

THE GREAT AWAKENING (1730 ONWARD)

Defined from an historical perspective: “Religious revival in the British American colonies mainly between about 1720 and the ‘40s. It was a part of the religious ferment that swept western Europe in the latter part of the 17th century and early 18th century, referred to as Pietism and Quietism in continental Europe ... and as Evangelicalism in England (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Defined from a philosophical perspective: “A major step along the way in the development of Americans’ thoughts about themselves and their relationships to society. One could argue that this was one of the developments that led to the rise of a revolutionary ideology. This logically leaves the ‘Great Awakening’ as a step toward the revolution.” (Steven Danver in “Knol”)

Defined from a Christian perspective: Men preached; God worked; thousands were saved.

And how mightily He worked! From Maine to Georgia, Colonial America was stirred by the mighty power of God’s Gospel. The Awakening, due to itinerant preachers like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, who went to almost every colony, became the first truly “national” event.



New England: “Northern New England witnessed one of the most powerful phases of the awakenings of the 1740s.” In October in **York, ME**, there was “a startling season of grace.” Kittery Physician Edmund Coffin wrote that the York revival “surpassed even the 1735 Northampton revival. Conversions came quickly... They cried out to God for help and would not eat, sleep, or drink until they found spiritual comfort.” As Samuel Willard of **Biddeford, ME**, preached people cried out for fear that the Day of Judgment had come. Preachers in **New Hampshire** agreed to observe a monthly fast for revival to break out as it had in York. **In Boston**, on September 27,

1740, Whitefield preached on the common to a crowd estimated at 15,000. Many were deeply affected. “*Boston common has become a portal to divine glory.*” The first regularly published magazine in America, *The Christian History*, was founded by Thomas Prince of Boston just to report the news of the revival in the colonies. Of the 300,000 people in New England, between 25,000 and 50,000 professed salvation during the Awakening. Were that same blessing to be seen today, it would be the equivalent of approximately 2,000,000 people being saved in the next 20 years **just** in New England

PHILADELPHIA: Ben Franklin wrote that when George Whitefield arrived in 1739: “The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous ... It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro’ the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”

NEW JERSEY: In Newark, during the first 3 1/2 months of the year 1740, “the whole town in general was brought under a common concern about their eternal interests.”

MARYLAND: “Great numbers flock to hear and the power of an ascended Savior attends the word. Maryland is yielding converts to the blessed Jesus.”

VIRGINIA: Special “reading houses were built because the crowds wanting to hear the preaching would not fit in private homes ... religion seems to flourish; it is like the suburbs of heaven.” When Samuel Davies arrived to begin preaching, “the awakening surged.” Jonathan Edwards wrote in 1749, “I have heard lately a credible account of a remarkable work of conviction and conversion ... at Hanover, Virginia, under the ministry of Mr. Davies, who is lately settled there.”

SOUTH CAROLINA AND GEORGIA: Numerous congregations of believers “increased in number with great speed as men – many of them farmer-preachers – preached the gospel in tents, in barns, and in the open-air. Souls in great numbers were won to Christ.”



What were some of the results of this First Great Awakening?

EDUCATION: From a desire to prepare men for the ministry and to give students a Christian foundation for secular studies, a concern for higher education grew and many colleges and universities were founded: Princeton, Washington and Lee, Hampden-Sydney, Queens, Kings (Columbia), Rutgers, Brown (which was established to train evangelists), and Dartmouth (which was established to train missionaries to the Indians) were all founded as a direct result of the Great Awakening.

MORALS: Before Whitefield came to Boston, the president of Harvard University wrote to a friend complaining of the moral decay in the college. He said, “Whence is there such a prevalency of so many immoralities amongst the professors?” Later, describing the revival which came to the Harvard Campus, President Willard wrote, “That which forebodes the most lasting advantage is the new state of the college. Gentlemen’s sons that were sent here only for a mere polite education, are now so full of zeal for the cause of Christ and the love of souls as to devote themselves absolutely to the study of divinity. The college is entirely changed; the students are full of God — and will I hope come out blessings to this and succeeding generations.” **At Harvard no less!!**

MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE: Brainerd’s diary inspired William Carey (India), Henry Martyn (Iran), and Samuel Marsden (New Zealand) to engage in missionary work.

PHILANTHROPY: The Bethesda Orphanage at Savannah was started in 1741 by George Whitefield. Missionary work among the Indians became very prominent, and Dartmouth College was established for that very purpose. David Brainerd was a product of the Great Awakening and worked tirelessly among the Indians in NY and NJ. Extensive work, with great blessing, was seen at Stonington, CT, and at Westerly, RI, as missionaries worked among the tribes.

HISTORY: John Adams gave credit to the Great Awakening as the source of motivation behind the war, and in certain parts of England the revolution was even called the “Presbyterian Rebellion.” That the religious spirit of the colonists was a necessary component to the drive for independence is confirmed in the sentiments of those who lived during the period of fighting. As British statesman William Knox noted about the American drive for independence, “Every man being thus allowed to be his own Pope, he becomes disposed to wish to become his own King.” Historians ponder deeply the connection between the revivalists’ willingness to break with religious tradition and the eagerness of Americans only a few decades later to throw off the hereditary rule of England. Some feel that, although not a cause of the rise of revolutionary thought in America, the very questioning of authority was a necessary step in a long line of events that led to revolutionary thought.

RELIGION: The Great Awakening changed the way many viewed salvation as not something that happens when we die, but something that occurs while we live, and the “release that such salvation knowledge brings is both powerful and joyous to those who once feared God’s judgment hanging over them.”