

Francis Asbury, the Civil War, and 7 Ways We Can Contend Against Injustice

Over 600,000 people were killed in America's bloodiest conflict: the Civil War, which ended 150 years ago this week. Was that struggle inevitable, or did anyone have the foresight to see slavery would tear our nation apart?

In the earliest days of our founding, Rev. Francis Asbury was a voice for the abolition of slavery when few could hear it. He was instrumental in shaping America's culture and laws in defense of human life.

For instance, Francis Asbury made a profound impact on a signer of the U.S. Constitution, Richard Bassett, and the two became close friends. After converting to Methodism, Bassett freed his slaves, paid them as hired labor, and joyfully attended revival meetings with them.

My keen interest in Francis Asbury was sparked during my studies of historic revival and great awakening. Imagine my surprise when I discovered a family ancestor was one of Asbury's circuit riders in the 18th century.

After more than a decade working in the pro-life movement, I have come to an unapologetic conclusion: The same God who ended slavery wants to end abortion.

How can we, a new generation of modern-day revivalists and abolitionists, be inspired and equipped with the same passion as Asbury? Here are seven principles Francis Asbury and the circuit riders can teach us today.

1. Francis Asbury allowed his heart to be affected by the injustice of slavery.

This point leads the list for a reason: most people guard their hearts from identifying with pain and suffering. We must give more than mental ascent to the injustice of abortion. Biblically, the fight against injustice is a long one (see Luke 18). Connecting your heart with God's heart is the key to motivation and sustainability.

Asbury recorded numerous comments in his journals about how the abuse of the slaves affected his heart.

On June 27, 1780, during the American Revolutionary War, he wrote, "There are many things that are painful to me, but cannot yet be removed, especially slave-keeping and its attendant circumstances. The Lord will certainly hear the cries of the oppressed, naked, starving creatures. O, my God! Think on this land. Amen."

The weather itself seemed to mirror his internal struggle on July 3, 1780, "Very rainy night, with thunder and lightning. I am grieved to see slavery, and the manner of keeping these poor people."

The reality of slavery was inescapable. On June 8, 1783 he lamented, "I went to I. Worthington's; but I beheld such cruelty to a negro that I could not feel free to stay; I called for my horse, delivered my own soul, and departed."

Godly grief turns our hearts to the Just One in a heartfelt cry for wrong things to be made right. On October 14, 1784, he said: "I pity the poor slaves. O that God would look down in mercy, and take their cause in hand!"

What a challenge it is to be surrounded by injustice and yet not turn a blind eye. We must look upon injustice and allow it to affect our hearts. We must identify with those who suffer and connect with God's heart for them. In the process, we comfort God and then find pure motivation to aid in comforting the oppressed.

2. Francis Asbury prayed for slavery to completely end.

Prayer is the greatest form of activism for the Christian. In spite of the cultural obstacles, divisions and the complexity of the slavery debate, Asbury prayed. Surrounded by injustice and with little power to change the situation, still Asbury prayed.

He cried out in faith to the God who answers prayer, "O Lord, banish the infernal spirit of slavery from thy dear Zion."

That prayer was genuine, regardless of what anyone may have thought about it being "unrealistic." In hindsight, we can confidently say that such an audacious prayer was appropriate, valuable and necessary.

Let's not get lost or discouraged in the complexity of the abortion debate. Let's pray audacious prayers. "O Lord, banish the infernal spirit of abortion from America."

3. Francis Asbury saw a divine connection between experiencing revival and the need to stand against injustice.

The Methodist abolitionist movement was inspired by the uncompromising stand of the Quakers.

Asbury reflected in his journal on June 10, 1778, "I find the more pious part of the people called Quakers are exerting themselves for the liberation of the slaves. This is a very laudable design, and what the Methodists must come to; or, I fear, the Lord will depart from them."

This begs the question of us today, a penetrating one: Can we tolerate or ignore the injustice of abortion—and still expect God's blessing and favor in our churches?

4. Francis Asbury confronted the church that was tolerant of the evil of slavery.

Asbury brought leadership to the growing movement of Methodism by promoting a doctrine and discipline that spoke directly concerning the evil of slavery.

On June 4, 1780, Asbury lamented, "I spoke to some select friends about slave-keeping, but they could not bear it: this I know, God will plead the cause of the oppressed, though it gives offence to say so here."

Repeatedly in his journals, Asbury recorded conversations where he broached the topic of slavery. Some people were persuaded, some were not—but Asbury kept talking about it. He kept the conversation going while the church caught up, even though the discussion was challenging and convicting.

Some circuit rider preachers would give altar calls and immediately hand out pre-printed manumission forms for the converts to set their slaves free on the spot. Now that's an altar call!

As the movement grew Asbury was faced with a body of Christian believers who didn't always see eye-to-eye on slavery. He was ahead of his time for both the church and the culture. That made it even more imperative for him to hold a strong, principled stand for truth.

It is not compassionate to remain silent when God's people are deceived. We must speak truth in love while being confident, persuasive, patient and yet not judgmental.

5. Francis Asbury appealed to governmental leaders for intervention and change.

In his efforts to reform the culture, Asbury saw the necessity to shape the laws of the land in order to relieve the suffering of the slaves, prevent expansion of the slave trade, and ultimately ban the practice altogether.

In the spring of 1785, Asbury and fellow bishop Thomas

Coke went to Mount Vernon to call upon the great George Washington to sign a petition for emancipation. Washington told them he shared their sentiment, but he would not sign due to challenges in the Virginia Assembly.

Personal appeals didn't always meet obstinate resistance. It was Asbury's influence that led state senator Richard Bassett to successfully introduce anti-slavery bills into the Delaware Assembly. Bassett became a kindred spirit, and his home served as a popular retreat for Asbury and the circuit riders.

During the years 1800–1804, circuit riders were charged with carrying petitions for anti-slavery legislation into states that did not yet have it—making their appeal at the grass-roots level.

At the 1924 dedication ceremony of the Asbury Memorial in Washington, D.C., President Calvin Coolidge remarked, “[John] Adams and [Thomas] Jefferson must have known him, and [Andrew] Jackson must have seen in him a flaming spirit as unconquerable as his own ... He is entitled to rank as one of the builders of our nation.”

Who can estimate the cumulative impact of Asbury's efforts on the decision makers of the day? His influence extended far beyond the walls of any church and deep into the bedrock of our government and society.

Pro-life sentiment is now winning the day in America. Recent elections have brought a wave of pro-life legislators into office at the state and federal level. Successful pro-life legislation throughout the states is reshaping America's apathy toward abortion. We need more pro-life prophets like Asbury helping guide lawmakers along the way.

6. Francis Asbury was passionate and pragmatic.

When the boldest efforts like all-out emancipation proved to be ahead of their time, Asbury was relentlessly pragmatic.

This enabled him and his Methodist followers to move forward gradually “till the desired end be fully accomplished.”

Incremental approaches can be detrimental, if their true aim is to fall short of the goal. This was not the case with Asbury—who saw the suffering of oppression and sought to stem the tide of death.

Asbury believed the best way to impact culture was to embody the message. No doubt many messages were preached from the text, “Judgment begins with the household of God.” Under his leadership the Methodists took resolute steps year after year to eliminate slaveholding among their followers. If this is considered incrementalism, then it was quite effective.

While there is no shortage of opinion today about which pro-life strategy is the best or most effective, Asbury’s example serves as an appeal for us to embrace a pragmatic and systematic approach that does not stop until the goal is complete.

Let’s rejoice for every attempt designed to rescue precious lives in the womb, to save the mothers and fathers who would be wounded by abortion—whether it’s on the sidewalk in front of an abortion center or in the halls of Congress.

7. Francis Asbury never stopped preaching the gospel.

Francis Asbury was a revivalist and an abolitionist. There was no conflict between the two for him, and there shouldn’t be for us either. He never stopped laboring for the salvation of souls, and he never stopped fighting to eradicate the injustice of slavery.

Asbury loved the slave and the slaveholder.

The atrocity of slavery didn’t cripple the heart of Francis Asbury, for he carried the internal flame of the only true

answer to injustice in the earth. Jesus Christ was that answer then, and He still is today.

The world needs fiery people of conviction who will preach the word of God in every sphere of society. Revival with reformation is possible. Let's learn the timeless lessons of Francis Asbury and the circuit riders as we contend against the injustice of abortion until the new day dawns.

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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