



**August 14, 2024**

# MESSENGER

## QUOTE FOR TODAY

"But God proves his love for us  
in that while we still were  
sinners Christ died for us."  
Romans 5:8

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## New York's 'Burnt Over' District

In the Revolutionary War, the Iroquois and allied tribes had sided with the British. As a result, after the American victory, tribal influence was radically diminished, and that left a power vacuum in western New York State. Soon it was filled by new pioneers moving west from the Hudson Valley and from all of New England. These settlers had uprooted themselves, not only from their place of birth, but also from comfortable patterns of life, a familiar culture and predictable church involvement.

The new settlers were ripe for what's become known as the *Second Great Awakening* (1790-1840). This spiritual revival was experienced throughout the young Nation, but it was especially pronounced among the new rural communities of western New York State.<sup>1</sup> Outdoor "camp meetings" were led by itinerant Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian evangelists. The emphasis was on individual personal response to God's call, and there were many converts throughout the region. Each of these hoped to continue their spiritual high with local gatherings of believers. This is how many new churches came into being.

Since the people of the region had been disconnected from earlier, more traditional church roots, they were ripe soil for novel expressions of faith, including some that were quite edgy. Here's a partial list of spiritual movements that had their beginnings in that time and place:

1775 - The **Shakers** were charismatic Quakers who expressed themselves with ecstatic dances and claimed direct revelations from God. Led by Ann Lee, they established roots near Albany.

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1776 – The “**Public Universal Friend**,” was Quaker Jemimah Wilkinson, who died of typhus and rose again to lead a community named Jerusalem, near the Finger Lakes.

1815 – **William Miller** began his studies of Bible prophecy, which led to predictions of Jesus’ imminent return. His teachings ultimately led to the spread of Seventh Day Adventism.

1822 – **Joseph Smith** was 17 when he had his first vision at the family farm near Palmyra. His visions later became the Book of Mormon, and his followers became the Latter Day Saints.

1848 – The teenaged **Fox sisters** of Hydesville learned how to communicate with spirits by rapping on a table.<sup>2</sup> This led to many seances and the wide spread of Spiritualism.

1848 – The **Oneida Community** is one of several experiments in utopian communal living, with an emphasis on perfectionism and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth.

As diverse as these various movements were, there are two strong themes that emerge as we study them:

- **Women in leadership** were influential in many of these groups. They are affirmed and respected for their unique ideas and insights. It’s no accident that the Seneca Falls (NY) was the site of the first National Women’s Rights Convention. This

gathering planted the seeds that ultimately grew into the Constitutional amendment allowing women to vote.

- **Social justice issues** were raised in many of these movements, including the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of child labor, control of the abuse of alcohol and protection of people born without money or privilege.

As a young man, **Charles Finney** (1792-1875) had been a gifted Presbyterian evangelist who preached effectively during the Second Great Awakening in western New York. However, in his later years he advised the next generation of evangelists not to bother going to that area, which he referred to as the “**burnt over district.**” He said the residents had experienced “a very extravagant excitement” that may have left them with the impression that “religion was a mere delusion.”

I wonder if you’re reading this and saying: “That’s **me**. I’m a ‘burnt over district.’ Too much of the wrong kind of Christian experience. I can’t quite hear the message any more.” If so, let’s talk.

Pastor George Van Alstine

<sup>1</sup> In 1825 the Erie Canal was completed between Albany and the Great Lakes, and this became the major route west. If you look at a map of New York State, follow Interstate 90. The Canal ran parallel to that, a few miles north, along the Mohawk River.

<sup>2</sup> This is not exactly the same as the kind of rapping you may hear today on the streets of New York or Los Angeles.