

# The Great Awakening

One summer day in July 1741, a congregation listened, trembling, to a black-robed minister, preaching from the pulpit of the Entfield, Massachusetts Congregational church. This minister, with dark, piercing eyes aflame with zeal, spoke of fearful things -- of hell, of God's judgment, of the hopelessness of unrepentant sinners: "all you that were never born again and made new creatures, are in the hands of an angry God," he said.

"The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow is made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again and made new creatures, are in the hands of an angry God..."

These powerful words were well aimed. Many of those listening to Edwards were struck with fear and sorrow for their sins. With tears and wailing they repented before the terrible God whose "good pleasure" alone kept them from burning in hell. The fiery preaching of Jonathan Edwards had the same effect everywhere. Since 1734, overcome with enthusiasm, hundreds had chosen to renounce sin and the world and begin their long pilgrimage to heaven.

Jonathan Edwards was at the center of a great Protestant religious revival called the "Great Awakening." Since the mid 17th century, the character of New England Puritanism had changed greatly. Many had grown lax in the practice of their religion. Desire for wealth, power, and honors had replaced Puritan zeal for spiritual goods among them.

Many people in New England had rejected the religious ideas of the Puritans --- called Calvinism after the Protestant reformer, John Calvin. Calvin had taught that only God's "sovereign will" chose who went to heaven and who to hell. Instead of this doctrine, many people came to hold the "Arminian" doctrine (named after a theologian named Arminius), which said that each person has a free will by which he or she can choose or reject salvation. Still other people in New England were beginning to accept a new religion, called Unitarianism, which denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the existence of original sin. Unitarians said man doesn't need God's grace to be good.

Jonathan Edwards opposed both the lack of concern for morality in his society and its rejection of strict Calvinism. Born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut, Edwards was the son of a Congregational minister; his mother's father was the Reverend Solomon Stoddard of Northampton, Massachusetts --- a great preacher who softened some of the harsher aspects of Puritanism in New England. The young Edwards was a genius; at the age of ten he wrote a treatise, titled "Nature of the Soul," and at age 12 he composed another work, called the "Habits of Spiders." Edwards entered Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, at the age of 14 and graduated at the age of 17.

Edwards could have gone far as a philosopher, but at age 17 he had a conversion experience that turned him in the direction of theology and the Congregationalist ministry. After studying theology in New Haven, he served a congregation in New York City, finally becoming assistant minister for his grandfather's congregation in Northampton in 1727. While at Northampton, Edwards was not known as a warm, pastoral minister. Except when there were emergencies among his congregation, he did not spend much time in ministering to them. His chief passion was theology, and he would spend about 14 hours a day in his study. A stout Calvinist, Edwards fought Arminianism with word and pen.

Jonathan Edwards called for conversion so eloquently and ardently in his sermons that, by 1734, hundreds chose to turn from their old lives to seek the kingdom of God. Edwards never promised his listeners an easy road to salvation. The Christian, he taught, had to make great efforts if he hoped to reach heaven. "We should travel on in this way in a laborious manner," Edwards wrote in "The Christian Pilgrim." "Long journeys are attended with toil and fatigue, especially if through a wilderness."

A wave of spiritual fire seemed to have descended upon the Connecticut River Valley. Edwards's "revival" meetings everywhere saw enthusiastic and emotional conversions. In 1736, Edwards wrote *A Faithful Narrative of The Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*, a work that spread through America, England, and (translated) even into Germany. It inspired others to follow Edwards's example. One of those Edwards inspired was the Englishman George Whitefield. After reading the *Narrative* on a journey from Oxford to London, Whitefield dedicated his life to revival preaching in both Great Britain and America.

The Great Awakening had several important effects on colonial life. For one, it kept Puritanism alive for a time; but, more importantly, it made the revival a popular way of expressing religion in America. The Great Awakening led, too, to the establishment of three new universities: the College of New Jersey (Princeton), Dartmouth in New Hampshire, and Brown in Rhode Island. But most importantly, perhaps, the Great Awakening established a popular religion based on the idea that each individual achieves salvation through a personal relationship with God --- not through a church.

The Great Awakening gave the common man a new interest in religion. Because many church leaders in America rejected these revivals, congregations that embraced them broke away and formed "New Light" churches, which later became Baptist or Methodist. These new churches emphasized personal religious experience and the ability of all men, not just ministers and learned theologians, to understand Scripture. The common man now saw himself as equal to the educated ministers of his church -- and if he was equal to his superiors as regards religion, why was he not equal to them in other areas as well? Thus, the Great Awakening influenced the development of an important strain of political thought in America. It helped give rise to democracy.