

America's Great Awakening



I. Elements of the Great Awakening

A. Enthusiasm--emotional manifestations (weeping, fainting, physical movements) in contrast to staid and formal Anglican and Congregational worship. Whitefield would preach to crowds as large as 30,000 with great emotion.

B. Itinerancy--preachers roamed rural and urban areas and held meetings

C. Democratic religious movement

- 1) Insisted that all should have the religious experience.
- 2) Stirred impulse towards independence among colonists.
- 3) Broke down strong denominational ties.
- 4) Challenged religious authority. Baptists in the South preached to slaves and against the ostentatious wealth of the planter class.

II. Content of Message

A. Salvation came through faith and prayer, not rituals or good works

B. The individual, not any religious authority, judged his or her own behavior based on one's understanding of God and the Bible

C. Personal piety--break away from the constraints of the past and start fresh. Revivals resulted in changed behaviors (decrease in card-playing, drunkenness, increase in church attendance, Bible study)

D. Individual revival--rejection of cold rationalism of Puritanism and Anglicanism and more reliance on the "heart" rather than the "head."

E. Leading preachers: George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William and George Tennent. Originally welcomed by local ministers, they often harshly criticized local religious leaders.

III. Impact of the Great Awakening

A. Creation of new colleges to train "new light" ministers--Princeton, Brown, Rutgers

B. Divisions in denominations and a sharpening of the differences between those who defined religion as a rational process (old lights) and those who focused on experience (new lights)

C. Religious challenges to authority strengthened political challenges to authority. Many Revolutionary War soldiers were "new light" believers, particularly Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists

D. Development of revivalism tradition in American religion. Future outbreaks:

1) Second Great Awakening in first half of 19th century--camp meetings and frontier revivals featuring emotional appeals and spontaneous religious expressions

2) Charles G. Finney and Dwight Moody--19th century urban revivalism with campaigns in many cities

3) Billy Sunday, Billy Graham and mass meetings--20th century revivalism