

## Remarkable Tokens of God's Presence: The First Great Awakening

### Overview

For some, the word “revival” evokes unpleasant memories of long, loud sermons by traveling evangelists. Others associate the word with emotional manipulation and drawn out choruses of “Just As I Am.” Yet in others, it evokes a nostalgic longing for spiritual renewal. However we might identify with the term, our associations are often based on past experience, or stories we have heard of revivals in our time.

This lesson explores the period of spiritual renewal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the colonies of the New World, in Great Britain and Europe. As we study the First Great Awakening, we will see that the movement raised many questions that continue to confront contemporary believers and churches:

- What is spiritual revival?
- What causes spiritual revival? Is it entirely a function of God's sovereign direction, or can it be induced by specific activities of believers?
- Are there factors that inhibit revival?
- What are the effects of revival on the church?
- How does revival impact society?

### Understanding the Setting

1700

1729	Jonathan Edwards becomes pastor in Massachusetts
1734	Revival begins in Edwards' church
1738	Charles and John Wesley converted
1739	John Wesley begins preaching outside in England
1740	Itinerant preaching of George Whitefield
1797	Second Great Awakening begins

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## Step 1: Grasp the Issue

### Sound Bites

“I am profoundly convinced that the greatest need in the world today is revival in the Church of God. Yet Alas! The whole idea of revival seems to have become strange to so many good Christian people. There are some who even seem to resent the very idea, and actually speak and write against it. Such an attitude is due to both a serious misunderstanding of the Scriptures, and to a woeful ignorance of the history of the Church. Anything therefore that can instruct God's people in this matter is very welcome.” – Rev. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

“On January 12, 1723, I made a solemn dedication of myself to God, and wrote it down; giving up of myself, and all that I had to God; to be for the future, in no respect my own; to act as one that has not right to be himself, in any respect. And solemnly vowed to take God for my whole portion and felicity; looking on nothing else, as any part of my happiness, nor acting as if it were; and his law for the constant rule of my obedience: engaging to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil, to the end of my life.” – Jonathan Edwards

“I fear wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any renewal of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger and the love of the world in all its branches.” – John Wesley

“A revival is not a miracle, or dependent on miracle in any sense. It is the result of the right use of the constituted means.” – Charles G. Finney

“A revival is at God's control and in his hands. We must pray for it and wait for his response. All man made revivals are based on emotional manipulation, and will not last.”

“Who needs revival? What we need is people reading the Word and doing what God has plainly asked us to do.”

## Case Studies

A friend of yours is getting ready for a trip to a city in which there has been an ongoing revival for three years. There have been reports of miraculous healings, deep emotional expression, and people who come back “on fire” for the Lord. As you discuss your friend’s plans, you find yourself torn. It sounds wonderful, something just doesn’t seem right to you. When you begin to express some doubt, she answers, “I know what you mean. I’ve struggled with this too. Some have called this a sociologic phenomenon—a corporate emotional high. How do I discern whether it is genuine? What should I look for? Shouldn’t there be some specific results in the church and the society at large?”

How would you respond to her?

As a leader in your church, you have found yourself increasingly discouraged by the lack of zeal in the body. There seems to be little passion for God and his work even though the pastor and parishioners seem to love God. As you share your concerns with some mature believers in the church, they begin to propose some ideas. Suggestions range from fasting, a month of prayer vigils or a prayer chain, or even bringing in a well-known evangelist for a week of meetings. One elderly man has been silent for the time. When others at the meeting become quiet, he softly asks, “Perhaps I am confused, but our focus seems to be on our activity. Isn’t it God’s responsibility to manifest his presence?”

How would you respond?

**What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?**

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## Step 2: Study the Scriptures

### **Nehemiah 8:2-3, 5-6, 9-12; 9:1-3; 10:28-29**

After a period of captivity, Nehemiah led the third wave of returning exiles from Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra, the priest and scribe, led the spiritual renewal.

- What is the setting of this renewal?
- What elements do you find in this period of spiritual renewal?

### **1 John 4:1-12**

In his *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, the great defender of the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, used this passage to establish five clear evidences of a work of God's Spirit.

- How did the Apostle John indicate that a person could distinguish whether a work is from God?

### Step 3: Consult Other Sources

The Great Awakening would arise in a world in which the passion for Christ had often been lost. Reading 1 provides insight into that world. Reading 2 describes the revival that occurred in New England beginning around 1730. A leader in the movement, Jonathan Edwards, would look carefully at the place of emotion in the spiritual walk. His thoughts are reviewed in Reading 3. A revival also would occur in Great Britain under the Wesleys. Insight into their lives and work is found in Reading 4. Finally, Reading 5 asks the question, “How do you look for the fingerprints of God in a revival?”

As you read, try to answer these questions: After the vitality of the Puritans, what led to the spiritual deadness of the colonies? What surprised you or impacted you about the Great Awakening under the leadership of Jonathan Edwards? What role does emotion have in faith? What was powerful about the message or activities of the Wesleys?

“Colonial New England: An Old Order, New Awakening,” by Steven Lang and Mark Noll.

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“New England,” by Keith Hardman.

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“How Do You Measure a Revival?” by Timothy Clark.

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## Colonial New England: An Old Order, New Awakening by Stephen Lang and Mark Noll

When Jonathan Edwards reached manhood in the 1720's, Englishmen had settled New England for a hundred years. The area was conscious of its historical roots, and Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan preacher, had produced a monumental history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). Mather's work was intended as a religious history of the colonies, but it reports on every aspect of early New England. For the early New Englanders, religious and social history was inseparable. It was assumed since the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620 that the settlers were (or should be) Christians, and that God would bless the building up of a godly commonwealth in the new land.

Needless to say, the churches of New England were no longer persecuted sects: they had become established churches. The religious groups that settled New England left the old country because of persecution, or because they saw the Church of England as a poor model of biblical faith.

They carved out a place for themselves in the New World, with much hardship and discipline. In time the New Englanders realized that they were no longer the righteous remnant running from an apostate English church establishment. They were now an establishment.

The settlers had begun with the idea that the visible church should be identical with the invisible—that is, the gathered congregations should be bodies of true believers. Nominal Christianity is indeed unthinkable among persecuted sects. If one suffers for one's beliefs, one will either believe strongly or

forsake the beliefs. But in the New World, away from persecution and adjusted to life in new territory, nominal Christianity became a reality. Mingled with devout believers were church members who merely paid lip service to Christian belief. The vision of New England as a righteous city set on a hill never died completely, but realistic observers were painfully aware that many church members gave little attention to building up the kingdom in America. They were far more interested in prospering materially in the vast land with its seemingly infinite possibilities.

This drift from spiritual to material interests is not difficult to understand. New England was basically peaceful and comfortable. Most New Englanders were farmers and made an adequate living. Industries—lumbering, fishing, shipbuilding, and others—did well, and artisans earned a good living. The disciplined work habits of the first settlers were passed down to succeeding generations, who, like their forefathers, did not depend on slavery or indentured servants. They worked hard and created an essentially middle-class society with almost no poverty. The level of education was also relatively high.

Such a society was a far cry from the mother country, where poverty, alcoholism, sexual immorality and other social ills prevailed. Yet the Puritan clergy knew that the people of New England were losing their original spiritual drive.

Worldliness and religious apathy were not the only problems affecting the religious life of New England. Historians often call the seventeenth century the Age of Reason. This is more a description of the philosophical

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climate of Europe than of America, but the colonies were affected by the intellectual life of Europe.

The Age of Reason was characterized by belief in man's capacities for good, especially when man acted under the guidance of reason. Many European thinkers rejected the idea of a sinful mankind living under the judgment of a wrathful God. Clergymen were affected by the new thought. Strict Calvinism gave way in many churches to religion that emphasized man's capabilities.

Of course, Puritanism still dominated New England in the 1700's. Calvinism was the ruling ideology, but was losing ground. When Jonathan Edwards attended Yale (1716–20),

he came into contact with the new skepticism there. Harvard likewise entertained new ideas, so it was inevitable that the two colleges would produce some clergymen who (unlike Edwards) rejected or at least greatly modified the Calvinist theology of their forbears.

The old order was changing. Pastors and people prayed for a revival of spiritual energy. Revival came in the form of a Great Awakening, the first event in North American history to stir people of several colonies with a common religious concern.



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New England  
by Keith Hardman

When Rev. Solomon Stoddard died in 1729 at 86 years, his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, who had been his assistant for two years, became pastor of the Congregational Church of Northampton, Massachusetts. His congregation could not have guessed that one day their tall, mild new minister would be called one of the best minds America has ever produced, and her greatest Christian thinker. He also would prepare the soil for a great spiritual harvest in New England in their day.

## Jonathan Edwards & God's Surprising Work

In 1734, Rev. Edwards began to stress evangelism from his Northampton pulpit with a series of sermons on Justification by Faith. No immediate effects became apparent, but after some time, in December 1734 "The Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in and wonderfully to work among us . . .

Soon the town was enveloped in spiritual concern. Edwards wrote about these events in his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. He referred to the awakening as a work of God:

This Work of God, as . . . the Number of true Saints multiplied, soon made a glorious Alteration in the Town; so that in the spring and summer following, Anno 1735, the Town seemed to be full of the Presence of God; it was never so full of Love, nor of Joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable Tokens of God's Presence in almost every House. It was a time of Joy

in families on account of Salvation being brought unto them . . . More than 300 Souls were savingly brought home to Christ, in this Town, in the Space of half a Year. . . . I hope that by far the greater Part of persons in this Town, above sixteen Years of age, are such as have the saving Knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Other pastors began to promote the awakening, and it spread to over twenty communities in western Massachusetts and Connecticut, lingering for a few years in some villages. Observers who came to Northampton and were impressed touched off further revivals when they returned to their own churches to tell what they had witnessed. While there had been awakenings here and there in New England previously, never had so many towns and churches been involved at once.

## Preacher & Reporter

Edwards not only promoted the awakening, but also kept a careful written account of his observations. He noted that many people who came under conviction initially were concerned over their sinful behavior, but gradually they began to see that their greatest problem was internal—a sinful heart.

*The Faithful Narrative* was published in London and Boston, and went through twenty printings by 1738, thus giving it a wide readership and popularity. As New Englanders read it and inched towards the Great



Awakening of 1740 and beyond, they gradually divided into three groups:

- *those who were opposed to anything but the usual expressions of worship, and who regarded emotional excesses as harmful to religion.* The members of this group were called the “Old Lights.” One of the champion Old Lights was a Boston minister named Charles Chauncy;
- *those who were naturally inclined to excesses of emotionalism,* such as the preacher James Davenport, who later drew criticism upon the Great Awakening by his wild behavior;
- *and those who tried to be open-minded and steer a middle course between the two above extremes.* This group, called the “New Lights,” was much larger than that of the opponents of awakening. They saw in awakening much to be thankful for, and felt that excesses were not a necessary aspect of a work of God.

Edwards became the leader of this moderate group. Throughout New England there were many other pastors also who recognized that awakening was the logical answer to their preaching against the current spiritual slump.

## The Great Awakener

The colonies' craving for news of awakenings was not confined to the happenings at Northampton. The events taking place in the Middle Colonies were becoming known in New England also.

Even more publicity was being given to the activities the English “Methodist” evangelist George Whitefield in England and the Southern Colonies. In Boston, the press advertised Whitefield's works and reported his movements in anticipation of his coming visit to New England. A book about Whitefield published in Boston included a preface invoking the blessing of God upon Whitefield to the end that “his purposed coming to us may be with as full a Blessing the Gospel of Christ as other places have experienc'd, only more so, by God's Grace.”

Jonathan Edwards had plowed the ground by favorably preparing New England with his *Faithful Narrative*, but it was the powerful preaching of George Whitefield that brought the Great Awakening springing to life.

Whitefield preached from Maine to Connecticut during the period 14 September to 29 October 1740. As the historian Edwin Gaustad wrote, he “came, bristling, crackling, and thundering” to an area “electrified with expectancy.” He preached first in Newport, Rhode Island, and then left for Boston, where the *News-Letter* reported:

Last Thursday Evening the Rev'd Mr. Whitefield arrived from Rhode Island, being met on the Road and conducted to Town by several Gentlemen. The next Day in the Forenoon he attended Prayers in the King's Chappel, and in the Afternoon he preach'd to a vast Congregation in the Rev'd Dr. Colman's Meeting-House. The next Day he preach'd in the Forenoon at the South Church to a Crowded Audience, and in the Afternoon to about 5000 People on the Common: and Lord's Day in the afternoon having preach'd to a great Number of People at the Old Brick Church, the House not being large enough to hold those that crowded to hear him,

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when the Exercise was over, He went and preached in the Field, to at least 8000 Persons. . . .

### Both Minister & People Wept

For over a month Whitefield preached along the New England coast, through Massachusetts, New Hampshire, as far north as York, Maine. On Sunday evening, 12 October 1740, his farewell sermon in Boston was heard by an estimated 20,000 persons! Turning westward, he preached across central Massachusetts and on Friday, 17 October 1740, he arrived in Northampton. Here he met Edwards, and preached four times in his church.

Edwards and his family impressed Whitefield, as he recorded in his personal *Journal*:

Friday, October 17 . . . Mr. Edwards is a solid, excellent Christian, but, at present, weak in body. I think I have not seen his fellow in all New England. When I came into his pulpit . . . to remind them of their former experiences, and how zealous and lively they were at that time, both minister and people wept much.

Sunday, October 19. Felt great satisfaction in being at the house of Mr. Edwards. A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, as become the children of those who, in all things, ought to be examples of Christian simplicity. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek and quiet spirit; she talked solidly of the things of God, and seemed to be such a help meet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, which, for some months, I have put up to God, that He

would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.

Leaving Northampton and New England on his way south, Whitefield met Gilbert Tennent on Staten Island, New York, and urged him to make a preaching tour of New England similar to the one he had just completed, "to blow up the divine fire lately kindled there." Tennent arrived in Boston in December 1740, and proved as popular to many as Whitefield had been. The Awakening continued to blossom.

### Judgment & Mercy

Back on the frontier at Northampton, Edwards, in response to invitations, was traveling outside his parish to bring the New Light message. At Enfield, Connecticut he preached his famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* on 8 July 1741.

Edwards has often been portrayed as a hell-fire and brimstone preacher because of this sermon. Unfortunately, most people only think of this one sermon when they think of Edwards. But, as the historian Sydney Ahlstrom pointed out, Edwards, who wrote over 1,000 sermons, wrote less than a dozen of this type.

Rather than gleefully picturing the doom of sinners, as English teachers often have portrayed him, Edwards would shudder to think that any of his hearers might not heed his warnings about eternal damnation:

O Sinner! Consider the danger you are in!  
'Tis a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and  
bottomless Pit, full of the Fire of Wrath. . . !

Some revival preachers showed little tolerance for human frailty; they believed that

if audiences remained calm under fiery preaching, it indicated a lack of concern. They thought emotional outbursts indicated a supernatural moving within souls.

Edwards could not accept this: "Great effects on the body certainly are no sure evidences. . . ." His preaching, he determined, was to appeal to the mind, and not to encourage outbursts of emotion. He was by all accounts never a spellbinding speaker, and he did not wish to be. All of his sermons were delivered in the same calm fashion—but with penetrating force.

When the congregation at Enfield could not control themselves as they listened to *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and Edwards could not be heard for the commotion, he stopped and requested that they be quiet to hear the rest of the sermon, and refrain from weeping and crying out!

## Advice & Warnings

The Great Awakening was then at its zenith, and Edwards at the peak of his fame. In 1741 he received an invitation to speak at Yale College, and some there wondered if he would scorch them with a sermon similar to the one he had preached at Enfield. But Edwards went to Yale to make converts of a different type: he wanted to turn his hearers away from the danger of indifference toward the Awakening.

In his address on *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, his aim was to show that the Awakening was from God. He argued that similar things were happening in many places, though various evangelists with different methods were involved. He attacked those who opposed the revival: "Let us all be hence warned, by no means to oppose or do any Thing, in the least to clog or hinder that Work that has lately

been carried on in this Land, but on the contrary, to do our utmost to promote it."

Silence was "a secret Kind of Opposition, that really tends to hinder the Work," he said: "Such silent Ministers stand in the Way of the Work of God; as Christ said, 'He that is not with us is against us.'"

He warned that the Awakening's opponents would increase, for Satan's forces always stand ready to undermine God's work. Those in favor of the revival must "give diligent Heed to themselves to avoid all Errors and Misconduct, and whatsoever may darken and obscure the Work, and give Occasion to those that stand ready to reproach it."

And he was right, for there were some who went too far, and by their fanatical behavior invited the criticism from enemies of the awakening. He was aware of these problems, but insisted that it was a mistake to judge and condemn the Awakening because of some unfortunate side-effects, without "distinguishing the Good from the Bad."

Both Christians and non-Christians made the mistake of expecting too much from those who were awakened: "When any profess to have received Light . . . from Heaven . . . many are ready to expect that now they [should] appear like Angels. . . ."

## The Threshold of the Millennium

Edwards threw an entirely different light upon the revival than its critics. He thought that, despite the fact that the Puritan Fathers' dream of a nation ruled by God and his Law had not yet come true, Jehovah might now be using the Awakening as the last ingathering of the elect before the end time.

It is not unlikely that this Work of God's Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the Dawning, or at least a Prelude of that

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glorious Work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which, in the Progress and Issue of it, shall renew the World of Mankind.... And there are many things that make it probable that this Work will begin in America.

Edwards's enthusiasm for the Awakening was fired by his vision of hope for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. He believed that the Great Awakening could be

the doorway to the Messianic Kingdom, the Millennial period foretold in Isaiah and Revelation 20, during which the redeemed of God "Lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." It is not surprising that he felt this way, for all over New England a remarkable transformation was taking place.



Jonathan Edwards Speaks to Our Technological Age  
by George Marsden

Edwards, a defender of revivalism, was thus confronted with one of the major questions that has faced modern evangelicalism ever since. What is the proper place of emotion in Christian commitment?

Edwards answered by pointing out that central to our genuine religious experiences are our affections. By affections he meant our dispositions or loves that incline or disincline toward things. "The holy Scriptures," Edwards observed, "do everywhere place religion very much in the affections; such as fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal." Edwards thus defended religion of the heart as opposed to those critics of the revivals who condemned emotionalism to the point of leaving themselves with only a religion of the head, a Christianity that amounted only to believing right doctrines and maintaining proper morals.

As Edwards defended the religion of the heart, however, he warned against two major errors that have plagued the pietist-evangelical-revivalist tradition even more in our day than in his. First, Edwards cautioned against sheer emotionalism. He recognized that revivalists might simply excite the emotions and thus counterfeit genuine conversions. High emotions were neither clear evidence of genuine religion nor of the lack of it. Rather, in his great treatise on *Religious Affections* Edwards carefully mapped out biblical tests for genuine religious experience. These tests included a focus on God's gracious work, doctrines consistent with biblical revelations, and a life marked by the fruits of the Spirit.

In the course of delineating the biblical standards for genuine Christian experience, Edwards emphasized another lesson much needed in our day. He pointed out the mistake, so common today, of making human nature and human psychology the primary focus of theological analysis, or even sometimes the object of worship. This trend had already begun in Edwards' day, shifting theological analysis from looking at God to looking at human responses to God. Today this tendency has many manifestations in evangelicalism, both in theologies that celebrate the self and self-fulfillment, and in testimony meetings where the emphasis may subtly shift from God's grace to congratulating oneself on one's own remarkable experiences.

Edwards' theology would allow none of that. He always made crystal clear that God is the central focus in human religious experience. Edwards' stress on God's sovereignty was far from a static doctrine. Edwards' conception of God centered around God's *love*. God's very purpose in creating the universe was to express his love, to communicate himself to his creatures, to display to them his glory and his beauty. Thus the essence of true religious experience is to be overwhelmed by a glimpse of the beauty of God, to be drawn to the glory of his perfections, to sense his irresistible love. This experience of being spiritually ravished by God's beauty, glory and love is something like being overwhelmed by the beauty of a great work of art or music. We can be so enthralled by such beauty that we lose consciousness of our self and self-interests and become absorbed in the magnificent object. So also we

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might be drawn out of ourselves by the power of the beauty of a truly loveable person. God's sovereign grace works this way. Our hearts are changed by his irresistible power; but this power is not exercised as an alien mechanical force over our wills. Rather, when our eyes are opened so that we are literally captivated by the beauty, glory, and love of God, when we see this love, manifested most powerfully in the beauty of Christ's sacrificial love for the undeserving, we are gladly forced to abandon love of self as the central principle in our lives and to turn to the love of God.

Edwards describes our side of this regenerating experience as like being given a sixth sense—a sense of the beauty, glory, and love of God. The Bible, he points out, often speaks in a similar way. “Hence the work of the Spirit of God in regeneration is often in Scripture compared to the giving of a new sense, giving eyes to see, and ears to hear,

unstopping the ears of the deaf, and opening the eyes of them that were born blind, and turning from darkness unto light.” So the knowledge of God in true Christian experience will be *sensible* knowledge. It will differ from mere speculative knowledge in the same way that the taste of honey differs from the mere *understanding* that honey is sweet. True Christian experience then, is built not just on knowing and affirming true Christian doctrines, as important as those doctrines may be. It is *affective* knowledge, or a *sense* of the truths the doctrines describe. The Christian, says Edwards in a characteristic statement, “does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart.”



The New Piety: The Conversion of the Wesleys  
by Mark Noll

**I**t was Monday, April 2, 1739. The city was Bristol, a rapidly growing seaport and rising manufacturing center on the west coast of England. Bristol's laboring population was crammed into dank housing on dark, narrow streets. The city's safety net had collapsed. Its old, elegant churches were utterly failing to keep up with the population or provide for its spiritual needs. Riots protesting squalid living conditions had already broken out in the city, and they would be repeated regularly throughout the eighteenth century.

On that day in that place a strange man did a strange thing. The man was short, slightly under five feet five inches, and wiry. He moved as if driven by relentless energy. What made him strange for Bristol was his pedigree. He was an Anglican minister and the son of an Anglican minister in a place where the national Church of England had all but abandoned spiritual support for the ordinary people. In politics he was a Tory, or conservative, who would later denounce the American Revolution as a sinful attack on the God-given social order. He was also a graduate of Oxford University at a time when less than one percent of the college-aged young people in Britain were privileged to attend university. Many of the Bristol laborers had probably never seen an Oxford graduate up close before.

What this strange man did was even more provocative. In eighteenth-century Britain, conventions for every area of life were strict. They were most strict for the churches. The local Anglican rectors were supposed to be in

complete control of all spiritual activity in their parishes. Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians needed special licenses simply to hold worship services. Catholics suffered harsher constraints. No one who was not a member of the Church of England could serve as an alderman in Bristol or anywhere else in England. The Anglican Church and the British state worked hand in glove to guide the population. One of the most absolute religious conventions was that preaching took place on Sundays, and it was done in the churches. Anything else was incendiary and fanatical. To preach out of doors was virtually unheard of. If it did occur, it was considered seditious.

But on that April Monday something new, and something very important for the whole history of Christianity—especially its Protestant expression—was taking place. The minister knew what he was doing. Here is how, with characteristic economy of speech, he put it in his journal.

At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile; and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this (is it possible any one should be ignorant that it is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ?), "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent Me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight

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to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

The speaker was John Wesley (1703-91). In order to preach the gospel to the poor, he was willing to break the religious conventions that also defined his own well-disciplined life. In order to bring a message of “deliverance, recovery, and liberty” in Christ to people who had never heard that message, Wesley would preach out of doors, he would “submit to be more vile.” As he took this momentous step, John Wesley was not alone, for his brother, the hymn-writer Charles (1707-88), was always a full partner in his enterprises.

In several important ways the Wesleys were the most effective proponents of the Reformation's basic message in the two centuries since Protestantism began with the work of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Menno Simons, and Thomas Cranmer. In other ways, the Wesleys were adapters of the Reformation message. In both preserving and adjusting the message of the early Protestants, the Wesleys' work kept alive the message of God's grace and greatly broadened its outreach. But their adjustments to Protestant traditions were—along with the innovations of the Wesleys' fellow Anglican George Whitefield (1714-70)—probably the most important single factor in transforming the religion of the Reformation into modern Protestant evangelicalism.

The adjustments that the Wesleys made in Protestantism continue to influence decisively the shape of Christianity in Britain, America, and elsewhere in the world where evangelicals have carried the gospel. John Wesley was not so much an innovator as a gifted organizer

who creatively exploited other people's new ideas. Thus, George Whitefield and the Welshman Howell Harris had pioneered field preaching, but it was John Wesley who became the great organizer of itinerant, outdoor evangelism. Again, the Moravians had pioneered the small-group cell meeting. But it was John Wesley who attended diligently to organizing these small-group cells into bands, societies, and circuits, and in so doing founded the Methodist Church. Once more, Wesley was not the first Protestant to organize voluntary agencies for reform in society, but his campaigns against slavery and excessive drinking, and for the education of unschooled children, set precedents that many evangelicals have followed ever since.

Wesley also made doctrinal as well as practical changes in the Protestant heritage. He was an Arminian who, unlike most of his Protestant predecessors, held that God by his grace restored free will to lost humanity. John and Charles Wesley also taught that believers could lose their salvation by deliberate, unrepentant sinning. In addition, they taught that Christians should strive to reach a place of “Christian perfection.” This perfection did not mean an absolute sinlessness, but it did mean that Christians could expect to be free from every conscious sin in thought, word, and deed. Finally, the Wesleys also placed great stress on the work of the Holy Spirit. While none of these doctrinal contributions was entirely new, they did represent differences from traditional Protestant teaching. Just as Wesleyan practices have continued to mold Protestant life, so too have their doctrinal emphases—whether in entire denominations like the Methodists, and later the Nazarenes and the Assemblies of God, or in a more general way across the spectrum of Protestant churches.

<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1938), 2:172-73.



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Important as the Wesleys' adjustments to traditional Protestantism were, they also marked an important turning point in church history because of how much of the Protestant heritage they retained. The Wesleys lived in a world that was changing with unprecedented speed—as much for the reorganization of economic life as for the promotion of new ideas, as much for the renovation of politics as for the reconceptualization of the self. Yet in the cauldron of change that Europe became during the eighteenth century, the Wesleys maintained secure ties to the Protestant Reformation. Most important, as heirs of the earlier Protestant movements, John and Charles Wesley vigorously reaffirmed the central message of Protestantism: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*—salvation was by grace alone through faith alone as communicated with perfect authority in the Scriptures.

These Reformation truths were also the living realities that meant the most to John and Charles Wesley. The details of their own conversions show clearly their ties to the Reformation. On May 17, 1738, Charles Wesley and a friend began reading together Luther's commentary on the Book of Galatians. They found the volume “nobly full of faith.” Four days later, Charles Wesley could finally say, “I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Even more striking was John Wesley's own evangelical breakthrough and the role of the Reformation in that experience. Wesley had recently returned from a failed missionary venture in America. Although he was already

known for the earnestness of his “methodical” approach to doing good, this troubled clergyman still lacked the assurance that God had forgiven his sins in Christ. Then on May 24, 1738, just a week after his brother had begun reading Luther on Galatians, John Wesley was also given a new sense of God's grace. Here are the memorable words from his journal: “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society [meeting] in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle of the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”<sup>3</sup>

From the time of that experience, the message of God's grace formed the heart of the Wesleys' ministry. In an era when Britain enjoyed virtually no reliable roads, John Wesley traveled constantly to spread the good news of grace in Christ. After Aldersgate in 1738, his preaching tours took him about a quarter of a million miles (mostly on horseback), and he delivered forty thousand sermons (that is, an average of more than two a day). For many years, until Wesley at last won the reluctant admiration of all Britain, he preached these sermons in unfavorable conditions and often in the face of raucous opposition—sometimes outdoors, usually very early in the morning or at twilight, frequently while being heckled by the mob or harassed by the elite. Only in his seventies did Wesley abandon his horse for a carriage. Only in his mid-eighties did Wesley give up preaching before dawn. Here is his own account of an

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze: Spiritual Renewal and Advance in the Eighteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 109.

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<sup>3</sup> *Journal of John Wesley*, 1:475-76.

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## Remarkable Tokens of God's Presence

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early-morning sermon on Wednesday, September 7, 1785, when he was eighty-two years old. “Just as I began, a wasp, though unprovoked, stung me upon the lip. I was afraid it would swell, so as to hinder my speaking; but it did not. I spoke distinctly, near two hours in all; and was no worse for it.”<sup>4</sup> For his part, John’s brother Charles, who itinerated almost as actively for many years,

wrote nearly ten thousand hymns to spread the good news of God’s grace.

Through the ups and downs of their very active lives, and while engaged in a considerable number of traumatic controversies, John and Charles Wesley never relinquished this grand theme: God’s free grace saves sinners.



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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7:113.

## How Do You Measure a Revival?

by Timothy Clark

Is a revival just a wonderful emotional experience? How do you know if it is really an act of God? One way is to look at the impact of that revival not only on individual's lives but more broadly the world around them. In other words, can you see the fingerprints of Christ?

The Great Awakening provides a model for a revival that changed people and a culture. Reflect on the following observations:

1. The church experienced rapid growth across New England and the Middle Colonies. Growth occurred in Congregational, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches. More than 150 new churches were started in New England alone. More than seven percent of New England's population came into the church as a result of this revival (according to estimates by Keith Hardman.)
2. Missionary work increased. New efforts began to reach Native Americans in New England. A steady growth in missionary efforts by lay people or missionary societies would arise after the spiritual revival in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
3. New centers of higher learning were established. By 1740 a plan was in place to educate Native Americans to be evangelists. This school would become Dartmouth College. Other schools started in the following years included Princeton, Rutgers, University of Pennsylvania, and Brown University.
4. There was new concern and action for the poor and the disenfranchised. Social reform would be stimulated. The Wesley's opposed slavery and led his support to the antislavery movement. By 1807 the Parliament would vote to abolish slavery. Wesley and his followers went into the prisons, hospitals, and work house. They preached a gospel of respect and hope. They established clinics for the poor. In 1780 Robert Raikes would establish the first Sunday Schools to educate poor children in the work houses.

So how do you measure a revival? When we read scripture we can see the heart of Jesus in both the Sermon on the Mount (especially the beatitudes) and in the marching orders he left (the Great Commission). The impact of the Great Awakening in important ways reflected this heart:

- Spiritual renewal with repentance and changed lives.
- Establishment of believers in the life of the local church.
- Evangelism locally
- Missionary outreach.
- Concern for the poor and needy resulting in tangible action.
- And challenging social norms to reach people who need a Savior.





## Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What, if any, has been your personal experience with revivals in the church? What positive or negative memories or connotations does this topic have for you?
2. How would you define “revival”? What are some synonyms or alternative terms we might use instead of “revival”?
3. Do you think revival is needed at this time? Explain.
4. To what degree is revival in the church an action on God’s part? To what degree is it the result of the activity of believers?
5. What prevents revival or renewal? Can a lack of spiritual fervor or awareness of God’s presence in a church be part of God’s plan? Give examples.
6. The Toronto Blessing and the Pensacola revival were notable examples of periods of spiritual fervor and alleged miraculous signs in the United States during the 1990s. What biblical standards or lessons from history could be used to evaluate these revivals?
7. Many Christians in the United States have seen the prosperity and power of the United States as a sign of God’s blessing for its establishment on biblical principles arising from the Puritan influence and the Great Awakening. They have argued that national revival is possible, based on the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 *“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”* To what extent do you think this view is a valid interpretation of history? Is national revival a concept that can be applied to nations other than Israel?
8. What effect should genuine revival have on churches? On individuals? On society?
9. Should we be preparing for revival? If so, how, and how does this differ from ordinary Christian living or church practice?



## Issue Evaluation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:**

**Sound Bites and Case Studies** (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

**Study the Scriptures** (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

**Consult Other Sources** (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey** (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Discuss the Issue** (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

**Overall Impression of this Issue** (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1      2      3      4      5

**Corrections** (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):