Chapter 4 -- The First Great Awakening Transforms America's Churches		
 George Fox (Quaker) (1624-1691)	**Dates:** 1607-1730	**Sections:** • America's Religious Heritage Up To The Early 1700's • Jonathan Edwards Sparks The "First Great Awakening" Movement • The Evangelical Spirit Expands With John Wesley's Methodist Episcopalians

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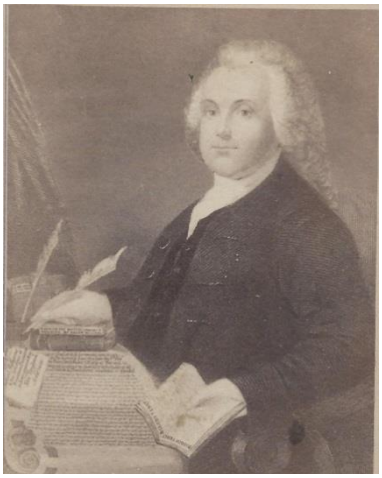
Time: 1607-1706

America's Religious Heritage Up To The Early 1700's


Roger Williams (Baptist)(1603-1683)

Effects of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment movements in Europe spill over to the religious environment developing in America.

What begins in 1607 with traditional Church of England (Anglican) settlers in Virginia, and in 1620 with Puritan rebels in Massachusetts, morphs into a full spectrum of theological options.

At the conservative end lie the Roman Catholics, who come to America via the Spanish "missions" scattered from Florida west to New Orleans and up the Mississippi River. In 1632 they discover a home in the colonies when the Catholic, Lord Baltimore, founds Maryland. They will, however, remain a much maligned presence in an America dominated by Protestant antipathy toward Rome.

Conservatism also marks the Anglicans, who assume an American identity as the Episcopalian Church. In form it remains King Henry VIII's patchwork amalgamation of Catholicism and Protestant reform. But its governance is clearly top-down, with authority over all church matters resting with a clerical hierarchy. Its liturgy mimics the old world mass, and its tonality is formal. Followers are heavily skewed toward the Southern colonies.

America's other churches are more sharply aligned with the German and Swiss contemporaries, Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564), who spark the Protestant Reformation. Both regard the entrenched clergy of their time as corrupt, and encourage their followers to take control over their own church governance.

This principle is embedded in the Puritan flight from the Church of England, and it carries over to their practices in America. Over time the Puritans and Lutherans tend to evolve into the Congregational

Church, which eliminates the clerical hierarchy and places authority for religious practices in the hands of the membership. Its influence is centered in New England.

Like the Congregationalists, Baptists embrace basic Calvinist tenets: salvation through faith alone, predestination, the Bible as the word of God dictating the right path, authority in the hands of the congregation rather than a clergy. What distinguishes them, however, is a belief that the act of baptism should be reserved for adults, not newborns, as a symbol of their studied commitment to entering the church. After its founding by Roger Williams in 1632, the Baptist Church spreads beyond Rhode Island, especially into the South.

The Presbyterian sect, founded by the Scottish preacher, John Knox (1505-1572), also traces its theological roots to Calvin. Its governance, however, falls to a body of "church elders" rather than to the members as a whole. Hence its name, which derives from the Greek word for elders – "presbyteros." The Presbyterian Church arrives in America around 1706, accompanying immigrants from Scotland. It takes hold in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and the western territories.

By 1730 each religious denomination is settling into place in the colonies, some holding on to traditional church hierarchies and liturgy, others breaking away toward new options.

At this point the Enlightenment spirit strikes the American church scene.

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Time: 1730's

Jonathan Edwards Sparks The "First Great Awakening" Movement

An Early Church in Dunbarton, New Hampshire

The general effect of the Enlightenment is to awaken individuals to the notion of self-reliance – that by using their own capacities of reason, they can re-shape their societies and personal destinies.

This is a transformative idea, and its impact is felt throughout colonial America in the 18th century.

Within the religious realm, the enlightenment spirit is ironically manifested by an otherwise conservative Puritan minister, Reverend Jonathan Edwards, preaching in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Edwards is born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut, a single son surrounded by ten sibling sisters. The family survives on modest means, a minister father eking out spare income by tutoring boys prior to entering college. One such boy is the son, Jonathan, a precocious student who enters Yale at age 13 and graduates as valedictorian of his class in 1720. Young Edwards is intensely disciplined throughout his life, studying and writing every day for up to 13 hours, taking time out only when other duties demand his attention. He is naturally drawn to the sciences, but sees in them a framework for man that is divinely inspired. His life will be devoted to faith not Deism.

He serves briefly as a novice pastor in 1722 before returning to Yale as a theological tutor, affirming his strict adherence to traditional Calvinist principles. His personal life is ascetic, marked by self-imposed

control over his time, his diet, his study and contemplation, his search for the moral perfection expected of those who are among the "elect" (destined for salvation) according to Puritan theology.

> *The way to Heaven is ascending; we must be content to travel uphill, though it be hard and tiresome and contrary to the natural bias of our flesh.*

In 1727 Edwards is formally ordained as a Congregationalist minister, and marries the daughter of the clergyman James Pierpont, founder of Yale.

In 1732 his spiritual journey encounters what becomes known as Arminianism, named after the Dutch Reformed Church theologian, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). The Arminian movement deviates from Calvin on one crucial tenet – rejecting the notion that God's grace grants salvation only to the few He chooses (the "elect") in favor of the idea that every man is blessed by the capacity to be saved, with the outcome determined by their free will.

While Edwards, the pure Calvinist, comes down on the side of God as sole arbiter of salvation, the Arminian idea of man's free will participation in the outcome resonates with Enlightenment fervor .

Edward's most famous sermon, "Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God," delivered in 1741, exhibits the "fire and brimstone" nature of his traditional Old Testament Calvinism.

> *O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell.*

But what marks Edward's as the "father of the First Great Awakening" are the "revival meetings" he institutes within his Northampton congregation. The Puritans have always been drawn toward "conversion experiences" that members share in public, and the "revivals" provide a useful forum. Edwards describes one in 1741:

> *In the month of May, 1741, a sermon was preached to a company, at a private house. One or two persons were so greatly affected with a sense of the glory of divine things and the infinite importance of the things of eternity that…it had a visible effect upon their bodies….The affection was quickly propagated throughout the room (with) many of the young people overcome…with admiration, love, joy and praise and compassion (while) others were overcome with distress about their sinful and miserable state and condition. The whole room was full of nothing but outcries, faintings and the like. The meeting continued for some hours, the time being spent in prayer, singing, counseling, and conferring. There seemed to be a consequent happy effect on many people and on the state of religion in the town.*

Suddenly, with Edwards, the preacher himself has come down from the pulpit to engage with a congregation encouraged to share their religious feelings openly and with emotion.

Thus Evangelical Christianity – the belief that all men can be "re-born" through studying, embracing and evoking the literal word of God in the Bible --begins to assert itself in America.

Needless to say, Edward's more traditional colleagues are shocked and dismayed by the "revival meetings," which may draw up to 500 people, extend over several days, and dominate a town's entire life while they last. On rare occasions they are also followed by suicides, as some attendees leave convinced they are among the doomed.

The effect is that by 1751, Jonathan Edwards falls out of favor with the forces around him, and is driven out of his Northampton Church. He lives eight more years, dying one month after being named President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton).

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Time: 1730's

The Evangelical Spirit Expands With John Wesley's Methodist Episcopalians

John Wesley (1703-1791)

The Evangelical spirit also manifests itself in the Methodist Church, which comes to America in 1736.

This Protestant sect is founded by John Wesley, who insists throughout his life that its roots are firmly in the Anglican tradition – hence its followers are often called Methodist Episcopalians.

The church tenets are worked out at Oxford University around 1730 by Wesley, his younger brother William, and one George Whitefield. Together they start a prayer group on campus, the "Holy Club," which is so disciplined in its practice of piety that fellow students cast them as "The Oxford Methodists." And the nickname sticks.

Unlike his brother and Whitefield – both staunch Calvinists – John Wesley is drawn toward Arminianism, with its promise that all men can be saved by accepting God's grace and trying to live a life of "moral perfection."

For Wesley a signal of "perfection" lies not only in worshipping Christ, but also engaging in "reform missions" aimed at correcting injustices and supporting those in need.

To rally people toward these ends, Wesley embraces the "Evangelical revival meetings" currently popularized by Edwards.

In February 1736, John Wesley sails to America, eager to hold his revivals in the Georgia colony, especially among poor whites and various Indian tribes. His stay, however, lasts just under a year, and he regards it as a total failure.

After Wesley returns to London, his 23 year old colleague, George Whitefield follows him to Georgia in 1737.

Whitefield proves to be much more adept than the reserved Wesley with the open-air context – probably a reflection of his love for theater and for acting out Bible stories as a youth. He travels broadly in America, even preaching in 1739 alongside Edwards in Northampton. The colonial editor and inventor, Benjamin Franklin befriends him in Philadelphia and publishes several of his sermons in his newspaper. He also notes the positive effects of his ministry on the local community.

> *Wonderful...change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem'd as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could*

not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

The Reverend George Whitefield will make thirteen Atlantic crossing back and forth to England, before dying in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

John Wesley survives Whitefield by two more decades. During that time he faces many challenges from the Anglican Church hierarchy. But he forever moves forward to establish his Methodist Church.

His beliefs will have great impact on mainstream religious development in America – among them the conviction that all men can achieve salvation, and that the proper path lies in studying and embracing God's words in the Bible and in completing saving "missions."

Over time Wesley's Methodists will be joined by many Presbyterians and Baptists in their adoption of evangelical practices. In turn their membership will dominate the American religious scene over the years ahead.