



Philosophy & Religion > Religious Movements & Organizations

Second Great Awakening

religious movement, United States



Methodist camp meeting Hand-coloured woodcut of a Methodist camp meeting in Eastham, Massachusetts, c. 1850.

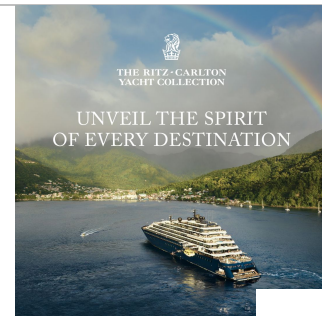
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Britannica Editors Jan. 5, 2026 • History

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Second Great Awakening, [Protestant](#) religious revival in the [United States](#) from about 1795 to 1835. During this revival, meetings were held in small towns and large cities throughout the country, and the unique frontier institution known as the [camp meeting](#) began. Many churches experienced a great increase in membership, particularly among [Methodist](#) and [Baptist](#) churches. The Second Great Awakening made soul-winning the primary function of ministry and stimulated several [moral](#) and philanthropic reforms including



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humanitarian reforms, including [temperance](#) and the emancipation of women. Generally considered less emotional than the [Great Awakening](#) of the early 18th century, the second wave of evangelical [revivalism](#) led to the founding of numerous colleges and seminaries and to the organization of mission societies across the country.

The Second Great Awakening can be divided into three phases. The first phase (1795–1810) was associated with frontier camp meetings conducted by American preachers [James McGready](#), John McGee, and [Barton W. Stone](#) in [Kentucky](#) and [Tennessee](#). The second and more [conservative](#) phase of the awakening (1810–25) centred in the [Congregational churches](#) of [New England](#) under the leadership of theologians [Timothy Dwight](#), [Lyman Beecher](#), Nathaniel W.

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Taylor, and Asahel Nettleton. The third and final phase (1825–35) stemmed from the activities of evangelist [Charles Grandison Finney](#), who began his revivalism in small towns in western [New York](#) in the 1820s but eventually conducted revival meetings in the largest cities in the United States and Britain.

Quick Facts

Date: 1795 - 1835

Location: [United States](#)

Context: [Great Awakening](#) • [temperance movement](#)

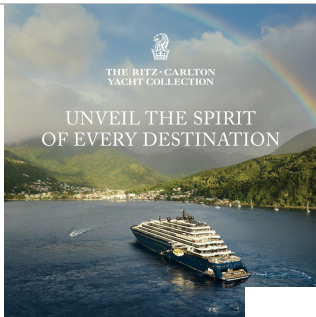
Key People: [Lyman Beecher](#) • [Timothy Dwight](#) • [Charles Grandison Finney](#) • [Barton W. Stone](#)

On the Web: [OpenStax - U.S. History - An Awakening of Religion and Individualism](#) (Jan. 05, 2026)

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During the Second Great Awakening revivalistic theology in many denominations shifted from [Calvinism](#) to a practical [Arminianism](#) as preachers emphasized the ability of sinners to make an immediate decision for their [salvation](#); theological differences almost disappeared among [evangelical](#) churches. Moreover, under Finney's aegis a rationale for carefully contrived revival techniques evolved. After 1835 an irregular corps of professional revival experts traveled through the towns and cities of America and Britain organizing

annual revival meetings at the invitation of local pastors who wanted to reinvigorate their churches. Although many American Protestants lost interest in revivalism in the first half of the 20th century, tent revivals as well as annual revivals in churches in [the South](#) and [Midwest](#) continued to be an important feature of Protestant church life.



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Methodist camp meeting Hand-coloured woodcut of a Methodist camp meeting in Eastham, Massachusetts, c. 1850.

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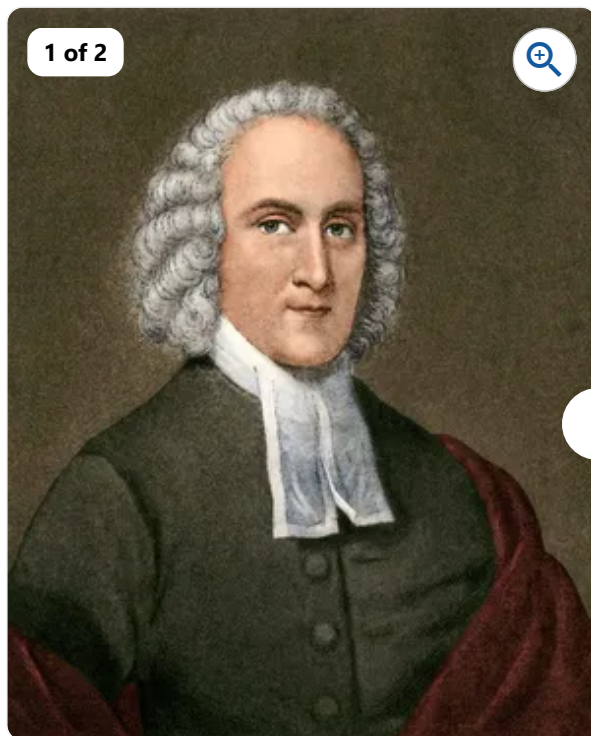
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Top Questions

- What is revivalism in Christianity? 
- How do revivals typically begin in Christian communities? 
- What are some common features or practices of Christian revivals? 
- Why do people participate in revival meetings? 
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revivalism, generally, renewed religious fervour within a [Christian](#) group, church, or [community](#), but primarily a movement in some [Protestant](#) churches to revitalize the spiritual ardour of their members and to win new adherents. Revivalism in its modern form can be attributed to that shared emphasis in [Anabaptism](#), [Puritanism](#), German [Pietism](#), and [Methodism](#) in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries on personal religious experience, the [priesthood of all believers](#), and [holv](#) living. in protest against

[established church](#) systems that seemed excessively sacramental, priestly, and worldly. Of central importance, however, was the emphasis on personal conversion.



Jonathan Edwards Theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards.

Among the groups that contributed to the revival tradition, the English [Puritans](#) protested against what they saw as the sacramentalism and ritualism of the [Church of England](#) in the 17th century, and many [migrated](#) to America, where they continued their fervour for experiential [religion](#) and devout living. The Puritan fervour waned toward the end of the 17th century, but the [Great Awakening](#) (c. 1720–50), America's first great revival, under the leadership of [Jonathan Edwards](#), [George Whitefield](#), and others, revitalized religion in the North [American colonies](#). The Great Awakening was a part of a larger religious revival that was also influential in Europe. From the late 17th to the mid-18th century, [Protestantism](#) in Germany and Scandinavia was revitalized by the movement known as [Pietism](#). In England a revival led by [John Wesley](#) and others eventually resulted in the [Methodist movement](#).

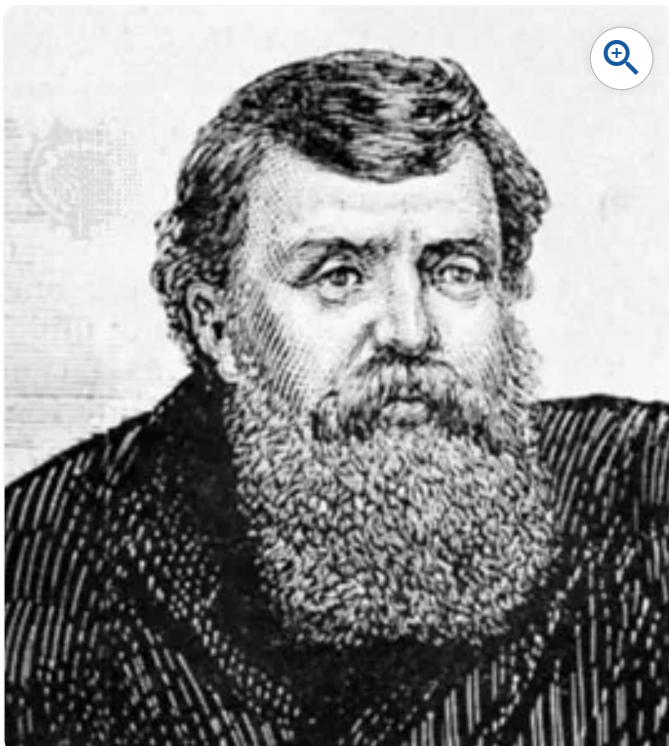
Toward the end of the 18th century, another revival, known as the [Second Great Awakening](#) (c. 1795–1835), began in the [United States](#). During this revival, meetings were held in small towns and the large cities throughout the country, and the unique frontier institution known as the [camp meeting](#) began. The Second Great Awakening produced a great increase in church membership, made soul winning the primary function of the ministry, and stimulated several [moral](#) and philanthropic reforms, including temperance, emancipation of women, and foreign missions.



revival meeting on a Southern plantation Revival meeting on a Southern plantation, illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, 1872. [...\(more\)](#)

After 1835 revivalists traveled through the towns and cities of the United States and Great Britain, organizing annual revival

meetings at the invitation of local pastors who wanted to reinvigorate their churches. In 1857–58 a “prayer meeting revival” swept U.S. cities following a financial panic. It indirectly instigated a revival in [Northern Ireland](#) and England in 1859–61.



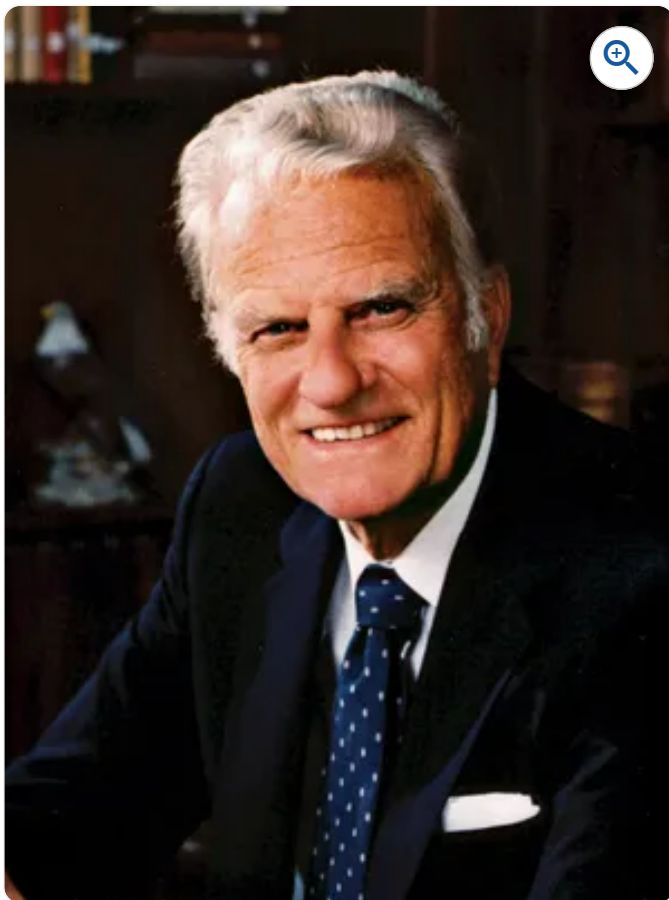
Dwight L. Moody American evangelist Dwight L. Moody, detail from a drawing by Charles Stanley Reinhart in *Harper's Weekly*, March 1876. ...[\(more\)](#)

The preaching tour of the American lay evangelist [Dwight L. Moody](#) through the [British Isles](#) in 1873–75 marked the beginning of a new surge of Anglo-U.S. revivalism. In his subsequent revival activity, Moody perfected efficient techniques that characterized the urban mass [evangelistic campaigns](#) of early 20th-century revivalists such as Reuben A. Torrey, [Billy Sunday](#), and others. The interdenominationally supported revivalism of Moody and his imitators in 1875–1915 [constituted](#), in part, a conscious cooperative effort by the Protestant churches to [alleviate](#) the plight of urban [industrial society](#) by evangelizing the masses and, in part, an unconscious effort to counter the challenge to Protestant orthodoxy—namely, an understanding of the Bible as literal and inerrant—brought on by the new critical methods of studying the [Bible](#) and by modern scientific ideas concerning [evolution](#).

Key People: [Jonathan Edwards](#) • [Billy Graham](#) • [Tim LaHaye](#) • [Aimee Semple McPherson](#) • [Alma Bridwell White](#)

Related Topics: [Christianity](#) • [Protestantism](#) • [Methodism](#) • [Puritanism](#) • [mission](#)

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Billy Graham Famed American evangelist Billy Graham.

Although American Protestantism in general lost interest in revivalism in the first half of the 20th century, tent revivals as well as annual revivals in churches in the South and Midwest continued to be an important feature of Protestant church life. After [World War II](#), however, a renewed interest in mass [evangelism](#) was especially evident in the [widespread](#) support given to the revival “crusades” of the American evangelist [Billy Graham](#) and various regional revivalists. Graham’s crusades, often conducted in major metropolitan centres, were but the best known of many such revivals.

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This article was most recently revised and updated by [Melissa Petruzzello](#).

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Summary



Martin Luther's excommunication Martin Luther burning the papal bull that excommunicated him from the Roman...[\(more\)](#)

Roland H. Bainton • All  Britannica Editors  History [Table of Contents](#)**Top Questions**

What is Protestantism? 

How did Protestantism begin? 

Who was Martin Luther and why is he important to Protestantism? 

What are some main beliefs that make Protestantism different from other branches of Christianity? 

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Protestantism, Christian religious movement that began in northern [Europe](#) in the early 16th century as a reaction to [medieval Roman Catholic](#) doctrines and practices. Along with Roman Catholicism and [Eastern Orthodoxy](#), Protestantism became one of three major forces in [Christianity](#). After a series of European religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries, and especially in the 19th century, it spread throughout the world. Wherever Protestantism gained a foothold, it influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the area.

Origins of Protestantism

The name Protestant first appeared at the [Diet of Speyer](#) in 1529, when the [Roman Catholic](#) emperor of [Germany](#), [Charles V](#), [rescinded](#) the provision of the Diet of Speyer in 1526 that had allowed each ruler to choose whether to administer the [Edict of Worms](#) (which banned [Martin Luther](#)'s writings and declared him a heretic and an enemy of the state). On April 19, 1529, a protest against this decision was read on behalf of 14 free cities of Germany and six [Lutheran](#) princes who declared that the majority decision did not bind them because they were not a party to it and that if forced to choose between obedience to God and obedience to Caesar, they must choose obedience to God. They appealed either to a general council of all Christendom or to a [synod](#) of the whole German nation.

Those who made this protest became

Those who made this protest became known to their opponents as Protestants, and gradually the label was applied to all who adhered to the tenets of the [Reformation](#), especially to those living outside Germany. In Germany the adherents of the Reformation preferred the name evangelicals and in [France](#) [Huguenots](#). The name was attached not only to the [disciples](#) of [Martin Luther](#) (c. 1483–1546) but also to the Swiss disciples of [Huldrych Zwingli](#) (1484–1531) and later of [John Calvin](#) (1509–64). The Swiss reformers and their followers in Holland, England, and [Scotland](#), especially after the 17th century, preferred the name [Reformed](#).

In the 16th century Protestant referred primarily to the two great schools of thought that arose in the Reformation, the

Lutheran and the Reformed. In [England](#) in the early 17th century, the word was used to [denote](#) “orthodox” Protestants as opposed to those who were regarded by [Anglicans](#) as unorthodox, such as the [Baptists](#) or the [Quakers](#). Roman Catholics, however, used it for all who claimed to be Christian but opposed Catholicism (except the Eastern churches). They therefore included Baptists, Quakers, and Catholic-minded Anglicans under the term. Before the year 1700 this broad usage was accepted, though the word was not yet applied to [Unitarians](#). The [English Toleration Act of 1689](#) was titled “an Act for exempting their Majesties’ Protestant subjects dissenting from the [Church of England](#).” But the act provided only for the [toleration](#) of the opinions known in England as “orthodox dissent” and conceded nothing to Unitarians. Throughout the 18th century the word Protestant was still defined in relation to the 16th-century Reformation.

W. Owen Chadwick

The context of the late medieval church

The [Protestant Reformation](#) occurred against the background of the rich ferment of the late medieval [church](#) and society. It has been difficult for two reasons to gain a proper understanding of

the relationship between the late [Middle Ages](#) and the Reformation. One reason is the tradition of the sectarian historiography of the period. Catholic historians had an interest in showing how much reform occurred before and apart from the activities of the Protestant reformers of the 16th century. Protestant historians, on the other hand, portrayed the late medieval church in the most negative terms to show the necessity of the Reformation, which was characterized as a movement that broke completely with a corrupt past.

The second reason for difficulty in understanding the period is that the 15th-century critics of the church were not “Pre-Reformers”; they neither anticipated Protestantism nor acquired their importance from the Reformation. The

events of that period were also not “Pre-Reformation” happenings but had an identity and meaning of their own.



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Alexander VI Pope Alexander VI, detail of a fresco by Pinturicchio, 1492–94; in the Vatican.

The existence of reform efforts in the 15th-century church from [Spain](#) and Italy northward through Germany, France, and England has long been acknowledged. Some of these were directed against abuses by the [papacy](#), the [clergy](#), and [monks](#) and nuns. The pious, for example, [abhorred](#) Pope [Innocent VIII](#) (1484–92), who performed marriage ceremonies for his own [illegitimate](#) children in the Vatican, and Pope [Alexander VI](#) (1492–1500), who bribed his way to the throne of

1503), who blazed his way to the throne of St. Peter and had fathered eight children by three women by the time he became [pope](#). The public was also increasingly aware of and angered by extravagant papal projects—patronage of art and architecture, wars of conquest—for which funds were exacted from the faithful.

The distaste for the papacy increased at a time of rising nationalist spirit. The popes, who had long intervened in European political affairs, faced setbacks when European monarchs acquired new power and asserted it against both the papacy and the local clergy.



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During this time of rising national [consciousness](#), a generation of [theologians](#) appeared who remained entirely within the [context](#) of medieval Roman Catholicism but who engaged in fundamental [criticisms](#) of it. Thus [William of Ockham](#) (died 1349?) spoke up as a reformer within the [Franciscan order](#), which he hoped to return to its original strict rule of apostolic poverty. Ockham argued that Pope [John XXII](#) was a heretic because he denied that [Jesus](#) and the [Apostles](#) were possessionless. Ockham saw the papacy and empire as independent but related realms. He believed that when the church was in danger of [heresy](#), lay people—princes and commoners alike—must come to its rescue. This meant reform.



John Wycliffe English reformer and theologian John Wycliffe.

Another English theologian, [John Wycliffe](#), also challenged the church's abuse of power and questioned its doctrines. Wycliffe encouraged reform of the church and its teachings and granted uncommon spiritual authority to the king. His primary source of inspiration for reform was the [Bible](#). Wycliffe gave [impetus](#) to its translation, and in 1380 he helped make it available to rulers and ruled alike.



Jan Hus Jan Hus at the stake, coloured woodcut from a Hussite prayer book, 1563.

In [Bohemia](#), [Jan Hus](#), who became rector of the [University of Prague](#), used that school as his base to criticize lax clergy and the recent prohibition of offering the cup of wine to communicants. He also exploited nationalist feelings and argued that the pope had no right to use the temporal sword. Hus's bold accusations were judged heretical and led to his death by burning at the [Council of Constance](#) in 1415.



Hans Holbein the Younger: *Erasmus* *Erasmus*, oil on panel by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1523–24; in the Louvre, Paris. 43 × 33 cm. [...\(more\)](#)

Alongside a piety that combined [moral](#) revulsion with [nationalism](#), [Christian humanism](#) was a further sign of unrest in the late medieval church. In Italy [Lorenzo Valla](#) (1407–57) used philology and historical inquiry to expose a number of

historical inquiry to expose a number of forgeries, including the [Donation of Constantine](#), which purportedly granted control over the Western Roman Empire to the pope. In Germany [Johannes Reuchlin](#) (1455–1522) studied Greek and Hebrew, the biblical languages, and was involved in an international controversy that pitted [intellectual](#) freedom against [ecclesiastical](#) authority. [Desiderius Erasmus](#) (1466/69–1536), the most famous and important of the Northern or Christian humanists, used his vast learning and his satiric pen to question the practices of the church. Because of his philosophy of Christ, which stressed a focus on the Bible and rejected much medieval superstition, Erasmus, a lifelong Catholic, was accused of laying the egg that hatched Luther.

While these reformers attacked people in high places, they also regarded the Catholicism of ordinary people as needing reform. Such practices as pilgrims visiting shrines or parishioners regarding the [relics](#) of [saints](#) with awe were open to abuse. The pestilences and plagues of the 14th century had bred an inordinate fear of death, which led to the exploitation of simple people by a church that was, in effect, offering [salvation](#) for sale.

Key People: [Louis XIV](#) • [Philip](#) • [Johan van Oldenbarnevelt](#) • [Saint Pius V](#) • [Mary I](#)

Related Topics: [Catholic Apostolic Church](#) • [Free Church](#) • [Christian Church \(Disciples of Christ\)](#) ...[\(Show more\)](#)

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Despite instances of anticlericalism and polemics against the church, most of the faithful remained loyal and found the church to be the vehicle of their eternal salvation. Nothing is more [erroneous](#) than the notion that, early in the 16th century, Europe was ripe for a reform of the church.

[Martin E. Marty](#)

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