

First great awakening

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Revival history is an interesting topic and one that can be explored at great depths. Revivals of the past, if looked at through the right lens, can awaken hope and desire for God to move again, even in the darkest times. Revivals show us that God is still very much active and interested in His people. The Father desires that we would know Him as a real Person and who loves to make Himself known through His Son Jesus. I wrote my paper on the First Great Awakening mainly because I am from New England and I have a passion to see the church set ablaze again in that area. The heritage is so rich in that land and I believe that the Lord would love to encounter His people again with a great spiritual awakening.

Below, I will go over the Great Awakening in detail discussing the dates, location, key leaders, scope of impact, main features, main message, controversial aspects, principles learned, and our application for today. The First Great Awakening was a religious revitalization movement that took place in the northeast, mainly in the New England area. The Great Awakening spread throughout the colonies on the eastern seaboard. The dates of when the First Great Awakening began vary due to the opinion of the chosen historian. Most say that the dates begin somewhere in the early 1700's - 1740's. The earliest stirrings of revival were recorded in the 1730's in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The next noticeable move of God was in Northampton, Mass around 1734 - 36.

The final thrust of awakening took place in the 1740s with the arrival of the powerful orator and itinerant speaker, George Whitefield. A contributor to the National Humanities Center validates these claims by informing, “ The earliest manifestations of the American phase of this phenomenon—the

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beginnings of the First Great Awakening—appeared among Presbyterians in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Led by the Tennent family—Reverend William Tennent, a Scots-Irish immigrant, and his four sons, all clergymen—the Presbyterians not only initiated religious revivals in those colonies during the 1730s but also established a seminary to train clergymen whose fervid, heartfelt preaching would bring sinners to experience evangelical conversion. Originally known as “the Log College,” it is better known today as Princeton University. ” 1 When looking historically at the Great Awakening, many may not recognize that the hand of the Lord was already starting to awaken hunger for revitalization of religion before the man Jonathan Edwards came on the scene. While serving as the new local congregational minister of a Northampton church, Jonathan Edwards noticed the spiritual dullness and condition of the town. He wrote this quote: “Just after my grandfather's death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion.

Licentiousness for some years prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others. ” 2 Afterward, Jonathan was moved to the point of calling the young people to gather into small groups to join for prayer and a time of discussion. The next recognized stirrings began in December 1734 of Northampton, Massachusetts. Two well known young people died in the town and the population began to become concerned with death, life after death, eternity and other spiritual matters. In this stirring context, Edwards began preaching a teaching series on Justification by faith alone. It was at this point

that six young people were converted. One of whom was a young girl who was said to be known by many young men in the town, meaning she was very immoral.

The town of Northampton was shaken to its very core and three hundred more conversions took place following the initial 6. With the entire town boasting 1, 100 people, this equates to 25% of the population getting saved. About a year later in 1736, the town went back to normal mainly due to the suicide of Jonathan Edward's uncle. The next wave of revival to hit New England was in 1740 upon the revival of George Whitefield. He was another key figure and leader during this great spiritual awakening and stirring. George at one point spoke to 30, 000 people in England. The night before he died he saw that 2, 000 people had gathered out his home so he went to his balcony and preached on the excellencies of Christ.

The key leaders of the Great Awakening as mentioned previously were Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Gilbert Tennent was born in 1703 in Ireland and was the son of William Tennent. Gilbert had immigrated to the United States in 1718 and lived in Pennsylvania. After wrestling over his salvation during his teen years he was converted at 20 years old in 1723. It was only three years later that he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Tennent was a stirring speaker and from his sermons he led many into a conversion experience. In 1739 Gilbert met George Whitefield and went on tour with him throughout New England.

They both shared a great passion for revival. While on tour Gilbert introduced George to many different ministers which aided in making the

tour a great success. When George returned to England, Tennet continued on with preaching throughout New England and from these speaking engagements little revivals sparked. The revivals in New England were scattered but aided in creating what we now call “ The Great Awakening”. Jonathan Edwards, a native to the New England area was born in East Windsor, Connecticut on October 5, 1703. Jonathan grew up as the only son out of 11 children. From a young age he lived a life of prayer and study in the word.

He also studied many topics and was one of the most brilliant minds to be produced on American soil. Edward’s didn’t have his actual conversion experience until January 12, 1723. Jonathan studied the bible 13 - 14 hours a day and wrote over 120 pieces of literature which many can still be found. Edward’s was bold in his proclamation of the truth and didn’t not shy away from it even when it was uncomfortable for the people. Edward’s desire for doctrinal purity is admirable and the dedication and devotion given to it is worth reduplicating. George Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714 in Gloucester England. George was the youngest of seven children.

He was not raised in a Christian home but rather one that was dysfunctional. His father passes away when he was at the mere age of two. His mother did eventually remarry but it was indicated that the marriage was not peaceful. In 1733 Whitefield met the infamous 'Wesley brothers" while studying at Pembroke College in Oxford. John and Charles Wesley at that time were leading what is known as the Holy Clubs and before Whitefield even had his conversion experience he was apart of the holy clubs for 3 years. The

schedule was one that was very rigorous and it must have been the hand of the Lord to keep him enough content to stay. It took a very serious illness to confront him on his internal state while in England.

Whitefield's accomplishments are quite amazing he pioneered open air, square and field meetings. The church walls were filled to beyond capacity and thousands had to be turned away from hearing him. The scope of impact of the great awakening was a watershed event in the life of the American people. Before it was over it had spread throughout the colonies of the eastern seaboard. The revival had great impact on the church and saw 1000's of sinners saved. The revival did more than effect the spiritual climate it also had an impact on the social and governmental levels. A contributor from a website dedicated to the Great Awakening gives more details on the scope of impact " The effect of Great Awakening unity was an attitude that went against the deferential thinking that consumed English politics and religion.

Rather than believing that God's will was necessarily interpreted by the monarch or his bishops, the colonists viewed themselves as more capable of performing the task. The chain of authority no longer ran from God to ruler to people, but from God to people to ruler. The children of revivalism later echoed this radicalism and popular self-righteousness in the American Revolution, when self-assertion turned against the tyrannical ways of George III. It was not to any church that the signers of the Declaration of Independence appealed to, but directly to the " Supreme Judge of the World". It was through the revivalism of the first half of the Eighteenth

Century that the colonists were finally able to step out from under the protectorate of the established Christian churches and assert religious control over their own nation's destiny. In other words the Colonists realized that religious freedom and power rested in their own hands and not in the church of England anymore. Some of the main features of the Great Awakening were men and women turning away from religious apathy and turning back to their puritan roots.

Others who were not saved were being confronted with their need for a savior and the reality of eternity. Upon and from the arrival of George Whitefield in 1740 to Northampton Massachusetts where Edward's resided the awakening spread wherever George went as he was an itinerant speaker who spoke mainly in open fields. One of the most famous messages was preached on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God". The revival was titled the "Great Awakening" with good reason as it was a movement of religious revitalization within and outside of the church. The people of the towns had an understanding of faith as they or their father's had come from England to have freedom of expression in their worship. But they had turned apathetic especially with the entrance of the Half Way Covenant. Essentially people who were baptized and lived half way decent lives but made no public confession of Christ were allowed to bring their children in to be baptized which led to people who did not profess to being Christians partaking of the Lord's Supper.

This over time created a church that was disconnected from their state of desperation and need for a savior to save them from their sin. The main

message was about justification by faith. Men and women were cut to the heart as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield spoke to them the word God. They could not be saved by works alone but it must be an inner working of the heart and faith in Jesus Christ alone. The preachers were calling them up higher from just a Sunday morning church goer mentality. One of the main controversial aspects of the Great Awakening was the phenomena that took place during some of the services. Much opposition was stirred among conservative congregational ministers so Edwards wrote in defense “ The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God” dealing with much of the bodily affects.

He noted that these bodily affects were not necessarily a work of the spirit which forced him to write another apology in 1742 called “ Thoughts on Revival in New England” noting the great moral improvement. Another one of the controversies which is still around to this day is the called the Old Lights and New Lights. The New Lights were those congregants who had a new light or perspective on sin and atonement. They were also those who also felt that the revival was from the Lord and that they would be able to continue in that kind of environment. The old lights were ones that did not like or enjoy change but wanted to keep things the way that they were. They were skeptical of the revival and depending upon which branch of the denomination they were from they took a stance with their view point. The old lights were also apprehensive because they were afraid that the new lights would act in rebellion and that they may possibly be a threat to authority.

1<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/grawaken.htm>
2Edwards, Jonathan. A Narrative of Surprising Conversions. Wilmington, DE: Sovereign Grace Publ. , 1972. Print.