

Nathan Cole and the First Great Awakening

WITH COMMENTARY BY L. MAREN WOOD

Nathan Cole, *The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole*, 1761. Reprinted with the permission of the Connecticut Historical Society.

As you read...

THE GREAT AWAKENING

Starting in the 1710s and 1720s, many ministers in England, Scotland, and the British colonies held religious revivals. They told people that true believers needed to have an emotional experience, not rely on the mind or learned ministers. True believers needed to have their own spiritual conversion and experience a change of heart. They would then reform their lives to reflect their belief in God.

All of these different revivals are collectively referred to by historians as the Great Awakening. Historians also refer to the new religious groups who emphasized emotion over reason as “Awakened” religion.

These religious revivals divided colonies. Those who stayed with established churches were called “Old Lights” and those who formed new churches that emphasized emotional experiences were called “New Lights.” Often, those who stayed with established churches were people with money and wealth. Those who went to the New Light churches were often women, poor whites, and African Americans — or people who were often on the sidelines in the Old Light churches.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

One of the most popular figures of this time period was George Whitefield, a minister from England who made several trips to the Americas and preached throughout the British colonies. Thousands of people flocked to hear him preach. He preached in ordinary language and referred to everyday experience, and taught that the rules of established churches were unimportant. In a sermon in Philadelphia, he said,

Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No! Any Presbyterians? No! Any Independents or Methodists? No, No No! Whom have you there? We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians... Oh, is this the case? The God help us to forget your party names and to become Christians in deed and truth.

NATHAN COLE

Below is the experience of Nathan Cole who lived in Kensington, Connecticut, from 1711 to 1783. In 1740, he went to hear George Whitefield preach a sermon. This experience had a profound impact on Cole's life. He began a spiritual journey that last the rest of his life.

Cole's spiritual journey was very typical of people who went to religious revivals during the first part of the eighteenth century. Many people, including Cole, wrote accounts of their religious conversion. These are referred to by historians as "Conversion Narratives." Cole's personal account helps us understand the emotional fever of the time period, the effect these religious revivals had on ordinary men and women, and the conversion process of someone who participated in Awakened religion.

There are many differences between Awakened religion and modern-day evangelicalism. Even though Cole might use words that people use today to describe their experience, he had a different understanding of God, salvation, and the meaning of life. As you read, think about the ways the ideas of the Great Awakening differ from modern religion and about how Nathan Cole understood his place in the world and his relationship to God. Given what you now know about life in backcountry North Carolina, why might you imagine colonists would find Whitefield's preaching appealing?



Figure 1. George Whitefield preaching to a great crowd.

George Whitefield at Middletown

Now it pleased God to send Mr. Whitefield into this land; and my hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia,¹ like one of the Old apostles,² and many thousands flocking to hear him preach the gospel;³ and great numbers were converted to Christ; I felt the Spirit of God drawing me by conviction; I longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way. I heard he was come to New York and the Jerseys⁴ and great multitudes flocking after him under great concern for their Souls which brought on my Concern more and more hoping soon to see him but next I heard he was at Long Island; then at Boston and next at Northampton.

Then on a Sudden, in the morning about 8 or 9 of the Clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the Clock, I was in my field at Work, I dropt my tool and I had in my hand an ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then run to my pasture for my horse with all my might; fearing that I should be too late; having my horse I wish my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse got much out of breath I would get down and put my wife on the Saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not Stop or Slack for me except I bad her and so I would run until I was much out of breath; and then mount my horse again, and so I did several times to favour my horse; we improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives; all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the Sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour ⁵ and we went round by the upper housen parish.

[ON THE ROAD TO THE SERMON]

And when we came within about half a mile or a mile of the Road that comes down from Hartford, Wethersfield and Stepney to Middletown; on high land I saw before me a Cloud or fogg rising; I first thought it came from the great River, but I came near the Road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of Horses feet coming down the Road and this Cloud was a Cloud of dust made by the Horses felt; it arose some Rods⁶ into the air over the tops of Hills and trees and when I came within about 20 rods of the Road, I could see men and horses Slipping along in the Cloud like shadows and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady Stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than a length behind another, all of a Lather and foam with sweat,⁷ their breath rolling out of their nostrils every Jump; every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of Souls; it made me tremble to see the Sight, how the world was in a Struggle;⁸ I found a Vacancy between two horses to Slip in min and my wife said law our cloths will be all spoiled see how they look, for they were so Covered with dust, that they looked almost all of a Colour Coats, hats, shirts, and horses.⁹

[THE CROWD]

We went down in the Stream but heard no man speak a word all the way for 3 miles but every one pressing forward in great haste and when we got to Middletown old meeting house there was a great multitude it was said to be 3 or 4000 of people Assembled together; we dismounted and shoo[k] off our Dust; and the ministers were then Coming to the meeting house; I turned and looked towards the Great River and saw the ferry boats Running swift backward and forward brin[g]ing over loads of people and the Oars rowed nimble and quick; every thing men horses and boats seemed to be Struggling for life; The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses all along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.

[WHITEFIELD SPEAKS]

When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the Scaffold he lookt almost angelical; a young, Slim, slender, youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted Countenance, and my hearing how God was with him every where he came along it Solemnized my mind; and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was Cloathed with authority from the Great God¹⁰; and a sweet sollume¹¹ solemnity sat upon his brow And my hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound;¹² By Gods blessings: my old Foundation¹³ was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me; then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election :¹⁴ and went right to quarrelling with God about it; because that all I could do would not save me; and he had decreed from Eternity who would be saved and who not.

[MADE FOR HEAVEN OR FOR HELL?]

I began to think I was not Elected, and that God made some for heaven and me for hell. And I thought God was not Just in so doing, I thought I did not stand on even Ground with others, if as I thought; I was made to be damned; My heart then rose against God exceedingly, for his making me for hell; Now this distress lasted Almost two years:¹⁵ - Poor – Me – Miserable me. – It pleased God to bring on my Convictions more and more, and I was loaded with guilt of Sin, I saw I was undone for ever; I carried Such a weight of Sin in my breast or mind, that it seemed to me as I should sink into the ground every step; and I kept all to my self as much as I could; I went month after month mourning and begging for mercy,¹⁶ I tried every way I could think to help my self but all was failed : - Poor me it took away most all of my Comfort of eating, drinking, Sleeping, or working. Hell fire was most always in my mind; and I have hundreds of times put my fingers into my pipe when I have been smoaking to feel how fire felt: And to see how my Body could bear to lye in Hell fire for ever and ever. Now my countenance was sad so that others took notice of it.

“FORSAKE EVERYTHING THAT WAS SINFUL”

... I made a great Resolution that I would forsake every thing that was Sinfull;¹⁷ And do to my uttermost ever thing that was good; And at once I felt a calm in my mind, and I had no desire to any thing that was sin as I thought; But here the Devil thought to Catch me on a false hope,¹⁸ for I began to think that I was converted, for I thought I felt a real Change in me.¹⁹ But God in his mercy did not leave me here to perish; but in the space of ten days I was made to see that I was yet in the Gall of bitterness²⁰; my Convictions came on again more smart than ever²¹ – poor me-

[AT THE VERY MOUTH OF HELL]

There was then a very Mortal disease in the land, the fever and the bloody flux; and I was possesst with a notion that if I had it I would die and goe right to hell, but I presently had it and very hard too: then my heart rose against God for making me for hell, when he might as well have made me for heaven; or not made me at all: - Poor me – Oh that I would be a Dog or a toad or any Creature but Man : I thought that would be a happy change for they had no Souls and I had. Oh what will become of me was the language of my mind; for now

I was worse than ever, my heart was as hard as a Stone: my Eyes were dry, once I could weep for my Self but now cannot shed one tear; I was as it were in the very mouth of hell. The very flashes of hell fire were in my Mind; Eternity before me, and my time short here. Now when all was failed me then I longed to be annihilated; or to have my Soul die with my body; but that way failed too. Hell fire hell fire ran Swift my mind an[d] my distemper grew harder and harder upon me, and my nature was just wore out – Poor me – Poor Soul.

[SAVED BY CHRIST]

...One day as I went out into my field to work when I went out of my door, I fell into a prayer and continued so until I cam[e] to the place of my work and then I had a glorious Sight.²² It seemed as if I really saw the gate of heaven by an Eye of faith,²³ and the way for Sinners to Get to heaven by Jesus Christ; as plan as ever I saw anything with my bodily eyes in my life, I looked round to see if I could see any poor Creature; I thought that I could almost point and shew them the straight way to heaven by Jesus Christ: I saw what free Grace was;²⁴ I saw how stubborn and willful man was; I saw it was nothing but accepting of Christ's Righteousness and the match was made; I saw I was saved by Christ,²⁵ Here I thought I had the sealings of the holy Ghost²⁶; and here I had evidence clear what I saw here is unspeakable, I could do no work here but lay down for want of bodily Strength until the view was a little abated...

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Notes

1. Whitfield published accounts of his preaching in American newspapers telling people where he had preached, how many people had attended, and where he was going next.
2. Cole is referring to the Apostles in the New Testament who preached the gospel of Christ, such as Peter and Paul.
3. Benjamin Franklin went to hear Whitefield speak in Philadelphia. Franklin was not a religious man, but he published material for Whitefield and so he went to hear him preach. He was also curious about why so many people apparently went to hear this man's sermons.

Ever the man of science, Franklin tried to determine how many people could hear Whitfield while he spoke. Franklin had read and published accounts of Whitefield preaching to crowds of 20,000 people and was skeptical that this was possible. By walking the crowd, Franklin determined that if people stood in a circle around Whitefield, then indeed 20,000 people could have heard his sermons.

4. Between 1674 and 1702, New Jersey was divided into East and West Jersey, each with its own government. Apparently many colonists in the region still referred to "the Jerseys," plural, later in the eighteenth century.

5. While a horse can run about 10 to 15 miles an hour, it can only sustain that speed for a mile or two, and then it begins to tire. An average horse will walk about 3 miles per hour. And, of course, a horse runs more slowly when it is carrying two people instead of one ("riding double").
6. A rod is an old English unit of measurement. It is the equivalent of 16.5 feet.
7. When horses run, their sweat and saliva become foamy and look like the suds made from dish soap.
8. This was a common expression used by preachers during the Awakening. They told people that the whole world was struggling between good and evil. There were only two sides, they said, and a person was either struggling for God (good) or the devil (evil). Preachers asked their audiences which side of the struggle they were on.
9. That is, the dust covered everything and made it the same color.
10. Clothed in this context means being covered with, or having the particular qualities, of a person who is inspired by God.
11. *Sollome*, or sacred.
12. At revivals, ministers told people that their hearts were "hard," which meant that they could not feel God's presence. Ministers told their audiences that they needed to have a conversion experience in which the Holy Spirit would pierce their hearts so that they might be able to feel God's presence. People who were converted during the revivals often spoke of receiving a "heart wound," which meant that they had this type of conversion experience.
13. Foundation in this context means his belief system, or the rules by which he lived his life.
14. Here, Cole provides a very good definition of the Doctrine of Election. This was a common religious teaching in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

According to the Doctrine of Election, put forward by a man named John Calvin, God had already chosen everyone who would be saved. Calvin taught that, because God was all powerful and knew everything, He already knew whether a person would be saved before he or she was born. There was nothing people can do to change their fate. Their path — their eternal path, to heaven or hell — was already determined before they were born.

Before hearing Whitefield, Cole believed that he could try and earn a place in heaven by doing good works. People who believed in the Doctrine of Election still thought people should do good works — not because it would help them be saved, but because people chosen to be saved would naturally do good, and so you could tell if people were chosen for Heaven partly by their actions.

15. Cole is not alone in suffering for years over the fate of his soul. A lot of people published conversion stories like Cole's, and they all told a similar story of their suffering and emotional turmoil.
16. Although Cole does not believe that any of his own actions can help him become saved, he is still hoping to find out from God that he is destined to be saved. He is hoping to learn that God had mercy on him and had decided that he would be one of the saved.
17. People who were part of Awakened religious movements believed that you could only know you were saved once you stopped committing sins. You had to clear your mind of doubt, anger, or sinfulness in order for God to communicate with you.

18. Many Christians, including Cole, believed that the devil was an actual, physical being, and they talked about seeing the devil or having conversations with the devil. Cole isn't being that literal — he is only speaking of the devil's influence over him. He believed that the devil could put ideas in his mind.
19. One of the many dilemmas for people who believed in the Doctrine of Election was how to know whether they had really been saved. You might believe you were one of the saved, but this might simply be pride — and pride was a sin. Cole believed that he was tempted by the devil to believe he was saved, when in fact he had not had the conversion experience necessary to know that he was one of the elect. That experience was yet to come.
20. A state of great bitterness, or sadness and frustration. This is a quotation from the King James Bible (Acts 8:23).
21. That is, sharper and more painful than ever. "Smart" meant stinging or painful, as in the expression "That smarts!" (Smarties candies, which are extremely sour, probably take their name from that sense of the word "smart" as well.)
22. A vision or a waking dream.
23. It was by his faith and trust in God that he was able to see the vision.
24. *Free Grace* is the belief that a person is saved by having faith in Jesus Christ. Cole used to believe in Free Grace but no longer does, because Free Grace mean that the person should choose Jesus, whereas Jesus chose the person who would be saved.
25. Note the difference between Free Grace — a person accepting Jesus — and what Cole says, that he was saved *by* Jesus. Cole accepted Christ's righteousnesses, meaning he accepted that Christ had the ultimate power and authority to save people and knew which people were worthy of salvation. At no point does Cole accept Jesus as his savior; he accepts the power and authority of Jesus to determine which people would be saved and which would be damned.
26. Cole believes now that he has been "sealed" by or to the Holy Spirit — that is, that he is guaranteed of his salvation and that he will be with God forever.

About the author

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