2nd Great Awakening

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By the beginning of the 1800’s, educated Americans were moving away from traditional Christian beliefs. This began to change drastically when a tremendous religious revival spread westward during the century's first half. The revival was fueled by preachers spreading the message that entry into heaven was in their own hands and could be achieved by contributing to a societal change. It coincided with the nation's population growth from five to 30 million and the boundary's westward movement.

This Second Great Awakening, a renewal of the Great Awakening of the early 18th century, was marked by an emphasis on personal religion over schooling and religion. It arose in several places and in several active forms. In northern New England, social activism took precedence; in western New York, the movement encouraged the growth of new denominations. In the Appalachian region of Tennessee and Kentucky, the revival energized Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists, and gave rise to the popular camp meeting (a.k.a. revival meeting), a chance for isolated frontier folk to gather and enjoy the excitement of evangelistic enthusiasm. The first camp meeting occurred in south-central Kentucky in June 1800. James McGready, a Presbyterian, and two colleagues preached for three solid days. The following day, two travelling Methodist ministers arrived and emotionally engaged the crowd. The revivals of the west were much more emotional than those in the east.

The revival's effects consisted of two main strains:

1. Behavior of the expanding middle class—a strong work ethic, penny-pinching and temperance (not drinking)—were recognized as valuable and encourgaed.
2. The focus on the ability of individuals to change their lives prompted a wide variety of reform movements aimed at righting societal wrongs and easing suffering—Created equality and fairness nationwide.

Social activism spawned groups committed to ending slavery (abolition), ending or limiting the use of alcohol (temperance) and winning the vote for women (suffrage). There were others committed to prison reform, care for the handicapped and mentally ill. A noted proponent of such reforms was the evangelist Charles G. Finney. In addition to being an innovative evangelist whose techniques others would imitate, he held that the Gospel saved people, but also it was a means to reform society. True to his word, Finney was an abolitionist and encouraged other Christians to get involved.

The Second Great Awakening created a lasting impact on American society, more than any other revival. While its intensity dropped, it left a legacy of many established churches, democratization and social reform.