

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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### #19. Summary of The Church in the Eighteenth Century

#### The Great Awakening

As the Enlightenment gained traction in Europe, a fertile field was opening up in the New World. Throughout the Old World, people were becoming disillusioned by centuries of corruption, hypocrisy, and bloodshed within the church. The Enlightenment began to capture the minds of Europeans, convincing them that "Reason" was the ultimate authority, not Scripture, and certainly not the institutional church. By the eighteenth century, philosophy trumped theology. Some eliminated God from their thinking altogether. Many of those who allowed some room for Him were Deists, people who believed that God created the world, subjected it to the laws of nature, and then let it discover its own way. God was thought of as a clockmaker who set His creation on a shelf after winding it, then walked away from it, allowing it to run down on its own. Obviously, this is not an accurate description of the God of the Bible. Jesus was described as Immanuel or "God with us," and there was no room for such a being in the world of Deism. When the Gospel was preached at all, it was reduced to a message of moderation and good works. The message was essentially powerless, and the citizens of Europe saw little need for the miraculous intervention of Heaven. There was no reason to suspect one of the greatest moves of God in church history was about to take place.

The revival known as The Great Awakening began in Wales in the 1730s. Within 20 years, over 400 religious "societies" (organizations or ministries) were formed, and they would affect the religious landscape in Wales for over 200 years. The fire would spread throughout Britain and establish England as the center of Christianity for over two centuries.

In 1735, George Whitfield was converted and became one of the leading evangelists of the Awakening, preaching both in England and the American Colonies. Around the same time, John and Charles Wesley, who belonged to a society known as "The Holy Club" began a pursuit of God that would change the world. Born

into a devout Anglican home, the Wesleys began their ministry based on systematic, disciplined lifestyles. They shortly became referred to as "Methodists" because of their methodical approach to the work of God and to discipleship. The Wesleys, like Whitfield, were well known and very successful on both sides of the Atlantic. Americans know John as the founder of the Methodist Church.

John Wesley was deeply influenced by a German Pietist group known as the Moravians, who were led by Nicolaus von Zinzendorf. In fact, though he tried to serve God in the strength of his own efforts, John testified that his conversion occurred in 1738 at a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate Street in London. As he listened to the reading of Martin Luther's commentary on Romans, he felt his heart "strangely warmed." It was at this moment that the founder of Methodism found assurance described as "New Birth." The Moravians understood the power of prayer as few others. We know that the Moravians conducted round the clock prayer for over a century, and many credit the Great Awakening to such intense intercession.

American Christians owe a debt to the Moravians, Whitfield, the Wesleys, and a New England pastor known as Jonathan Edwards. Beginning in the early 1730s, revival in the region reached a peak in 1735 with about 30 people weekly coming forward to repent at Edward's church alone. The fire of God's Spirit spread throughout all of the Colonies. It is estimated that in New England, about 50,000 people (20% of the population) became Christians. Some have calculated that by the time of the American Revolution between 60-70% of Americans were regular Church attenders.

The Great Awakening impacted two continents, and produced fruit among both Calvinists and Arminians. Missions endeavors came alive during this period as men and women, like Adoniram and Nancy Judson and Samuel and Harriet Newell, became the first American Protestant missionaries when they sailed from Salem, Massachusetts to the Far East. William Carey, considered the Father of Modern Missions, was also a product of the Great Awakening.

Revival won the day over Reason, but a new menace would arise in the 19th century, as men like Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher tried to turn Christianity in a new, different, and devastating direction.