

The Christian Revival That Defined America and Broke Slavery's Back

At a time when slavery was accepted and practiced in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and throughout the world, there arose a movement against it in colonial America. One of the great intellects of our day, Dr. Thomas Sowell, who happens to be Black, has written of this, saying,

“Slavery was just not an issue, not even among intellectuals, much less among political leaders, until the 18th century—and then it was an issue only in Western civilization. Among those who turned against slavery in the 18th century were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and other American leaders. You could research all of 18th-century Africa or Asia or the Middle East without finding any comparable rejection of slavery there.”

This anti-slavery movement resulted in slavery in America having a short lifespan when compared to the rest of the world. The late Dr. Walter Williams, professor of economics at George Mason University, pointed this out, saying that the unique characteristic of slavery in America was both the brevity of its existence and the moral outrage against it.

But what was the source of this moral outrage that arose against slavery in colonial America?

The Source of the Moral Outrage Against Slavery

The source of this sudden moral outrage against slavery is to be found in a Christian revival that became known as the Great Awakening. In this revival, that began in 1726, it seemed that entire towns repented and turned to God. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin described the amazing transformation of his

hometown of Philadelphia in 1739. He wrote,

“It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”

In this revival, racial and cultural barriers were breached as Blacks and whites worshipped together and shared the Good News to neighbors and friends regardless of race or social standing. For example, when George Whitefield, in 1739, preached night after night to thousands from the steps of the Philadelphia courthouse, Blacks were part of the audience, and there was no segregation.

After Whitefield preached his farewell sermon, many followed him to his place of lodging, including many Blacks. He later recorded in his *Journal*, “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.”

Evangelists of the Great Awakening, in fact, found Blacks to be among the most receptive to the gospel message. Gilbert Tennent, for example, 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.”

Further south, Samuel Davies gave special attention to Blacks, including slaves, during his time of ministry in Virginia. He was greatly encouraged by their enthusiastic response to the Gospel and wrote,

“My principal encouragement of late has been among the poor negro slaves; in the land of their slavery they have been

brought into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.”

Davies not only preached to free Blacks and slaves, but treated them as brothers and sisters in Christ, inviting 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 60 black faces.”

Although these early evangelists did not attack the institution of slavery, 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 the next generation of Awakening preachers.

Second Generation Awakening Preachers Attack Slavery

Indeed, the revivalists who came after Whitefield, Tennant and Jonathan Edwards 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.”

These “ardent opponents of slavery” included the followers of 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. {eoa}

For the rest of this article, visit .

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

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