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## The Great Awakening and the Coming of the American Revolution

Kerry E. Irish  
kirish@georgefox.edu

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**The Great Awakening and the  
Coming of the American Revolution  
By Professor Kerry E. Irish**

It is September 1740, Boston Massachusetts. The town is electric, a great preacher will appear today on the common. Perhaps 15,000 people have gathered to hear the frail young man speak. There are only 17,000 people living in the city that is in the midst of economic hard times. (Kidd, 84, 85) In a surprisingly booming voice the black-clad preacher does not hesitate to warn his listeners of the perils of sin, the sureness of hell, unless they repent and rely solely on Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation. There is much weeping and moaning, at times it drowns out the staccato notes of the impassioned preacher. Some of the people are so moved they fall to the ground. The preacher, George Whitfield, continues his sermon while others attend to the stricken. When he is finished, Whitfield prays for the people of Boston, and, exhausted, retires to his lodgings. Whitfield preached in Boston for only a few days, but he set the stage for a continuing revival that transformed the city. As historian Thomas Kidd has written, “The singular servant (sic) and holy youth’ had led a revival that touched all quarters of Boston society.” And many of Boston’s ministers, themselves moved by the preacher, continued the evangelistic work well after he had departed. (Kidd, 94-98)

The “Great Awakening” was a Christian revival of the mid-Eighteenth century. Dozens of travelling preachers, famous and obscure, along with local ministers, called colonial Americans to a stronger and deeper Christian faith.

The Great Awakening was also a trans-Atlantic event. Charles and John Wesley were leaders of the awakening in England. But it was in America where the movement would have its most profound expression and impact. For the Great Awakening, along with the philosophic and scientific developments of the Enlightenment, transformed American culture socially and politically, setting the stage for the American Revolution.

Late in the previous century a bloody war for survival brought the spiritual condition of the Puritans of New England into sharp focus. In 1675, after two generations of relative peace, the Pokanoket Indians attacked Puritan settlements on the frontier of Massachusetts. The now largely forgotten war eventually included most of the Native American tribes in the area, and all of the English settlers. It was the most devastating war in New England's history; the Puritans were fortunate, they would say blessed by God, to win it.

Most Puritans considered the war to be a punishment from God for their lackadaisical and even sinful lifestyles. The war, then, intensified the concern of many Puritans over their spiritual condition. Faithful ministers increasingly preached sermons called "Jeremiads." These sermons, named after the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, were an attempt to call the people of New England back to a lifestyle pleasing to God. Indeed, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the "Puritan idea of a holy commonwealth in Massachusetts was fading." As one of the great historians of Christianity in America has written, "The ministerial utterances from pulpit and press were...gloomy." (Ahlstrom, 280, 281). Many ministers and leading laymen were concerned about what they believed was the

decline of both faith and morality in New England. But declension may easily be exaggerated, and Puritanism was itself a “vast and extended revival movement.” Few of its “central spirits had ever wandered far from a primary concern for the heart’s inward response” to the call of the Holy Spirit.

(Ahlstrom, 291) But in this case, perception was reality though it was true that the spark of religion had never fully died, and there were minor revivals even in the most apparently comatose times. A natural disaster or an Indian uprising might occasion a revival. (Ahlstrom, 281, 282) In 1727, there was a great earthquake in New England that energized the “most significant stir” of revival before the Jonathan Edwards led beginning of the Great Awakening in 1734. (Kidd, 10)

Indeed, local awakenings or revivals occurred frequently enough that some historians have argued that the term “Great Awakening” is misleading as it suggests something unusual and more organized than it was. But the label has value in describing a Christian revival that was much more than local, that encompassed much of the trans-Atlantic world. And it also represents what the people of the time believed was happening.

### **The Theology of the Great Awakening**

What did the revivalists believe? What did they preach? There are some common themes. First, they believed that the revival was a movement of the Holy Spirit, that it was God ordained. They further believed, in the tradition of John Calvin, that God chose who would be saved, who would respond to the

call to believe in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the individual person had to make a decision. Secondly, a person so responding would “experience” a change of heart and a change of life. This is why they called their version of Christianity an “experiential religion.” Most of the evangelists who preached the revival also believed that the new Christian would know with some certainty that he had received salvation. This was contrary to new England congregationalism in that believers could not say for sure if God had chosen them. The heart of the message included the ideas that Jesus Christ was and is the only Son of God, was born of the virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, was crucified on the cross, dead, and buried, then rose again to life ever-lasting on the third day. Belief in Christ then, absolved a person of sin and resulted in the believer’s eventual reward in heaven. In short, the Great Awakening begins to codify what eventually became American Evangelical Christianity. It is important to note that these evangelical Christians would not have said they were inventing a new version of Christianity, but were emphasizing the truths of the New Testament. Indeed, if one is familiar with the Apostle’s Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, one may see the similarities of theology.

It should come as no surprise to those who understand human nature that the awakening encountered strong opposition. Such was the culture of the western world at the time, and more so in the colonies, that Christianity in general permeated almost everything. It is difficult for a twenty-first century person to understand this. Those opposed to the revival were not only Christian, but leaders of the long-established churches. Charles Chauncy was

head minister of Boston's First Congregational church, and was perhaps the most vocal critic of the movement. The dispute was not over the trinity, or the atoning work of Jesus Christ, or the reality of heaven; it was over how the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, works in the hearts and minds of human beings, and how those human beings relate to one another in the church. This dispute was as old as the Christian faith, and of course it gathered fresh vigor once Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517.

Regarding the first dispute, those who responded to the evangelists often did so emotionally: sighs and groans, crying, falling prostrate, calling aloud on Jesus, falling into trances, and claiming to have visions were all common experiences though not universal. These behaviors were termed "enthusiasm" by opponents of the revival and were thought to be an affront to organized and rational religion (Kidd, 173). Indeed, even the revival preachers were divided over this behavior, the radicals such as James Davenport encouraged it for a season, while the moderates such as Jonathan Edwards discouraged it.

The second objection, which falls under the term ecclesiology (the study of the church) is more complicated. It was still a commonly held belief in the colonies that "the church" was more than the body of believers. Somehow it also encompassed a community. In America, this idea derived largely from Puritanism. But Anglicans and Catholics had their own version of the concept. Each minister had responsibility for his own "parish" so to speak. The Great Awakening challenged this standard because travelling preachers, itinerants,

preached just about wherever they wanted, trespassing, so to speak, on the ground and prerogatives of the local minister. Many of these ministers cooperated with the evangelists, but many did not. Those who refused to cooperate often cited the “enthusiasm” described above, and were offended at the infringement on their own community-based responsibilities and privileges. Relations between the traveling evangelists and many of the parish pastors eventually turned ugly as the itinerants, especially men like Davenport, began calling the ministers who opposed them “un-Christian,” and even “unsaved.” Eventually, the Great Awakening would go a very long way in breaking down the notion of the church as a place, a landed community, and replacing it with the idea that the church, or a church, is a body of Christian believers. In a very real sense, the Great Awakening challenged the structure of colonial society. It would do so in other ways as well.

In summary, the majority of men involved in this dispute were Christians, they differed over how the Holy Spirit moved among people to lead them to Christ, and they differed over the meaning of “the church.”

We turn now to Jonathan Edwards, whom historian Thomas Kidd has called “the greatest American articulator of the evangelical view of God, man, and revival.” (Kidd, 13). Indeed, many scholars regard Edwards as the greatest theologian America has produced. But in this short work we are concerned only with Edward’s role as pastor, preacher and steady-hand of the Great Awakening.

By 1734, Edwards had been pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts for the better part of a decade. In 1731 Edwards noticed that his efforts might be producing some fruit (conversions to Christ). (Marsden, 152) Then in 1734 a revival broke out among a few families under Edward's care in nearby Pascommuck. Then, when a young man died suddenly of pleurisy, "many young people" were deeply touched. This combined with Edward's preaching ignited the revival. (Marsden, 153) Edwards later reported that 300 people had been impacted, virtually all the adults in town. (Marsden, 160) For a moment this near universal harvest of souls seemed to resolve the definition of the church in favor of the old Puritan notion that it included all of the people of the town; the town was the church at work. This was not to be, for a falling away of many converts frustrated Edwards over the next few years. Eventually, he came to the view that only those who could assert a saving faith in Jesus Christ were to be admitted into the church. (Ahlstrom, 305). It was this stand, too demanding for the majority of his congregation, that ultimately led to his dismissal in 1750 (Marsden, 350-361). Note to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: a community church at this time was such a powerful cultural presence that many people, perhaps most, wanted to be members whether or not they held to a sincere Christian faith and lifestyle.

In regard to the second great issue of the Awakening, "enthusiasm," Edwards walked a middle-path which allows for some ambiguity, but he is clear that "we must throw by [away] our Bibles, and give up revealed religion; if this [the revival including enthusiasm] be not in general the work of God."

(Ahlstrom, 302). Using I John 4:2 "...every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God," Edwards argued that new converts may, or may not, be "enthusiastic." He was too Biblically knowledgeable to overlook the book of Acts, chapter two, in which new Christians were thought to be drunk on "new wine," in other words very enthusiastic. On the other hand, some persons went too far: Edwards was thankful when the response of his listeners was largely without excess emotions or dramatic behavior. He was much more impressed with long-lasting evidence of moral regeneration, and understanding of "sound doctrine." (Ahlstrom, 302) Ultimately, Edwards would chastise preachers who encouraged enthusiasm in their listeners.

The Edwards led Northampton revival swept the Connecticut river valley and on into New Jersey. It became a trans-Atlantic event with Edward's publication of *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God ...* in 1737. (Ahlstrom, 301). Because Edwards described it so well, so movingly, the Northampton revival became the model for evangelical revivals in America and even in Europe. (Kidd, 21)

### **George Whitfield in America**

While Jonathan Edwards was certainly the preeminent theologian of the Great Awakening, he was not the most important evangelist. That honor surely belongs to Englishman George Whitfield whose preaching set alight the souls of thousands in his several trips to the American colonies (Kidd, 54).

As we have seen, Whitfield came to America in 1740. He was only 25 years old when he preached at Boston; he had much to learn, but was already a superb preacher whose passion and focus on the New Birth moved thousands of hearts to repentance and a closer walk with Jesus Christ. Whitfield intelligently took advantage of Ben Franklin's friendship and the publicity the well-known printer and publisher could provide. The two together were a formidable team (Dickey, 4, 5, 6, 13) Whitfield described himself as "a friend to any friend of Christ." He did not concern himself much with this or that denomination and also preached to blacks, slave or free, and Indians (Kidd, 52, 53)

Wherever he went, Whitfield sowed controversy as well as the seed of the gospel. The controversies were exactly as described above. It was not unusual for those who heard Whitfield to experience the "enthusiasm" that so alarmed many of the more conservative leaders of the day. In addition, Whitfield thought many of the ministers who opposed him on this point to have no faith in Christ, were essentially unconverted (Dickey, 34, 35, 40). No wonder he was unpopular among many ministers and they often denied him use of their churches. This, of course, was related to the other contentious issue: the nature of the church. Even Jonathan Edwards thought Whitfield went too far in his criticisms, and thought the enthusiasm he engendered was overwrought (Dickey, 74, 75). In later years, Whitfield recognized his failings and became a more moderate voice for the New Birth.

It must be noted that that the great preachers of the awakening were probably not responsible for the majority of conversions. That work was done by the hundreds of local ministers and who overcame their pride and took part in the revival. Whitfield in particular, did not “stay long enough to put a permanent stamp on any particular place” (Kidd, 38, 99). Indeed, the traveling preachers had little to do with one of the great miracles of Awakening: the healing of Mercy Wheeler.

### **The story of Mercy Wheeler**

The healing of Mercy Wheeler was one of the more dramatic and compelling events of the awakening. Mercy was a young woman when, in 1726, she was struck down by a “wasting fever” that left her unable to walk without crutches. She wrote of her long-suffering and Christian faith six years later in *An Address to Young People*; thus Mercy’s handicap was well-known in New England. In 1740, the main period of the Great Awakening began. Mercy requested that a special sermon be preached at her home. In the days before the event, she felt God might do something miraculous for her. She focused on John 11:40, the story of Lazarus, in which Jesus instructs Martha on faith: “Did I not say to you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” As the day of the sermon approached Mercy became evermore convinced God would heal her. Minister Hezekiah Lord spoke that day on Isaiah 57:15:

“...I dwell on a high and holy place,

And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit

In order to revive the spirit of the lowly  
And to revive the heart of the contrite.

Isaiah's promise moved Wheeler to tremble quietly. She could not stop shaking. She tried to speak but no one understood her. Her friends laid her on a bed to make her comfortable. Pastor Lord tried to calm her, but now she spoke clearly that God would heal her. Then again she heard the words of Jesus, "...if you will believe, you will see the glory of God." With these assuring thoughts she lost herself in the promise that God would heal her. The shaking in her hands returned, and the tremors moved up her arms engulfing her entire body. The sensation of renewed strength followed the shaking and soon she felt compelled to rise and walk. As she walked about the room she exclaimed "Bless the Lord Jesus, who has healed me."

The clear healing of Mercy Wheeler helped energize the awakening in New England. It also raised a theological storm. The reformed faith of the Puritan fathers held that miraculous healing ended with Apostolic age. Did the resumption of miracles signify the end of history? Was the second coming of Christ near? Of course, those opposed to the revival and its methods sneered at this display of gullibility by the evangelicals. (Kidd, 162, 163)

### **Other Evangelists**

Gilbert Tennent was perhaps the most powerful colonial evangelist. With his booming voice and fearless sermons, he told the truth about hell and damnation, then offered a reprieve, the grace of Jesus Christ. Upon hearing

Tennent for the first time, George Whitfield acknowledged the man's power and determined to become bolder in his own preaching (Dickey, 21). Tennent was a graduate of Yale, and, in his spare time, helped found the College of New Jersey that would later become Princeton (Kidd, 31, 32). Tennent's style of preaching often led his listeners into that "enthusiasm" that would eventually discredit some of the revivalists and the movement in general. Tennent, like Whitfield, later modified his preaching and theology to minimize "enthusiasm" (Kidd, 147)

It may be that Samuel Hopkins was the most modern – for lack of a better word - of the major figures of the Great Awakening. He was a student of Jonathan Edwards and it was his privilege and pleasure to refine and explain the great man's thought to succeeding generations of Americans (Dickey, 217, 218). Hopkins, following in Edwards footsteps, became a champion of the Christianization of Native Americans, and the forerunner of the evangelical concern for enslaved Americans. As J.D Dickey wrote, "...he came to the conclusion that no other prominent minister of a mainline faith had ever preached in America, slavery was a sin against God..." (Dickey, 250-255). In the midst of the American Revolution, Hopkins argued that the logic of the American fight for freedom must include the abolition of slavery. This view would eventually prevail, but not for nearly a century when it helped bring on the Civil War. (Kidd, 230)

### **Impact of the Great Awakening on American Culture**

The Great Awakening had a tremendous impact on American culture. Indeed, it was a “cultural earthquake” (Ahlstrom, 294, Dickey, xvi, 16). George Whitfield taught evangelicals to challenge colonial officials, upsetting public order (Dickey, 82, 106, 132, 146-150, 184). The wealthy and powerful, those who had prospered with the traditional social, religious, and political system, felt threatened. It seemed the Anglican or Congregational control of society was slipping away under the tidal wave of religious freedom (Dickey, 174) Secular historians miss the significance of the cultural change in the decades before the American Revolution because many of them are not interested in religion, especially Christianity. So they discount the significance of the Christian faith. The truth was that evangelical Christianity, the Christianity of the Great Awakening, was an incredibly important antecedent of the American Revolution (Dickey, xviii, xvix, Kidd, 306, 307). Indeed, some scholars believe that evangelicalism was the most subversive movement in the colonies before the revolution (Kidd, 289). I would not go quite that far. Enlightenment thought regarding the rights of men and role of government was more subversive than evangelical Christianity. But that faith was a close second. The two together formed an incendiary environment that British high-handedness would spark into revolution.

### **Impact of the Great Awakening on the revolutionary spirit.**

The revolutionary cause may not have had sufficient public support to be successful were it not for evangelicals. Even as it was, the Revolution was

nearly lost many times before it was finally won. Taken as a whole, about one-third of the English colonists in America supported the revolution, about one-third wavered back and forth, and about one third were opposed – remained loyal to King and country. The large majority of evangelicals supported the revolution. Thus evangelicals were a large and indispensable subset of revolutionary Americans. These people saw political “rights of conscience” as being closely aligned with religious rights of conscience (Kidd, 287, 289). Evangelical ministers like Isaac Backus were powerful and persuasive preachers of revolutionary Christianity. And Christian political rhetoric, even its enthusiastic preaching style, was persuasive among non-evangelicals. The great orator and patriot himself, Patrick Henry, drew much inspiration and style from evangelical preachers (Kidd, 290, 291, 294)

Moreover, the impact of evangelical Christianity was not confined to the leaders of the revolution. Historian J.D. Dickey has made the salient point that “the common people would not have fought so vigorously in American armies against the British, would not have sacrificed their lives and livelihoods, only on behalf of Enlightenment philosophies, or anger over taxation, or dislike for trade mandates.” Indeed, average Americans were more concerned with what they believed was cosmic struggle between good and evil, “a war between God’s armies and those of Satan” (Dickey, xxii)

No wonder then that on the eve of an American invasion of British Quebec in 1775, some American officers led members of the invading army to the tomb of George Whitfield, buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts since his

death five years before. They opened the crypt and many of the men took “relics” off the body, a piece of clothing etc., apparently hoping to garner the great preacher’s support, Catholic style, for the invasion. It did not avail them; the invasion was a disaster (Kidd, 288).

While the majority of evangelicals supported the revolution, those opposed to the revolution more often than not also opposed the Great Awakening (Dickey, 187) The Quebec Act of 1774, which the American colonists feared might be a template of some future act of parliament pertaining to the American colonies, threatened to deprive them of religious freedom and self-government (Kidd, 300). There were notable exceptions to the above generalization. The aforementioned Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston’s First Church and perhaps the Awakening’s greatest critic, was also a powerful voice for the revolution (Dickey, 271, 272)

Academics did not hold themselves aloof in these passionate times. Princeton was a “bastion” of the revival (Dickey, 217, 219) and a breeding ground of revolutionaries (Dickey, 217, 219, 224) John Witherspoon, president of the school from 1768-1794, was a member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence (Kidd, 297). Though by no means an academic, but highly educated, Boston’s Sam Adams, one of the leaders of the Sons of Liberty, was motivated by both the Great Awakening and his reading of the ancient philosophers. For Adams, deeply concerned with the evident moral decline in New England (as was Ben Franklin), there was no separating religion from “public liberty” (Dickey, 270).

Contrary to the authors of the 1619 Project, the American Revolution was not about the preservation of slavery in the colonies, but the establishment of political liberty. Nevertheless, slavery was an aspect of the war in that the British attempted to use slavery as a lever to win the war: they promised freedom to slaves who fought for them. This did turn many slaves in favor of Great Britain (Kidd, 305) Meanwhile, many evangelical patriots, among them Samuel Hopkins, argued for the end of slavery in America (Kidd, 302).

### **Impact of the Great Awakening on American Evangelical Christianity**

The Great Awakening transformed American Christianity. This is not to suggest that there were few Christians in the American colonies before the awakening as some of the more radical preachers suggested. But the Great Awakening did change how most Americans understood the process of salvation, of justification by faith; and how they understood the nature and role of the church in society. Before the Great Awakening, Christians were attempting to build the church as the foundation of community, everyone in the community was to belong to the church. Believers grew up in the church and may have lived their entire lives as Christians without being able to identify a precise moment in which they committed themselves to Christ. The new evangelicals rejected those two concepts for what they would have described as a New Testament faith. First one must be “born again” as Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:3, and only those born again are then

members of the universal church which is a spiritual kingdom not an earthly community. As Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

“Born again” Christianity would be the foundation of how American evangelicals would see themselves, the church, and the world. It is the foundation of Evangelical Christianity in the world today.

### **Summary**

The Great Awakening created modern evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christians then and now believed they were re-establishing a more Biblical faith, just as the Protestants of the Reformation two-hundred years before believed they were not inventing something new, but returning to a New-Testament faith.

In the creation of this widespread evangelicalism, the social and political culture of the colonies was transformed. Elites were no longer unchallenged, the old ways no longer sacrosanct. If religion in the colonies could become so unsettled, so changeable, politics was now in play. Indeed, the Great Awakening set the stage for the American Revolution: a political revolution that would change the world.

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