# The Second Great Awakening

**Introduction**

The Second Great Awakening was a Protestant revival movement during the early nineteenth century. The movement began around 1790 and gained momentum by 1800; after 1820, membership rose rapidly among Baptist and Methodist congregations, whose preachers led the movement. The Second Great Awakening began to decline by 1870. It enrolled millions of new members and led to the formation of new denominations. It has been described as a reaction against skepticism, deism, and rational Christianity, although why those forces became pressing enough at the time to spark revivals is not fully understood.

**Major Ideas of the Second Great Awakening**

The burst of religious enthusiasm that began in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1790s and early 1800s among Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians owed much to the uniqueness of the early decades of the republic. These years saw swift population growth, broad western expansion, and the rise of participatory democracy. These political and social changes made many people anxious, and the more egalitarian, emotional, and individualistic religious practices of the Second Great Awakening provided relief and comfort for Americans experiencing rapid change. The awakening soon spread to the East, where it had a profound effect on Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The thousands swept up in the movement believed in the possibility of creating a much better world. Many adopted millennialism, the fervent belief that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth and that God would reign on earth for a thousand years, characterized by harmony and Christian morality. Those drawn to the message of the Second Great Awakening yearned for stability, decency, and goodness in the new and turbulent American republic.

**Characteristics of the Second Great Awakening**

In the newly settled frontier regions, the revivals of the Second Great Awakening took the form of camp meetings. These meetings were often the first experience settlers had with organized religion. The camp meeting was a religious service of several days’ length involving multiple preachers. Settlers in thinly populated areas would gather at the camp meeting for fellowship. The sheer exhilaration of participating in a religious revival, with crowds of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people, inspired the dancing, shouting, and singing associated with these events.

The revivals typically followed an arc of great emotional power and emphasized the individual’s sins and need to turn to Christ, and subsequent personal salvation. Upon their return home, most converts joined or created small local churches, which resulted in rapid growth for small religious institutions. With the effort of such leaders as Barton W. Stone (1772–1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788–1866), the camp meeting revival became a major mode of church expansion for denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists.

Women made up a large part of these voluntary societies. The Female Missionary Society and the Maternal Association, both active in Utica, New York, were highly organized and financially sophisticated women’s organizations responsible for many of the evangelical converts of the New York frontier.

Each denomination that participated in the Second Great Awakening had assets that allowed it to thrive on the frontier. The Methodists had an efficient organization that depended on ministers known as “circuit riders,” who sought out people in remote frontier locations. The circuit riders came from among the common people, which helped them establish rapport with the frontier families they hoped to convert.

**Relation to Social Reform**

Social reform prior to the Civil War came largely out of this new devotion to religion. Efforts to apply Christian teaching to the resolution of social problems presaged the social gospel of the late nineteenth century. Converts were taught that to achieve salvation, they needed not only to repent for personal sin but also work for the moral perfection of society, which meant eradicating sin in all its forms. Thus, evangelical converts were leading figures in a variety of nineteenth-century reform movements.

Reforms took the shape of social movements for temperance, women’s rights, and the abolition of slavery. Social activists began efforts to reform prisons and care for the handicapped and mentally ill. They believed in the perfectibility of people and were highly moralistic in their endeavors. Many participants in the revival meetings believed that reform was a part of God’s plan. As a result, local churches saw their role in society as purifying the world through the individuals to whom they could bring salvation, as well as through changes in the law and the creation of institutions. Interest in transforming the world was applied to political action, as temperance activists, antislavery advocates, and proponents of other variations of reform sought to implement their beliefs into national politics. While religion had previously played an important role on the American political scene, the Second Great Awakening highlighted the important role which individual beliefs would play.

In 1833, a white student at Lane Theological Seminary named Amos Dresser was publicly whipped in Nashville, Tennessee, for possessing abolitionist literature while traveling through the city.