

5 The Great Awakening

★ Section Focus

★ **Key Terms** deism ■ Great Awakening
■ denomination

★ **Main Idea** About 1740 there swept through the colonies a religious movement that would have a profound effect on social and political thought.

★ **Objectives** As you read, look for answers to these questions:

1. How was change affecting the Puritans in New England?
2. How did preachers capture the imagination of many Americans in the 1740s?
3. What effects did this movement have?

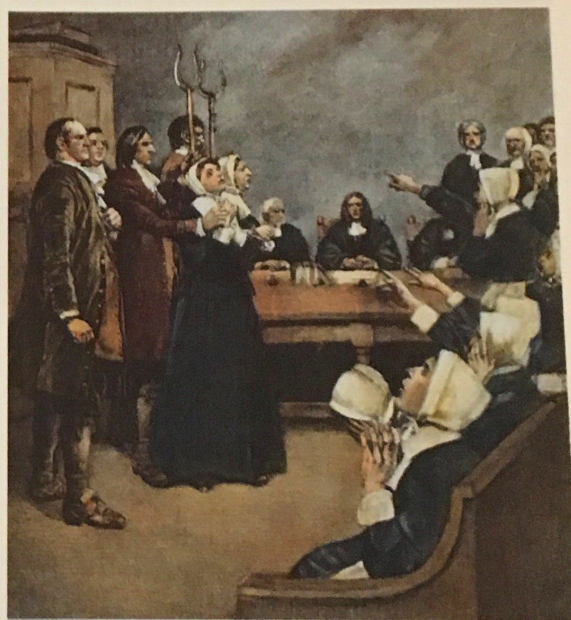
With the growth of colonial trade and commerce, Puritan ministers in New England began to lose authority. As early as 1679 the ministers were bemoaning new ways in the commonwealth. Among their complaints:

- Pride among those who had acquired more wealth than their “betters.”
- An increase in swearing and in sleeping during sermons.
- A decay in family authority, for young men and women were out prowling at night.
- An increase in lawsuits.
- An increase in lying, particularly when selling.
- A decrease in business morality, with a rise in land speculation and with laborers making “unreasonable” demands.

SCAPEGOATS AND “DRY BONES”

The ideas of Cotton Mather, the leading minister in New England at the end of the seventeenth century, reflect the decline of the old and the emergence of the new. Mather’s curiosity about the supernatural encouraged people to revive the medieval fear of witchcraft. Faced with bewildering social changes as well as a series of natural disasters, Massachusetts colonists succumbed to a wave of mass hysteria in 1692. As a result several hundred people were accused of witchcraft. In Salem, nineteen persons were hanged and one pressed to death for the offense. The short-lived outbreak was an example of a society unconsciously expressing its fears by focusing on scapegoats.

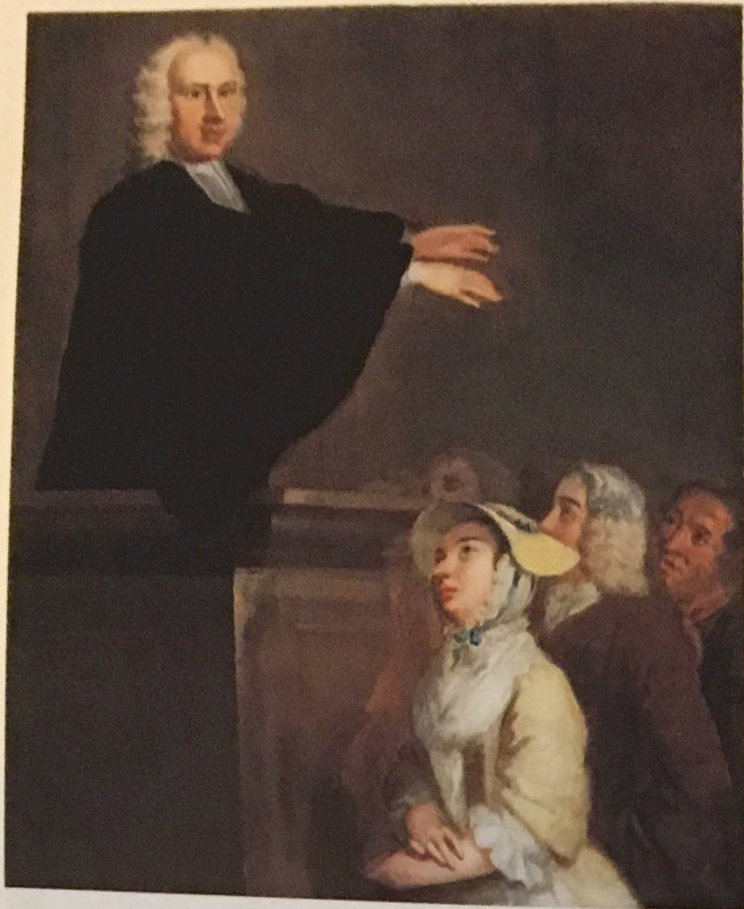
For all his interest in witchcraft, however, Mather was not completely stuck in the past. He was also a modern man, open to new ideas.



Twenty people were found guilty of witchcraft and executed in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Later, the judge and jurors admitted that they had made errors in the trial, and the families of the victims received compensation. **ISSUES** Could similar trials occur today? Why or why not?

Among the books he read were those of Isaac Newton, the English mathematician whose works form the basis of modern science.

Like many educated people of the time, Mather concluded that reason and the contemplation of nature could lead one to a knowledge of God. This view was called **deism**. Deists believed that God created the universe and then let it run itself; God did not intervene in earthly events through miracles. They emphasized morality (right living) over



George Whitefield's fervent preaching helped spark the Great Awakening. His dramatic, emotional style set a pattern for future religious revivals in America. **RELIGION** How might Whitefield's style and message account for the large crowds his sermons attracted?

piety (devotion to God). In the American colonies, deism, along with the colonists' growing preoccupation with economic success, led to a decline in religious zeal. As a result, religion wore a bland face throughout the colonies.

An English minister, George Whitefield, visited Philadelphia in 1740, and was disturbed by the colonists' lack of religious enthusiasm. He wrote that "I fear numbers amongst them, as amongst us, can give no other reason why they are Quakers, than that their fathers were so before them." In South Carolina, Whitefield said, "I hear no stirring among the dry bones."

Whitefield had a point. Even in 1720, the vast majority of Americans belonged to no church. Only 25 percent of New Englanders were church members, and the figure was less in the other colonies. Men of education and intelligence were no longer drawn to the ministry. Instead, they became lawyers and merchants. Those who did become ministers scolded more than they inspired.

A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

About 1740 a religious movement began that "roared through the colonies like a sheet of flame and left behind a world transformed." This movement, known as the **Great Awakening**, was marked by an appeal to the heart rather than to the mind. It sought to reach people's souls through their emotions.

In revival meetings throughout the colonies, ministers preached "fire and brimstone" sermons designed to make people recognize their sins and experience a new spiritual birth. "I think it is a reasonable thing," Jonathan Edwards of New England said, "to fright persons away from hell."

The effect of the Great Awakening was electric. People who had drifted away from the church, bored by the stale rituals and tired sermons, responded to these energetic new preachers. George Whitefield and others were itinerant preachers. That is, they had no congregation but traveled from place to place. When Whitefield preached, or rather roared, thousands showed up. Whitefield's diary gives the figures: "6 or 7,000" in Philadelphia, 6,000 in Boston "besides great numbers standing about the doors." For each of these cities the numbers equaled about one-third of the population. Remember too that Whitefield had only the power of his own voice to reach these thousands of people.

When Whitefield preached in Philadelphia in 1740, Benjamin Franklin was in attendance. He wrote: "From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street." Franklin, a deist, was skeptical of Whitefield. But on hearing Whitefield's appeal for funds to start an orphanage in Georgia, Franklin emptied his pockets.

Those who took the message of Whitefield and Edwards to heart became known as the "New Lights." Those who remained suspicious or even hostile to the Great Awakening were the "Old Lights." The differences between them caused the "New Lights" to break off and organize into new **denominations**, or religious groups. Baptist membership soared from about a dozen churches in 1740 to some 500 in 1775. The Methodists

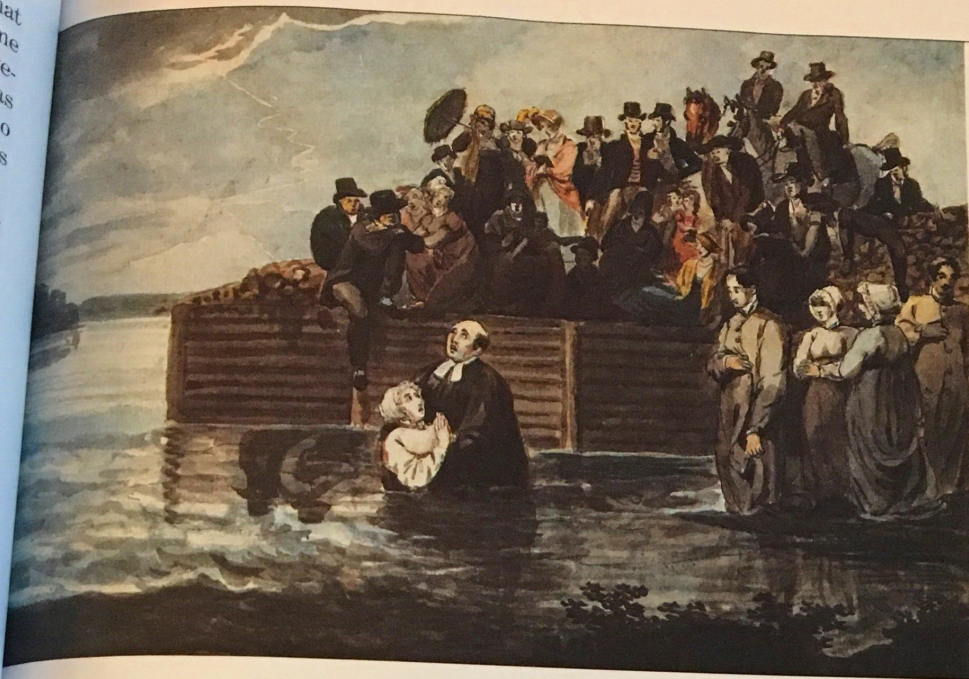
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Baptists were one of the denominations whose membership grew as a result of the Great Awakening. This watercolor from the early 1800s shows a Pennsylvania Baptist ceremony on a riverbank. **RELIGION** What are the four persons on the shore at the right waiting for?

emerged as a "New Light" faith. The desire of the "New Lights" for a new kind of preacher led to the founding of new colleges, including Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania.

THE MESSAGE OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Great Awakening had far-reaching political and social implications. It cut across existing class and ethnic barriers and affirmed each person's worth in the eyes of God. It emphasized equality. Instead of looking up to someone who was wealthier or better educated, people called each other "brother" and "sister."

The movement also led some colonists to reach out to blacks and the Indians. Although few black people found their way to the preachings, those who did found comfort in the message that in God's eyes all were equal. (In a Second Awakening about 1800 the message reached large numbers of black people and led to the establishment of many black churches.) To help the Indians, Jonathan Edwards served six years as a missionary from his frontier church located at Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

The Great Awakening also nourished the idea that state and church should be separate. Because the movement was so widespread and because it caused church denominations to multiply, it delivered a death blow to that old idea of "One State, One Church." Not everyone agreed, of course. But by the time of the American Revolution, the idea had taken hold.

SECTION REVIEW

- 1. KEY TERMS** deism, Great Awakening, denomination
- 2. PEOPLE AND PLACES** Cotton Mather, Salem, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards
- 3. COMPREHENSION** Name three complaints that were raised by Puritan ministers regarding their congregations.
- 4. COMPREHENSION** How did the Great Awakening affect American political and social ideas?
- 5. CRITICAL THINKING** What are the advantages of appealing to the emotions instead of to reason? The disadvantages?