Old Light vs New Light - Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, First Great Awakening, New Light, Old Light, fire and brimstone
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Early U.S. Colonial Life Unit

You look at the book and sigh. It's probably thicker than a dictionary and it's just as boring: the sentences are long, the words are big and unnecessarily confusing, and you really don't have any motivation read it. Because the book isn't very exciting, you're probably not interested in the material it covers. By the time you finish, you can barely even remember what most of the book was about!

In the thirteen U.S. colonies around the 1730s, church services were a lot like this book: they were long, boring, and confusing. The pastors, who were like teachers for churches, would get up and teach the lessons they thought were important for the people who went to church. But since their lessons were long and confusing, nobody really paid attention, and they didn't learn much, just like you probably didn't learn anything from the boring book.

One pastor during this time saw that people who went to church weren't paying very much attention. He wanted people to go home and think about the lessons they had learned in church and how they could use these ideas in their lives. Instead, they went home and started to come up with independent ideas and interpretations, some of which contradicted (went against) everything they had been taught. This would be like you making up the parts of the book that you didn't care about!

The pastor became furious, because people were making up concepts that weren't true, and the things they were making up contradicted what Christians were supposed to believe. He started telling people they were wrong; even if the book was boring, that doesn't mean they could make something else up! He gave speeches about how God was going to punish people for making up their own versions of the book. His name was Jonathan Edwards, and he was one of the first pastors to push people into paying attention to the church by scaring them.
Jonathan's messages were not boring; in fact, they scared a lot of people. Instead of talking about good or happy things, he threatened them with an angry God. The students definitely weren't bored any more; they realized they had been wrong and needed to change, before God became even more angry. Jonathan also scared them with stories of fire and brimstone, which means that he talked about powerful and scary things that would happen to you if you didn't do the right thing.

Jonathan wasn't the only pastor to notice that people's behavior needed to change; another pastor did too. His lessons weren't exactly the same as Jonathan's, though. Instead of scaring the students or threatening them with fire and brimstone, he made them feel sad and guilty about what they had done wrong. Any time they sinned, they were basically telling God they didn't care. He reminded them of everything God had done for them and that they would feel better right away if they converted to his religion. George Whitefield helped his people to pay more attention with a powerful voice and exciting sermons that by made listeners feel guilty and want to join his church.

Pastors began to notice that preaching like George and Jonathan inspired people to pay attention, so some of them started to copy these two. They saw that people got more excited about going to church and learning if they were excited by the lesson they heard! More people started going to church and people came together to make new churches too. The First Great Awakening was when more people were excited about church and groups of people started to come together and make new churches.

During the First Great Awakening, a lot of new churches were built, and new types of sermons were developed. A lot of other pastors also realized that more people went to church when it was exciting. These pastors start their own churches too, and each new church would have slightly different versions of the story of their religion in each church. The New Light was the name for all the new churches and pastors that got started during the Great Awakening.

Not everyone appreciated the New Light; they liked the way the old pastors would preach. Some people thought that people like George and Jonathan didn't preach enough real facts, or that their versions weren't exactly right. They thought the new pastors spent too much time trying to make their listeners so sad or scared so they would pay attention. The Old Light was the name for people and pastors who didn't want the churches to change.

Even though the Old Light didn't want it to happen, a lot of the new churches stuck around for good. They started to change how people thought about church and lessons from pastors, and some people even
thought about how they could take these lessons outside of the churches. It turns out that the First Great Awakening was very important in America, because people started to feel more independent. People in the colonies felt less like they were from Europe and more like they were from America.