

The Second Great Awakening

Cane Ridge 1801, Charles Finney, and the revival that filled frontier camp meetings — and fueled the great American reform movements • c. 1795–1840

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 22 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series. Sixty years after **the First Great Awakening**, American Christianity went through a second wave of revival that shaped the nineteenth century as thoroughly as the first had shaped the eighteenth. The religious atmosphere the **Founders** had worried was fading was about to explode again — in forms they would not have predicted. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

In early August 1801, in a muddy clearing at **Cane Ridge**, Kentucky, a sacramental service drew somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 frontier people — at a moment when the nearest town (Lexington) had a population of 1,795. Preachers of three denominations took turns from four platforms simultaneously. People fainted, jerked, barked, laughed, and wept under conviction. Conversions were counted in the thousands. Presbyterian minister James Crawford estimated 3,000 knocked down during the six-day meeting. Barton Stone, the organizing pastor, later wrote: *“I have never seen anything like it before or since.”* The **Second Great Awakening**, which had been quietly building in the Carolinas and in Kentucky’s Logan County since 1796, had its signature moment. The revival would run for four decades.

Its consequences reshaped American Christianity more than any other single event between the Revolution and the Civil War. **Baptist and Methodist denominations exploded in membership** — by 1820 they were the two largest Protestant bodies in America, displacing the older Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal establishments. A charismatic lawyer-turned-evangelist named **Charles Grandison Finney** took the revival to upstate New York (the “Burned-Over District”) in the 1820s and, through his *Lectures on Revivals* (1835), systematized revival as a teachable technique. An entire generation of **reform movements** — abolition of slavery, temperance, women’s rights, public education, prison reform, missions — sprang from the awakening’s converts. Whole new colleges (Oberlin, Wheaton, Mount Holyoke) were founded, and whole new denominations (the Stone-Campbell churches, eventually the Seventh-day Adventists and Latter-day Saints from the same soil) emerged. This is where American evangelical revivalism became an organized movement, and where American Protestantism assumed much of the shape we still know.

Greek NT (Acts 2:17): και ἔσται ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, λέγει ὁ θεός, ἐκχεῶ ἀπο τοῦ πνεύματός μου ἐπὶ πᾶσαν σάρκα.

Acts 2:17 (ESV): “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.”

PART 1 — THE WORLD AFTER THE REVOLUTION

American Christianity was weaker in 1790 than it had been in 1730. The Revolution had disrupted churches on both sides; Anglican clergy had largely fled as Loyalists; Methodist work had been suspended; new frontier territories in Kentucky, Tennessee, western New York, and Ohio were almost entirely unchurched. Contemporary estimates of church membership hover around 10% of the adult population. Deism (see **Lesson on Founders**) was influential among educated men — including several of the Founders. Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* (1794–1807) circulated widely on the frontier.

Into this spiritual vacuum moved three forces:

- **Methodist circuit riders** (from Asbury’s 1784 organization; see **Lesson 21 Part 11**) carrying revival preaching into every settlement, horseback, on tiny salaries. By 1820

Methodists numbered ~250,000.

- **Baptist farmer-preachers**, often bivocational, spreading even faster than Methodists in the South and West. Baptists had 65,000 members in 1790, 400,000 by 1820.

- **Revived Presbyterians** — especially Scots-Irish descendants of the First Awakening's New Side (see **Lesson 20 Part 6**) — concentrated in the trans-Appalachian frontier.

The revival that resulted had three overlapping streams: **New England** (under Timothy Dwight at Yale and Lyman Beecher), **the frontier** (under James McGready, Barton Stone, and the Methodist circuit riders), and **upstate New York** (under Charles Finney). Each shaped the movement differently.

PART 2 — MCGREADY AND LOGAN COUNTY (1796–1800)

James McGready (c. 1760–1817)

SCOTS-IRISH PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER • SERVED RED RIVER, MUDDY RIVER, AND GASPER RIVER CONGREGATIONS IN LOGAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Frontier revival

First camp meeting

McGready had pastored in North Carolina with modest revival results before moving in 1796 to three frontier Presbyterian churches in Logan County, Kentucky. He preached hell and heaven with startling earnestness and led his congregations in a covenant of prayer for revival. In June 1800 the Red River sacramental meeting produced the first clearly recognizable “camp meeting” — families who had come long distances for the quarterly communion season stayed on the ground for days, sleeping in wagons, and the preaching continued around the clock. Hundreds were converted. News spread up and down the frontier. McGready’s revival became the template.

The Scots-Irish Presbyterian *sacramental season* — a once- or twice-yearly four-day communion gathering involving fasting, preparation, multiple sermons, and culminating in the Lord's Supper on the Sunday — was the liturgical seedbed of the American camp meeting. Add the frontier context (far-flung families, long travel, communal camping), the Second Awakening's conversionist preaching, and the willingness to invite Methodists and Baptists to the platform, and the result was the distinctive American revival institution.

PART 3 — CANE RIDGE (AUGUST 1801)

The sacramental gathering at **Cane Ridge**, Bourbon County, Kentucky — organized by the Presbyterian minister **Barton W. Stone** (who had attended McGready's Red River meeting) — drew families from hundreds of miles. It began on Friday, 7 August 1801. Conservative estimates of attendance run to 10,000; Stone's own estimate was about 20,000; other witnesses said 25,000. At a time when Lexington had ~1,800 people and the entire state of Kentucky 221,000, it was an astonishing mass event.

What happened at Cane Ridge:

- **Four preaching platforms operated simultaneously.** Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers preached in rotation. Preaching ran from sunup to past midnight for six days.

- **“Bodily exercises.”** Eyewitnesses described people falling to the ground as if dead (the *falling exercise*), trembling uncontrollably (the *jerks*), uncontrollable laughter, barking, running, singing — all taken by participants as evidence of the Spirit's work. Critics took them as mass hysteria. Stone himself defended most of the phenomena cautiously.

- **Conversions were counted in the thousands.** Precise numbers are impossible; the best guesses are 3,000–5,000 serious converts from the six days.

- **The Lord's Supper was celebrated on Sunday morning** — the original purpose of the gathering. Stone reported that some 750 people communed at multiple tables set

up in the woods around the meeting house.

Cane Ridge became, for most of the 19th century, the standard against which American revivals were measured. Its camp-meeting template spread south and west through the Methodist and Baptist churches for the next fifty years. Its informal ecumenism — Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists sharing platforms — also foreshadowed the later **Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement** (see [our next lesson](#)).

PART 4 — CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY (1792–1875)

Charles Finney — the father of modern revivalism

BORN 29 AUGUST 1792, WARREN, CONNECTICUT • LAWYER UNTIL 1821 • ITINERANT EVANGELIST 1824–1835 • PROFESSOR AND PRESIDENT, OBERLIN COLLEGE 1835–1866 • DIED 16 AUGUST 1875

New Measures

Oberlin Theology

Reformer

Finney grew up in upstate New York with essentially no formal religious education. He studied law and was admitted to the Adams, New York bar. On 10 October 1821, reading the Bible's passages cited in legal textbooks, Finney experienced a dramatic conversion in the woods behind his office — he described the Holy Spirit rushing through him “like a wave of electricity” and speaking to his soul so vividly he felt on the verge of death. The next morning he told a client: “Deacon Barney, I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and I cannot plead yours.” He abandoned the law and began preaching.

1824–1830 • Upstate New York revivals — the so-called **Burned-Over District**, a band of counties running from the Hudson Valley through Rochester and Buffalo. Finney's preaching produced sustained revivals across the region. His most famous campaign, **Rochester 1830–1831**, is often cited as the most influential single revival in American history after Cane Ridge — tens of thousands of converts, whole businesses closed during services, the town's liquor trade wiped out.

1832–1835 • Pastorate at Chatham Street Chapel (1832) and the Broadway Tabernacle (1834) in New York City, backed by the wealthy Tappan brothers (Arthur and Lewis Tappan, evangelical abolitionists).

1835 • Publishes *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. In the book's most controversial claim, Finney flatly declares: "A revival of religion is not a miracle... It is the result of the right use of the constituted means." Revival, for Finney, is the predictable outcome of scientifically applicable techniques — the **New Measures**. This was a dramatic break from Edwards's and Whitefield's understanding that revival is a sovereign act of God.

1835–1875 • Professor of Theology at **Oberlin College**, a newly founded institution in Ohio committed to coeducation (from 1837 — the first coeducational college in America), racial integration, and reform. Serves as Oberlin's president 1851–1866. Continues preaching revivals (including a major London campaign 1859–1860).

Finney's New Measures:

- **Protracted meetings.** Nightly revival services continued for weeks rather than days — borrowed from frontier camp meetings and brought into towns and cities.
- **The "anxious bench"** (or mourner's bench). A front bench where those under conviction of sin were invited to sit publicly, making the invitation to conversion visibly structured. The direct ancestor of modern altar calls.
- **Direct, extemporaneous preaching** aimed at decision. Finney addressed listeners by name in prayer ("O Lord, you know how Brother So-and-so has been resisting..."), used pointed illustrations drawn from daily life, and preached for immediate response rather than gradual persuasion.
- **Women praying in public meetings.** Controversial in many Presbyterian and

Baptist circles; Finney defended the practice on the basis of Acts 2.

- **Inquirers' meetings** for personal follow-up, systematic census of the converted, and rapid integration of new believers into existing congregations — organizational techniques Finney treated as indispensable.

The theological controversy. Finney's classical Calvinist critics — most notably Princeton's Charles Hodge — charged that his view reduced conversion from a sovereign work of grace to a managed human decision. Finney's theology, later called **Oberlin Theology**, moved steadily toward Wesleyan-Arminianism and embraced a form of *Christian perfection* (the Oberlin version of holiness). The doctrinal fight between Princeton and Oberlin set the terms of American evangelical theology for the next century: *Reformed* conservatism versus *revivalist* activism.

PART 5 — THE BURNED-OVER DISTRICT

Western New York in the 1820s and 1830s, laced with the new Erie Canal, was the most religiously energetic square mile in the English-speaking world. Revival after revival swept through; Finney called the region “burned-over” because revivals had come through so often there were no unconverted souls left to revive. Besides mainstream evangelical growth, the Burned-Over District produced a series of new religious movements:

- **William Miller** (1782–1849), a Baptist farmer, calculated from Daniel 8:14 that Christ would return on 22 October 1844. His followers, the Millerites, numbered about 50,000. After the “Great Disappointment” of 22 October 1844, the movement split; the faithful remnant under Ellen G. White reconstituted itself as the **Seventh-day Adventist Church** (officially organized 1863).

- **Joseph Smith** (1805–1844), in Palmyra, New York, reported visions beginning in 1820 and published the *Book of Mormon* in 1830. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints is thus also Burned-Over District in origin. (Mainstream Protestant Christianity does not recognize the LDS as historic orthodox Christianity; this is a historical not theological observation.)

- **John Humphrey Noyes** (1811–1886), a Dartmouth-trained theologian influenced by Finney, founded the **Oneida Community** (1848–1881) — a perfectionist communal experiment that practiced “complex marriage” and produced, after its dissolution, the modern Oneida silverware company.

- **The Fox Sisters** of Hydesville, New York, launched modern **Spiritualism** in 1848 by claiming to communicate with a spirit rapping on their bedroom walls.

The common feature. Every one of these movements believed the end of the age was near, every one believed some form of personal experiential religion was the key, and every one arose in the religious atmosphere the Second Awakening had created. The Burned-Over District is a permanent warning about the unpredictability of revival’s fruit.

PART 6 — REVIVAL BECOMES REFORM

Unlike the First Great Awakening, which remained largely pietistic and individual, the Second Awakening produced a wave of organized social reform. Historians call it “evangelical reform” or “the benevolent empire.” Finney himself said: “The great business of the church is to reform the world.”

- **Abolition of slavery.** The movement’s most consequential offshoot. Wealthy Finney converts **Arthur and Lewis Tappan** founded the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833) and funded abolitionist newspapers and colleges. Oberlin (founded 1833) was the first college to admit Black students (1835) and served as a major Underground Railroad station. William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké all came out of evangelical awakening networks.

• **Temperance.** The American Temperance Society (1826) and later the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (1874) grew out of revival converts’ conviction that alcohol destroyed families and frontier communities. Per-capita American alcohol consumption fell by roughly half between 1825 and 1850.

• **Women’s rights.** The first women’s rights convention, at **Seneca Falls, New York** in July 1848, was organized by evangelical reformers (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, the Quaker Hunt sisters) whose activism had been shaped by awakening networks.

• **Public education.** Horace Mann’s common school movement in the 1830s-40s, and the Sunday School movement (American Sunday School Union, 1824) both rose from evangelical soil.

• **Foreign missions.** The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810) was born from revival converts at Williams College’s “Haystack Prayer Meeting” (1806). Adoniram Judson went to Burma; Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to Oregon; dozens of other awakening converts went abroad.

• **Prison reform, hospitals, asylums.** Dorothea Dix’s campaigns for humane treatment of the mentally ill (from 1841) were directly rooted in awakening networks.

• **Colleges.** Amherst (1821), Oberlin (1833), Wheaton (1860), Mount Holyoke (1837, the first American women’s college), and dozens of others were founded by awakening-era evangelicals.

The Second Awakening’s cumulative social effect is hard to exaggerate. Nearly every major reform movement of 19th-century America traced to evangelical revival — a connection modern secular historians have increasingly acknowledged.

The revival rearranged American Protestantism. By 1850 the denominational landscape looked entirely different from 1790:

- **Methodists** became the largest American Protestant denomination (1.5 million members in 1850, up from 58,000 in 1790).
- **Baptists** grew from 65,000 to over 800,000 and split into Northern and Southern conventions in 1845 over slavery.
- **Presbyterians** grew but split: the revival-friendly “New School” (1837–1869) and the more conservative “Old School” — a split partly over Finney’s theology and methods.
- **Congregationalists** stagnated, largely confined to New England and upstate New York.
- **Episcopalians** remained small.
- **The Stone-Campbell movement** (Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ) emerged as a distinctive new American denominational family — see our next lesson.
- **Black Christianity** exploded. The awakening was the formative period for the independent Black church — the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME, founded 1816 under Richard Allen), the AME Zion Church (1821), and independent Black Baptist congregations (the oldest, Silver Bluff in South Carolina, dates to the 1770s). By the 1860s these would be the primary institutional vehicles of Black community life.

PART 8 — THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY

Five theological emphases came out of the Second Awakening and shape American evangelicalism to this day:

1. Conversion as a datable crisis. Edwards and the First Awakening had already made conversion personal (**Lesson 20**); the Second Awakening made it *scheduled*. Converts could tell you the date they “came forward” at the revival. Every modern evangelical altar call descends from the anxious bench.

2. Arminian leanings. The awakening’s preaching gradually tilted evangelical Protestantism toward an Arminian emphasis on human responsibility and choice. Calvinist doctrines of election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace retreated from popular preaching even where they remained in confessional documents. Modern American evangelicalism is, theologically, a Wesleyan-Finneyite synthesis.

3. Sanctification and Christian perfection. The Wesleyan emphasis on entire sanctification (see **Lesson 21**) was carried by Methodists into Finney’s Oberlin Theology and into the later **Holiness movement** — which produced Pentecostalism by 1906. That story is our Lesson 24.

4. Postmillennial optimism. Most Second Awakening reformers believed they were helping to usher in Christ’s kingdom through social improvement and evangelism; they expected the millennium to arrive through the gospel’s victorious progress *before* Christ’s return. This postmillennial optimism fueled the reform energy. It broke on the rocks of the Civil War and gradually gave way to the premillennial dispensationalism that dominated late 19th- and early 20th-century American evangelicalism.

5. The local church as revival center. Finney and his successors taught that the normal state of the church was either *revival* or *decline*. A church that was not seeing conversions was dying. This “revival expectation” still shapes American evangelical congregations’ self-understanding today — for better and for worse.

- **American evangelical religion as we know it is Second Awakening religion.**

The altar call, the protracted revival service, the emphasis on a datable conversion, the coupling of personal piety with social reform, the dominance of Baptist and Methodist polity in American Protestantism — all of this is Second Great Awakening. It is important to know we inherit these patterns from a specific historical moment rather than assume they are simply “Christianity.”

- **Revival is not the same as theology.** Cane Ridge’s “bodily exercises” could produce both genuine converts who spent their lives serving God and cases of mass hysteria. The Burned-Over District produced both serious evangelical awakening and Joseph Smith. Revival is a Spirit-given event. Its fruit must be tested — as Edwards warned in *Religious Affections* (**Lesson 20 Part 9**).

- **The reform movements we take for granted were built by Christians.**

Abolition, temperance, public schools, women’s colleges, prison reform, the Underground Railroad — these were Finney’s converts at work. When American evangelicals today wonder whether social engagement is compatible with gospel priority, they have forgotten their own grandfathers.

- **But reform is not the gospel.** Finney’s slide toward viewing revival as a technique, and his successors’ slide from gospel-driven reform into reform-without-gospel, is the permanent warning of the era. By the 1880s some of the benevolent empire’s institutions had become aggressively theologically liberal. A reform without a gospel becomes a gospel that is only reform.

Greek NT (2 Cor 5:17): ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινά.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV): “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cane Ridge drew 20,000 people with no advertising except word-of-mouth on horseback. What does that say about the spiritual hunger of the frontier — and are there equivalent hungers around us now?

2. Finney taught that revival is “not a miracle... It is the result of the right use of the constituted means.” Edwards thought revival was a sovereign Spirit-sent event. Which view is closer to Scripture? Where does each go wrong when pushed to extremes?

3. The Burned-Over District produced both mainstream evangelical growth and Joseph Smith. How do we tell good fruit from bad in a revival context?

4. Nearly every 19th-century American reform movement — abolition, temperance, women’s rights, missions, education — came from revival converts. Where is that generative energy in the American church today?

5. Finney’s New Measures included direct personal address, the anxious bench, and women praying in public. Each was controversial at the time. What “new measures” is your congregation reluctant to consider now, and why?

6. Black churches, split Methodists and Presbyterians, the Stone-Campbell churches, and the Seventh-day Adventists all came out of the same revival atmosphere. What does that tell us about the double-edged nature of religious enthusiasm?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank you for the frontier preachers who rode through mud to forgotten settlements, for the Presbyterian sacramental seasons that became American camp meetings, for Cane Ridge in the woods of Kentucky. Thank you for Finney abandoning his law practice to plead your cause, for Arthur Tappan writing checks for Oberlin and for the American Anti-Slavery Society, for Black preachers founding AME churches when the white churches would not have them. Thank you for Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Angelina Grimké, whose conviction of sin became conviction about the sins of their nation. Forgive us where we have inherited the revival tradition's techniques without its theology, or its emotion without its obedience, or its conversions without its reforms. Revive us again. In the name of Jesus Christ, still the head of his church. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835); *Memoirs* (1876, posthumous) — the definitive primary sources for his theology and method.
- Barton W. Stone, *A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone* (1847, his autobiography).
- James McGready, *The Posthumous Works of Rev. James McGready* (2 vols., 1831–33).
- Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography* (1856) — the great Methodist circuit rider's memoir.
- Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc.* (2 vols., 1864–65).
- Primary documents on abolition and reform (Tappan brothers, Garrison, Grimké sisters, Frederick Douglass).

Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (2nd ed., 2019) — the standard one-volume history.
- Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) — the best modern account of how the Second Awakening reshaped American Protestantism.
- Paul Keith Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (1990).
- Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (1996).
- Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (1950) — the classic study.
- Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (1993).
- Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (1994).

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