary of Whitefield's and a committed agnostic. He didn't believe a word Whitefield said when he preached the gospel, but Franklin couldn't help but admire him. In fact, the two were good friends, and Franklin attended many of Whitefield's events. Whitefield's speaking style was so refined, Franklin wrote, "that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well turned and well placed," that even if you had no interest in the subject matter—and Franklin didn't—"one could not help being pleased with the discourse." It elicited the same sort of pleasure as listening to "an excellent piece of music." This was quite a change of pace from the average sermon of the day, which was typically read aloud by a seated pastor in some degree of monotone. Whitefield was captivating. Rumor has it he could cause a crowd to swoon by the way he pronounced the word *Mesopotamia*.

At one event, Franklin did the math and estimated Whitefield could preach to more than 30,000 people in the open air, without amplification. "He had a loud and clear voice," Franklin observed, "and articulated his words and sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great distance." It helped

that his audience, "however numerous, observed the most exact silence." But the immensity of Whitefield's audiences testifies to more than the power of his voice. It testifies, too, to his extraordinary appeal in colonial America. Boston was America's most populous city in 1740. In that year, the entire population of Boston was around 16,400 souls. A crowd of 30,000 would have been equivalent to the entire populations of Boston and Philadelphia at the time.

Wherever Whitefield preached, people swarmed from cities and villages to hear him. A New England farmer, Nathan Cole, recorded in his journal his experience of hearing Whitefield preach. Cole knew Whitefield by reputation and "longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way." Soon enough, he had his chance:

Then on a Sudden, in the morning about 8 or 9 of the Clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the Clock. I was in my field at Work, I dropt my tool I had in my hand and ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then run to my pasture for my horse with all my might; fearing that I should be too late; having my horse I with my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse got much out of breath I would get down and put my wife on

the Saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not stop or slack for me except I bade her and so I would run until I was much out of breath; and then mount my horse again, and so I did several times to favor my horse; we improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives; all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the sermon.

It's difficult to imagine this level of enthusiasm about a sermon from any preacher in modern times. In the years before digital streaming entertainment, this was about as good as it got.

Cole and his wife were not the only ones frantic to hear Whitefield preach. They soon ran into traffic in their breakneck journey to see the English celebrity:

And when we came within about half a mile or a mile of the road that comes down from Hartford, Wethersfield and Stepney to Middletown; on high land I saw before me a cloud or fog rising; I first thought it came from the great River, but I came near the road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of horses feet coming down the road and this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses feet; it arose some rods into the air over the tops of hills and trees and when I came within about 20 rods of the road, I could see men and horses slipping along in the cloud like shadows and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than a length behind

another, all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils every Jump; every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of souls; it made me tremble to see the sight.

The sermon the Coles heard that day touched on the themes Whitefield included in most of his sermons. Whitefield was no feel-good preacher. Cole said of the sermon,

And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound; by God’s blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me; then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election and went right to quarrelling with God about it, because all that I could do would not save me; and he had decreed from Eternity who should be saved and who not.

Like other revival preachers at the time, Whitefield assured his listeners that they were wretched sinners doomed for the fires of hell. Franklin marveled at the fact that people traveled so far only to hear a preacher describe them all as “naturally half beasts and half devils.” Nevertheless, the message about human depravity and God’s grace struck a chord in the colonies. Sinners heard again and again—not just from Whitefield but from a host of other preachers—that they must repent of their sins and have a personal and converting experience of faith. If they did, they could experience the “new birth” and be “born again.”

The Awakening drew a line in the sand and demanded that a casual, inherited faith was no faith at all. People responded, and the effects of their new birth, in some towns, were palpable in society. Franklin saw the transformation too, although he doubted there was anything supernatural about it. “From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion,” Franklin observed, “it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”

Other Luminaries

George Whitefield was not the only important figure of the Awakening. There were the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, whose followers became known as Methodists. In addition to writing hymns still sung in churches the world over today, they founded a movement that became America’s largest Christian denomination in the following century.

And there was Jonathan Edwards, the reserved and startlingly brilliant pastor whose uncharacteristically grim sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” brought white-knuckled Christians to their knees in repentance in more than one parish church. If George Whitefield was the movement’s most notable evangelist, Edwards was its most influential theologian. Edwards led his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, through a season of awakening in the early 1730s, at which time nearly three hundred people converted and joined the church. Three hundred people is a lot of people, until we put the number

in perspective. Then it becomes a *whole* lot of people. The average church in Edwards’s day usually had about seventy-five in attendance. It’s possible the Awakening more than quadrupled the size of Edwards’s congregation.

Edwards wrote an account of these events called *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. What made Edwards unique is that he was a diligent student of the Enlightenment’s most important rationalistic writings, which were increasingly en vogue in America at the time. *A Faithful Narrative* is a personal testimony of God’s work in people’s lives written as if it were the scientific observations of a trained botanist or zoologist. He carefully recorded and cataloged the events of the Awakening, including excesses and abuses, to help people know how to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit when they saw it.

A Faithful Narrative was published in England in 1737. When it appeared in print, it influenced important British evangelicals, including Isaac Watts, John and Charles Wesley, and even George Whitefield, inspiring them to expect and pray for spiritual awakening. Edwards ultimately helped to establish the theological center of the Awakening. He mentored George Whitefield, who took Edwards’s carefully reasoned theology and popularized it for tens of thousands in his sermons.

That brings us to Isaac Backus.

Filled Up with Sin

Isaac Backus was profoundly influenced by the work of both George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. When Backus

presented a case for religious liberty before the First Continental Congress three decades after the Awakening, the heart of his argument borrowed from Edwards's theology. But that's jumping ahead. George Whitefield played a key role in Backus's conversion, even though Backus didn't hear Whitefield preach until several years after he was "born again."

Revival fire burned through Backus's hometown of Norwich, Connecticut, when he was a teenager. Backus's mother, Elizabeth, was caught up in it. When Isaac was fifteen or sixteen, his mother experienced the new birth. She became devout and prayed for her son. But Isaac wasn't impressed. Maybe it was typical teenage rebellion. Maybe it was sincere religious apathy. But Backus resisted. He rarely attended church and didn't care much about the revival smoldering around him.

Backus reflected the spirit of the age, with its rebellious youth culture, in his teenage disregard for religion. He illustrated, too, how a deep concern for faith can skip a generation. Backus's hometown, Norwich, was established in 1660 for religious reasons, when Pastor James Fitch led a majority of his congregants not only to start a new church but indeed to plant a new town. Pastor Fitch and his congregants felt that some new rules about church governance within the Congregational Church, known as the Saybrook Platform, took control of the local church out of the hands of the people. So they left. Among those who left Saybrook to found Norwich was Backus's great-grandfather.

But Backus felt no family pressure to take his faith seriously until the Awakening. Even though he witnessed “powerful preaching” and “the sight of many in distress or joy,” Backus remained a “hardened sinner” until August 24, 1741, when God led him to “embrace salvation in His own way.” Backus was alone in a field working, as Nathan Cole had been when news of Whitefield’s visit reached him. Outside the walls of a church, without the appeal of a preacher, Backus experienced the presence of God:

As I was mowing in the field alone I was thinking of my case; and all my past life seemed to be brought fresh to my view and it appeared indeed nothing but a life of sin. I felt so that I left work and went and sat down under a shady tree; and I was brought to look particularly into my duties and strivings, how I had tried to mend myself by my tears, prayers, and promises of doing better[—]but all in vain—my heart was hard and full of corruption still. And it appeared clear to me then that I had tried every way that I possibly could and if I perished forever I could do no more. And the justice of God shined so clear before my eyes in condemning such a guilty rebel that I could say no more—but fell at his feet. . . . I felt a calm in my mind—their tossings and tumults that I felt before seemed to be gone.

A couple days later, Backus attended an evening prayer service in which someone read a sermon by George Whitefield on Acts 19:2: “He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost

since ye believed?” In the sermon, Whitefield delineated the evidence of true conversion. Backus did not yet consider himself born again. But as he listened to the sermon he identified “marks of true grace” in his own life: “a spirit of prayer—a loathing and hatred of sin—love to the brethren, etc.” In that moment “the Lord was pleased to give me some sweet sealings of the Holy Spirit of promise.” For the rest of his life he looked back on that moment as the time he left the darkness and entered the light.

Once he was convinced he was converted, Backus never doubted the work God had done in his life. But he did have questions about what this change meant for him. He was hesitant, for example, to join the local church in town, because the pastor honored a practice called the “Half-Way Covenant.” The Half-Way Covenant essentially allowed for people to become members of the church without giving an account of their personal faith or conversion. If they lived a moral life and didn’t commit any grievous sins, they could enjoy Communion in the church without being converted. Their children could be baptized in the church, too, and grow up as members.

Like others in town who experienced conversion during the Awakening, Backus felt halfway membership undervalued the personal experience of saving faith. His own experience with saving faith convinced him that true faith can’t be inherited. Besides, there is some evidence that the pastor of the Congregational church in town, Benjamin Lord, had opposed the Great Awakening because it encouraged uneducated men to preach unauthorized sermons. For these reasons, Backus waited almost

a year before he finally decided to join the church, despite his misgivings. He joined the church with the goal that he and the other born-again members could reform the church's membership policy from the inside. They had enough confidence in the power of God to believe that he could use their example to change the heart of their pastor.

In this instance, God did not change the pastor's heart. In 1744, Backus and his mother, along with several of the most prominent families in town, left the Norwich standing church and formed their own congregation. When they did this, they became known as "Separates," because they had *separated* themselves from the majority of believers in town. The pastor said the reasons weren't good enough and demanded that they come back to church posthaste. Backus refused, and he, his mother, and their close friends were excommunicated.

Backus's pastor, Benjamin Lord, was one of many at the time who refused to believe that the Awakening was the work of God because the movement had too many abuses, too many strange and socially unacceptable consequences. Critics had a point. In addition to the thoughtful and cautious advocates of the Awakening, like Edwards, there were other, more radical advocates. There were book-burning populists who heaped into large piles volumes written by "unregenerate" pastors and theologians and set them on fire. Men such as Theodorus Frelinghuysen and Gilbert Tennent threatened the social order by questioning the faith of local ministers. Tennent, a Scots-Irish Presbyterian, preached an infamous sermon titled "The Danger of an

Unconverted Clergy” (1739), in which he suggested that most of the pastors in most of the churches in New England were not actually born-again Christians. James Davenport, in 1741, decried New Haven’s minister as a sheep in wolf’s clothing. He itinerated in New England, preaching in the streets against the orders of local ministers and eventually was arrested for slander. In the same year, David Brainerd was expelled from Yale for claiming one tutor had “no more grace than [a] chair.”

The Awakening was plagued with other excesses. Some of the awakened claimed to receive special spiritual visions from the Lord. Others experienced uncommon manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s presence, including groans, shaking, and “holy laughter.” Some went so far as to break down all social barriers, encouraging women, children, and even slaves not only to *experience* the new birth but also to *preach* about it.

Backus would almost certainly have taken issue with most of these excesses—though he probably would have delighted to hear a slave preach the gospel. Nevertheless, these are the people Backus became associated with when he left his church in Norwich.

Thus Backus experienced two conversions during the Awakening. The positive conversion was that he passed from darkness to light, death to life—he experienced the new birth the Awakening emphasized. The negative conversion was that he began his journey toward becoming socially marginalized because of his religious convictions. In this area Backus had something to lose. He had been born into a prominent and conservative

family in Norwich in 1724, about sixty years after it was founded. His father, Samuel, had served in the General Assembly. His grandfather had been a justice of the peace. His great-grandfather had been a founding member of the commonwealth. Before the Awakening, Backus was a wealthy farmer, a man of means who enjoyed a privileged status. Whatever he gained spiritually upon his conversion to faith, he also sacrificed a great deal materially and socially. The rest of his life was marked by conflict and the struggle for respectability—a respectability he could have kept as his birthright if he’d said no to God’s call to new birth.

Revival and Its Consequences

The Great Awakening had a profound impact on eighteenth-century America. America feels the impact of that revival even now in the twenty-first century. But it is easy to overstate the *immediate* effects of the revival on colonial culture. If Finke and Stark are right that only 17 percent of colonial Americans attended church in 1776—almost thirty years *after* the Awakening—we can assume that the rates of church attendance were lower before the Awakening and that the revivals were responsible for bringing the rates *up to* 17 percent. While the experience of new birth certainly changed individual lives and even some villages dramatically, in many towns—as in Norwich—there were not enough converts to change the polity of the local church, much less the culture of the entire town.

Perhaps the greatest large-scale change the Awakening introduced was shifting the religious balance in America. This is especially true in New England. Fewer than 20 percent of the population attended church regularly, but most of those churchgoers belonged to one denomination. The Congregationalists in New England owned the largest percentage of the religious market share. More than 70 percent of churchgoers in Massachusetts were Congregationalist. Roughly 65 percent were Congregationalist in Backus's home state of Connecticut. That began to change with the Awakening. Over the next hundred years, Congregational churches got a smaller and smaller portion of the churchgoing pie, and newer denominations gobbled up the rest.

This is still only part of the story. Ironically, this Great Awakening took place at a time when a different portion of the American population was becoming *less* religious. As some Americans were becoming convinced that God wanted a personal relationship with them, others were becoming convinced that it was nonsense to believe in a personal God who concerned himself with human affairs. Benjamin Franklin is a great example of this. He experienced his own conversion during the Great Awakening—he became a deist. Franklin and others like him, including Thomas Jefferson, were exchanging traditional faith for something more material and secular and scientific. Beginning around the mid-eighteenth century, then, American culture was pulled in opposite directions—the pietists (those converted during or friendly to the Awakening) pulled it in one

direction, and the rationalists (like Franklin) pulled it in the other. Most Americans sat somewhere in the middle.

The point of all this is simply to say that the greatest immediate change the Awakening brought was increased tension among religious people. The more religious life diversified in New England, the more conflict was brought out into the open. Marginal groups, like Baptists and Quakers, had experienced persecution in Puritan New England in the past. In the years to come, the resentment that resulted from the Awakening would lead to increased persecution against religious minorities in New England and beyond. Traditional religion fought battles on at least two fronts: it fought both pietism and rationalism. That means it saw enemies everywhere.

Congregationalists, the descendants of the Puritans who had preached jeremiads and prayed for revival, lost power after the Awakening. Their experiment had always been fragile. Now they saw it unraveling at the seams. A growing number of unsatisfied, insubordinate folks were boldly threatening to dismantle the edifice the "Standing Order" had been building for generations.

This is where religious liberty gets hard—when it feels like a zero-sum game. It's one thing to be tolerant of others when the "others" make up a small minority of the population. But when their numbers begin to grow, their presence becomes a threat. Today, the Pew Religious Landscape Study concludes that more than 70 percent of the American population identifies as a Christian of some variety. A quarter of all Americans are identified as "evangelical Protestant." The percentage of religiously

unaffiliated persons is almost 23 percent, just a couple points from the percentage of evangelicals. It's no wonder many evangelical Christians feel insecure or even threatened; the landscape is shifting. The evangelical slice of the pie is shrinking. The question, of course, is, What now?

Backus would soon discover the power of history and leverage it to support his movement. First, though, he would learn that no matter who is right about history, the people in power get to decide what is true.

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