

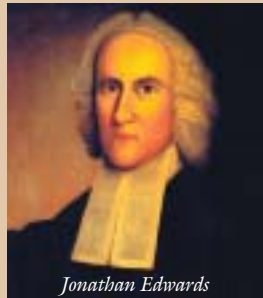
Revivalism and the American Revolution



By the early 1700s the Puritan movement to establish in the New World a “city set on a hill” as its first governor, John Winthrop envisioned, had lost its passion. What had emerged was a diverse society of religious but worldly-ambitious colonists each building his own kingdom. Yet the Puritan soul of America remained, expressing itself with a different sort of passion in the “Great Awakening.”

Starting on the Massachusetts frontier in the 1730’s and spreading up and down the Atlantic seaboard from Maine to Georgia, crowds of people gathered to hear about their sin and the coming judgment.

Often gathering outdoors in crowds of up to 8,000, they heard how they could be reconciled to God. Amid scenes of intense emotion, men and women responded, wanting to be saved from their sins. It was called *Revival*.



Jonathan Edwards

Revival

Whether responding to the preaching of the quiet and measured Jonathan Edwards or the bellowing George Whitefield, the outcome was the same: individuals experienced moral reform and a religious awakening.

Called the Great Awakening, it was perhaps the first historical event that could be described as *American* — that is, shared by all the colonies, North and South, frontier and port city. Although its message was intensely personal, it swept with equal force through all the colonies, helping cement their American identity.

People were challenged

The revivals, due to their intense emotional impact, were widely criticized by the wealthier, more settled classes, who feared social disruption. Long-established religious traditions were challenged, and three major new denominations began: Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Their gospel called individuals to a higher morality but could not call them together into a *spiritual* nation.

Yet the Great Awakening shook up Colonial society, setting in motion forces that would result in both the Revolutionary War and the writing of the Constitution. Whether a thirst for spiritual liberation also awakened in the colonies a thirst for political liberation is mere speculation. At any rate, it set the stage for the political zealots, the “Sons of Liberty” to focus the passion of the colonies on revolution.