

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## CRITICAL MASS

### No. XVIII: Why Revivalism Leads to Humanism

by Gary North

*And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God (II Sam. 6:6-7).*

In the Old Testament, no man was allowed to touch the Ark of the Covenant. It had rings on its sides so that specially designed poles could be inserted into them (Ex. 25:12-15). Men were to touch the poles, not the Ark itself. When David ordered the Ark back to Jerusalem, the people loaded it onto a cart, presumably by using poles, since God did not bring punishment against them. Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark as they carried it in the cart, and God struck him dead. Conclusion: better that the Ark should fall, and those in authority pick it up lawfully by using poles, than to allow someone to use unlawful means to keep it from falling. The biblical principle is this: **God's work done in God's way.**

This principle leads me to the topic at hand: revivalism. One of the greatest evils in American life has been the mass revival. Such revivals have always brought with them a "higher" view of law than the Bible. The revivalists and their victims have substituted for the law of God a theology of shared emotional experiences associated with the revivals. Every time this has happened, it has undermined the authority of the Bible and the authority of the institutional church. Every time this has happened, it has led to the capture of society by humanists.

#### The Halfway Covenant

The history of the secularization of the American republic is the history of a process of substitution: personal experience in place of judicial confession as the basis of church membership. It began in Puritan New England, probably by 1636, when the churches began requiring candidates for membership to relate the experience of their salvation. Without this confirming experience, the candidate's request was denied.

The second generation of Puritans, unlike their parents, had been born and reared in Calvinist churches. They had not run Archbishop Laud's gauntlet, nor had they fled to New England. They could not easily identify such an emotional point of conversion in their lives. They could not become church members. This created a problem: Should their children be baptized? If so, on what legal basis? The New England theologians invented a new theology in order to authorize the baptism of the children of the baptized but non-

communicant children of the first generation: the half-way covenant. But these baptized grandchildren of the founders were not authorized to take communion. Then when could they take communion, and on what basis? Only after they became full-covenant members: experiential confession. The halfway covenant's solution was in fact only a one-generation deferral of the problems raised by experientialism.

The great irony – rarely if ever mentioned in monographs on the halfway covenant – is that the 1662 Synod's standards for halfway covenant membership were the same as those for full membership in European Calvinist churches: profession of faith in Christ and an outwardly obedient life. Calvin had declared that "we recognize as members of the church those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us." The Synod declared: "Church members who were admitted in minority, understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publicly professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church, their Children are to be baptized." In any Continental Calvinist church, this would have entitled New England's halfway covenant, non-communing members and children to access to the communion table.

This ecclesiastical anomaly could not persist indefinitely. In the early eighteenth century, Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards' maternal grandfather, reversed the Calvinist conception of closed communion – church members only – and went to open communion as a means of bringing into the church those excluded by the halfway covenant's ban. Those who before God had always been lawfully entitled to the Lord's Supper now gained access, but only because Stoddard believed that the communion meal could stimulate the experience required for personal salvation. An experience, not profession of faith and outward obedience, was still seen as the essence of saving faith. Experience, not mere confession, was central to the church covenant. Stoddard's view of the covenant was coupled with a judicial downgrading of the Lord's Supper from a rite of covenant renewal and a mark of full church membership to a technique of evangelism with no threatened supernatural sanctions attached to it.

#### The First Great Awakening

Stoddard was the first American revivalist. He would not be the last. In the mid-1730's, accelerating rapidly after 1740, the First Great Awakening swept through the colonies. Revivals

and revivalists spread across the land. The theology of revivalism retained the New England Puritan assumption that a unique experience is the mark of salvation and the basis for assessing one's status as a saint. The full implications of this theology now became clear: it divided congregations into saints and self-deluded people with sound theology but without a work of salvation in their lives.

Itinerant preachers – George Whitefield being the most capable – would come into a town, preach in the open air, gain converts out of local congregations, and leave behind split congregations. In 1741, the Presbyterian Church split into two branches, Old Side vs. New Side (revivalists). This breach was not healed until 1758, after the Great Awakening had cooled. Congregationalists also split: Old Lights vs. New Lights (revivalists).

But New England's theocratic order had more than one oath-bound covenant. There was also the civil covenant. Fragmenting undermined the Puritan concept of the Trinitarian, oath-bound holy commonwealth, including Christian politics. The older theocratic order of New England began to erode in the face of this new experiential theology.

The culmination of this experiential-based view of social order was a new sense of nationalism based on shared experiences and a new concept of natural law: Newtonianism. The older biblical law-based postmillennialism of New England Puritanism was transformed into a form of optimistic nationalism. The revivals had transformed politics, not just the churches. This new political outlook led to the American Revolution.

The crucial but academically neglected judicial result of the American Revolution was Article VI, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids the imposition of a religious test oath for holding any Federal office. This definitively substituted a supposedly religiously neutral secular civil government for the older Trinitarian civil governments.

### The Second Great Awakening

Even before the Constitution was ratified, sparks of the Second Great Awakening had begun. For the next half century or more, revivals again swept the nation. This time, Calvinist churches did not respond to the new demand for pastors. Their educational requirements for ordination to the ministry were too high. Methodists and Baptists did not labor under equally tight constraints. They could more easily meet the new demand. Arminianism became the dominant theology of the nation by 1850.

Once again, the debate over experientialism vs. judicial confession split the Presbyterian Church. In 1837, the Old School General Assembly ejected four New School (revivalists) synods. The Church split, 1838-1869.

Once again, politics experienced a revolutionary transformation, just as it had a century earlier. The major political result of the Second Great Awakening was the abolitionist movement. Abolitionism had become a judicial matter first among the Quakers, prior to the American Revolution, where it remained bottled up. It spread to the Presbyterian Church in 1815. It spread a decade later to the Congregationalists. But the "field grade officers" of the abolitionist movement after 1830 were mostly New England Unitarians, despite the fact that the troops were mostly northern New School Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Because of the Unitarians'

emphasis on political action as the ultimate strategy for abolition, the Civil War transferred moral authority to the Unitarians and to politics. (So did the curricula of the public schools, beginning in Massachusetts: Horace Mann's legacy.)

One judicial result of the Civil War was the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), which over the century extended the Constitution's restraints on Federal actions to state and local governments. This process culminated in the little-known Maryland case of *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961): the final secularization of the American civil covenant. Article VI, Section 3 was extended to all government officers, not just Federal. This case involved the lowest office in the land: the notary public.

Each time experientialism was substituted for confession, especially Calvinist confession, as the basis of church membership, the process of secularization increased. Authority moved, step by step, from Calvinism to Arminianism to Unitarianism to secularism.

### The Third Awakening

There was a third Awakening, although it is rarely acknowledged as such. It was not a "great" awakening, i.e., not a mass revival. It was a concentrated revival. We can date it: 1887 to 1920. When John R. Mott, a young Methodist college student, journeyed to Dwight L. Moody's 1887 summer conference held in Northfield, Massachusetts, his life was changed. He became an evangelist: an evangelist for foreign missions. He recruited thousands of college students for the mission field, 1887 to 1955, and he did so on a non-denominational basis. A year later, in 1888, he was joined by a young Presbyterian layman, Robert E. Speer. For the next six decades, Mott became the spokesman for Protestant world missions. Speer shared second billing until his retirement in 1937.

Early in the twentieth century, another layman, liberal Baptist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., began giving away millions of dollars – eventually, over \$100 million, when that was worth billions of today's dollars. He hired Mott full time and Speer part time to assist him. The three of them – all laymen – converted the Northern Protestant mainline denomination foreign mission field into antinomian pietism and, under Mott's influence and the influence of his long-time assistant Sherwood Eddy, the Social Gospel. For over four decades, Mott ran the Student Volunteer Movement, the American YMCA foreign missions operation, and the International Missionary Council. He was the guiding hand behind the World Council of Churches, from its stirrings in 1937 until its incorporation in 1948.

### Conclusion

We want revival in our day. We want the world's billions to avoid eternal damnation. But what kind of revival can we expect? Antinomian revival has always led to common-ground, experience-based social theories, to increased social liberalism, and to secularization. Those groups that are at the forefront of evangelism today are Arminian and antinomian. Can the church afford a revival led by such groups? But will God wait indefinitely to bring the Great Awakening? Secularists are already in control. Can a revival make things worse?

This is why those of us who are neither Arminians nor antinomians have our work cut out for us. We must evangelize the antinomians before they evangelize the world.

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