

The First Great Awakening

*Edwards at Northampton, Whitefield in the open air, Tennent splitting the Presbyterians
— the revival that remade American Protestantism • c. 1734–1745*

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 20 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — a supplementary lesson covering the revival of the 1730s and 1740s in the American colonies. This is the first time a recognizably *American* Christianity enters our story. The Awakening’s theology rests on **Calvin (Lesson 16)** and the **Puritan inheritance (Lesson 18)**; its British parallel is John Wesley, whose conversion on **24 May 1738** is Noll’s ninth turning point and our next lesson. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

On 8 July 1741, in a packed meeting-house at Enfield, Connecticut, a small, bookish Massachusetts pastor stood up in the pulpit in the afternoon and began to read a sermon in a quiet, deliberate voice. He did not shout. He did not gesture. His twenty-eight-year-old wife Sarah at home was, at that moment, in a protracted ecstatic state over the presence of God. Within ten minutes of his reading, his Enfield congregation was so broken by conviction of sin that he had to stop preaching multiple times to quiet them enough to continue. People were moaning, sobbing, crying out, collapsing on the floor. Grown men were gripping the pillars of the meeting-house as though afraid they would slide into hell before the closing prayer. The sermon was “**Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.**” The pastor was **Jonathan**

Edwards. And the Great Awakening, already four years old in scattered places, had reached its defining moment.

The Awakening did not start in a New England pulpit. It started quietly in Dutch Reformed parishes in New Jersey under Theodorus Frelinghuysen in the 1720s; spread through Scots-Irish Presbyterian parishes in the Middle Colonies under the Tennent family; ignited suddenly in Jonathan Edwards’s parish at Northampton, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1734–35; and exploded across the colonies during the seven preaching tours of a young English Anglican evangelist named **George Whitefield** between 1739 and 1770. By the early 1740s, colonial newspapers were reporting conversions in towns and villages from Georgia to Maine. Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia was printing Whitefield’s sermons and emptying his pockets into the offering. Denominational lines were bending. The Presbyterians split. The Congregationalists split. The Baptists grew. New colleges were founded (Princeton, Dartmouth, Brown, Rutgers). And for the first time, Americans up and down the coast discovered that they shared a common evangelical Christian identity — an identity that, forty years later, would help make revolution possible.

This is the lesson about how American Protestant evangelicalism was born.

Greek NT (John 3:6–7): το ἑγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς σὰρξ ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ ἑγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος πνεῦμά ἐστιν. μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι· δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.

John 3:6–7 (ESV): “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Jesus’ phrase to Nicodemus, *γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν* (“born again” or “born from above”), became the signature phrase of the Awakening. Every evangelical testimony you have ever heard descends, in substantial part, from it.

PART 1 — THE WORLD THE AWAKENING BEGAN IN

In 1730 the American colonies were still thoroughly religious societies — legally, socially, and calendrically. But three things made colonial Protestantism vulnerable to a revival:

- **Formalism.** Second- and third-generation New England Congregationalists, who by the 1730s had been in America almost a century, often practiced a serious but unconverted Christianity: church attendance was compulsory, the Halfway Covenant of 1662 allowed baptized non-communicants to have their children baptized, and formal religious observance substituted for personal conversion. Church membership required, in theory, a credible testimony of saving grace; in practice, the experience was often missing.

- **Enlightenment rationalism.** Educated urban clergy — especially in Boston — were increasingly drifting toward a reasonable, moralistic Christianity influenced by John Locke, Isaac Newton, and early deist thought. A minister like Charles Chauncy of Boston’s First Church considered himself orthodox but had little patience for what he called “enthusiasm” (any claim to direct experience of the Holy Spirit).

- **Scots-Irish immigration.** Roughly 250,000 Ulster Scots had emigrated to the Middle Colonies (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, the Carolinas) between 1710 and 1775. Many were devout Presbyterians disposed to experiential religion. They needed ministers, and the few they had were already pressing toward revival.

The Puritan backdrop. American Protestantism in 1730 was overwhelmingly Reformed in theology — Congregationalist in New England, Presbyterian in the Middle Colonies, Anglican in the South, Dutch Reformed in New York and New Jersey, with scattered Baptists, Quakers, and Lutherans. Two generations earlier, Increase and Cotton Mather and Solomon Stoddard had already been complaining about spiritual decline. By 1730 the question was not whether revival was needed but whether it would come.

PART 2 — THE PRE-AWAKENING SPARKS (1720S–1734)

The revival did not begin as a single event. Four pre-Awakening sparks lit the larger fire:

Theodorus Frelinghuysen (1691–1747) — New Jersey

DUTCH REFORMED PASTOR IN THE RARITAN VALLEY • PIETIST
FORMATION IN THE NETHERLANDS • BEGAN PREACHING
CONVERSIONISM IN THE 1720S

First spark

Pietist

Often considered the earliest Great Awakening revivalist in America. Arriving in 1720, Frelinghuysen insisted that nominal Dutch Reformed parishioners in New Brunswick, Raritan, and Six Mile Run be born again — preaching conversion on a Continental Pietist model that shocked his congregations and his conservative colleagues alike. By the late 1720s his church was producing visible conversions; Gilbert Tennent, passing through in 1727 on his way to his first Presbyterian pastorate, was deeply impressed.

William Tennent Sr. and the “Log College” (c. 1727–1742)

ULSTER-SCOTS PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER AT NESHAMINY,
PENNSYLVANIA • TRAINED FOUR SONS AND DOZENS OF OTHER YOUNG
MEN IN THE MINISTRY

Log College

New Side Presbyterians

William Tennent Sr. built a simple log cabin at Neshaminy to train young Presbyterians for ministry — a seminary his opponents derisively called “the Log College.” Its graduates included William’s four preacher sons (Gilbert, William Jr., John, Charles), Samuel Blair, Samuel Finley, John Rowland, and others — the core of what became the evangelical “New Side” Presbyterian movement. The Log College was the direct ancestor of Princeton, founded in 1746.

Northampton Revival (Winter 1734–Spring 1735)

JONATHAN EDWARDS’S PARISH IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS • SMALL-
SCALE BUT INTENSELY DOCUMENTED

Local but decisive

The Connecticut River Valley town of Northampton (pop. about 1,100) had been pastored for 55 years by Edwards’s grandfather Solomon Stoddard, who died in 1729. His grandson-successor Edwards preached a series on justification by faith in the fall and winter of 1734. Beginning in December 1734, conversions began spreading through Northampton at extraordinary speed. By the end of spring 1735, Edwards counted about 300 conversions in his town alone — probably most of the adult population. The

revival spread through a dozen neighboring towns over the summer of 1735 before fading.

1737 • Edwards publishes *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*. The book becomes a transatlantic bestseller; Isaac Watts and John Guyse edit the English edition. John Wesley reads it in 1738 and credits it as one of the influences on his own conversion. The book persuades pastors on both sides of the Atlantic that revival is possible again.

PART 3 — JONATHAN EDWARDS (1703–1758)

Jonathan Edwards

BORN 5 OCTOBER 1703, EAST WINDSOR, CONNECTICUT • YALE 1720 • PASTOR AT NORTHAMPTON 1727–1750 • MISSIONARY AT STOCKBRIDGE 1751–1758 • DIED 22 MARCH 1758

Greatest American theologian

Northampton

Calvinist

Jonathan Edwards is widely considered the most brilliant theological mind America has produced. He entered Yale at 13, graduated as valedictorian at 17, and experienced his own conversion around age 17–18 while reading 1 Timothy 1:17 (“Now to the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God...”) and finding himself “swallowed up in God.” He served briefly in a Presbyterian church in New York, tutored at Yale, and in 1727 became his grandfather Stoddard’s assistant at Northampton, succeeding him in 1729.

The same year he married **Sarah Pierpont**, a young woman he had noticed years earlier and described in a famous paragraph he wrote on the flyleaf of a book:

“They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is beloved of that Great Being who made and rules the world... She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly, and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her.”

— Jonathan Edwards on Sarah Pierpont, written c. 1723 when he was 20 and she was 13

They married in 1727 when Sarah was 17 and Jonathan 24. Their home became one of the most remarkable pastoral households in American church history, with eleven children and a visibly shared spiritual life. Samuel Hopkins, who boarded with them, wrote that he had “never seen so happy a marriage.”

Edwards’s major works (just the essentials):

- ***A Faithful Narrative* (1737)**. The sober, careful account of the Northampton revival that persuaded the transatlantic Reformed world.

- **“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)**. His most famous sermon; see Part 4.

- ***The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* (1742)**. Careful defenses of the revival against both its radical supporters and Charles Chauncy’s attacks.

- ***Religious Affections* (1746)**. Edwards’s masterpiece on distinguishing true conversion from false. His twelve signs of gracious affections are still used in evangelical discipleship today. See Part 9.

- ***The Life of David Brainerd* (1749)**. Edited from the young missionary’s diaries; became perhaps the most influential missionary biography in Protestant history.

- ***Freedom of the Will* (1754)**. A tour de force of Reformed philosophical theology defending compatibilist freedom against Arminian libertarianism.

- ***Original Sin* (1758, posthumous)**. The Augustinian/Calvinist doctrine defended against 18th-century Enlightenment liberalism.

Edwards's dismissal and late years. In 1750, after a bitter dispute with his congregation over admission to the Lord's Supper (Edwards insisted on credible evidence of conversion; Stoddard had admitted unconverted members; Edwards's congregation sided with their grandfather-pastor), Edwards was dismissed by a 200-to-20 vote after 23 years as their pastor. He and his large family moved west to **Stockbridge**, a frontier outpost where he served as missionary to the Housatonic Indians and wrote his most philosophically demanding works. In early 1758 he reluctantly accepted the presidency of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). He died five weeks after arrival from complications of a smallpox inoculation — one of the first Americans to die in the cause of a medical innovation. He was 54.

Edwards's last recorded words, to his daughter Lucy as she stood weeping at his bedside: *"Trust in God, and you need not fear."*

PART 4 — "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD" (8 JULY 1741)

The single most famous sermon in American history was preached not by Edwards in his own Northampton pulpit but as a guest preacher at Enfield, Connecticut — a town whose population had seemed resistant to the revival sweeping the surrounding region. Edwards had preached the same sermon at Northampton a few weeks earlier to less dramatic effect. On 8 July 1741, the Holy Spirit did something extraordinary with the Enfield congregation.

The text: Deuteronomy 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time" — God's warning that his enemies stand on slippery ground, liable to fall at any moment.

The sermon's structure. Edwards spent the first half outlining ten reasons why the wicked are preserved from hell only moment by moment: they have no power of their own, no righteousness, no cover, no natural help, no guarantee of tomorrow. The second half applies these to the unconverted in the congregation, line by line. The famous image reads:

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD • 8 JULY 1741

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked... The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not 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...

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in. It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder..."

Four things most Americans do not know about this sermon.

1. Edwards did not shout it. Every eyewitness report describes him reading it in a quiet, even, deliberately unemotional voice, holding the manuscript close to his nearsighted eyes. The drama was not in his delivery; it was in the content and the moment.

2. The sermon is not chiefly about hell. It is about God's *patient mercy*. The central logical move is that the unconverted are *already* over the pit, held by nothing but God's hand; the sermon urges them to seize God's offered Savior *now*, before the thread breaks. Every verse of its application points to Christ.

3. Edwards was a careful exegete. Every image has a scriptural reference — the slender thread, the spider, the furnace, the bow bent with arrow drawn, the lifted hand, the bottomless pit. He was not improvising.

4. Most of Edwards's sermons were nothing like this. The bulk of his surviving 1,200 sermons are warmly pastoral, Christ-centered, and heaven-directed. "Sinners" is famous because it survives in high schools and because of what happened at Enfield. It is not representative of his pulpit.

The aftermath at Enfield. Stephen Williams, a visiting minister, recorded that Edwards had to pause his reading multiple times because the cries of the congregation were too loud to

continue. “The shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing... What shall I do to be saved? Oh I am going to hell! Oh what shall I do for Christ?” By evening the Enfield minister reported numerous conversions. The sermon became, for better or worse, the single text that has shaped American public memory of the First Great Awakening.

PART 5 — GEORGE WHITEFIELD (1714–1770)

George Whitefield — the Grand Itinerant

BORN 16 DECEMBER 1714, GLOUCESTER, ENGLAND • OXFORD 1732–36 •
ORDAINED ANGLICAN PRIEST 1736 • PREACHED APPROX. 18,000
SERMONS • DIED 30 SEPTEMBER 1770, NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS

Itinerant evangelist

Open-air preaching

Calvinist Methodist

If Edwards was the Awakening’s theologian, Whitefield was its voice. He was born to a Gloucester innkeeper’s family, worked behind the bar as a child, and won a scholarship to Pembroke College, Oxford. There he joined the “Holy Club” organized by Charles and John Wesley. Through Charles’s mentorship he experienced his own conversion in 1735, while reading Henry Scougal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. He was ordained deacon in 1736 at 21 — the canonical minimum age — and began preaching in London churches with astonishing effect. Within months he was the most sought-after young preacher in England.

What Whitefield did that was new.

- **He preached in the open air.** When Bristol’s pulpits closed to him in 1739 because of his “enthusiasm,” he began preaching to the Kingswood coal miners in a field. On 17 February 1739 he preached to about 200 miners; within six weeks he was preaching to crowds of 20,000. It was the birth of modern open-air evangelism. John Wesley, who initially thought it was vulgar, adopted it after visiting and watching.

- **He preached transdenominationally.** Whitefield was a lifelong Anglican priest, but he preached in Congregational meeting-houses, Presbyterian kirks,

Baptist barns, Dutch Reformed sanctuaries, and open fields interchangeably. “Father Abraham,” he would say, mimicking Jesus in Luke 16, “have you any Baptists in heaven? Any Presbyterians? Any Congregationalists?” The answer — “none of those names are known here; we are all Christians” — was the Awakening’s signature ecclesiology.

- **He preached to America.** Between 1738 and his death in 1770 he crossed the Atlantic seven times. His **second American tour (1739–1741)** was the one that transformed the colonies. From Georgia through South Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, he preached daily to crowds ranging from hundreds to twenty thousand. The crowd at Boston Common on 12 October 1740 was reported at 23,000 — larger than the population of Boston itself — drawn from miles around.

- **He used the press brilliantly.** Whitefield announced his tours in advance in the colonial newspapers. He published journals of his travels as he went. He was the first religious figure in American history to manage his own publicity. The revival spread through print as much as through voice.

Whitefield’s preaching style. He had a sonorous baritone capable of reaching the edges of a crowd of thousands without amplification (David Garrick, the greatest actor of the age, reportedly said he would give a hundred guineas to be able to pronounce the word “Mesopotamia” the way Whitefield did). He preached with theatrical gestures, tears, physical expressiveness, and extemporaneous freedom. Unlike Edwards’s careful written sermons, Whitefield usually preached from brief notes or from memory. Eyewitnesses describe his sermons as emotionally overwhelming.

“Works? Works? A man get to heaven by his own works? I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand.”

— **George Whitefield, attributed sermon saying, c. 1740**

His death. On the evening of 29 September 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Whitefield preached a two-hour open-air sermon from the steps of a parsonage, with a candle held beside

him as the sun set. He collapsed that night from an asthma attack and died at dawn. He was 55. He is buried in the crypt of the Old South Presbyterian Church at Newburyport.

“Let the name of Whitefield perish, if only God be glorified.”

— **George Whitefield, characteristic sentiment reported often by his friends**

PART 6 — GILBERT TENNENT & THE PRESBYTERIAN SPLIT

Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764)

ELDEST SON OF WILLIAM TENNENT SR. • PRESBYTERIAN PASTOR AT NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J., AND PHILADELPHIA • HARDEST-EDGED OF THE AWAKENING’S PREACHERS

New Side leader

Unconverted ministry

Gilbert Tennent was the iron of the Awakening. Deeply influenced by Frelinghuysen, trained at his father’s Log College, and familiar with the worst kind of formal unconverted ministry in the Presbyterian parishes of the Middle Colonies, Tennent preached the Awakening’s sharpest critique: that *many ministers were themselves unconverted*, and that ordinary believers should travel, if necessary, to hear a converted one.

On 8 March 1740, at Nottingham, Pennsylvania, Tennent delivered “**The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry**” — a sermon on 2 Corinthians 11:13 (“false apostles”). The sermon compared unconverted ministers to Pharisees, to the blind leading the blind, to hirelings. It told parishioners stuck with such ministers that they had every right to leave for the preaching of a converted one, even on another side of the parish line:

“To bind men to a particular minister, against their judgment and inclinations, when they are in no doubt of his being a Pharisee, is carnal, and is the way to destroy all religion... Pharisee-Teachers will with the utmost hate oppose the very Power of Godliness.”

— Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, 8 March 1740

The sermon split the Presbyterian Church in America. In 1741 the Synod of Philadelphia expelled Tennent's Presbytery of New Brunswick. For the next seventeen years there were two rival American Presbyterian synods: the conservative **Old Side** (traditional, order-minded, suspicious of revival) and the evangelical **New Side** (Log College, Tennent, conversion-centered). The two reunited in 1758 on New Side terms — a decisive victory for the Awakening's theology.

PART 7 — WHITEFIELD AND FRANKLIN

One of the Awakening's most interesting friendships was the unlikely but lifelong one between the revivalist evangelist George Whitefield and the Deist-leaning Philadelphia printer **Benjamin Franklin**. (For Franklin's own religious views, see our separate study on **Founders, Faith, and the American Experiment**.)

Franklin heard Whitefield preach in Philadelphia in 1739. He went to the sermon determined, as he later recounted in his *Autobiography*, not to contribute to the collection for Whitefield's Georgia orphanage. He describes what happened with characteristic honesty:

"I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I empty'd my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all."

— Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, on hearing Whitefield preach in Philadelphia (1739)

Franklin also conducted a classic experiment to test the wild crowd estimates reported in the newspapers. He stood at the edge of the Court-house steps in Philadelphia and walked away from Whitefield while Whitefield preached, marking the farthest distance at which he could still hear clearly. He then calculated, geometrically, how large a crowd a voice of that projection

could fill. He concluded that 25,000 or 30,000 was entirely plausible — settling what had been a running 18th-century media controversy in Whitefield’s favor.

Franklin became Whitefield’s American publisher, printing the evangelist’s sermons and journals for the rest of his life. The two corresponded for three decades. Whitefield repeatedly urged Franklin’s conversion; Franklin, while honoring Whitefield’s sincerity, never converted. They remained friends until Whitefield’s death.

PART 8 — CHARLES CHAUNCY & THE CRITICS

The Awakening produced fierce critics as well as fierce converts. The leading opponent was **Charles Chauncy** (1705–1787), pastor of Boston’s First Church for sixty years and by far the most learned “Old Light” Congregational minister in New England.

In 1743 Chauncy published *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* — a 424-page attack on revival “enthusiasm.” His four main charges:

1. Religious emotion is not religious substance. Shrieking, swooning, and trembling are not proofs of conversion; they are only physical responses that could come from anything.

2. Itinerant preachers violate parish boundaries. Whitefield had preached to Chauncy’s own congregation in Boston without Chauncy’s permission. Congregational church order, Chauncy argued, made every parish the minister’s responsibility.

3. Lay exhorting produces chaos. Ordinary church members claiming the Spirit’s leading to preach was, Chauncy argued, a revival of the worst 17th-century Puritan excesses.

4. Revivalism ultimately collapses orthodoxy. Here Chauncy proved prophetic in an unexpected way: he himself eventually converted to Universalism, and his Boston church (now the Unitarian First Church of Boston) became a center of New England Unitarianism. The Awakening’s *opponents*, rather than its friends, provided the

intellectual pedigree for the Unitarianism that later split New England Congregationalism.

The radical fringe. Chauncy was not wrong about everything. The Awakening did produce radicals who went beyond its leaders. The most famous was **James Davenport** (1716–1757), a Long Island Presbyterian who, at a 1743 bonfire in New London, led his followers to burn Puritan classics (including Increase Mather’s sermons) and their own fine clothing as evidence of worldliness. Davenport later repented publicly. Even Whitefield and Edwards distanced themselves from his excesses. Every revival has its Davenports; a wise revival leader knows what to do about them.

PART 9 — EDWARDS’S *RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS* (1746)

By 1746 the peak of the Awakening had passed. Critics were pointing to exactly the false conversions and emotional excesses Chauncy had predicted. Edwards’s response — arguably his theological masterpiece — was *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. It is, at one level, a defense of the revival. At a deeper level, it is a manual on how to distinguish true conversion from false.

Edwards’s thesis. “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” Religious emotion is neither automatically real nor automatically fake. The question is: what produces it, what does it produce, and what kind of heart does it reveal?

The book is in three parts. Part 1 defends affections as essential to true religion. Part 2 (the most famous) lists **twelve “signs that are not reliable evidence either way”** — things both true and false converts can have (strong emotions, orthodox professions, memorized Scriptures, zealous activity, tears, ecstatic experiences, even a sense of divine love). Part 3 lists **twelve “signs of truly gracious affections”** — distinguishing marks that can be used for discernment.

A sample of the twelve positive signs:

- **Sign 1:** Truly gracious affections arise from supernatural, spiritual, and divine influences on the heart — not from one’s own nature or social influences.

- **Sign 2:** Their primary object is the divine nature itself — God as God, for who he is, not for what he gives.

- **Sign 3:** They are grounded on the moral excellency of divine things, not on self-interest.

- **Sign 8:** They attend and produce a Christ-like (lamblike) temper and spirit — humility, meekness, mercy.

- **Sign 12 (the longest chapter in the book):** They produce the fruit of Christian practice. True religion is visible in an ordered life. The final test of affections is not feelings but fruit.

“Christian practice is the sign of signs, that which seals and crowns all other signs... Christian practice is the sign that Christ himself has told us to use above all others.”

— **Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Part 3, Sign 12 (1746)**

Religious Affections is still studied today by Reformed and evangelical pastors as the single most careful analysis of conversion and spiritual experience in Protestant history.

PART 10 — WHAT THE AWAKENING PRODUCED

By 1745, the peak of the Awakening had passed. Its effects on American Christianity were permanent:

1. **New Light / Old Light splits.** The Congregational churches of New England divided. New Light Congregationalists went along with the revival; Old Light kept their

distance. The split was never formalized into separate denominations, but the theological fault-line persisted and eventually produced both the evangelical tradition and (ironically) the Unitarian tradition out of Massachusetts Congregationalism.

2. New Side / Old Side Presbyterian split (1741–1758). Reunited on New Side terms in 1758. American Presbyterianism ever since has been substantially evangelical.

3. The Separate Baptists. New Light Congregationalists who, following the Awakening's insistence on regenerate church membership and believer's baptism, became Baptists by conviction. **Shubal Stearns** and **Daniel Marshall** launched the Separate Baptist movement in the South in 1755, which became the ancestor of much of the modern Southern Baptist Convention.

4. New colleges. Almost every Protestant college founded in colonial America between 1746 and 1769 was an Awakening institution: **Princeton** (New Side Presbyterian, 1746), **Dartmouth** (Eleazar Wheelock, missionary to the Mohegans, 1769), **Brown** (Baptist, 1764), **Rutgers** (Dutch Reformed, 1766). Each trained the next generation of revival-minded clergy.

5. A transdenominational American evangelical identity. Before the Awakening, colonial Christians were Congregationalists or Presbyterians or Anglicans or Baptists. After it, they were also “evangelicals” — people marked by personal conversion, devotion to Scripture, active piety, and emphasis on Christ's substitutionary atonement. This transdenominational evangelical identity, largely invented in the Awakening, remains the backbone of American Protestantism today.

6. A foreshadowing of American political unity. Benjamin Franklin and others noted that the Awakening was the first event in the history of the English-speaking colonies that had been shared by colonists in every province from Georgia to New Hampshire. The later colonial revolution would rest on social and rhetorical infrastructure the Awakening had built. The distinction between “the people” and their appointed elites — ecclesiastical and political — was central to both.

• **Conversion is personal, but never private.** The Awakening made conversion an experienced event — something that happens to a specific person at a specific time. But it also built communities, new churches, new colleges, and a transatlantic movement. Every modern evangelical testimony stands in that line. The question is never whether conversion is personal but how it is then plugged into the visible church.

• **Emotion is not the enemy.** Edwards's careful insistence that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections" corrects both the rationalist dismissal of emotional experience (Chauncy) and the revivalist over-valuing of it (Davenport). Worship that cannot move us is not mature; worship in which we are moved about the wrong things is not safe. The test is fruit, not feeling.

• **Revival cannot be manufactured, but the church can be ready.** Neither Edwards nor Whitefield could start a revival by deciding to. They could only preach the gospel faithfully and trust the Spirit with the rest. But both had prepared for decades — in theology, in pastoral care, in personal discipline — for the day the Spirit moved. A church that cannot begin a revival can still be ready for one.

• **Edwards's sign of signs still applies.** "Christian practice is the sign that Christ himself has told us to use above all others." Every modern evangelical who has seen a church swept up in emotional excitement and then quietly produce no transformed lives has been learning, painfully, what Edwards warned about in 1746. The twelve signs of *Religious Affections* are still the best checklist we have.

Greek NT (2 Cor 5:17): ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινά.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV): "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Edwards said the Awakening was a “surprising work of God.” Does the word “surprising” fit what we expect God to do in our own generation? Why or why not?
2. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is famous because it is, in content, extraordinarily severe — and because it worked. Is there any place for preaching like that today, or has our moment closed to it? If the latter, what has replaced it?
3. Whitefield preached to mixed Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican, and Dutch Reformed crowds as though denominational labels didn’t matter much. Does our congregation inherit any of that transdenominational instinct? Where does it help us, and where does it cost us?
4. Franklin — the good-humored Deist — respected Whitefield but never converted. What does the long friendship between those two men teach us about how evangelistic relationships actually work?
5. Edwards’s final sign of gracious affections is Christian practice — actual fruit in a life. Over the last six months, where has your fruit grown most? Where has it withered?
6. Chauncy was wrong about the revival but right about specific excesses within it. Can our congregation hold the tension of celebrating God’s work *and* honestly critiquing its distortions at the same time?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, head of the church, we thank you for Northampton in the winter of 1735, for Enfield on 8 July 1741, for Whitefield on Boston Common before 23,000, for Tennent at Nottingham, for Frelinghuysen in the Raritan Valley before any of the rest of it. Thank you for Edwards at his desk writing *Religious Affections* with a child on his knee.

Forgive us for the times we have mistaken emotion for faith or coldness for orthodoxy. Send us the twelve signs of gracious affections in visible fruit. Use our church as you used theirs, as much or as little as pleases you. Let our practice, not our feelings, be the sign of signs. Through Jesus Christ, our new creation. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737); *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741); *The Distinguishing Marks* (1741); *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* (1742); *Religious Affections* (1746); *Freedom of the Will* (1754); *Original Sin* (1758). Yale's 26-volume *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1957–2008) is the standard edition; a searchable online version exists at edwards.yale.edu.
- George Whitefield, *Journals* (1738–1741); *Select Sermons*; *Letters*. The Banner of Truth reprint of the *Journals* (1960) is accessible.
- Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (1740).
- Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (1743).
- Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, Part 3 (on Whitefield).
- David Brainerd, *Journal* (1740s); edited posthumously by Jonathan Edwards.

Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (2003) — companion volume to *Turning Points*. Noll discusses the Awakening in the framework of the broader 18th-century transatlantic movement.
- George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (2003) — the definitive modern biography.
- Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (2007) — the best single-volume history.
- Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (2014).
- Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991).
- Douglas Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word* (2009).
- John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (1980).
- Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (1994).

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