

# The Great Awakening

AP.USH:  
ARC (Theme)

KC-2.2.1.A (KC)

Unit 2: Learning Objective H

An explosion in religious revivalism rocked both England and the American colonies in the eighteenth century.

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## Overview

- The **Great Awakening** was an outburst of Protestant Revivalism in the eighteenth century.
- The beliefs of the **New Lights** of the First Great Awakening competed with the more conservative religion of the first colonists, who were known as **Old Lights**.
- The religious fervor in Great Britain and her North American colonies bound the eighteenth-century British Atlantic together in a shared, common experience.

## The First Great Awakening

During the 18th century, the British Atlantic experienced an outburst of Protestant revivalism known as the **First Great Awakening** (a [Second Great Awakening](#) took place in the 1800s). During the First Great Awakening, evangelists came from the ranks of several Protestant denominations: Congregationalists, Anglicans—members of the Church of England—and Presbyterians. They rejected what appeared to be

sterile, formal modes of worship in favor of a vigorous emotional religiosity.

Whereas [Martin Luther](#) and [John Calvin](#) had preached a doctrine of **predestination** and close reading of scripture, new evangelical ministers spread a message of personal and experiential faith that rose above mere book learning. Individuals could bring about their own salvation by accepting Christ, an especially welcome message for those who had felt excluded by traditional Protestantism: women, the young, and people at the lower end of the social spectrum.

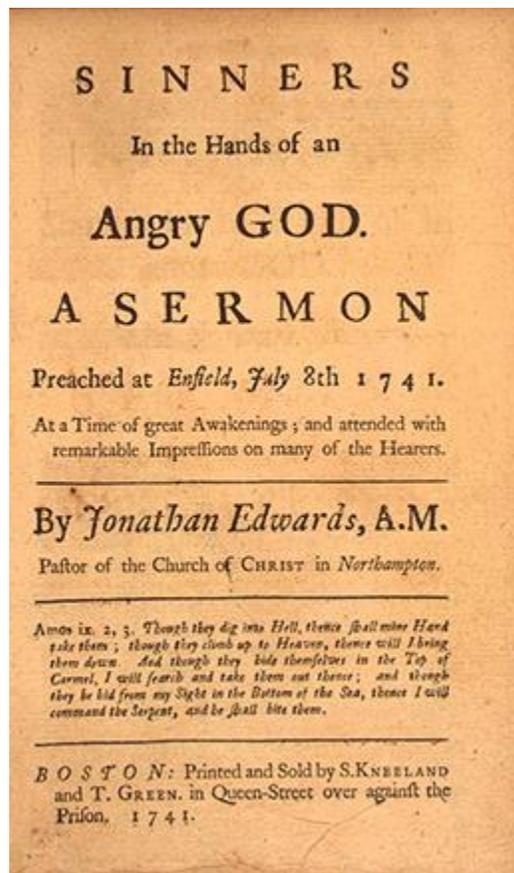
The First Great Awakening caused a split between those who followed the evangelical message—the **New Lights**—and those who rejected it—the **Old Lights**. The elite ministers in British America were firmly Old Lights, and they censured the new revivalism as chaos.

One outburst of Protestant revivalism began in New Jersey, led by a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church named Theodorus Frelinghuysen. Frelinghuysen's example inspired other ministers, including Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian. Tennant helped to spark a Presbyterian revival in the Middle Colonies—Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey—in part by founding a seminary to train other evangelical clergyman. New Lights also founded colleges in Rhode Island and New Hampshire that would later become Brown University and Dartmouth College.

## **Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield**

In Northampton, Massachusetts, **Jonathan Edwards** led still another explosion of evangelical fervor. Edwards's best-known sermon, "Sinners

in the Hands of an Angry God”, used powerful imagery to describe the terrors of hell and the possibilities of avoiding damnation by personal conversion. One passage reads: “The wrath of God burns against them [sinners], their damnation don’t slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened her mouth under them.” Edwards’s revival spread along the Connecticut River Valley, and news of the event spread rapidly through the frequent reprinting of his famous sermon.



The frontispiece of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8, 1741"

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The foremost evangelical of the Great Awakening was an Anglican minister named George Whitefield (pronounced "whit-field"). Like many evangelical ministers, Whitefield was itinerant, traveling the countryside instead of having his own church and congregation. Between 1739 and 1740, he electrified colonial listeners with his brilliant oratory.

The Great Awakening saw the rise of several Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists—who emphasized adult baptism of converted Christians rather than infant baptism. These new churches gained converts and competed with older Protestant groups like Anglicans, members of the Church of England; Congregationalists, the heirs of Puritanism in America; and Quakers. The influence of these older Protestant groups, such as the New England Congregationalists, declined because of the Great Awakening. Nonetheless, the Great Awakening touched the lives of thousands on both sides of the Atlantic and provided a shared experience in the 18th-century British Empire.