

The Great Awakening: Preaching That Crossed the Colonies

US History - Unit 2: Colonial America

Learning Targets

- ★ Explain what the Great Awakening was and when it swept the colonies.
- ★ Describe how traveling preachers reached crowds no building could hold.
- ★ Analyze a 1741 sermon for the techniques that moved its listeners.
- ★ Explain why the new preaching split colonists into two rival camps.
- ★ Evaluate how one shared event helped link the colonies together.

One Colony, One Official Faith

established church

The church a colony's government supported with tax money and law.

congregation

The group of people who regularly worship at one particular church.

Key Concept: Most colonies before 1740 taxed everyone to support one official church.

Worried Ministers, Emptier Pews

- By the 1720s many ministers worried devotion was fading fast.
- Younger colonists had not lived through the founders' fervor.
- Growing farms and towns spread families from worship sites.
- Trade and land competed hard for attention ministers wanted.
- Some preachers tried plainer, more urgent sermons to wake listeners.

Note: Ministers called this problem a cooling of religion, not a loss of belief.

Fire in the Connecticut Valley, 1734

revival

A large gathering held to stir up religious feeling, often lasting several days.

conversion

A personal change of heart in which a person claims a new religious commitment.

Did You Know: Edwards counted roughly 300 new professions of faith in Northampton within six months.

The Preacher Who Would Not Stay Put

itinerant

A preacher who traveled from town to town instead of leading one settled church.

denomination

A distinct religious group with its own name, organization, and beliefs.

Key Concept: Whitefield preached in nearly every colony from Georgia to New Hampshire between 1739 and 1741.

Crowds No Building Could Hold

Outdoor crowds

- Fields held thousands no meetinghouse could fit.
- Whitefield preached outdoors across every colony.
- Crowds sometimes topped several thousand people.

Franklin's test

- Franklin walked back until words blurred.
- He guessed how far the voice could reach.
- His estimate ran past thirty thousand people.

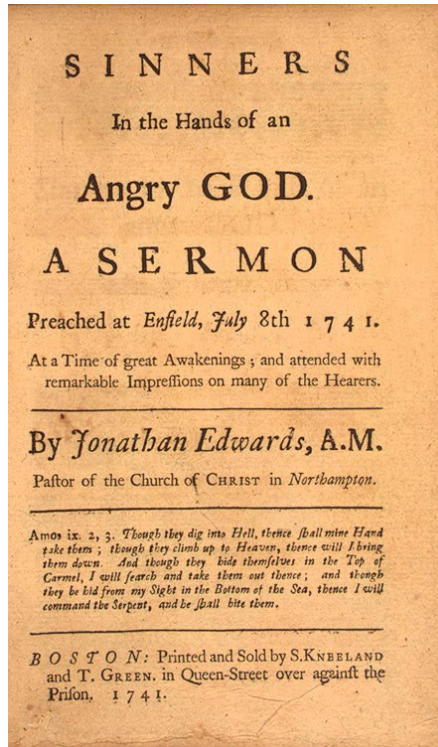
Fun Fact: Franklin estimated Whitefield's voice could reach over thirty thousand listeners in the open air.

Enfield, July 8, 1741

- On July 8, 1741, Edwards preached this sermon in Enfield, Massachusetts.
- Witnesses reported loud crying and people gripping the pews.
- Accounts say Edwards read it in an even voice, not a shout.
- The sermon was printed in Boston later that same year.
- Historians study it as a case in colonial preaching's reach.

Warning: Edwards's imagery is intense - the excerpt is presented as rhetoric to study, not belief to adopt.

The Sermon in Print



The 1741 Boston printing: 'At a Time of great Awakenings'

How the Preaching Worked

Concrete Comparison

- Compared sinners to a spider over flame.
- Turned an abstract warning into a picture.
- Made danger feel close and physical.

Direct Address

- Spoke straight to 'you,' not people generally.
- Made each listener feel personally named.
- Turned the sermon into a private address.

Urgency and Repetition

- Stressed danger as immediate, not distant.
- Repeated key phrases to build pressure.
- Words like 'now' pushed listeners to act.

Tip: Ask which technique students think worked hardest on a colonial audience, then test it against the Activity.

A Divided Pulpit

New Light

A colonist who supported the awakening and the emotional preaching it brought.

Old Light

A colonist who rejected the awakening as disorderly and its preachers as unlearned.

Remember: Neither side is the villain here - both defended what they believed proper worship required.

Voices Without a Pulpit

exhorter

An unordained speaker who urged listeners to repent, often outside any pulpit.

dissenter

A colonist who left the official colonial church to worship in another way.

Did You Know: Some colonies briefly restricted unlicensed preaching in response to traveling exhorters.

Growing Churches, Founding Colleges



New churches

Supporters who could not accept an old minister's stance started churches of their own.



Baptist growth

Churches that required a personal profession of faith grew quickly in the decades after 1741.



Presbyterian split

Presbyterians split into rival synods over the new preaching before reuniting later.



New colleges

Supporters founded colleges that became Princeton, Dartmouth, and Brown to train preachers.

Key Concept: A single argument over preaching style reorganized colonial religious life for a generation.

Before and After

Category	Before the 1730s	By the 1750s
Membership	Inherited by family and standing	A personal choice to join
Preaching style	Calm, reasoned, from a settled pulpit	Urgent and emotional, often outdoors
Local authority	One tax-supported church per town	Rival churches compete for members
Colonial contact	Colonies mostly went separate ways	A shared event linked distant colonies

Note: The right column describes debate and change, not universal agreement - many colonists kept the older pattern.

One Story in Thirteen Places

What carried it

- Printed sermons sold across colony lines.
- Newspapers tracked Whitefield's tour by colony.
- Whitefield preached in nearly every colony.

What it created

- Colonists argued about the same distant event.
- News rarely crossed that many colonies at once.
- It was a rare shared experience across colonies.

Fact: Colonial newspapers before this rarely covered news from more than one or two other colonies.

What Historians Argue About

- Some historians say the awakening taught habits of questioning authority.
- Others counter that religious dissent and political revolt differ.
- Revivals peaked in the 1740s - the Revolution began roughly thirty years later.
- Not disputed: colonists organized and argued across colony lines.
- This lesson leaves the debate open - historians still disagree.

Note: No single cause explains the Revolution - treat this connection as one thread historians debate.

Key Takeaways

- ★ Revivals and traveling preachers reshaped religion, 1730s-1750s.
- ★ Edwards's 1741 Enfield sermon shows preaching's persuasive techniques.
- ★ The new preaching split colonists into New Light and Old Light camps.
- ★ The split built new meetinghouses, faster-growing groups, and new colleges.
- ★ Printed sermons and touring preachers linked colonists across colonies.