

The First Great Awakening: The Revolution of Self-Rule in Religious Life

The First Great Awakening was a revival, a new excitement, of the religious beliefs brought by the original settlers from England. These settlers traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to create a new life in America. But what were those religious beliefs? To answer this question, we need to go all the way back to nearly a hundred years before the First Great Awakening.

On December 31, 1630, an Englishman named John Winthrop led a group of people from England across the Atlantic Ocean to start a new life in what is now Massachusetts. Before starting this dangerous and deadly journey, Winthrop delivered a sermon, a religious speech, to explain the reasons behind their decision to start a new life in the American territory:

We must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. *So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace . . .* For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.¹

Winthrop's words calling the Massachusetts colony a city on the hill is talking about the Book of Matthew Chapter 5, verse 14 in the Bible: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden."² What does this mean? It meant that Massachusetts would be a light of hope, a good example, to the other American colonies and to the entire world.

How would they be a good example to the other colonies? By recognizing that everyone in the colonies should unite and respect the rights of each other because they were created by God. This same idea was eventually written in the Declaration of Independence, the belief that all humans are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."³

Unfortunately, the colonies did not get along as John Winthrop hoped. Not all colonies shared the same beliefs, leading to problems mostly caused by disagreements among different groups of Christians, called denominations.

Rhode Island was founded by those who left Massachusetts due to disagreements with Puritanism. Pennsylvania was home to Quakers, a Christian group formed after the English Civil War. Meanwhile, Georgia banned Catholicism, another Christian denomination.



Simply put, there was no unity among the colonies. The colonists forgot the “eyes of all people” are watching them and mistreated each other because of religious differences.

[Important Note: John Winthrop and others wanted to start a new life in America after witnessing the conflicts between different types of Christians in England. This period is called the Glorious Revolution of England and reached its peak in 1688-89. It was caused by religious and political differences between the Catholic King James II and the non-Catholic population.⁴ For further information, read William and Mary’s Toleration Act of 1689, which united “their Majesties Protestant subjects in interest and affection.”⁵]

This changed in the 1730s, when a massive religious and spiritual revival swept up and down the British colonies along the North American coast, a mass movement led by gifted and energetic preachers. This First Great Awakening, as it is called today, is important because it religiously united all Christians in the colonies. As Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s Founding Fathers, put it: “The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his [George Whitefield] sermons were enormous.”⁶

George Whitefield, a dramatic and powerful British preacher, was responsible for the sudden religious revival in the colonies. He arrived in Philadelphia in 1739 and traveled up and down the East Coast visiting all the Colonies, traveling from Savannah, Georgia, all the way to Boston, Massachusetts, and Maine.

For Whitefield, even though there are many different types of Christian denominations, he believed Jesus Christ’s love should not be limited to a certain denomination or colony: “The kingdom of God, or true and undefiled religion, doth not consist in being of this or that particular sect or communion.”⁷ Christ’s love rests in each person’s heart, and they must choose it for themselves.

Whitefield’s powerful voice became so popular that he became America’s first famous person or what we might call a celebrity. He delivered roughly 18,000 sermons to nearly 10 million people, mostly in America but also in other countries, speaking to thousands at a time.⁸

His message united the colonies in a shared understanding that they were equal before God, regardless of their denomination.

[Important Note: The Great Awakening united Christians and non-Christians. Benjamin Franklin, a non-Christian, became close friends with Whitefield. Franklin even printed Whitefield’s sermons for thousands to read: “The Reverend Mr. Whitefield, having given me copies of his Journals and Sermons, with Leave to print the same, I propose to publish them with all expedition.”⁹]

There was another man responsible for the First Great Awakening. Before Whitefield, there was an American-born pastor named Jonathan Edwards, whose preaching at a Congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the early 1730s became famous and transformed western Massachusetts.

Edwards delivered what many think is the most famous sermon of the 1700s, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. In his sermon, Edwards says Americans from the North, South, East, and West are all returning to a God:

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein CHRIST has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south.¹⁰

Edwards wanted people to leave their bad habits behind and come closer to Christ. Like Whitefield, Edwards believed that following Christ meant a change of heart, regardless of what church you visited: "But this light, as it reaches the bottom of the heart, and changes the nature, so it will effectually dispose to a universal obedience."¹¹

The Great Awakening had a huge impact on American identity. First, it united all the colonies under a common understanding that everyone was made equal before a Creator. Edwards' and Whitefield's sermons were popular among a wide range of people—laborers, servants, farmers, rich, poor, educated, and uneducated alike.

Second, it promoted the principles of self-reliance and self-government by making the acceptance of Christ a personal decision in the hearts of everyone.

Finally, the idea that a popular single voice, speaking what people wanted to hear, could be a basis for authority laid the foundation for the concept of a government "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."¹²

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Footnotes

1. <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/colliding-cultures/john-winthrop-dreams-of-a-city-on-a-hill-1630/>
2. <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/matthew/5>
3. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp
4. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Glorious-Revolution#:~:text=Church%20of%20England.,What%20caused%20the%20Glorious%20Revolution%3F,non%2DCatholic%20population%20and%20others>
5. <https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~rkeyser/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TolerationAct1689.pdf>
6. <https://gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>
7. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/come-poor-lost-undone-sinner>
8. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/george-whitefield-did-you-know>
9. <https://gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>
10. <https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/174120sinners20angry20god.pdf>
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12. Jefferson, Thomas. Declaration of Independence.