

The Great Awakening

The early colonial settlers were predominantly Protestant denominations despite there being Catholics in Maryland and the cities of New York and Boston having small Jewish populations.

Colony or Area	Protestant Denomination
New England	Presbyterian
New York	Dutch Reformed
Pennsylvania	Lutherans, Mennonites, Quakers
Virginia	Anglican (Church of England)
Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut	Congregationalists

During Puritan times, sermons given in churches on Sundays stressed sinfulness and the perils of damnation but during the first decades of the 18th century, the trend had changed to long, intellectual speeches portraying God as a kind and gentle creator of a perfectly ordered universe. This form of preaching led to religious complacency and was about to change.

In the 1730s, **The Great Awakening** rapidly took hold of the population. This movement saw the return to passionate, zealous and often fanatical expressions of religious feeling among the masses. The Great Awakening lasted from the 1730s to the 1740s and had a profound effect and impact on society.

Jonathan Edwards

The Reverend Jonathan Edwards was a Congregationalist minister from Massachusetts who wrote down many of his sermons that later were published. His most famous was written in 1741 – “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards used scriptures from the Old Testament to argue that God was angry at the human sinfulness he saw. He proclaimed that repentance was needed in order to be saved from his wrath. Anyone who did not follow his word would have their soul face eternal damnation.

George Whitefield

He was an Englishman who arrived in colonial America in 1739. He was a circuit preacher who toured the New England colonies, often speaking to crowds of 10,000 or more. His sermons were rousing and proclaimed the hellish torments of the damned. He stressed that God was all-powerful and would only save those who believed in Jesus Christ (the New Testament). Failures would be cast down to hell. Whitefield also preached that people did not need ministers to tell them how to be religious and forthright.

The Great Awakening impacted colonial America in several ways:-

- Protestant services became “emotional” events with the congregations loudly exalting their salvations
- Ministers, thanks to Whitefield, lost some of their authority as people now studied the Bible at home
- A split within the Protestant Church took effect. Those who supported the teachings of The Great Awakening became known as “New Lights” and those who opposed this radical form of religion became known as “Old Lights.”
- New sects of Protestant churches emerged such as the Baptists and Methodists
- The old-fashioned church communities now faced competition to fill the pews on a weekly basis

In addition, The Great Awakening changed political and social life in the colonies. The movement affected every social class of colonial society, regardless of their national origins. People now shared a common experience as Americans. This further changed their view on authority. As people now believed they did not need preachers or a “higher authority” for their religion, they carried this forward to their political belief about having a Mother Country as a higher authority that was no longer needed.

Education expanded due to The Great Awakening. Higher education colleges and universities were opened to teach theology and graduate future ministers into colonial society.

Harvard , Cambridge, Mass.	1636	Presbyterian
William and Mary , Virginia	1694	Anglican
Yale , Connecticut	1701	Congregationalist
Princeton (College of New Jersey)	1746	Presbyterian
Columbia (King’s College)	1754	Anglican
Brown (Rhode Island)	1764	Baptist
Rutgers (Queens College)	1766	Dutch Reformed
Dartmouth College	1769	Congregationalist

These colleges also graduated professional people who advanced colonial society by becoming lawyers and doctors.

Only one nonsectarian college was founded, the **College of Philadelphia** (later becoming the University of Pennsylvania). This had no religious affiliations as it was a medical school and of note was one of its co-founders, Benjamin Franklin.