

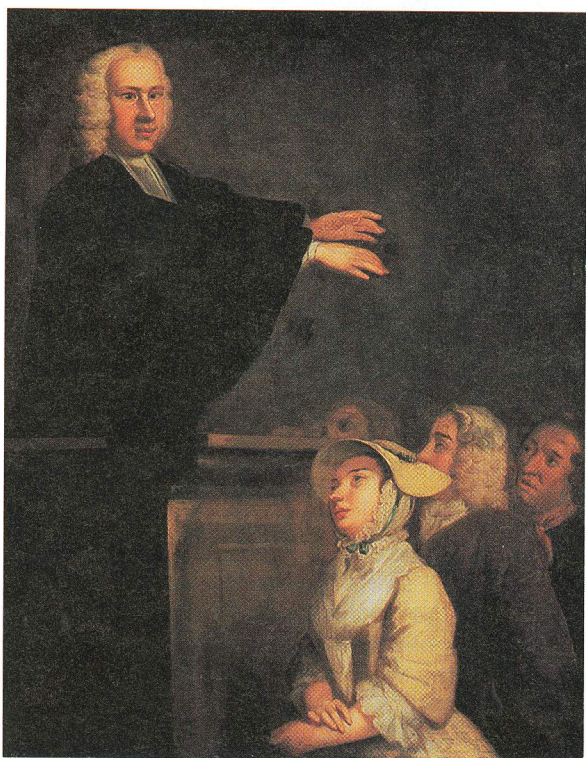
What was the "Great Awakening"?
 Who were the two primary figures of the "G.A." and what distinguished them?

RELIGIOUS REVIVALS IN PROVINCIAL SOCIETIES

How did the Great Awakening transform the religious culture of colonial America?

A sudden, spontaneous series of Protestant revivals in the mid-eighteenth century, known as the **Great Awakening**, profoundly affected the lives of ordinary people. This new, highly personal appeal to a "new birth" in Christ caused men and women of all backgrounds to rethink basic assumptions about church and state, institutions and society.

Thesis



George Whitefield The fervor of the Great Awakening was intensified by the eloquence of itinerant preachers such as George Whitefield, the most popular evangelical of the mid-eighteenth century. (Source: John Wollaston, "George Whitefield," ca. 1770. National Portrait Gallery, London.)

The Great Awakening

Whatever their origins, the seeds of the Great Awakening were generally sown on fertile ground. In the early eighteenth century, many Americans—especially New Englanders—complained that organized religion had lost vitality. They looked back at Winthrop's generation with nostalgia, assuming that common people at that time must have possessed greater piety than did later, more worldly colonists. Congregational ministers seemed obsessed with dull, scholastic matters; they no longer touched the heart. And in the Southern Colonies, there were simply not enough ordained ministers to tend to the religious needs of the population.

1.

? see p.43

The Great Awakening arrived unexpectedly in Northampton, a small farm community in western Massachusetts. It was sparked by Jonathan Edwards, the local Congregational minister. Edwards accepted the traditional teachings of Calvinism, reminding his parishioners that an omnipotent God had determined their eternal fate. There was nothing they could do to save themselves. They were totally dependent on the Lord's will. He thought his fellow ministers had grown soft. They left men and women with the mistaken impression that sinners might somehow avoid damnation by performing good works.

2.

? see p.43

Read the Document
 Jonathan Edwards,
 "Sinners in the Hands
 of an Angry God" on
myhistorylab.com

Although Edwards was an outstanding theologian, he did not possess the dynamic personality to sustain the revival. That role fell to George Whitefield, a young, inspiring preacher from England who toured the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia. While Whitefield was not an original thinker, he was an extraordinarily effective public speaker. And like his friend Benjamin Franklin, he symbolized the cultural forces that were transforming the Atlantic world.

3.

see pp. 92-93


Whitefield's audiences came from all groups of American society: rich and poor, young and old, rural and urban. While he described himself as a Calvinist, Whitefield welcomed all Protestants. He spoke from any available pulpit: "Don't tell me

3.a.

Does this point contradict the thesis? (see paragraph one above)

you are a Baptist, an Independent, a Presbyterian, a dissenter, tell me you are a Christian, that is all I want.”

3.b Whitefield was a brilliant entrepreneur. Like Franklin, with whom he published many popular volumes, the itinerant minister possessed an almost intuitive sense of how to turn this burgeoning consumer society to his own advantage, and he embraced the latest merchandising techniques. He appreciated, for example, the power of the press in selling the revival, and he regularly advertised his own work in British and American newspapers. The crowds flocked to hear Whitefield, while his critics grumbled about the commercialization of religion. One anonymous writer in Massachusetts noted that there was “a very wholesome law of the province to discourage Pedlars in Trade,” and it seemed high time “to enact something for the discouragement of Pedlars in Divinity also.”

 **Read the Document**
Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield (1771) on myhistorylab.com

Quick Check

- ✓ What explains the Reverend George Whitefield's extraordinary popularity among colonial Americans?

Evangelical Religion

Other American-born itinerant preachers, who traveled from settlement to settlement throughout the colonies to spread their message, followed Whitefield's example. The most famous was Gilbert Tennent, a Scots-Irish Presbyterian who had been educated in the Middle Colonies. His sermon “On the Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” printed in 1741, set off a storm of protest from established ministers who were insulted by assertions that they did not understand true religion. Lesser-known revivalists traveled from town to town, colony to colony, challenging local clergymen who seemed hostile to evangelical religion. Men and women who thronged to hear the itinerants were called “New Lights.” During the 1740s and 1750s, many congregations split between defenders of the new emotional preaching and those who regarded the movement as dangerous nonsense.

Despite Whitefield's successes, many ministers remained suspicious of the itinerants and their methods. Some complaints may have just been sour grapes. One “Old Light” spokesman labeled Tennent “a monster! impudent and noisy.” He claimed Tennent told anxious Christians that “they were damned! damned! damned! This charmed them; and, in the most dreadful winter I ever saw, people wallowed in snow, night and day, for the benefit of his beastly brayings; and many ended their days under these fatigues.” Charles Chauncy, minister of the prestigious First Church of Boston, raised more troubling issues. How could the revivalists be certain God had sparked the Great Awakening? Perhaps the itinerants had relied too much on emotion? “Let us esteem those as friends of religion,” Chauncy advised, “... who warn us of the danger of enthusiasm, and would put us on our guard, that we may not be led aside by it.”

Despite occasional anti-intellectual outbursts, the New Lights founded several important centers of higher learning. They wanted to train young men to carry on the good works of Edwards, Whitefield, and Tennent. In 1746, New Light Presbyterians established the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University. Just before his death, Edwards was appointed its president. The evangelical minister Eleazar Wheelock launched Dartmouth (1769); other revivalists founded Brown (1764) and Rutgers (1766).