

Francis Asbury: Revivalist and Role Model for Modern-Day Abolitionists

Today marks the anniversary of the passing of a spiritual hero and the father of American circuit riders—Francis Asbury, who died on March 31, 1816. This simple preacher once met with George Washington, urging him to sign an emancipation for slaves.

While I was a bit of a late-bloomer in discovering why history matters, now I devour it in my spare time. Revival history especially captures my imagination, and recently I have been studying the Methodist circuit riders who had a profound impact on the shaping of America during its formative years.

These untiring preachers on horseback relentlessly carried the gospel of Jesus Christ across the rough terrain of our newly settled land.

From the extraordinary work of Rev. Francis Asbury, we can glean valuable lessons to help shape the future of America ... especially as it pertains to the great abolitionist movement of our day: ending abortion.

Startling Parallels

Wait—why am I associating this with abortion? A careful study of history reveals that, in addition to spearheading revival in the nation, Francis Asbury was an ardent abolitionist of slavery. Few realize the pivotal role he played. His leadership on the slavery issue was instrumental in forming and multiplying abolitionist sentiment in the nation.

The Lord has highlighted to me startling similarities between how the American church—and the nation as a whole—dealt with

the issue of slavery and how we are currently dealing with the issue of abortion.

Saying such a thing can be a volatile statement to some. My intention upfront is not to offend anyone, diminish the pain of a community or selfishly piggyback on a borrowed interest. There *are* simply undeniable parallels between slavery and abortion that must be considered by the church and by our culture—too many in fact to fully explore here.

After more than 10 years in the pro-life movement, I can say without a doubt that the same God who ended legal slavery wants to end abortion. If that is a new concept for you, let's explore this relationship together.

The Call of a Lifetime

Under the leadership of John Wesley, Methodism (as it came to be called) arose during an immoral age and spread revival throughout England, Scotland and Ireland. Soon John and Charles Wesley along with George Whitefield were instrumental in spreading the Great Awakening to America.

In August 1771, John Wesley rose in their Annual Conference at Bristol and asked with much intensity, "Our brethren in America call aloud for help. Who will go?"

A young 26-year-old Asbury heeded the missionary call that day and sprang to his feet. Little did he know, but he was answering a call to his lifelong work.

America at the Crossroads

In between the First and Second Great Awakenings of this nation, the circuit riders spread the gospel throughout the colonies and later the states. When Revolution broke out, Francis Asbury was the only English preacher to remain in America when their loyalties were challenged.

"To no other man does American civilization owe so much as to

Bishop Asbury," wrote American minister and historian Matthew Simpson in *A Hundred Years of Methodism*. "He is worthy of a place among the heroes of '76."

One of the preeminent questions our founding fathers wrestled over was the issue of slavery. Thomas Jefferson described the slavery dilemma saying, "But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."

People fighting for their God-given liberty were simultaneously denying that same liberty to other human beings. The irony of the situation didn't go unnoticed. Enter the abolitionists.

God's Heart Breaks Over Injustice

I am so moved by how God raised up prophets of righteousness to condemn slavery during America's earliest days. The Lord was clearly communicating His heart for the suffering and injustice of an oppressed people. We were given truth, and we would then become responsible for it.

Asbury and the circuit riders carried in their saddlebags Bibles, hymnals ... along with petitions and legal forms for the freeing of slaves. For them it wasn't an inappropriate mixture of church and state issues. Their Christian faith actually *demanded* they pursue emancipation and justice for the oppressed.

I can't help but think that God saw down the road to a bloody Civil War, a conflict that would claim the lives of more than 600,000 people and nearly destroy our new nation. The abolitionist prophets like Francis Asbury were God's mercy strategy, providing an opportunity to avert bloodshed and disaster.

History Repeating Itself

We see Jesus confront his generation in Matthew 23:29-32, saying, "And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!"

He clarifies his point in Luke 11:48: "So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs."

Simply stated, they were continuing to walk in the same destructive path of their ancestors instead of interrupting it with reform.

Most everyone today would make a similar statement: *If I had lived in the days of slavery, I would not have owned slaves. I would not have dehumanized and devalued life like they did. I would not have denied another human being their God-given right to life, or profited financially from the destruction of others.*

Today America decorates the tombs of those honored dead, yet at the same time we maintain an attitude of indifference towards vulnerable babies in the womb.

We dehumanize them at every opportunity; in other words, "It's just a lump of tissue." We treat them as disposable in exchange for pursuing financial prosperity. We have built industries that have monetized their destruction. We ignore their torture, suffering and pain. We deny giving a voice to the voiceless. We say that we pity their demise, but still we persist. And all this is celebrated as a glorious "right" for us to do so.

Can we see the startling parallels? Jesus' words of warning have haunting relevance to us today. Our tolerance, participation and apathy concerning abortion testify against

US.

Modern-Day Abolitionists

Recently I found the gravesite of Francis Asbury in the aging Mount Olivet Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland. I like to track down the resting places of revivalists and spiritual heroes. Not only that, but I like to visit those places and pray for fresh impartation of what they walked in and the mantles they carried.

Remember that Elijah was taken up, yet his mantle remained on the earth for Elisha to pick up!

I take ministry interns to visit the gravesite as well as to a memorial of Francis Asbury in Washington, D.C. This forgotten memorial dedicated to the "Prophet of the Long Road" is on the same 16th Street as The White House, just two miles up the road.

Who can estimate the impact of Francis Asbury's life as a revivalist and abolitionist? In *Francis Asbury: The Prophet of the Long Road*, his biographer sums up Asbury's life in one sentence:

If to speak with authority as the accredited messenger of God; to have credentials which bear the seal of heaven; to have a voice keyed to the theme of the centuries; if when he lifted the trumpet to his lips the Almighty blew the blast; if to be conscious of an ever-present sense of God, God the Summoner, God the Anointing One, God the Judge, and to project it into speech which would make his hearers tremble, smite them with terror, and cause them to fall as dead men; if to be and do all this would entitle a man to be called a great preacher, then Asbury was a great preacher.

The story of Francis Asbury has forever marked me. I believe God desires to raise up modern-day revivalists and abolitionists who will embody the same convictions as Asbury.

To see another Great Awakening *and* the ending of abortion, we must not forget the lessons of the circuit riders.

Pockets of true revival are breaking out across America. Want to know more about the next great move of God? Click here to see Jennifer LeClaire's new book, featuring Dutch Sheets, Reinhard Bonnke, Jonathan Cahn, Billy Graham and others.

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