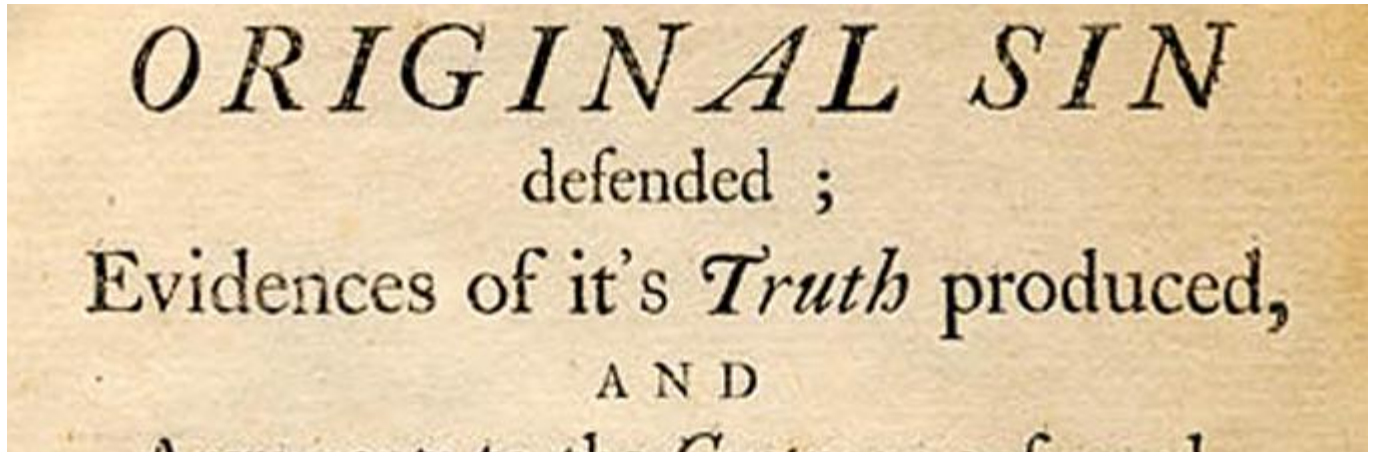


Religion and Eighteenth-Century Revivalism

by Jon Butler



The Great Christian doctrine of original sin defended, evidences of it's truth produced, and arguments to the contrary answered, 1758. (Library of Congress)

Revivals and revivalists seem endemic to the broad sweep of American history—Billy Graham’s 1957 “crusade” appearance at New York City’s Yankee Stadium; Amy Semple McPherson’s theatrical preaching and healing at her Angeles Temple in the 1920s and 1930s; Charles Finney’s “anxious bench” of the 1820s and 1830s; and Jonathan Edwards’s infamous 1741 sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, still a staple in many high school and college American literature courses.

The revivalists’ calls for spiritual recovery and renewal reveal their concern for religion’s uneven influence in America, even in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonies. Massachusetts and Connecticut were founded as havens for a puritanized Protestantism and Pennsylvania as a model for religious toleration. But the remaining colonies, from New York, New Jersey, and Delaware to Virginia and North and South Carolina only occasionally saw religion typify motivation for European emigration or dominate colonial life before the American Revolution.

The American revival tradition originated in Britain’s eighteenth-century mainland colonies, and some historians have linked them to the American Revolution. But a closer examination suggests that the revivals actually bore little unifying or political force, exhibited strong regional and religious differences, and had no substantial relationship to the Revolution. A few of their features indeed became commonplace in nineteenth- and

twentieth-century American revivals, but others proved distinctively colonial and unique to special circumstances in the colonies where revivals emerged and then receded.

“Revival” had two important meanings when it first appeared in eighteenth-century religious settings. It meant a “born-again” experience that transformed individuals spiritually and personally. The term also sometimes implied that men and women should recover the piety presumably common to their ancestors. Both have been standard features of religious revivals from the eighteenth century to the present.

Many modern studies of colonial American revivalism focus on New England and homogenize the religious revivals of the period with “The Great Awakening,” a term not invented until the 1840s. In fact, the eighteenth-century revivals emerged in different colonies under substantially different circumstances, never achieved the consistency of a cohesive colonies-wide movement, reflected several different theological modes, and evinced interrelationships with Britain and Europe largely absent in the next century’s revivals.

In general, revivals stressed personal religious experience rather than doctrinal knowledge in the converted as well as in revival ministers. This tendency became one of revivalism’s flash points, producing erratic behavior in converts as well as anti-intellectual impulses often common to American revivalism.

Revivalism emerged episodically in Britain’s mainland colonies in different places and times. New Englanders experienced them early. Solomon Stoddard encouraged religious “harvests” in Northampton, Massachusetts, at least five different times from the 1690s to the 1720s, and in his 1714 *Guide to Christ*, Stoddard reminded clergy and laity alike that even after individuals began a “work of preparation,” “sin reigns in them as much as before.” Revivals overtook many New England congregations from the late 1730s to the mid-1740s, and Stoddard’s grandson Jonathan Edwards became the region’s most famous theologian of revival.[1]

The New England revivals focused primarily on rejuvenating spiritual commitment among third- and fourth-generation Puritans, on drawing in members’ indifferent children, and on bringing un-churched neighbors into lagging congregations. Yet even this carefully limited appeal churned up enthusiastic men and women who struck out on their own, producing “imprudences and errors,” like the unordained James Davenport, who burned anti-revival tracts in New London, Connecticut.[2] The New England clergy denounced Davenport, and as Congregationalist and Baptist congregations split over revivals into “New Light” (pro-revival) and “Old Light” (anti-revival) camps, Jonathan Edwards and other ministers pulled back. Edwards quickly encouraged ministerial discipline: “no wonder then that when a people are as sheep without a Shepherd, they wander out of the way.”[3] The revival-inspired tensions within communities sometimes intersected politics because New England towns paid a minister’s salary, and by 1745, many towns were relieved to see the revivals declining.

While revivals essentially skipped New York, Delaware, Maryland, and South Carolina, they roiled the Dutch Reformed of New Jersey and Presbyterians in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, demonstrating the uniqueness of revivals in different colonies. The newly arrived Dutch immigrant Rev. Theodorus Frelinghuysen created tension in his and other New Jersey Dutch Reformed congregations in the 1720s. He emphasized a pietistic, introspective moralism that demanded rectified lives in church members. But Frelinghuysen's methods and demeanor won as much hostility as favor from Dutch Reformed congregants and neighbors. He infamously "fenced" in his Communion table, admitting only the most pure, but excluding many others, and his moralism knew few limits. Frelinghuysen insulted New York City's senior Dutch minister, Rev. Gautherus DuBois, telling him that a large wall mirror DuBois owned was ostentatiously out of place in a minister's home.

Rev. William Tennent and his three minister sons, William Jr., Gilbert, and John, became engines of Presbyterian revival in New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the 1730s and 1740s. Their demands for religious renewal, and particularly their emphasis on discipline among Presbyterian clergymen, produced a schism in the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1741 that lasted until 1758. They walked out to form a rival Presbytery of New York that would better train and supervise "true" Presbyterian clergy as the only ministers capable of effectively leading revived congregations.

Concern about revival excesses concerned Pennsylvania Presbyterians as much as it had New England Congregationalists. Samuel Blair led "soul exercises" for his congregants in New Londonderry, Pennsylvania, but warned them to "moderate and bound their passions."^[4] In 1740 New Jersey's Gilbert Tennent ridiculed ministers learned in theology but lacking a conversion experience as "Pharisee-shepherds." But only two years later he denounced unsanctioned and untrained preaching by "ignorant young converts" for introducing "the greatest errors and the greatest anarchy and confusion."^[5] In contrast to New England, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, Baptist and Presbyterian revivals in Virginia and North Carolina stimulated major confrontations with the established Church of England headed by George III (the "Anglican" Church) and occurred mainly in the 1760s and early 1770s, two decades after the northern revivals. Virginia sheriffs, provoked by prominent local Anglican parish vestrymen and their Anglican ministers, beat, whipped, arrested, and jailed Baptist and Presbyterian ministers to stop their preaching. In 1771 the Anglican minister in Virginia's Caroline County ran "the end of his horsewhip in [the Baptist minister's] mouth." When he finished preaching, Anglican supporters "violently jerked [the minister] off the stage" then "caught him by the back part of his neck [and] beat his head against the ground, some times up[,] sometimes down," after which the sheriff gave him "twenty lashes with his Horse Whip."^[6]

Despite this religious opposition, Virginia Baptists and Presbyterians supported the Revolution as strongly as did Virginia's mostly Anglican aristocratic elite. After the Revolution, Baptists and Presbyterians alongside deists like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison helped lead Virginia toward modern religious toleration and an end to government establishment for religion.

The preaching of George Whitefield cut across the different local and regional appearances of religious revival and reinforced the colonial connections to Britain and Europe. Whitefield was one of the few Church of England ministers to embrace revivalism. He had been part of a “Holy Club” at Oxford with Charles and John Wesley, who later founded the Methodist movement. Whitefield made seven different preaching tours of Britain’s mainland North American colonies between 1738 and his death in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770. These American tours, coupled with his preaching in Britain, made him one of the most famous ministers and, indeed, most famous individuals on either side of the Atlantic in the eighteenth century.

Whitefield’s effect can be traced in lives of Nathan Cole, a common Connecticut farmer and carpenter, and Benjamin Franklin. Cole had been told that Whitefield preached “like one of the old apostles,” and when he heard that Whitefield would preach in nearby Middletown, Connecticut, he reported, “I was in my field at Work, [and] dropt my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr Whitfield preach at Middletown, then run to my pasture for my horse with all my might; fearing that I should be too late.”[7]

The ever cool Franklin confessed Whitefield’s effect on him in his *Autobiography*: “I silently resolved he should get nothing from me, I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin’d me to give the silver; and he finish’d so admirably, that I empty’d my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all.”[8]

Whitefield asked a simple question of thousands of Britons and colonists: “Are you saved?” The challenge was dramatic, and Whitefield’s pliant and fascinatingly mercurial voice often produced transfixed silence. David Garrick, a famous eighteenth-century British actor and producer, confessed, “I would give a hundred guineas, if I could say ‘Oh’ like Mr. Whitefield.”[9]

Had Whitefield’s dramatic performances created a coherent, culture-changing event in the pre-Revolutionary mainland colonies? Whitefield indeed became the archetype for the image of the modern Protestant “revivalist,” such as Billy Graham and Charles Finney. Whitefield also epitomized the attention that flowed to revival clergy generally. Revivals actually tended to increase leaders’ stature and authority, even if laypeople were the objects of their attention. Thus, the names most famous in the eighteenth-century revivals are seldom the common laypeople like the Connecticut farmer Nathan Cole whom the clergy sought to convert, but preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Gilbert Tennent in the 1740s or Virginia’s Baptist preachers of the 1750s and 1760s, such as “Swearing Jack” Waller and James Ireland. Local revival ministers influenced their own congregations and other ministers through publications and personal relationships. If they turned to itinerancy, the results could be mixed, not least because they could impose on town ministers who hadn’t invited them, even if they did turn out and inspire excited listeners.

The outsized Whitefield attracted enormous crowds that regional itinerants never mustered. But his events brought little change to the colonies' denominational structure. Congregations formed by avid Whitefield supporters in Salem, Boston, and Philadelphia had closed by 1780, only a decade after Whitefield's death.

The denominational variety and regional differences of the colonies' eighteenth-century revivals reflected the distinctive pre-independent, colonial character of Britain's mainland colonies. Revivals tended to reflect local impulses and personalities, although Congregationalists and Baptists in New England and Presbyterians in New Jersey and Pennsylvania demonstrated the possibility of regional cooperation, both in support of revivals and in corralling them. The success of George Whitefield's seven preaching tours of the colonies between 1738 and 1770 demonstrated colonists' fascination with the theater he provided and at least a momentary fretfulness about salvation in a society where material success and failure seemed the most pressing concerns. And perhaps Whitefield's British origins and his fame across the Atlantic inspired extraordinary colonial interest.

Unlike many nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors, the eighteenth-century revivals eschewed secular politics. They did not tie themselves to efforts at British moral or political renewal and did not confront contemporary moral issues, such as slavery (both Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield owned slaves). The contest over unlicensed Baptist and Presbyterian preaching in Virginia in the 1760s and early 1770s perhaps bore the most obvious secular connotations. But even there, Baptists intriguingly posed a specifically religious rather than secular precedent to support their preaching: rather than calling on developing secular notions of open political speech, they simply argued that Baptist preaching "resembled primitive times, when the gospel was preached in the land of Judea."[10]

In short, the episodic religious upheavals of eighteenth-century America were the local expressions of colonists who were a long way from Britain and, as yet, a long way from each other. Whitefield touched many but never brought them together, and where revivals prospered, their concern centered on souls rather than politics, except perhaps in Virginia.

Yet after the Revolution, American religious leaders saw possibilities in the history of the eighteenth-century revivals. In 1842 the Protestant evangelical Joseph Tracy published *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*. He brought the disparate colonial revivals together as a precedent for revivals he hoped would overtake and influence a tumultuous, unruly, and disturbingly heterogeneous nation a half-century after independence.

Tracy's *The Great Awakening* homogenized the eighteenth-century past so he might steady his own anxious nineteenth-century society. Looking at it critically, however, offers an opportunity to understand eighteenth-century colonial revivalism for what it was in its own time, not in Tracy's time or ours. The sometimes peculiar and quite different Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian revivals in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the whipping and jailing of Baptist preachers by Virginia sheriffs and courts on the eve of the American Revolution, and the tension inside declining New England Puritan congregations that

fostered revivals there, point to the artificiality of Tracy’s homogenizing label about the eighteenth-century revivals, “The Great Awakening.”

But modern American revivals bore at least two important links to their colonial predecessors. The charismatic theatricality of George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and “Swearing Jack” Waller would take modern American form in Charles Finney, Amy Semple McPherson, Billy Graham, and these modern revivalists also emphasized individual conversion and the “born-again experience,” just as George Whitefield had done. In these ways, at least two critical features of the eighteenth-century colonial revivals lived on far beyond their own time to shape distinctive features of modern American life.

[1] Solomon Stoddard, *A Guide To Christ* (Boston, 1714), 6.

[2] Jonathan Edwards, “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, 1972), 4:269.

[3] Edwards, “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God,” in *Works of Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, 1972), 4:269.

[4] Samuel Blair, “A Short and Faithful Narrative of the Late Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry,” in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740–1745* (New York, 1970), 73.

[5] Gilbert Tennent, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis, 1967), 90, 97.

[6] Quoted in Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 162.

[7] Michael J. Crawford, ed., “The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 3d ser., 33 (1976), 92.

[8] Leonard W. Labaree, et al., ed. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. 2nd ed. (New Haven, 2003), 177.

[9] Quoted in Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1991), 237.

[10] William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Kettocton Baptist Association* (Staunton [Va.], 1808), 66.

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