

# First Great Awakening

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The **First Great Awakening**, or simply **Great Awakening**, was a religious revitalization movement that swept the Atlantic region, and especially the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, leaving a permanent impact on American religion. Indeed, the First Great Awakening launched the Evangelical Christian movement in America and laid the foundation for the Evangelical successes of the Second Great Awakening of 1800-1830.<sup>[1]</sup>

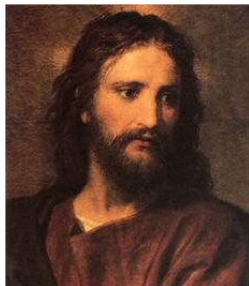
The leaders were Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, among many others.

The Awakening emerged from powerful preaching that gave listeners a sense of personal guilt and of their need of salvation by Christ. Pulling away from ritual and ceremony, the Great Awakening made religion intensely personal to the average person by fostering a deep sense of spiritual guilt and redemption, and by encouraging introspection and a commitment to a new standard of personal morality. It brought Christianity to African-American slaves and was an apocalyptic event in New England that challenged established authority. It incited rancor and division between old traditionalists who insisted on the continuing importance of ritual and doctrine, and the new revivalists, who encouraged emotional involvement and personal commitment. It had a major impact in reshaping the Congregational church, the Presbyterian church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the German Reformed denomination, and strengthened the small Baptist and Methodist denominations. It had little impact on Anglicans, and Quakers. Unlike the Second Great Awakening, that began about 1800 and which reached out to the unchurched, the First Great Awakening focused on people who were already church members. It changed their rituals, their piety, and their self-awareness.

To the evangelical imperatives of Reformation Protestantism, eighteenth- century American Christians added emphases on divine outpourings of the Holy Spirit and conversions that implanted within new believers an intense love for God. Revivals encapsulated those hallmarks and forwarded the newly created evangelicalism into the early republic.

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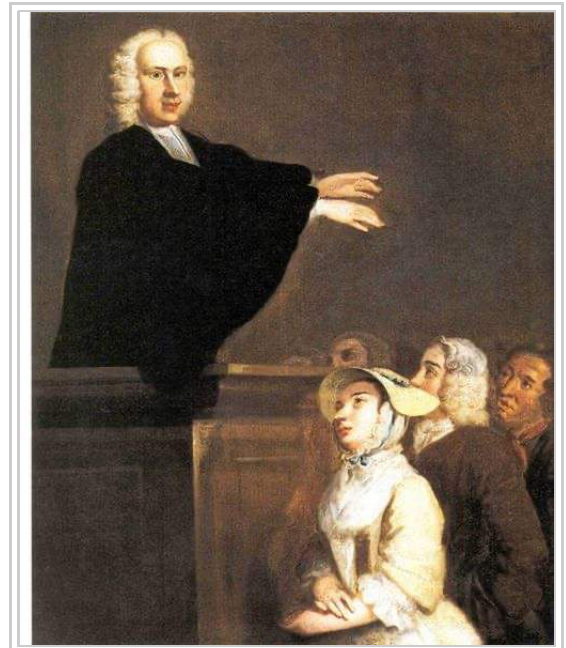
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## International dimension

The evangelical revival was international in scope, affecting the North Atlantic region. The dramatic response of churchgoers in Bristol and London in 1737, and of the Kingswood colliers with white gutters on their cheeks caused by tears in 1739 under the preaching of George Whitefield, is marked the start of the awakening in England. But in fact these events had been preceded by similar revivals in Wales some years earlier, predated again by a movement of God's Spirit in New Jersey in 1719 and 1726 and in Easter Ross, Scotland, in 1724. Historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom sees it as part of a "great international Protestant upheaval" that also created Pietism in Germany, the Evangelical Revival and Methodism in England.<sup>[2]</sup>



George Whitefield

The Awakening was thus an 18th century transatlantic revival involving England and its North American colonies. The revival was spurred by the sense that Christian worship had become too formulaic and devoid of emotion. Among the most notable clergy who fueled the awakening was Theodore Frelinguysen who led a revival in the 1720s among members of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Jersey.

## Jonathan Edwards

The revival began with Jonathan Edwards, a leading theologian and philosopher of The Enlightenment; he was a Congregationalist minister based in Northampton, in western Massachusetts. Edwards emerged from Puritan and Calvinist roots, but emphasized the importance and power of immediate, personal religious experience. Edwards was said to be 'solemn, with a distinct and careful enunciation, and a slow cadence.'<sup>[1]</sup> ([http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt\\_themes\\_420\\_edwards.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_420_edwards.htm)) Nevertheless, his sermons were powerful and attracted a large following. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," is his most famous sermon.

Winiarski (2005) examines Edwards's preaching in the Suffield, Massachusetts, meetinghouse on 6 July 1741 and the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" that he preached at Enfield two days later. At Suffield and Enfield, Edwards countenanced the "noise" of the Great Awakening, but his approach to revivalism became more moderate and critical in the years immediately following. The discovery of an anonymous letter composed by one who attended the Suffield service provides evidence for a reassessment of that seminal moment in the Great Awakening.<sup>[3]</sup>

Edwards' greatest contribution to the awakening was probably his book, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. For many younger untried clergymen, Edward's book was a "how to manual" that instructed them as to the finer points of conducting a revival. It influenced even the most famous of the Great Awakening ministers, George Whitefield.

## George Whitfield

The Methodist preacher George Whitefield, visiting from England, continued the movement started by Jonathan Edwards, traveling across the colonies and preaching in a more dramatic and emotional style, accepting everyone into his audiences.

Whitefield started as an associate of John Wesley in England. He was ordained as an Anglican minister. However, he was not assigned a pulpit and began preaching in parks and fields in England on his own. In short, he preached to people who normally did not attend Church. Like Edwards, he had developed a style of preaching that elicited emotional responses from his audiences. However, Whitefield had charisma, and his voice (which according to many accounts, could be heard over vast distances), small stature, and cross-eyed appearance (which some people took as a mark of divine favor) all served to help make him the first American celebrity. Thanks to the use of print in colonial America, perhaps more than half of all colonists, heard about, read about, or read something written by Whitefield. Whitefield used print extensively. He sent advance men to put up broadsides and to distribute handbills announcing his sermons. He also arranged to have his sermons published (a common practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Most notably, he entered into a profitable business partnership (and lifelong friendship) with Benjamin Franklin. While Franklin noted that Whitefield's sermons tended to improve morality among the colonists, Whitefield was never able to get Franklin to embrace Christianity on a personal level.

## Presbyterians

The Presbyterians split on the wisdom of revivals, with the "New Side" faction strongly supportive and the "Old Side" holding back. Gilbert Tennent (1703–64) of Pennsylvania was the most uncompromising of New Side Presbyterians. His sermon, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" (1741) played a major role in the schism that divided the Old Side and New Side. However, there was another side of Tennent's faith, one characterized by the pietism that nurtured religious renewal in the 18th century. This pietism is best seen in Tennent's celebration of the Sacramental Season, with its emphasis on Christian love and fellowship. Indeed, Tennent, like other revivalists, drew inspiration from the communal emphasis that permeated the sacramental celebration. In 1757, Tennent wrote a sacramental sermon, entitled "Love to Christ." It contains those elements of pietistic communion that inspired this "Son of Thunder" to work feverishly for the reunion of the New York and Philadelphia Synods, which took place the very next year.<sup>[4]</sup>

Samuel Davies was another well known evangelist of the era.

## Impact on individuals

Sermons were the centerpiece of the movement. They contained far less theology and stressed the impact of Christ's message on the souls of the audience. Receptive listeners became much more passionately and emotionally involved in their own destiny. New converts made the Bible a center of their home life, with frequent reading in family groups. Home study decentralized religion and was a further step in the individualistic trends introduced in Europe by the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

## Impact on American Revolution?

Historians in recent decades have disagreed sharply over the significance of the "Great Awakening." In 1982, Jon Butler argued that it was largely the invention of later historians who misjudged the cohesiveness and the extent of the revivals. Joseph A. Conforti built on Butler's argument, suggesting that the first Great Awakening was actually invented by revival promoters during the second Great Awakening of the 1830s.

Whitefield's reconciliation of humility and power contributed much to the creation of democratic thought in the American colonies. The First Great Awakening democratized religion by redressing the balance of power between the minister and the congregation. Rather than listening demurely to preachers, people groaned and roared in enthusiastic emotion; new divinity schools opened to challenge the hegemony of Yale and Harvard; personal revelation became more important than formal education for preachers. Such concepts and habits were a necessary foundation for the American Revolution.<sup>[5]</sup>

Scholars especially have debated whether the Awakening had a political impact on the American Revolution, which took place soon after. Heimert (1966) is the most controversial study; it argues that the evangelical Calvinism of the Awakening, not the religious liberalism of its opponents, laid the ideological foundation of the American Revolution.<sup>[6]</sup> Heimert says that Calvinism and Jonathan Edwards provided pre-Revolutionary America with a radical and democratic social and political ideology and that evangelical religion embodied and inspired a thrust toward American nationalism. Colonial Calvinism was the basis for the American Great Awakening and that in turn lay at the basis of the American Revolution. Heimert thus sees a major impact as the Great Awakening provided the radical American nationalism that prompted the Revolution. Awakening preachers sought to review God's covenant with America and to repudiate the materialistic, acquisitive, corrupt world of an affluent colonial society. The source of this corruption lay in England, and a severance of the ties with the mother country would result in a rededication of America to the making of God's Kingdom.

Heimert's work drew retorts from Edmund S. Morgan and Sidney E. Mead, even as other historians, including Patricia U. Bonomi, Richard L. Bushman, Rhys Isaac, Gary B. Nash, and Harry S. Stout. However, Heimert has been criticized for not recognizing the differences between educated and uneducated evangelists, and for not recognizing the significance of Separate-Baptists and Methodists.<sup>[7]</sup>

Some historians, in particular, Gary Nash in *The Urban Crucible* (1986), have seen the First Great Awakening as a means by which humbler colonial Americans were able to challenge their 'social betters'. Harry Stout (1986) has even suggested that the first Great Awakening radically democratized mass communication in the colonies, setting the stage for new popular politics later in the revolutionary decades that followed.

Christine Leigh Heyrman (1984) and Christopher Jedrey (1979) and others have been highly critical of this interpretation, arguing instead that The First Great Awakening was an essentially conservative movement a continuation of other, earlier religious traditions.

The Great Awakenings effect on early American settles was largely significant, directly effecting two thirds of the population.<sup>[8]</sup> The binding effect between the early American classes as a result of the Awakening also served as a proto-revolutionary event, preceding the political drive for Independence in the 1770s. British Historian Paul Johnson wrote in his book, *The History of the American People*, that,

"It was the marriage of the American elites touched by the Enlightenment with the spirit of the Great Awakening among the masses which enabled the popular enthusiasm thus aroused to be channeled into the political aims of the Revolution-itself soon identified as the coming eschatology event. Neither force could have succeeded without the other. The Revolution could not have taken place without this religious background. "

# Old Lights and New Lights

Preachers adopting the highly effective new style were called "new lights", while the old fashioned preachers were "old lights". Many colonial clergymen initially welcomed Whitefield and other revivalists, and opened their churches to them. However, many had second thoughts over time, regarding the revivalists — some of whom lacked theological training — as unorthodox. They saw the revivalists as challenging their own authority and regular church attendance as well as relying on emotionalism, which created disturbing histrionic displays among the mainly young people in attendance. As a result, many denominations split into “Old Light” and “New Light” factions. As a rule, the “Old Lights” preferred the order of regular church services, while the “New Lights” favored the more emotional appeal of the revivalists. Newer denominations, particularly the Baptists and the Methodists, gained many converts.

The two factions battled in several denominations. Divisions between “Old Lights” and “New Lights” did not stop at the church door. As a rule, older more established, and wealthier colonists (particularly in the South) tended to prefer the “Old Light” while poorer colonists and new arrivals gravitated toward “New Light” services.

The clergymen of the Great Awakening valued education, and during this period the University of Pennsylvania (1740), Princeton (1746), Brown (1764), Rutgers (1766), and Dartmouth (1770) were founded, all with identifiable connection to the movement.

## See also

- Second Great Awakening
- Third Great Awakening
- Fourth Great Awakening
- Historical examples of the exponential growth of Christianity
- Atheism vs. Christian revival and Christian apologetics
- Pietism

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## External links

- Great Awakening (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Awakening>), Britannica
- The First Great Awakening: Revival and the Birth of a Nation (<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=ljh>), Liberty University

### Videos:

- First Great Awakening (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IBEXiIjmps>)
- First Great Awakening (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R37ZkkAnG14>), CBN News

## Notes

1. ↑ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (2007)
2. ↑ Ahlstrom p. 263
3. ↑ This letter, likely written by Samuel Phillips Savage, a strong supporter of evangelical Protestantism, is published in the appendix to Winiarski (2005).
4. ↑ James B. Bennett, "Love To Christ': Gilbert Tennent, Presbyterian Reunion, and a Sacramental Sermon". *American Presbyterians* 1993 71(2): 77-89. 0886-5159
5. ↑ Nancy Ruttenburg, "George Whitefield, Spectacular Conversion, and the Rise of Democratic Personality." *American Literary History* 1993 5(3): 429-458. 0896-7148
6. ↑ Heimert's work was attacked by Edmund S. Morgan and Sidney E. Mead, while Patricia U. Bonomi, Richard L. Bushman, Rhys Isaac, Gary B. Nash, and Harry S. Stout were more supportive.
7. ↑ McLaughlin (1966), Goff (1998)
8. ↑ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, 1997

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