

## **Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening in Colonial America**

Starting in the 1730s, many American colonists experienced a huge Christian religious revival. Known as the “Great Awakening,” this revival spread new ideas about religion and may have influenced the American Revolution.

Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703 in the English colony of Connecticut. He was the son and grandson of famous Puritan ministers.

Jonathan went to a college (later called Yale) to prepare to be a pastor. He graduated at 17 and soon after had an intense spiritual experience, which the Puritans called a “conversion.”

Within a few years, Edwards became an ordained minister and was married. His grandfather, who was famous for leading local religious revivals, died in 1729. Edwards replaced him as minister of the Puritan Congregational Church in Northampton, a town on the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts.

Edwards soon became controversial. He ended his grandfather’s practice of permitting “unconverted” persons to participate in Holy Communion, a sacrament that recalls the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. Edwards sided with those Puritans who believed that only converted Christians could take communion and hope to avoid the terrors of hell.

In the winter of 1733–34, the behavior of the unmarried young men and women of Northampton troubled Edwards. They were meeting together at night, “frolicking” at the tavern, and not going to church meetings. When a young man suddenly died of an illness, Edwards seized the moment.

In his funeral sermon, Edwards warned that even those in the prime of life could die at any moment. Unless they were spiritually born again by accepting Jesus in their hearts, he preached, they would surely fall into the eternal fires of hell. Edwards spoke calmly, but intensely, and the young people listened. Some cried out, wept, and fainted at his words.

Soon, Edwards was holding prayer meetings just for the young people of the town. Many asked him, “What must I do to be saved?” The Great Awakening had begun.

### **The Evangelicals**

The Christian idea of being born again through a conversion process had its roots in the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The Reformation occurred 200 years before the time of Jonathan Edwards. John Calvin, a Protestant Reformation leader in Switzerland, taught that God had already decided (predestined) who

would go to heaven and who would go to hell. No one, however, could be sure of his or her fate.

Even so, Calvin believed that people might receive signs that God had saved them from eternal damnation. Calvin thought that one such sign was the conversion of a sinner. This happened when the person sincerely and fully opened his or her heart to Jesus and experienced a “new birth.” In return, God saved the converted individual from hell. Calvin called this a “covenant with God.”

Calvin’s doctrine of conversion became a central belief of the Puritans, Presbyterians, and other Protestants in Britain and America. Calvin believed that it would probably take a lifetime for a person to become converted. This involved first recognizing one’s sinfulness, experiencing the inner joy of Christ’s love, and then spending years studying the Bible, attending church, and living a moral life.

Around 1700, some Puritans and others began to preach that a sinner could be converted, born again, and saved from hell in one spiritual moment. Known as evangelicals, these Puritans emphasized not only sudden conversion, but also a strict reading of the Bible and dramatic preaching as well as moral behavior.

In 1700, most American ministers were religious scholars who used reason to instruct their church members. The evangelicals, however, tried to appeal to people’s emotions.

Protestants following the ideas of John Calvin believed that God created special “seasons” when outpourings of God’s spirit awakened sinners to the danger to their souls. These Christian awakenings, also called revivals, had taken place before in Europe and America.

Evangelical ministers like Jonathan Edwards expected a massive Christian awakening similar to the Protestant Reformation. They thought this revival would start in America and sweep the world.

### **The Awakenings Begin**

When signs of an awakening appeared, evangelical ministers would “preach up” the opportunity of sinners to save their souls. The ministers aimed to persuade the unconverted to open their hearts to God’s spirit passing over the land before it was too late.

Both scholarly and evangelical ministers believed colonial America in the 1730s was ripe for a spiritual revival. A majority in many churches remained unconverted. Jonathan Edwards wrote that it was “a far more degenerate time . . . than ever before.”

In the spring and summer of 1735, Jonathan Edwards was leading the Northampton awakening, which was rapidly spreading to other towns. Hundreds from all classes and ages stepped forward to be born again and saved from hell.

Edwards wrote a stirring account of the Northampton awakening, which inspired evangelical ministers in both America and England. In New England, people called these ministers “New Light” preachers.

Meanwhile, a recent mass migration of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians from Northern Ireland fueled another awakening in the Middle Colonies. Gilbert Tennent, an evangelical Presbyterian minister in New Jersey, had experienced a sudden conversion as a youth on his voyage to America. Tennent’s emotional preaching style with his vivid descriptions of the agonies of hell appealed to the young and shocked the older generation. Soon, hundreds of Presbyterians along with Lutherans, Baptists, and other Protestants were converting to save their souls.

Tennent discovered an ironic secret among many Protestant pastors. While most were highly educated and knowledgeable about the Bible, some, perhaps even a majority, had never experienced a “new birth” and thus remained unconverted.

Tennent attacked the unconverted ministers as being “blind as Moles, and dead as Stones.” He demanded to know how this “Ministry of Dead Men” could possibly guide others through conversion and spiritual rebirth. He told his listeners to leave these ministers and seek out converted ones. Tennent’s view of unconverted ministers often divided churches and communities where he preached.

Thus, in the 1730s, two separate awakenings were underway—one in New England and another in the Middle Colonies. But they were not connected, and the South remained untouched by any awakening.

### **“The Grand Itinerant”**

Another evangelical, George Whitefield, helped spread the awakening throughout the colonies. Whitefield grew up in England, the son of an innkeeper. At age 21, he had a conversion experience and joined the emerging evangelical movement. He became an ordained preacher of the Anglican Church, the official church of England.

Whitefield revolutionized evangelical preaching in England. He preached to large crowds in open fields and city streets. He delivered sermons without reading them. He moved about the countryside, ignoring the parish boundaries of the Anglican Church. This made him an “itinerant,” or traveling, preacher.

More than anything else, Whitefield spoke with deep emotion in a loud and riveting voice about the need for sinners to convert to Christ in order to save their

souls. His listeners often screamed, rolled on the ground, and fainted when he described burning in hell forever.

Whitefield promoted his preaching by putting up posters and placing notices in newspapers in advance of his speaking. He even had a press agent. Within a year, many in England and America knew him as “The Grand Itinerant.”

In 1739, at age 25, the now famous Whitefield made a well-publicized tour of the American colonies to unify and expand the local awakenings. Benjamin Franklin reported in his newspaper that Whitefield preached to thousands in Philadelphia with stunning effect.

Whitefield then traveled to other Middle Colonies and into the South. He preached every day to men and women of all Christian faiths, ages, and classes, even to slaves. Almost everywhere he went, his emotional sermons about the love of God and the horrors of hell produced hundreds of conversions.

Next, Whitefield went to Boston where both evangelical New Light and scholarly Old Light ministers welcomed him. He preached to 20,000 people on Boston Common. He visited other parts of New England and finally met with Jonathan Edwards at Northampton. Whitefield had read Edwards’s description of the Northampton revival. In 1740, Whitefield reignited it.

The Great Awakening was now occurring throughout most of the colonies. Only the South and frontier areas lagged behind in the religious excitement. Whitefield’s work seemingly finished, the “Grand Itinerant” returned home to England in 1741.

### **New Light vs. Old Light**

Toward the end of his spectacular revival tour of America, Whitefield joined with Gilbert Tennent in criticizing unconverted ministers. This issue would ultimately undermine the good feeling that Whitefield had brought to the revival.

Whitefield’s tour of the colonies had motivated other evangelical itinerant preachers. As they traveled about, these New Light preachers often held their meetings in competition with the regular town ministers. The town ministers became resentful and accused the itinerants of being “enthusiasts,” those who provoked hysterical reactions among the people.

James Davenport was probably the most famous enthusiast preacher of this time. After George Whitefield returned to England, Davenport abandoned his Congregational Church on Long Island (New York) and took up itinerant preaching in Connecticut.

Davenport’s style of preaching was highly emotional. He even imitated the agony of Christ on the cross.

He drew large crowds and brought about many conversions, especially among the poor. He also spent much time attacking unconverted ministers as “wolves in Sheep’s clothing.”

Connecticut, like most other colonies, had an official established church. In that colony, the government supported the Congregational Church with public taxes that paid the salaries of its pastors.

The Connecticut colonial legislature, dominated by the Old Light establishment, looked upon Davenport and other itinerant preachers as a threat to the Congregational Church. In the spring of 1742, the legislature passed a law that prohibited itinerant preaching by anyone from outside the colony.

When Davenport continued preaching in Connecticut, authorities arrested him. At his two-day trial before the colonial legislature, Davenport shouted out at his accusers, “Lord, strike them!” The legislature found him “under the influence of enthusiastical impressions and impulses,” declared him insane, and deported him back to Long Island.

The following year, Davenport returned to Connecticut. He told his followers to throw certain religious books and “idols” like jewelry and fancy clothing into a bonfire. This episode was too much even for other New Light preachers who, like Jonathan Edwards, feared Davenport was discrediting the entire revival movement.

By 1743, Old Light critics of the revival, such as the Reverend Charles Chauncy of Boston, had provoked a major debate on the revival. Chauncy charged that it was just a lot of “noise” and “enthusiastic Heat.” Others, however, pointed to thousands of conversions and a change in the moral behavior of many.

Back in Northampton where it all began, Jonathan Edwards announced in 1749 that unconverted parents could no longer have their children baptized in his church. This divided the church, which still included many who had not converted.

The following year, the Northampton congregation voted to dismiss Edwards. By then, the Great Awakening had ended in most colonies.

### **The Aftermath**

In the aftermath of the Great Awakening, hundreds of new, mainly evangelical, churches formed after separating from the established churches. The members of these new churches demanded the right to worship and preach, as they wanted. They also strongly objected to public taxes and laws that supported the established churches.

The Great Awakening created greater religious diversity and led to greater tolerance of differing religions. After the American Revolution, this tolerance was enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . . .”

Some historians say that the Great Awakening was a “rehearsal” for the American Revolution. They point out that revivals used colonial newspapers, pamphlets, circulating letters, outdoor rallies, and radical oratory to create an American mass movement. Later, Sam Adams, Patrick Henry, and others would use these relatively new communication techniques to unite the colonies against the king.

Those supporting the rehearsal theory also argue that evangelical preachers like Tennent and Davenport challenged the authority of the colonial political and religious ruling class. The New Light preachers taught Americans to decide things based on their individual consciences rather than blindly accept the will of the rich and powerful.

Hundreds of itinerant preachers carried this message of democratic individualism to the poor and powerless: women, servants, slaves, those without property, those who were uneducated, and even children. Without realizing it, say those favoring the rehearsal idea, the revivalists were preparing ordinary Americans to eventually take political matters into their own hands. Thus, the Great Awakening planted the seeds of the rebellion against England in 1776.

Those who reject the idea that the Great Awakening was a rehearsal for revolution say that it was not a true mass movement. Even after Whitefield’s tour of the colonies, most revival activity remained in New England, parts of New Jersey, and some large cities like Philadelphia. It hardly touched the Southern colonies at all.

Those opposing the rehearsal idea point out that no revolutionary leaders arose at this time. Even radicals like Davenport were more concerned about saving souls than changing the political system. He simply ignored the political authorities and the laws they passed against itinerant preaching. There were no outcries or uprisings against the king. The colonial governments remained in the hands of the established church and propertied classes.

Finally, opponents of the rehearsal idea stress that the revival faded in the late 1740s leaving few long-lasting effects. New issues such as customs duties on imports, the quartering of the king’s troops, and taxation without representation emerged after 1760 to anger the colonists. The Great Awakening may have stirred up a lot of people, but only with regard to the state of their souls.

The debate continues today. Historians are divided over whether the Great Awakening was a rehearsal for the American Revolution.

