

The Surprising Link Between African-Americans and the Great Awakening

The revivalists of the Great Awakening found an especially receptive audience among the black population of Colonial America. Blacks, both slave and free, resonated with the message of a “new birth” and found many areas of Scripture with which they could identify, such as Israel’s time of slavery in Egypt and God’s mighty deliverance of them. Through the Awakening, the racial chasm was breached, slaves were humanized and whites were awakened to the evils of slavery. The Great Awakening, indeed, marked the beginning of the end of slavery in America.

George Whitefield Reaches Out to Blacks in His Preaching

George Whitefield preached from the steps of the Philadelphia courthouse to crowds of over 10,000, when the population of the city was only 13,000. In the crowds were numerous blacks who were especially receptive to the evangelical, revival message that he preached. This was borne out by the fact that, after preaching his farewell sermon and retiring to his lodgings, “Near 50 Negroes came to give me thanks for what God had done for their souls.” Whitefield considered this an answer to prayer, saying, “I have been much drawn in prayer for them, and have seen them wrought upon by the word preached.”

One black woman who was converted under Whitefield’s ministry became discouraged and prayed that the Lord would manifest Himself to her. Shortly thereafter both she and Whitefield were in a meeting where a Baptist minister was preaching. Whitefield said that the word came with such power that the woman began to cry out and “could not help praising and blessing God.”

When some criticized her for interrupting the preacher, Whitefield came to her defense saying he believed that, in that hour, "the Lord Jesus took a great possession of her soul." He went on to say, "I doubt not, when the poor Negroes are to be called, God will highly favor them, to wipe off their reproach, and show that He is no respecter of persons." Whitefield exhibited genuine compassion and concern for the blacks in his audiences, and they recognized it. One black woman, after hearing Whitefield preach, stated that he must have been in a trance and insisted that "Jesus Christ must have told him what to speak to the people or else he could not speak as he did."

It is obvious that in these revival meetings blacks and whites were worshiping together. This should not be surprising, for in a genuine spiritual awakening, the Holy Spirit breaks down racial and cultural barriers, and this occurred in the Great Awakening. Mark Noll, professor of church history at Wheaton College, confirms this, saying, "It was under the impulse of the revival that the chasm between white and black cultures was breached."

Whitefield's impact among the black populace of Colonial America is indicated by the moving tribute that a young black woman, Phillis Wheatley, wrote at the time of his death in 1770. Wheatley, who became America's first published black poet, was 17 years old when she wrote the poem about Whitefield.

Wheatley heard Whitefield preach in Boston on more than one occasion and was profoundly impacted by his ministry. The words of her poem express the strains of equality she heard in the gospel he preached. It reads in part.

Thou didst in strains of eloquence refined,/ Inflamm the heart and captivate the mind.

The greatest gift that even God can give,/ He freely offered to the numerous throng.

Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,/ Impartial Savior is

his title due.

Wheatley obviously quoted directly from Whitefield's preaching in her poem. Knowing Whitefield's passionate form of preaching, one can picture him crying out to the blacks in his audience, "Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you."

Other Revivalists Target Blacks in Their Outreaches

Further south, Samuel Davies, who was a colleague of Gilbert Tennent, gave special attention to blacks, including slaves, during his time of ministry in Virginia. Davies not only preached to blacks but invited them to share in regular church observances including the Lord's Supper. In 1757, he wrote:

What little success I have lately had, has been chiefly among the extremes of Gentlemen and Negroes. Indeed, God has been remarkably working among the latter. I have baptized 150 adults; and at the last sacramental solemnity, I had the pleasure of seeing the table graced with sixty black faces.

Further north, Gilbert Tennent was delighted that during a preaching tour in Massachusetts, "multitudes were awakened, and several received great consolation, especially among the young people, children, and Negroes." Jonathan Edwards, in his account of the Awakening in his hometown of Northampton, mentions "several Negroes" who appeared to have been truly born again.

Anti-Slavery Sentiments Are Aroused

The revivalists' emphasis on the eternal bliss of those in Christ and the eternal damnation of those outside of Christ had the ironic result of many a converted slave feeling pity for his poor, hell-bound master, and praying for his conversion. Although some of the revivalists have been criticized for not being more outright in their opposition to the institution of slavery, we must remember that they were preoccupied with getting people ready for the next world, not improving their lot in this one. In their thinking, a slave on his way to heaven was far better off than a slavemaster on his way to hell.

Nonetheless, as historian Benjamin Hart has noted, "Among the most ardent opponents of slavery were ministers, particularly the Puritan and revivalist preachers." 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.

Samuel Hopkins, for example, who had been personally tutored by Edwards, sent a pamphlet to every member of the Continental Congress asking how they could complain about "enslavement" to Great Britain and overlook the enslavement of so many blacks in the colonies. Noll says,

"In this attack on slavery Hopkins was joined by other followers of Edwards, including Levi Hart in Connecticut, Jacob Green in New Jersey and Edwards' own son, Jonathan, Jr., who was also a minister in Connecticut."

Blacks Join the Patriotic Protests

The Awakening thus led to the humanizing of blacks and an awakening to the evils of slavery. It also led to the emergence of new, black congregations, among those who were enslaved and those who were free. This led to many blacks identifying with the struggle for freedom from Great Britain and becoming part of the patriotic protests, especially in New England.

For example, at the time of the Boston Massacre in April of 1770, a large black man, Crispus Attucks, was one of the leaders in the protests against the occupation of Boston by British troops. An escaped slave who had settled in Boston, he was one of those killed that day by British soldiers. A poem written in his honor refers to him as, "Leader and voice that day;/ the first to defy and the first to die."

The positive ripples from the Awakening also opened the way for blacks to later serve in the Revolutionary War. David Barton has provided documentation showing that numbers of

blacks were given honorable discharges and pensions, and some were honored with complete military funerals for their service in the war.

The anti-slavery sentiments unleashed by the Awakening were so strong in the North that when separation with Great Britain came in 1776, several states, including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire and New York, immediately took steps to abolish slavery, something they could not do under King George III.

Although there was more resistance in the South, where a monetary motive prevailed, the anti-slavery sentiments released by the Great Awakening flowered into the abolition movement of the next century, which, as Dr. Timothy Smith has shown, had its roots in American revivalism, starting with the First Great Awakening.

Concluding Thought

Yes, the Great Awakening was an important healing balm for race relations in Colonial America, and only another great, national awakening will bring the racial healing that is needed in our land today. {eoa}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book, Pilgrims and Patriots: The Radical Christian Roots of American Democracy and Freedom. This book is available from Amazon and his website at . Dr. Hyatt also conducts "America Reawakening" events in which he presents a PowerPoint presentation documenting how America was birthed out of the Great Awakening and calling on Christians to believe God for another great, national spiritual awakening. You can read about this at .