

First Great Awakening

Source information and historical context for the document set
History 170, Fall 2019

Historical Context of the First Great Awakening

“...And repent: i.e. Candidly confess, and sincerely lament your Coldness and Negligence in Time past, and resolve in the Strength of God to do better in Time to come, in Pursuance of which, strive to keep yourselves in the Love of God, strive to keep alive in your Souls the sacred Fire of divine Grace, that ye may not be dead while ye live, but live in Love, live to God, and feel you live!”

-Gilbert Tennent, 1760

The Great Awakening was a tremendous religious revival that began in England and Scotland and spread to the British colonies in North America in the 1730s. George Whitefield, an Anglican minister from England, arrived in 1739 and began a widely publicized and wildly popular tour of the colonies. Whitefield was a highly charismatic evangelical preacher who asked that his congregants look within themselves for the “indwelling of Christ” to know if they were true Christians and thus saved from hell.

Whitefield and other revivalist ministers of the First Great Awakening described hell in terrible detail and emphasized how sinful most people were. They also criticized other ministers for focusing too much on rational, intellectual faith and good works, rather than an emotional, passionate, deeply felt experience of faith in God.

Presbyterian minister Gilbert Tennent, like Whitefield, had his own intense conversion experience and as a young minister was a zealous proponent of revivalist religion. Tennent attacked the religious establishment for trying to limit the ordination of new clergy by requiring American-born ministers to attend the few colleges and seminaries in the colonies at that time. In a sermon from 1742, Tennent fiercely condemned his more conservative colleagues for frowning upon itinerant preaching—a mainstay of revivalism—and for not adequately impressing their congregations with the horrors of hell. Tennant and other revivalist preachers helped bring about a schism in the Presbyterian church between Old Side, traditional ministers and New Side, revivalist evangelical ministers. After the 1741 split, the two sides reconciled in 1758.

Offering a strong rebuttal to revivalists like Tennent, Irish minister John Caldwell painted revivalists as overly dramatic and out of control. Caldwell claimed that there was no way to verify that a person’s conversion experience was authentic, and that asking for proof often invited a defensive attack from the converted person. Just as the revivalists defended their concept of Christian faith, Caldwell held that the more traditional, rational expressions of faith were correct and acceptable to God.

Document 1: Tennent's The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry

Tennent, Gilbert. *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, [second edition]. Boston: Printed and Sold by Rogers and Fowle, 1742.

Call number: PAM P02717

**See especially pages 1-3, 5-7, 10-12, and 17-20. This document was printed using the "long s."*

Source note: Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) was an Irish-born Presbyterian minister and a leader of the First Great Awakening. Tennent was ordained in 1726 and became minister of a Presbyterian church in New Brunswick, NJ. Tennent promoted the revivalist style of preaching along with George Whitefield, and was deeply critical of his more conservative Presbyterian colleagues. In 1741, Tennent was instrumental in bringing about the schism between the Old Side (anti-revival, largely Scotch-Irish Presbyterians) and New Side (pro-revival, largely based in New England). Tennent later worked to heal the split between Old Side and New Side, and the two factions did reunite in 1758. In this sermon, Tennent often refers to “natural man,” a person who is not a true follower of Christ and depends on good works and the intellectual aspects of faith rather than the emotional and spiritual experience of faith.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? What is the historical context in which it was written?
2. What is the main problem that Tennent will address in this sermon (pages 2,3)?
3. Tennent talks about the old Pharisees—to what contemporary group of people is he drawing a parallel (pages 1-3)?
4. Given the context of this sermon within the Great Awakening, what does Tennent mean by “natural man” (page 5)? What other sources can you find that define this term?
5. Tennent forcefully denounces the “Pharisee-Teachers” for their misguided ministry, claiming that “These fooling Builders do but strengthen Men's carnal Security, by their soft, selfish, cowardly Discourses. They have not the Courage, or Honesty, to thrust the Nail of Terror into sleeping Souls...” (page 6). Why is it important to terrify one's congregation, according to Tennent? What could that tactic accomplish?
6. In addition to praying for the people who have Pharisee-Teachers as their ministers, what other action does Tennent suggest people take (page 11)?
7. What is Tennent's stance on “Persons going to hear others, besides their own Ministers” (page 17)? Is it permissible for people to prefer the ministry of a visiting minister over that of their parish minister?
8. How was this sermon likely received by anti-revivalists? How does this sermon fit into the context of revivalism in the First Great Awakening?

Document 2: Tennent's Nature of Religious Zeal Explained

Tennent, Gilbert. *A Persuasive to the Right Use of the Passions in Religion, or, the Nature of Religious Zeal Explained...* Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, 1760.

Call number: CR Amer 1760 E8745

* See especially pages 5-13 and 41-43. This document was printed using the "long s."

Source note: Tennent delivered this sermon 18 years after his fiery sermon, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (Document 1). At this time, the Old Side and New Side factions had been reunited two years earlier to form a single Presbyterian church.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written, and what was the historical context?
2. What are some of the different kinds of "bad zeal" that Tennent describes (pages 7-11)?
3. What actions should those without true Zeal take (page 42)? What actions should those who *do* have true Christian Zeal take (page 43)?
4. How does this sermon differ from Tennent's 1742 sermon (Document 1)? How are the two sermons similar?

Document 3: Caldwell's Impartial Trial of the Spirit

Caldwell, John. *Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World*.
Boston: Printed, and Glasgow Re-printed, and Sold by Robert Foulis, 1742
Call number: CR Amer 1742 E4908

**See especially the Preface, Pages 5-7, and 20-26. This document was printed using the "long s".*

Source note: John Caldwell was a Massachusetts minister who had immigrated to the colonies from Ireland. Caldwell was a forceful critic of the revivalism that was sweeping the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, and he gave this sermon at a Londonderry, New Hampshire Presbyterian church in 1741. Caldwell took a strong moral stance against what he saw as the overly dramatic and emotional excesses of revivalist religion. In contrast to the morally upright image he projected as a religious leader, Caldwell was later accused of fraud and theft committed while he still lived in Ireland, and he escaped to England with his career in shambles.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? What was the historical context in which it was written?
2. What are the “fashionable Principles in Religion” that Caldwell refers to in his preface (page i)? Why might he use the word “fashionable” to describe those principles?
3. What was Caldwell’s purpose for writing this sermon (see Preface)?
4. Caldwell opens his sermon by praising rationality, and urges people to “be careful and impartial in their Enquiries after Truth, especially religious Truths” (page 6). What argument is he setting up by emphasizing truth?
5. Caldwell suggests that “Men of contrary Principles...are equally censorious and uncharitable to such as differ from ‘em (page 6). What evidence of this do you see in Documents 1 and 2?
6. What conclusion does Caldwell draw about the conversion experiences of people in the revival movement, including the physical manifestations (convulsions, crying, falling to the floor, etc.)?

Document 4: Yoo Secondary Source

Yoo, William, ed. *The Presbyterian Experience in the United States: a Sourcebook*.
Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
Call number: West.Press 2017-23

**See especially the introduction to Gilbert Tennent's "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," page 15; and introduction to John Caldwell's "An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this part of the World," pages 18-19.*

Source note: William Yoo is a professor of religion at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia where he teaches American religious and cultural history. In this sourcebook, Yoo has compiled historical texts on multiple topics relating to Presbyterian churches and culture in the United States, and has also written a short introduction to each document.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? How reliable is this source?
2. Why did the Presbytery of Philadelphia come to oppose itinerant preaching (page 15)? How did Tennent respond to that opposition?
3. What is Tennent's place within the First Great Awakening? In what ways did he embody the movement?
4. What is Caldwell's place within the First Great Awakening? How does he counter the principles of revivalism in his work?
5. What parallels can be found between the First Great Awakening and American Protestant religion today?

Document 5: Brink Secondary Source

Brink, Frederick W. "Gilbert Tennent, Dynamic Preacher." *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* Vol 32, No. 2 (1954): 91-107.

Source note: Frederick W. Brink (1912-1981) adapted this article from his doctoral dissertation at Temple University, titled "The contribution of Gilbert Tennent to American Christianity and the American Nation." Brink was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in the early 1940s and served for many years as a navy chaplain.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? Is it a reliable source?
2. What action did Tennent take that helped bring about the schism between Old Side and New Side Presbyterians (page 96)?
3. What is the significance of the Log College to American Presbyterianism (page 100)? To the First Great Awakening?
4. In what ways did Tennent help with the founding and running of the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University (pages 103-105)?
5. Why was higher education so important to Tennent?