

# Religious Revival

**KEY QUESTION** How did the Great Awakening change American society?

As colonists developed a new society in America, they drew inspiration from two cultural movements:

- the **Great Awakening**, a Christian religious revival
- the **Enlightenment**, a movement stressing human reason

While the Great Awakening appealed to faith and emotions, the Enlightenment was based on reason and scientific observation. However, both movements offered people ways of changing themselves and their world—which is exactly what the colonists needed as they created a new society.

**The Great Awakening** In the 1730s and 1740s, a religious movement called the Great Awakening swept through the colonies. Traveling ministers preached that inner religious emotion was more important than outward religious behavior. Huge crowds gathered outdoors to hear famous preachers like **Jonathan Edwards** promise that all could be saved.

## PRIMARY SOURCE

“And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners. . . . How awful is it to be left behind at such a day!”

—Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

The Great Awakening offered hope that each person could break from the past and begin a spiritual relationship with God. This would happen during a sudden conversion, or rebirth. This is the doctrine, or belief, of Evangelicalism. The evangelical idea of spiritual renewal or rebirth would be very influential in American culture.

The movement led congregations to argue over religious practices. Some left their churches and joined other Protestant groups such as Baptists. As religious diversity increased, it became more difficult for one “established” church to control a colony’s religious life. In colonies like Virginia, the established Anglican church was weakened.

**Religion and Social Change** In the South, the Great Awakening’s focus on spiritual equality threatened the social system. Against the wishes of many plantation owners, the Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies baptized African Americans. Meanwhile Baptist congregations welcomed African Americans and Native Americans. They allowed slaves to preach and women to speak in church.

Reenactors portray African-American worship in the South.



*Beginnings of an American Identity*