

THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING AND REFORM IN THE 19TH CENTURY

American Protestant Christians' beliefs changed during the early 19th century in a period known as the Second Great Awakening. Marked by a wave of enthusiastic religious revivals, the Second Great Awakening set the stage for equally enthusiastic social reform movements, especially abolitionism and temperance.



Library of Congress

Camp meetings like the one pictured above were part of the Protestant Christian revival in the first half of the 19th century. What actions do you see people doing? What emotions are they showing?

After the American Revolution, the new American nation's population grew from almost 4 million in 1790 to 17 million in 1840. At the same time, the nation quickly expanded westward from the original 13 colonies into territories of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and the massive Louisiana Purchase of 1803. A new market economy dominated by merchants and manufacturers also developed.

During the 1790s, only about 10 percent of white Americans regularly attended church. To "revive" church attendance, many charismatic preachers, or evangelists, organized lively Christian revival meetings. Revivals were mass meetings where people heard biblical messages and came to have their souls saved from sin (evil thought and action).

This period of revivals began around 1800 and reached its peak in the early 1830s. It was a period of religious fervor called the Second Great Awakening. Like the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, the Second Great Awakening emphasized the importance of converting people to Protestant Christianity.

The Christianity of the revivals came to be known as "evangelical." The word *evangelical* has its root the ancient Greek word for "good news." Evangelical Christians emphasized personal commitment to faith over the

authority of priests. They also emphasized doing good works and perfecting humankind.

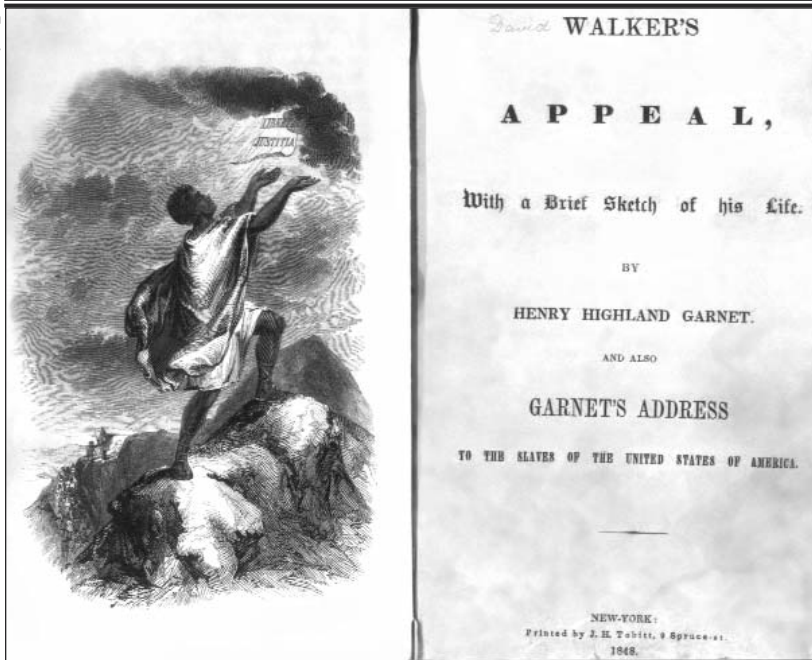
The Second Great Awakening, in particular, rejected the Enlightenment influences on the founding of the United States. Worshippers rejected rationalism and deism, the worship of a distant and uninvolved God. For evangelicals, God was directly involved with each person's life and with society as a whole.

The rapidly growing Baptist and Methodist churches helped spread the evangelical message the most through the new western frontiers. Many evangelicals also belonged to the Presbyterian Church.

Charles Finney

The most famous leader in the Second Great Awakening was the Reverend Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875). Finney was a minister in the Presbyterian Church, which traditionally held Calvinist beliefs. Calvinism is a Protestant theology that includes a doctrine of predestination. Predestination is the belief that God already knows which people are saved, regardless of any action these saved people might take in their lives.

Finney and other preachers of his time modified the Calvinist doctrine. Finney preached that people could and should exercise free will. He urged his followers to



This is the title page of an 1848 edition of David Walker's *Appeal* with a biographical sketch by Henry Highland Garnet. Garnet was a black minister and abolitionist who believed in legal coercion over moral suasion to abolish slavery.

choose to reject sin and instead to live morally upstanding lives. He also urged them to help others.

Finney was inspired to become a preacher after attending a revival in 1821. In turn, he then preached at revivals. "Religion," Finney said, "is something to do, not something to wait for." He also said, "Away with the idea that Christians can remain neutral and keep still, and yet enjoy the approbation [or praise] and blessing of God." With these ideas, Finney became committed to social reform. He supported temperance, which is opposition to the drinking of alcohol, and the abolition of slavery.

Finney preached at revivals from 1825 to 1835. He began preaching in the western frontier and then moved on to upstate New York. After his years at revivals, he became a professor of theology and president of Oberlin College in Ohio. He remained a preacher his entire life.

The Revivals

On the American frontier, revivals were called "camp meetings." They became a key feature of the Second Great Awakening. The first camp meeting took place in Kentucky in 1800, and the practice faded somewhat after 1835.

Both frontier and urban revivals attracted crowds of hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of worshippers. The frontier camp meetings were generally more emotional than the urban revivals. Frequently calling upon the Holy Spirit, people in camp meetings prayed out loud and, in some cases, collapsed in religious ecstasy.

The camp meeting was also an important social event. The meetings brought rural people together from wide geographic areas. A camp meeting usually lasted

several days. Ministers traveled from revival to revival, calling for attendees to convert and accept Christ's saving grace from morning until night.

In the urban areas, African Americans were often excluded from participating in politics but were not excluded from religion. They eagerly participated in revivals, at which they could call for equality and justice.

Women, especially young women, enthusiastically joined revivals. In fact, they outnumbered men as converts. Joining revivals may have reinforced women's traditional role as guardians of religion at home. Leadership and preaching roles at camp meetings were generally limited to white men, but women could also pray aloud at revivals. This allowed them to expand their public roles within the religious community.

In the urban revivals, people in the developing middle class of business managers, clerks, professionals, and others who found jobs in the new market economy were especially likely to respond to preaching like that of Finney's. They relied on religion to cope with the pressures of their daily lives.

In addition, church membership improved people's social statuses. Religious practice proved that a person had the values, determination, and discipline to succeed in society. Thus, church membership was often linked to upward social mobility.

Spreading the Gospel

With its emphasis on free will and self-reliance, the Second Great Awakening saw a flowering of voluntarism. Evangelicals set up voluntary associations in which men and women found ways to preach the Christian Gospel to an ever-growing population.

The voluntary associations included the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Tract Society. These groups sought to spread biblical messages and morals widely through the frontier and the cities. In addition, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists founded about half of all colleges and universities in the nation before 1860.

Abolitionism

As the revivals swept through New England, abolitionism also grew in that same area. Many early abolitionists were devout Protestant Christians. Some formed colonization societies with the aim of helping free blacks go to Africa. Others formed societies whose aim was to persuade slave-owners to *manumit* their slaves, which means to legally free them, often at the time of the slave-owner's death.

Still other Christian abolitionists were not satisfied with the “moral suasion” of colonization and manumission. Moral suasion means persuading people to stop voluntarily participating in evil. Radical abolitionists wanted an immediate end to slavery.

David Walker was a black man who had been born in 1785 to a free black woman in North Carolina. Despite his own free status, he was appalled by the black slavery he saw growing up and eventually moved north to Boston, Massachusetts. Walker used strong religious language in his anti-slavery writings. In 1829, he wrote *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. “It is a notorious fact,” he wrote, “that the major part of white Americans have . . . tried to keep us ignorant and make us believe that God made us and our children to be slaves to them and theirs. Oh! My God, have mercy on Christian Americans!”

The emotional atmosphere of revivals in Northern cities took hold in meetings of abolitionists. Sinners sought to be saved in revivals by openly repenting, or seeking forgiveness from Christ. Likewise, people who held proslavery views expressed remorse and openly repented in emotional abolitionist meetings. They pledged themselves to end slavery in Christ’s name.

After his years of revival preaching, Charles Finney became skeptical of the conversions at revivals. He thought that an extremely emotional conversion at a revival was “more superficial” than necessary. Christians, he thought, should instead lead lives of consistent holiness.

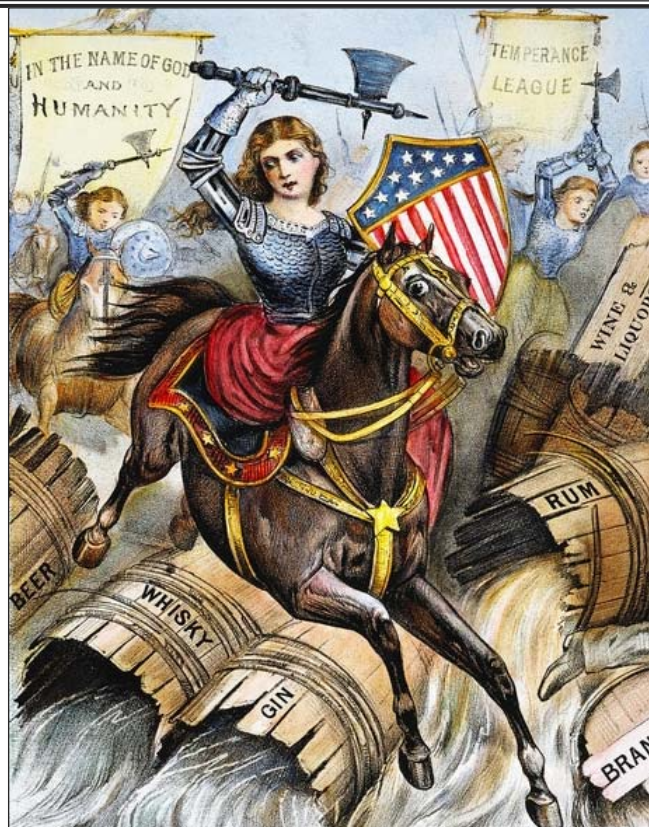
Finney’s changing opinion of revivalism coincided with a change in his abolitionist views. He and many Christian abolitionists began to focus on abolishing slavery through using the law, or legal coercion. They thought that trying to convince pro-slavery white Americans to voluntarily support abolition was not enough.

Temperance

Temperance societies formed throughout the nation in the antebellum, or pre-Civil War, years of the 19th century. They wanted to warn America of the dangers of alcohol abuse. Some temperance advocates feared social disorder from drunkenness. Most temperance advocates, however, simply believed that sobriety was holy. Evangelicals led the temperance movement, which also included non-evangelical Christians.

Between 1800 and 1830, Americans, especially white men, drank more alcohol on an individual basis than at any other time in American history. Each year during this time, Americans above the age of 14 on average consumed between 6.6 and 7.1 gallons of pure

Both frontier and urban revivals attracted crowds of hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of worshippers.



This cartoon from 1874 is titled “Woman’s holy war. Grand charge on the enemy’s works.” What does this cartoon tell you about the temperance movement in the 19th century?

alcohol. (In 1998, Americans drank 2.8 gallons per year on average.)

The American Temperance Society (ATS) formed in 1826. Its aim was to save people from the evils of liquor. Over time, the ATS defined temperance as complete abstinence from all forms of alcohol. By 1835, the ATS had over one million members.

To spread its message of reform, the ATS relied on methods similar to those of evangelical revivalists. For example, the ATS used roving lecturers to share its message, similar to the traveling ministers in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. As the temperance movement grew, in fact, evangelicals increasingly condemned drinking.

Like the growing evangelical movement, too, a majority of ATS members were women. Some joined all-female societies, and others often dominated the membership of mixed ATS societies. While temperance organizations barred women from leadership, approximately 35 to 60 percent of the members of local organizations were women.

Middle-class temperance spokesmen tied temperance to success in business. For example, in discussing why some people succeeded in an increasingly competitive society, the New York-based *Temperance Recorder* asserted,

“The enterprise of this country is so great, and competition so eager in every branch of business . . . that profit can only result from . . . temperance.”

The ATS and other temperance societies initially relied on moral suasion, similar to the early abolitionists. They successfully encouraged many people to reform through an optimistic message of progress. Average drinking had decreased to 3.1 gallons in 1840. Average drinking further declined to 1.8 gallons by 1845, the lowest average for the 19th century. Despite these successes, by the mid-1840s, the ATS began to seek legal coercion to enforce temperance, rather than rely on moral suasion.

The result was the so-called “Maine Laws” of the 1850s. In 1851, the state of Maine banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol by wholesalers and retailers. Between 1852 and 1855, twelve additional Northern states passed “Maine Laws,” which sometimes provoked violent protests.

As northern and southern states drew closer to open conflict over slavery in the later 1850s, Northern states focused their energy less on temperance and more on the evils of slavery. Several states repealed their Maine Laws, while most other states either ignored or minimally enforced the laws. In addition, the temperance issue divided the membership of both major political parties, which led them to try to deemphasize the temperance movement.

Revivalism's Legacy

After the Civil War, temperance continued to appeal to the middle class and large numbers of workers.

It remained especially appealing to skilled and native-born workers who sought upward mobility. Slavery, of course, ended with the 13th Amendment, beginning the period of Reconstruction.

Temperance reform reached its peak in the early 20th century in the period known as Prohibition. Ratified in 1919, the 18th Amendment prohibited the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol in the United States. It did not outlaw drinking alcohol. Due to ineffective enforcement, an increase in organized crime, corruption in law enforcement, and popular demand, the 21st Amendment repealed Prohibition in 1933.

The ultimate legal coercion, a constitutional amendment, did not end alcohol consumption. Evangelical temperance activists reverted to using moral suasion after Prohibition's end.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. What were the factors that led to religious revivals in the early 19th century?
2. Why did Protestants during the Second Great Awakening reject many values of the Enlightenment?
3. How did Charles Finney influence the Second Great Awakening? Why did his views change over the course of his career?
4. Compare the use of moral suasion in the abolitionist and temperance movements. Was the temperance movement successful? Why or why not? Use evidence from the article to support your answer.

ACTIVITY: Persuasion or Coercion

Divide students into small groups. Each group's task is to decide whether moral suasion or legal coercion is the preferable means to confront each problem listed below.

Each group should first identify criteria for moral suasion and legal coercion as the primary means of shaping behavior by identifying two or three pros and cons for each means. They should use the facts in the article for support and examples.

Then, each group should discuss each of the problems below, apply the criteria of moral suasion and legal coercion, and decide which of the two means is the better one for each problem. Each group will then present results to class.

- Eliminating cyberbullying.
- Requiring people to buy health insurance.
- Getting U.S. companies to stop banking profits overseas to reduce their U.S. tax obligations.
- Eliminating police brutality.
- Ending prescription drug abuse and addiction.
- Stopping animal cruelty.

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Standards Addressed

Second Great Awakening

National U.S. History Standard 12: Understands the sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period. **Middle:** (2) Understands the significant religious, philosophical, and social movements of the 19th century and their impacts on American society and social reform (e.g., the impact of the Second Great Awakening on issues such as public education, temperance, women's suffrage, and abolitionism . . .).

High: (2) Understands the social impact of the Second Great Awakening (e.g., how Great Awakening leaders affected ordinary people; how the belief in individual responsibility for salvation and millennialism influenced reform movements; the role of moral suasion, social control, and compromise in reform).

California HSS Standard 11.3: Students analyze the role religion played in the founding of America, its lasting moral, social, and political impacts, and issues regarding religious liberty. (2) Analyze the great religious revivals and the leaders involved in them, including the First Great and The Second Great Awakening and Reform in the 19th Century

Common Core State Standards: SL.6-8/11-12.1, SL.6-8/11-12.3, RH.6-8/11-12.1, RH.6-8/11-12.2, RH.6-8/11-12.3, RH.6-8/11-12.4, RH.6-8/11-12.10, WHST.6-8/11-12.1, WHST.6-8/11-12.2, WHST.6-8/11-12.9, WHST.6-8/11-12.10.

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Sources

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