

How the Great Awakening Impacted the Civil Rights Movement

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and America's black church are a vital part of the legacy of 1726 and the Great Awakening that began that year. As I have documented in my latest book, *1726*, the Awakening had a profound impact on the black populace of Colonial America. Indeed, it was out of this Awakening that the American black church was born and the spiritual and moral resources were unleashed that eventually brought about the end of slavery on this continent.

From Evangelism to Social Transformation

At the beginning of the Great Awakening in 1726, outreach to the black populace was evangelistic in nature and not characterized by opposition to slavery. Those early preachers, such as Whitefield, Tennant and Edwards, saw their primary purpose as getting people ready for the next world, not necessarily improving their lot in this one. In their thinking, a slave on his way to heaven was far better off than a king on his way to hell.

Nonetheless, their insistence on sharing the gospel with all people and their willingness to share Christian fellowship with blacks, both slave and free, breached racial and cultural barriers in Colonial America. Also, the inclusive gospel message they preached and their compassionate treatment of blacks created a climate conducive to the anti-slavery sentiments that would burst forth through those who would come after them.

Indeed, the revivalists who came after Edwards and Whitefield carried the message of their predecessors to its logical conclusion: If we are all creatures of the same Creator and if

Christ died that all might be saved, then how can slavery ever be justified?

They, therefore, began a vicious attack on the institution of slavery. This is what historian Benjamin Hart was referring to when he wrote, “Among the most ardent opponents of slavery were ministers, particularly the Puritan and revivalist preachers” (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 92).

These “ardent opponents of slavery” included the followers of Jonathan Edwards who expanded on his idea of the essential dignity of all created beings and applied it to the blacks of Colonial America. They included Levi Hart in Connecticut; Edwards’ son, Jonathan Jr., also in Connecticut; Jacob Green in New Jersey and Samuel Hopkins in Rhode Island.

Showing the Hypocrisy of Demanding Liberty and Tolerating Slavery

Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), who had been personally tutored by Edwards, pastored for a time in Newport, Rhode Island, an important hub in the transatlantic slave trade. Like Paul, whose spirit was “provoked” observing the idols in Athens, Hopkins was deeply grieved by what he observed in Newport. He began to passionately speak out against this “violation of God’s will” and declared, “This whole country have their hands full of blood this day” (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 92).

After the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in 1774, Hopkins sent a pamphlet to every member of the Congress, asking how they could complain about “enslavement” to Great Britain and overlook the “enslavement” of so many blacks in the colonies.

Indeed, as “liberty” became a watchword throughout the colonies, these second-generation Awakening preachers began applying it to the enslaved blacks in America. Like Hopkins, they pointed out the hypocrisy of demanding freedom from Great

Britain while enslaving black Africans. One of the most vocal was the Baptist preacher John Allen, who thundered,

Blush ye pretended votaries of freedom! ye trifling Patriots! who are making a vain parade of being advocates for the liberties of mankind, who are thus making a mockery of your profession by trampling on the sacred natural rights and privileges of Africans (Hyatt, 1726: The Year that Defined America, 156).

The opposition to slavery thus mounted as other ministers of the Awakening began to speak out. For example, in a sermon preached and published in 1770, Samuel Cooke declared that by tolerating the evil of slavery, “We, the patrons of liberty, have dishonored the Christian name, and degraded human nature nearly to a level with the beasts that perish” (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 93).

God Speaks to Freeborn Garrettson

Freeborn Garrettson (1752-1827), a revivalist from Maryland, freed his slaves after hearing God speak to him supernaturally. According to Garrettson, he heard the Lord say, “It is not right for you to keep your fellow creatures in bondage; you must let the oppressed go free.” Garrettson immediately informed his slaves that they did not belong to him and that he did not desire their services without giving them proper compensation.

Garrettson began preaching against slavery and advocating for freedom, which provoked intense opposition, especially in the South. One enraged slave-owner came to the house where Garrettson was lodging and swore at him, threatened him and punched him in the face. Garrettson did not retaliate but sought to reason with the man, who finally gave up and left.

Garrettson took his message to North Carolina, where he preached to black audiences and sought, in his words, “to

inculcate the doctrine of freedom in them." His opposition to slavery was firmly rooted in the gospel and he described a typical meeting with blacks, in which "Many of their sable faces were bedewed with tears, their withered hands of faith were stretched out, and their precious souls made white in the blood of the Lamb" (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 95).

Garrettson also preached to southern white audiences and sought to convince them of the evils of slavery and that God's will was liberty for all His creatures. In Delaware, Garrettson visited the Stokeley Sturgis Plantation and preached to both the slaves and the Sturgis family. He was able to convince Sturgis that slavery is a sin and Sturgis began making arrangements for his slaves to obtain freedom.

Richard Allen Founds the AME

One of those who obtained his freedom was Richard Allen who then became a successful evangelist to both black and white audiences. In 1784, he preached for weeks in Radnor, Pennsylvania, to mostly white audiences and recalled hearing them say, "This man must be a man of God; I have never heard such preaching before" (Hyatt, 1726: *The Year that Defined America*, 95-96).

Allen became close friends with Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence. When the Methodist Church in Philadelphia decided to segregate the congregation according to race, Allen and other blacks walked out. Rush, who called slavery a "hydra sin," came to their aid and assisted them in establishing their own congregation. They established Bethel Methodist Church out of which came the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination. Allen later wrote:

Dr. Rush did much for us in public by his influence. I hope the name of Dr. Benjamin Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston will

never be forgotten among us. They were the two first gentlemen who espoused the cause of the oppressed and aided us in building the house of the Lord for the poor Africans to worship in. Here was the beginning and rise of the first African church in America (Hyatt, 1726: The Year that Defined America, 156).

The Great Awakening's Legacy in Black America

Out of the Great Awakening, black congregations sprang up and black preachers arose, spreading the Good News throughout the land. It was thus out of the Awakening that the American black church was born and became a powerful and positive force in American society, producing some of the nation's greatest preachers, singers and musicians.

Indeed, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s-70s was anchored in the black churches of America and its most prominent leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1929-1968) were ordained ministers—a legacy of 1726.

It may well be that the black church in America is the best hope for the continuing legacy of 1726 in this nation. {eo}

*This article is derived from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt's** latest book, 1726, available from Amazon and his website at . He is also the founder of the "1726 Project" whose goal is to spread the message of America's birth out of the First Great Awakening and call on believers everywhere to pray for another Great Awakening across the land.*