

Introduction

In *The Great Awakening*, editor Richard Bushman tells the story of America's first great revival through a reading of primary source documents. He highlights the various themes of the awakening in separate chapters. Bushman discusses the state of religion before the Awakening and focuses on the contributions of the greatest itinerant revivalists and the staunch opposition to them. He also describes other key elements of the awakening which includes: a theology of conversion (new birth), how people of that day assessed the revival, how the revival pushed America towards tolerance in religious matters and millennial expectations in light of the revival fires.

Dr. Richard Bushman currently serves as the Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. He has authored many books on early American religious history. A former Mormon missionary, Bushman is best known for his scholarship on the founder of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, Joseph Smith. In 1984, Bushman's award winning book, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, was published.

Summary

Richard Bushman begins the first chapter with an excerpt from Samuel Willard's "The Peril of the Times Displayed (1700)." According to Bushman, Willard's sermons were cited by Thomas Prince Jr., the earliest historian to collect materials about the First Great Awakening, to prove "disdain for religion" in the years before the revival. In the excerpt, Willard, a vice-president at Harvard, stresses that his generation has become spiritually sick. He warns that men who do not fear God will attempt to "shew their wickedness" upon others. Continuing to warn the "Godly," Willard lists a multitude of sins and sinful activities in which people regularly engage. Willard also rails against the "grievous neglect of Family Worship." Family worship is composed of both scripture reading and prayer. Families that have neglected to pray daily unto God are deemed an irreligious family. Furthermore, men who raise their children without prayer have essentially

embraced atheism, according to Willard. Using the example of Israel entering Canaan from the second chapter of Judges, he notes that when the godliness of one generation begins to decline, the following generation will only be less godly.

Bushman next provides a classic sermon from Solomon Stoddard entitled, “Defects of Preachers Reproved,” delivered at the historic Northampton Church in 1723. Stoddard begins with the idea that men with an abundance of education still have the ability to preach “erroneous principles” or false doctrine. He gives the examples of the Pharisees and Sadducees who “were men of liberal education, yet leavened with many false principles.” According to Stoddard, educated men may be led astray by reading “erroneous books.” Thus, education will not protect men from “carnal reason.” Educated or learned men such as Arius, Socinus, Arminius, and Pelagius have been responsible for many errors in religion, according to Stoddard.

Stoddard continues his sermon by examining the controversial subject of conversion. According to Bushman, Stoddard departed from tradition and dropped the conversion requirement for admission to his Church. He argued that participation in communion would lead the unregenerate to Christ. Stoddard’s discussion of conversion included six major points. For example, teaching that men are not aware of the time or place of their conversion is not good preaching. Rather, good preaching requires that humiliation be taught as necessary before faith and it requires that men preach often of the dangers of damnation. Stoddard concluded with a strong condemnation of the reading of sermons. He noted that it was not the pattern of prophets to read their prophecies. Stoddard believed that men were drowsy and needed to hear lively preaching delivered with authority.

The third document which described revival preaching before the First Great Awakening was an excerpt of a 1735 sermon by the Presbyterian, Gilbert Tennent, entitled “Solemn Warning.” Tennent uses the imagery of hell and declares that his congregation will perish if they do not make

radical changes in their lifestyles. To emphasize his warning, Tennent references the story of Jonah who was swallowed by the whale while asleep. Tennent concludes his sermon by listing every group of “sinners” and questions the congregation as to when they will wake up from their Christless sleep.

Chapter two focuses on the “itinerants” of the revival. The first entry is a report on George Whitefield’s visit to New York in 1739 that was published in *The New England Weekly Journal*. The report reflected a positive bias towards Whitefield. According to Bushman, colorful reports of this type appeared in newspapers everywhere.

The following document included an invitation to Whitefield from the Eastern Consociation of Fairfield County, Connecticut to visit several towns and preach to the masses (1745). The Fairfield County council voted to invite Whitefield due to his success in “awakening secure Sinners and the Promotion of Piety.”

Bushman next includes Whitefield’s personal account of a five-city revival from 1740. Whitefield preached to 15,000 and 20,000 people while in Philadelphia alone. On the subject of slavery and religion, Whitefield wrote in his journal: “I believe masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their Negroes worse slaves.” In Boston, Whitefield met with the Governor and spent time with the Commissary who questioned some of his views. During their conversation, Whitefield expressed that he had seen regenerate Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents at his revivals. Who can tell which group is the most evangelical, asked Whitefield. In one journal entry, Whitefield exclaimed that congregations are dead because they have “dead men” preaching to them. Whitefield concludes the journal by describing his meeting with Jonathan Edwards and preaching before him at his church in Northampton.

Whitefield offers a heartfelt call to accept the “love of Jesus Christ” in his popular sermon, “The Marriage of Cana.” Preaching with passion, Whitefield declares that Christ “will sweetly

guide with his wisdom” those who are willing to embrace His grace.

Bushman’s eighth document is an article from the *Boston Gazette* (April 1741) in response to Whitefield’s criticism of Harvard University. The author, William Brattle, initially praises Whitefield for his instrumental role in “awakening and stirring up People to a serious Concern for the Salvation of their precious souls.” According to Brattle, Whitefield criticized Harvard for lacking discipline and neglecting its students’ souls. Brattle respectfully disagrees and declares that instructors and students engage in private conversations dealing with private matters such as the nature of one’s soul or salvation. In response to Brattle, Whitefield wrote that he was thankful to God for sending fiery revivalist Gilbert Tennent to Harvard and Cambridge. Whitefield encourages the students to study, not to get a Parish or be a polite Preacher, but instead to be a great Saint.

Bushman includes five short letters from ministers and itinerants to revivalist Eleazar Wheelock. These letters contain reports of their experiences and requests to Wheelock to visit and preach in their cities.

Bushman next focuses on James Davenport, “one of the most powerful and certainly controversial of all the itinerants.” One letter published in the *Boston Weekly* (1742) recounts the details of Davenport’s trial where he was charged with “disorderly conduct” and declared to be under “enthusiastical impressions and impulses, and thereby disturbed in the rational faculties of his mind.” Consequently, Davenport was expelled from Connecticut. Following the trial, Davenport was rebuked by fourteen pastors from Boston and Charlestown. They declared that Davenport would no longer be invited into their houses of worship. A piece was later published in the *Boston Weekly* which described the “wild, frantick, and extravagant” conduct of Davenport and the New Lights (pro revival Congregationalists). Davenport published a retraction in 1744 and confessed that he had in fact been possessed by “demonic spirits.”

Bushman then highlights opposition to the itinerants. In one excerpt, Rev. Theophilus Pickering complains that the unauthorized preaching of the itinerants subverted his authority as a minister and broke down the order of the churches. Furthermore, in 1742 the Connecticut Assembly passed a law forbidding itinerant preaching except when the itinerant minister had been invited by another local minister. Not all obeyed the law, however, as itinerant minister Benjamin Pomeroy was arrested in 1744. Likewise, Whitefield was not as well-received by local ministers when he returned to New England, although he was warmly received by the locals. Bushman concludes the readings about itinerants with a selection from Whitefield's journal in which the revivalist apologizes to those who mistakenly believed that he promoted separation.

The third chapter focuses on the "New Birth" which was at the heart of the Awakening, according to Bushman. He defines the "new birth" as the "culmination of the revival preacher's efforts, the point toward which he drove his listeners, the moment of release for those awakened to the terrors of the Lord."

"The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole" catalogues the conversion experience of a common farmer from Connecticut. After hearing Whitefield preach, Cole began to question his previously held beliefs. Cole doubted whether he was "elected" by God. After days of frustration and begging God to "shine into his soul," Cole wrote that God appeared before him and "heaven and earth fled away." Cole's burdens vanished, distress disappeared, and his mind was set free. Cole's conversion account was typical of that era, according to Bushman.

Bushman provides two other excerpts on the "new birth." Rev. Samuel Blair of New-Londonberry describes the revival in his congregation. Rev. Jonathan Dickson of Elizabethtown, New Jersey laid out a theology of "new birth" in "The True Scripture-doctrine Concerning Some Important Points of Christian Faith" (1741). Dickinson explains that the sinner must realize his own miserable condition, his unworthiness of the divine, and the "utter inability to help himself."

The “convinced” sinner must then repent after showing an interest in Christ. God will give the sinner a “realizing sight of the fullness and sufficiency” that exists in Christ and his willingness to save him. Finally, the Spirit of God will “carry on the work of Grace” and sanctify the believer.

In chapter four, “Trouble in the Churches,” Bushman focuses on the struggle between the rigid orthodoxy and traditional education championed by conservatives and the piety and spirited preaching espoused by the revivalists. Conservatives sought to exclude Log College revivalists such as Gilbert Tennent from the ministry by requiring a degree from Harvard, Yale, or a European University as a prerequisite for a preaching license. Pennsylvania’s Philadelphia Synod also forbade revivalists from evangelizing to those without a church.

Gilbert Tennent lambasted these decisions in his 1740 sermon “The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry.” He warned that many men filling the pulpits had never had a conversion experience and were thus unregenerate. He called for an inquiry into ministers suspected to be “Pharisee-teachers” or unconverted. Believers whose minister was found to be unconverted should “separate” themselves and find a suitable congregation with a regenerate pastor.

Old Lights (opponents of revivalism) and moderate New Lights such as Solomon Williams of Connecticut felt that the approval of “separations” would ultimately destroy churches. In “A Plea for Moderation,” Williams agreed with Davenport and Tennent that “if a man be found in an unconverted state in the work of the ministry, it must be unlawful for him to go on, and unlawful for his people, to attend his ministry.” However, Williams was angered by people who sought to disrupt and split churches based on a suspicion that their pastor was unconverted. He argued that those who without public reason treat a minister as unconverted may be guilty of “beating his fellow servant and forbidding him to do what Christ has set him about.”

Separations did occur. In 1741, the enemies of the Log College men demanded that the revivalists be excluded from the Presbyterian synod. These enemies believed that the excessive

emotionalism (i.e., convulsions) would lead to immorality in the church. Consequently, there were “old side” and “new side” Presbyterians.

Bushman offers several documents detailing these separations in New England and the development of the pro-revival Separates. One reason for separation was the imposition of ecclesiastical taxes by the Established Church. Some Separates even went to prison over their conscientious objections to the taxes. According to Bushman, “wherever the separating brethren ended up, a common yearning for a pure and holy church motivated their quest.” Consequently, Ebenezer Frothingham explained why the churches had failed those who separated. The churches had “dwindled away into a dead, dry, lifeless form of Godliness” and had become a haven for “hypocrites.”

In chapter five, Bushman offers assessments of the Great Awakening by contemporary observers and participants. Beginning in 1742, there was a growing hostility towards George Whitefield. Much of Whitefield’s opposition came from the Old Side Presbyterians and other New England conservatives who felt threatened by the preaching of Gilbert Tennent and James Davenport.

Like Tennent, Samuel Finley was one of the Log College men and a pastor in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. His letter, “The Priests are Blind,” is similar in perspective to Tennent’s “The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry.” Finley viewed the priests opposed to him as being “blind” or “unconverted.” He encouraged the laity to separate from churches led by “ungodly” or “unregenerate” men.

Leading the opposition against the revivalists was Charles Chauncy, pastor of First Church in Boston. Fearful of losing ecclesiastical control, Chauncy gathered stories of excessive enthusiasm among revival participants across New England. In letters and sermons, he attacked and sought to discredit Log College men like Tennent who he deemed to be “one of the main

instruments of all our disorders.” Chauncy explained that these revivalists placed “their religion so much in the heat and fervour of their passions, that they too much neglect their reason and judgment.” As a result, these ministers end up bitter, fierce, and implacable rather than gentle and full of mercy.

New Light minister Jonathan Edwards also spoke out against the excesses and enthusiasm produced by the Great Awakening. Although Edwards recognized God’s spirit at work among the revivalists, he condemned their “errors as vigorously as Chauncy,” according to Bushman. The revivalist Edwards was eventually fired from his Northampton church due to his efforts to exclude the unconverted.

In 1743, a group of Old Lights passed a statement detailing doctrinal errors of the revival at the Annual Convention of Massachusetts Ministers. This document entitled “The Testimony of the Pastors of the Churches,” claims that itinerancy is a breach of ecclesiastical order and contrary to the teachings of Scripture. The document boldly proclaims that preachers lacking a formal education are committing a “heinous invasion of the ministerial office, and thus are offending God. Overwhelmingly against the Awakening, the last paragraph of the Old Light statement did credit the revival with advancing God’s “spiritual kingdom” in the souls of many.

Many ministers objected to the convention statement’s implication that the entire Massachusetts clergy had censured the revivalists. According to Bushman, the Massachusetts convention was only an informal gathering which represented a small minority of the clergy. Of the group which passed the statement, only a small majority even agreed with the content. As a result, the clergy of Massachusetts met again to reevaluate their assessment of the Awakening. The product of this meeting was a document entitled “The Testimony and Advice of an Assembly,” which offered both praise and criticism to the revivalists. The document declared that when salvation is sought the Kingdom of God is advanced and requires the “praises of the Lord’s people.”

On the other hand, the document also issued a stern warning about the dangers of Arminianism and Antinomianism and concluded with an exhortation to pray.

In his sixth and final chapter, Bushman addresses the dissatisfaction with traditional Calvinism expressed by some New England ministers. After the Awakening had begun, a few ministers chose to openly express their “misgivings about the injustice of an arbitrary election of grace without regard to personal merit.”

According to Bushman, Experience Mayhew was one of the first ministers to raise questions about the accepted belief of salvation by grace alone. In his book, “Grace Defended,” Mayhew asks many of the same questions that non-Calvinists and Arminians continue to ask today. If God offers salvation to all believers, why is salvation only granted to the elect? Likewise, why would a fair and just God choose to arbitrarily save some while damning others to hell? Rejecting the doctrine of election, Mayhew argues that the offer of salvation made to sinners includes in it an offer of the grace given in regeneration. He claimed that “God cannot be truly said to offer salvation to sinners without offering to them whatsoever is necessary on his part, in order to their salvation.”

According to Bushman, “pristine Calvinism” enjoyed resurgence before the ascendance of Arminianism. The sermons of ministers such as Jonathan Edwards and Gilbert Tennent focused on the impotency of man and his utter dependence on God’s grace for salvation. The New Light Joseph Bellamy attacked Arminianism as an example of self-love. People are to love God without regard for selfish motives.

In his work, “The Nature of True Virtue,” published in 1755, Jonathan Edwards asserts that both a common morality and true virtue exists. However, common morality was held to be a secondary or inferior type of virtue. True virtue is always based on a benevolence or love to "Being, simply considered," known as God. In addition, true virtue consists in a "union to heart" to

"being in general" which means that other beings with true virtue (or love to God) will inspire in us a love for them. Both Bellamy and Edwards desired a selfless love of God.

Bushman points out that Old Lights, usually viewed as coercive for their use of religious taxes to maintain order, actually considered the New Lights to be coercive. This is best seen through the writings of John Caldwell who was one of the most vocal opponents of the Awakening. Caldwell demanded that each man judge for himself. He wrote, "to judge that a man or number of men (who profess to be believers), will be damned, or are in a damnable state, by any other way than the wickedness and unrepented immorality of their lives, is judging without any warrant or authority." According to Bushman, Caldwell was effectively "pleading for an order grounded in toleration of differences."

Likewise, the New Lights in Connecticut also argued for tolerance or a "liberty of conscience." Samuel Davies was a New Light Presbyterian who demanded liberty of conscience for his congregation in Anglican dominated Virginia. However, some "churchmen" believed Davies' congregation to be "malcontents" rather than true converts. After writing a persuasive letter to the Bishop of London, Davies congregation won toleration.

Bushman concludes his study with two documents that looked to the millennial future. Jonathan Edwards was a postmillennialist who believed that the Awakening would help usher in the reign of Christ. In 1742, Edwards attempted to help prepare for the good society. He drew up a covenant for his congregation to sign, binding them to live their faith visibly, and to abstain from selfish desires. For example, the congregation promised to be "very careful to avoid doing any thing to our neighbor from a spirit of revenge."

In contrast to Edwards, his son-in-law Aaron Burr was a premillennialist who believed that Christ would have to return before the age of the millennium could begin. According to Burr, when

the millennium arrives, Christians will be especially favored and “shine like lights in the world, families will be nurseries of piety and public schools will be seats for virtue.”

Assessment

Dr. Richard Bushman's approach to the Great Awakening was indeed creative. He effectively told the story of the revival through primary source documents so that the reader could hear and interpret the evangelists themselves. Any collection of documents usually has some illuminating but unknown documents, but also some surprising omissions. While Jonathan Edwards' “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is easily accessible in other religious history books, I still questioned Bushman's decision not to include it. At the same time, Bushman's introductions to the revival documents were helpful enough so that non-experts in the field of religious history could have the necessary context to understand these 18th century writings.

By studying these primary sources documents, readers can easily see the passion that revivalists had for evangelism and new birth in Christ. The revivalists' reading of the “new birth and the nature of sin” is easily seen. At the same time, it is easy to understand why their opponents disliked them. The revivalists were extremely exclusive and came across as arrogant unable to get along with others. In today's age, we expect religious tolerance and hope that Christians of varying opinions can have interfaith dialogue.

The readings about Gilbert Tennent illustrate the interpersonal tensions between those who disagreed with the methods of revivalism. Tennent, an embodiment of the Log College approach, was quick to de-Christianize any person who dared to oppose the revivals. Like James Davenport, Tennent was anxious to identify those who were damned to hell. In the first chapter, Bushman stated that Tennent “hoped to humble sinners and open them to grace.” I disagree. It seems as though Tennent never attempted to humble his congregation, but instead tried to fill them with the fear of hell, and thus consequently scare these “sinners” into heaven.

I found it surprising that the Great Awakening produced evangelists with radically different views of the Millennium. While Jonathan Edwards was a postmillennialist, his son-in-law, Aaron Burr, was a premillennialist. It would appear that Edwards was more consistent. If people get revived, then society should get better. However, Burr was a precursor to the attitudes of most modern evangelists. They preach that converted individuals are the only hope for society. At the same time, their premillennial views contend that the world is getting worse and worse. Such preaching clearly has tension and contradiction in its makeup.

I also found the excerpt from Experience Mayhew's book, *Grace Defended*, to be particularly relevant given the resurgence of Calvinism among college students and in denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention. In the wake of this resurgence, non-Calvinists and Arminians continue to ask many of the same questions that Mayhew posed over 200 years ago. It appears that American Religion is still grappling with the relationship between a sovereign God and human freedom.

In sum, Richard Bushman's has provided an excellent introduction to the First Great Awakening. Scholars and students alike will find the collection useful for research and analysis.