

• The Great Awakening •

In colonial America, religious belief shaped every aspect of life. It guided the individual and the family, work and play, community and government. The local church was where all of these were given meaning and direction.

Most Protestant colonial churches were strict. They taught that we are all sinful and that God grants grace and a place in heaven only to a faithful few. Puritan Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and many others accepted the idea that God had already decided who was saved. All a person could do was search for signs of being among the chosen few. Living a good life, studying the Bible, and attending church might be such signs. But they could not by themselves save a sinner. Only a deep faith granted by God could do that.

By the early 1700s, these beliefs were still widely held. Yet many colonists had begun to feel that people no longer took religion seriously. Colonial wealth was increasing and so were temptations to live a less godly life. Too many churchgoers were said to be only going through the motions, without real faith.

In the 1730s and '40s, this uneasy feeling gave birth to a huge revival of religion known as the Great Awakening. In this upheaval, thousands of people heard new sorts of preachers using a more emotional preaching style. The words of these preachers moved many to cry out, "What must I do to be saved?" Such terrifying awareness of sin might then shift as suddenly into an equally powerful feeling of joy and acceptance by Christ. The heart of the Great Awakening was this life-changing sense of being "reborn" as a new and better person of faith. The preachers were evangelicals who felt they could trigger this rebirth suddenly, in a flash, rather than over the course of a lifetime.

Many ordinary clergymen preaching in their own churches took part in the revivals. The key figures, however, were often "itinerants,"

preachers who moved from town to town. George Whitefield, an Englishman, was the most famous of them. His powerful, appealing voice and deep feeling could make crowds weep in fear of God's judgment and cry tears of joy at the thought of salvation. Whitefield first toured the colonies in 1739. He preached in fields and city squares, often to thousands at a time. Another key figure was Jonathan Edwards, a Congregationalist preacher in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards was perhaps the greatest American philosopher and religious thinker of the colonial period.

Some of the preachers, however, were not as thoughtful as Edwards. Many played on emotion and took no interest in whether the conversions they produced were real or likely to last. Some were harshly critical of those regular town ministers who stressed a calm use of reason and learning. Such hard feelings often split churches into opposed groups, so-called "New Lights" and "Old Lights." New churches appeared, and America's religious diversity became even more diverse.

The upheaval also made colonists more aware of a world beyond their town or church. This may have given them a sense of belonging to a broader "American" society rather than to one limited to a single town or colony.

The revivals also led people to become more critical of their local religious leaders. After all, salvation seemed to come from within, not necessarily from what happened in church. Did this foster a more independent spirit? Did it make Americans more willing to challenge all sorts of traditional forms of authority? If so, the Great Awakening may have prepared the colonists for the American Revolution just a few decades ahead. Did it? This is one of many questions the primary sources here can help you debate as you think about the meaning of America's first Great Awakening.

Great Awakening Time Line

1662

The "Half-Way Covenant" in New England eases Puritan rules about who can be a full church member. Some see this as a move away from the strict Puritan beliefs of the first settlers.

1692–93

Salem Witch Trials. Many people are accused of witchcraft. A large number are hanged. Some see this witchcraft as a sign that God is angry at the Puritans for giving up their strict beliefs. However, this is the last significant witchcraft scare in America. The trials are called off in 1693. Some jurors soon apologize for what happened.

1690s and
early 1700s

Cotton Mather is a famous Puritan leader. In many of his writings, he worries about the fading away of strict Puritan beliefs and practices.

1720s

Religious revivals are led by Theodore Frelinghuysen and Gilbert Tennant in New Jersey. These are the first signs of the Great Awakening.

1734–37

Jonathan Edwards begins giving very moving sermons in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards is considered one of America's greatest religious thinkers.

1739–41

Methodist George Whitefield travels between England and America several times, preaching throughout the colonies.

1741

Jonathan Edwards gives the most famous Great Awakening sermon of all, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

1741–58

The Great Awakening splits Presbyterians into groups for and against the revivals. Similar splits into "Old Lights" and "New Lights" take place among Congregationalists (Puritans) in New England.

1743

Charles Chauncy writes a pamphlet called "Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England." He is a leader of the Old Lights in Boston. In this pamphlet, he speaks out against the emotional preaching of the Great Awakening.

1747

Jonathan Edwards writes *The Visible Union of God's People*. In it, he describes how God is bringing people together because of what they shared in the Great Awakening.

1758

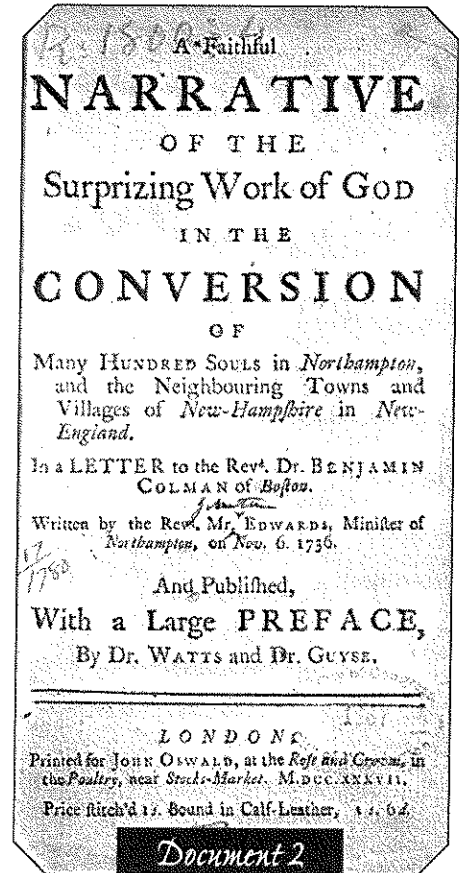
The Presbyterians heal their Old Side/New Side split.

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2



Document 1

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-45506.



Document 2

Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

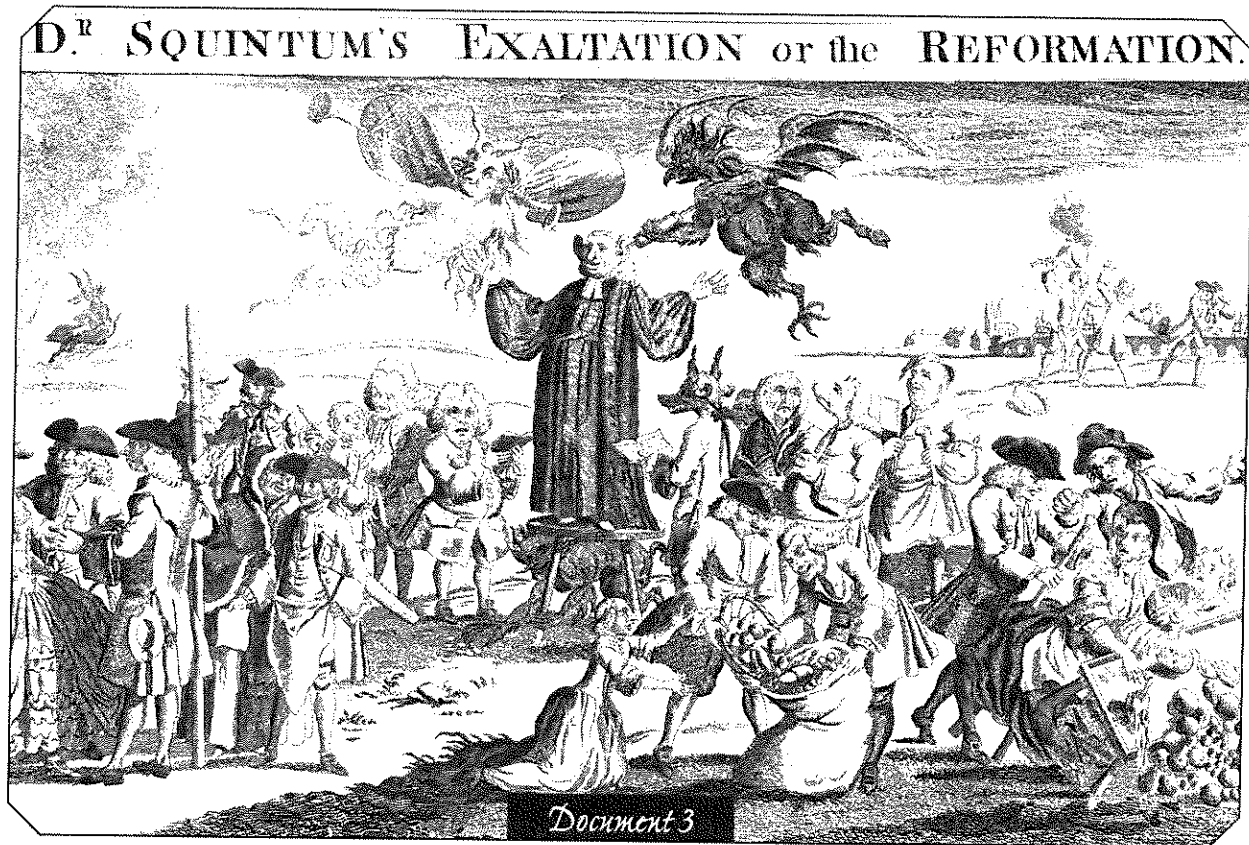
Information on Documents 1 & 2

The two most important figures in America's Great Awakening were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.

Whitefield was born in England in 1714. At the age of 22, he began preaching with a power and depth of feeling that few had ever seen. He urged listeners to feel their own sinfulness strongly, repent, and change. He often preached to huge crowds in fields, both in England and here. He made his first trip to America in 1739. The above illustration shows him preaching in his usual style.

Even before Whitefield arrived, Jonathan Edwards led a great revival of religion in his own New England town of North Hampton. Edwards held to the strictest form of his religion's traditional Puritan beliefs. He warned listeners of the overwhelming power of God and of their inability to do much to save their souls. Yet, his preaching triggered a great revival in his community. On the right is the cover from his own account of this revival, which even he seems to have found to be sudden and surprising.

Visual Primary Source Document 3



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-45506.

Information on Document 3

This engraving was published in London in 1763. It criticizes and makes fun of George Whitefield's emotional and evangelical preaching style. In the center, Whitefield stands on a three-legged stool preaching in the open air. A flying imp uses a pipe to pour inspired thoughts in his ear. Hovering on his other side is another evil-spirit, "Fame." This spirit listens to Whitefield's preaching with an ear-trumpet and uses another trumpet

to tell the crowd of the preacher's greed and sinful behavior. Meanwhile, under the stool, the Devil is grasping at gold coins offered as donations by the eager crowd of listeners. Whitefield impressed many with his powerful voice. However, an eye disease gave him a cross-eyed look. This led those who disliked him to call him "Dr. Squintum," the label used for him in this illustration.

Written Primary Source Document 1

Information on Document 4 (Parts 1, 2, and 3)

In May of 1743, a group of New England ministers attacked the revivals for doctrinal errors and emotional excess, which they termed “enthusiasm.” They also criticized the disrespect shown to ministers who did not favor the revivals. However, another group of New England pastors disagreed. They met in Boston on July 7, 1743, to defend the revivals. The three passages below are by this other group of pastors. In their statement, they say the revivals did bring about a real spiritual renewal for many who took part in them.

(A note on spelling and punctuation: The documents in this booklet have been altered only in that some spellings have been modernized, and the punctuation has been simplified to shorten the length of some sentences.)

• Document 4 •

Part 1

[Many in the revivals], were able to give, what appeared to us, a rational account of what so affected their minds—a quick sense of guilt, misery, and danger. And they would often mention passages in the sermons they heard, or particular texts of Scripture, which were set home upon them with such a powerful impression. And as to such whose joys have carried them into transports and ecstasies, they in like manner have accounted for them, from a lively sense of the danger they hoped they were freed from, and the happiness they were now possessed of ... and particularly of the excellencies and loveliness of Jesus Christ, and such sweet tastes of redeeming love, as they never had before.

Part 2

With respect to the numbers of those who have been under the impressions of the present day, we must declare there is good ground to conclude they are becoming real Christians; the account they give of their conviction and

consolation agreeing with the standard of the Holy Scriptures, corresponding with the experiences of the saints, and evidenced by the external fruits of the holiness of their lives.

Part 3

Indeed, it is not to be denied, that in some places many irregularities and extravagances have been permitted to accompany [the revivals]; which we would deeply lament and bewail before God, and look upon ourselves obliged, for the honor of the Holy Spirit, and of his blessed operations on the souls of men, to bear a public and faithful testimony against. Though at the same time it is to be acknowledged with much thankfulness, that in other places where the work has flourished, there have been few, if any, of these disorders and excesses. But who can wonder, if at such time as this, Satan should intermingle himself, to hinder and blemish a work so directly contrary to the interests of his own kingdom?

Written Primary Source Document 2

Information on Document ⁵ (Parts 1, 2, and 3)

Most revivalist preachers were “itinerants” who traveled from place to place giving sermons in fields or town squares. Their visits often left people dissatisfied with their own pastors, who were rarely as exciting as the revivalists. Some church leaders, in turn, saw itinerants as a threat to the religious order and even to authority itself. The passages below are from a 1744 statement that takes this view. The statement was by the president and faculty of Harvard. It was directed specifically at George Whitefield.

Document 05

Part 1

In regard of the danger which we apprehend the people and churches of this land are in, on account of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, we have thought ourselves obliged to bear our testimony, in this public manner, against him and his way of preaching as tending very much to the detriment of religion, and the entire destruction of the order of these churches of Christ, which our fathers have taken such care and pains to settle, as by the Platform, according to which the discipline of the churches of New England is regulated.

Part 2

First then, we charge him with enthusiasm. ... We mean by an enthusiast, one that acts, either according to dreams, or some sudden impulses and impressions upon his mind, which he fondly imagines to be from the spirit of God, persuading and inclining him thereby to such and such actions, though he hath no proof that such persuasions or impressions are from the holy spirit. ... And if such impulses and impressions be not agreeable to our reason, or to the revelation of the mind of God to us, in his Word, nothing can be more dangerous

than conducting ourselves according to them. For otherwise, if we judge not of them by these rules, they may as well be the suggestions of the evil spirit.

Part 3

Now by an itinerant preacher, we understand one that hath no particular charge of his own, but goes about from country to country, or from town to town, in any country and stands ready to preach to any congregation that shall call him to it. And such a one is Mr. W ... [and] all the itinerant preachers who have followed Mr. W's example and thrust themselves into towns and parishes, to the destruction of all peace and order, whereby they have to the great impoverishment of the community, taken the people from their work and business to attend their lectures and exhortations, always fraught with enthusiasm, and other pernicious errors. But what is worse, and it is the natural effect of these things, the people have been thence ready to despise their own ministers, and their usefulness among them, in too many places, hath been almost destroyed.