

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 35: Columbus & Christianity in the Americas

Cross and Sword

In Central and South America—an expanse two times as large as the continental United States—Spain and Portugal tried to build empires. Conquering so vast a continent seems an impossible enterprise. Only people of great ambitions could have the firmness of decision and the mystical push to face such a challenge.

The Spanish had that kind of firmness and mystical push. The Spain that sought political conquest also served as powerful patron of the Christian religion. Consequently, the vast expanse that saw cruelties of conquest and exploitation (which still affect Latin America) also witnessed heroic faith and spiritual zeal (which still cradle the popular piety and culture of these lands).

So this question puzzles us: How could one nation conquer the New World using both faith and violence, without apparent contradiction?

The Crusades Continued

The Crusades against Islam, begun in 1096, marked the first time the people of medieval Europe attempted to act together in a Christian cause. Most of the Crusades ended in defeat, however, and the eastern campaigns were interrupted about the year 1291.

But on the western borders of Christendom the conflict with Islamic power continued for two more centuries. On the Iberian Peninsula—home of modern Spain and Portugal—the battle against Islam had started in the eighth century and continued to the fifteenth century. During eight long centuries of struggle against the Muslims, military tenacity and religious zeal melted together.

This combination of elements—political and religious—rendered possible Spain's conquest of the Americas. One writer put it this way: "The religious unity became a political program and national unity a religious passion."

John A. Mackay, in his *The Other Spanish Christ*, adds this: "The new [world] crusaders were enlisted from knights and monks who thronged the Peninsula. The souls of those classic personages had so intermingled in the long wars against the Moor, ... that the typical resultant was an ascetic paladin and a martial monk. There was a monk in every helmet and a knight in every cowl."

With the same zeal and spirit shown in the Peninsula, then, these frontier fighters crusaded against the native empires of the Americas. Subduing pagan people was considered the necessary preliminary to converting them. "Who doubts that the gunpowder against the Indians is incense to the Lord?" said one sixteenth-century Spaniard.

Rugged Character

How could 180,000 Spanish explorers and conquerors skirt the shores from Greenland to Cape Horn to Oregon, explore large sections of both Americas, found more than two hundred settlements, and transplant bodily to more than half the New World their language, religion, social customs, and political institutions? These accomplishments can be understood only by comprehending the complex genius of

those who came from the Iberian Peninsula.

As one scholar put it, "They brought the Spaniard's intense awareness of his dignity as an individual, his quick appreciation of the dramatic and heroic, his keen sense of personal honor. They were on fire with an almost fanatical religious belief in divine mission and protection.... And they settled the New World with an imperial disregard for relative distances, perils, and hardships for which the modern world has no equal."

The early arrivals to New England were ordinary citizens. The early arrivals to New Spain, besides priests, were usually Spanish soldiers, *conquistadores*. To understand these fierce soldier/explorers is to understand the nature of the conquest.

Hernando Cortés and Francisco Pizarro led tiny bands of men against the huge Aztec and Inca empires. They could perform this incredible feat because they were unusually brave, resourceful, and religious. They were equally eager to spread the gospel, conquer new lands for their king, and to get rich. They had no difficulty combining these surprisingly different motives.

Love and Cruelty

Since the early years of the Conquest, Spanish action in the Americas has caused hard discussions. The issue remains complex.

For some historians, Spanish colonization was an enterprise of pillage, inflamed and inflated by religious fanaticism and martial vanity. Other scholars point to the humanitarian laws of the Indies, the merciful attitude of more than one conquistador, and particularly the self-denying service of many priests. They intend to prove the enlightened nature of the Spanish conquest and colonial system.

In the end, we must recognize in the Spanish heritage—and the dynamic individuals who incarnated it—the spirits of both war and compassion.

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Lights in the Darkness

As sincere believers marched to subjugate a continent, other Christians had to oppose them

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It was one of the bleakest times in the history of Christianity. In the name of Christ, thousands were slaughtered, millions enslaved, entire civilizations wiped out.

When the first Europeans settled in Hispaniola, there were some 100,000 native inhabitants on the island. Half a century later, there were scarcely 500. In Mexico, in seventy-five years the population declined from more than 23 million to 1.4 million; in Peru, in fifty years, from 9 million to 1.3 million. Military conquest, new diseases, wanton slaughter, forced labor, poor nutrition, and mass suicides contributed to these gruesome statistics. Behind all of it, as ultimate justification for the enterprise, stood the name of Christ.

In the name of Christ, natives were dispossessed of their lands by means of the *Requerimiento*. This document informed the native owners and rulers of these lands that Christ's vicar on earth had granted these lands to the crown of Castile. They could accept and submit to this, or be declared rebel subjects and destroyed by force of arms.

In the name of Christ, the natives were dispossessed of their freedom by means of the *encomiendas*. The crown entrusted natives—sometimes hundreds of them—to a Spanish conquistador to be taught the rudiments of the Christian faith. In exchange, the natives were to work for the conquistador—the *encomendero*. The system soon became a veiled form of slavery. Even worse, some *encomenderos* left the natives underfed and overworked to the point of death.

It was also in the name of Christ that native women were baptized before being raped or taken as concubines against their will. After all, Saint Paul had clearly said, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

The explorers and conquistadors were not hypocrites who pretended to have faith. On the contrary, they were sincere believers. Columbus himself was something of a mystic. Hernando Cortés attended mass regularly—and especially before taking military action against the natives. The last action of Francisco Pizarro, perhaps the cruelest of the major conquistadors, was to draw a cross with his blood so he could die gazing upon it.

From their perspective, they were serving Christ by bringing millions to faith in him. They were serving the church by expanding her boundaries as never before. If, in the process, some were made to suffer, that was nothing compared to the sufferings of hell from which the natives were being saved. If, in the process, those who were bringing such great benefits to these lands became masters of the lands and their inhabitants, that was not to be begrudged. After all, "The laborer is worthy of his hire."

Protest Erupts

That, however, was not the total picture. Many, because of their faith and their commitment to Jesus Christ, saw things differently.

Foremost among these were the Dominicans in Hispaniola. Their order had been founded by Dominic (1170–1221), who saw voluntary poverty as a means to render credible his friars' preaching. This attitude set apart his followers, when the Albigensians, among others, were cruelly being forced by the church to recant heresy. Now in Hispaniola, Dominic's spiritual descendants came to the conclusion that the often-cruel **encomiendas** were not proper means to bring the natives to Christ.

On December 21, 1511, Dominican Antonio de Montesinos mounted the pulpit. His text was Matthew 3:3, "A voice crying in the wilderness." He said the conscience of the **encomenderos** seemed to be as sterile as a desert. But even in the desert the voice of God must be proclaimed:

"I have climbed to this pulpit to let you know of your sins, for I am the voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island, and therefore, you must not listen to me indifferently, but with all your heart and all your senses.... This voice tells you that you are in mortal sin; that you not only are in it, but live in it and die in it, and this because of the cruelty and tyranny that you bring to bear on these innocent people.

"Pray tell, by what right do you wage your odious wars on people who dwelt in quiet and peace on their own lands? [By what right have you] destroyed countless numbers of them with unparalleled murders and destruction? Why do you oppress and exploit them, without even giving them enough to eat, or caring for them when they become ill as a result of your exploitation? They die, or rather, you kill them, so that you may extract and obtain more and more gold every day....

"Are they not human? Have they no souls? Are you not required to love them as you love yourselves? How can you remain in such profound moral lethargy? I assure you, in your present state you can no more be saved than Moors or Turks who do not have and even reject the faith of Jesus Christ!"

Montesinos's audience sat almost too stunned to celebrate the Mass. Then they recovered their wits and angrily demanded a retraction. But the **encomenderos** soon learned that Montesinos's sermon had been previously reviewed and signed by the other Dominicans in Hispaniola. Furthermore, their vicar, Pedro de Cordoba, followed Montesinos's sermon with harsher action: All **encomenderos** would be excommunicated until their Indians were freed.

The **encomenderos** protested before the crown. King Ferdinand was incensed. On March 20, 1512, he wrote to Columbus: "I have seen the sermon to which you refer ... and although he [Montesinos] was always a scandalous preacher, I am much surprised by what he said, which has no basis in theology, or canon or civil law, as all the learned declare, and I agree."

The Dominicans in Hispaniola did not flinch. Their provincial (immediate superior) in Spain ordered them to recant. They stood firm. Eventually, the matter came to a debate before the king, and Montesinos himself participated. As a result of that debate, a special commission issued seven principles for the treatment of the natives, and these principles became law in December 1512.

Given the settlers' greed and the difficulty of communicating over long distances, these laws were never obeyed (or, as the Spaniards said at the time, they were **obedecidas y no cuinplidas**, "obeyed but not done"). Therefore, the protest continued.

Spreading Opposition

The best-known leader in this second stage of the protest was Bartolomé de Las Casas, also a Dominican. Las Casas had once owned an **encomienda** but had relinquished it to protest the system's abuses. He lived almost a century and traveled repeatedly across the Atlantic, going before the royal court to plead the case of the natives. He attempted to obtain new laws and rulings, then returned to the colonies—only to discover the settlers had found new ways to disobey and continue their exploitation of

the natives.

The fame of Las Casas has eclipsed that of others who took a similar stance. Decades later in Chile, for example, stood another Dominican, Gil Gonzalez de San Nicholas. Gonzalez declared that anyone who waged war against the natives (in this case, the Araucanians of southern Chile) in order to take their lands should be excommunicated and denied confession. His fellow Dominicans agreed with him, and the Franciscans followed suit. As a result, the war effort faltered for lack of soldiers, and the Araucanians had a brief respite. Eventually, Gonzalez was silenced through a subterfuge, being declared a heretic on an unrelated matter.

In Paraguay, when European settlers began invading to capture slaves, the Jesuits armed the Indians and even organized them into an army that won several important victories against the slave hunters. According to an unsympathetic witness, the attitude of these Jesuits cost the crown forty million pesos—the tax due if the settlers had been allowed to exploit the lands and the natives.

As a result, according to another witness, “[The settlers] hate the Fathers of the Company [the Jesuits], because they are convinced that it is the Jesuits that keep them from all the profit that they could obtain for their farms and settlements from [the work of] the Indians of Paraguay.”

The list could be prolonged endlessly. Many early saints of South America—Luis Beltrón, Toribio de Mogrovejo, Francisco Solano as well as hundreds of lesser figures were noted for defending the natives. Later, with the coming of black slaves, another generation of saints came to their defense: Pedro Claver and Martín de Porres, himself a mulatto.

In Spain, the question of natives’ rights in the “Indies” gave rise to a vigorous debate. Foremost among those who participated was Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican professor at the University of Salamanca, who defended the natives as legitimate owners of their lands and possessions.

Light in Darkness

It is said that Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and the Spanish king, because of concern about Conquest abuses, considered abandoning the American enterprise. While that report is probably exaggerated, it indicates the impact of these voices of protest. Undoubtedly, some natives enjoyed a brief respite thanks to the work of the “lights in the darkness.”

Yet the Conquest continued. To this day the native inhabitants of these regions continue to be exploited and harassed out of their ancestral lands. The protest over the natives’ treatment was seldom translated into practical action, except in limited areas for a short time.

Still, the light shone in the darkness. It is true that the exploitation and immense cruelties of the Conquest were done in the name of Christ, but it is also true that some in the same Name chose to live in solidarity with the exploited, and they persisted in their denunciations even before kings and prelates. If it is true that the Spanish Catholic church generally acquiesced in and supported one of the most inhumane episodes in history, it is also true that it produced internal protest and self-criticism.

Protestant Europeans later launched similar colonial enterprises in the Western Hemisphere. They were similarly inhumane toward native Americans. In those ventures, though, the earlier level of internal protest was never matched.

A CITY SET ON A HILL: CHRISTIANITY IN THE NEW WORLD

PROGRAM SCRIPT

Martin Luther was only nine years old when Christopher Columbus set sail for India and, in the process, stumbled onto a new hemisphere. Columbus, himself, saw his voyage as a religious mission, the launching of a new crusade which would restore the unity and splendor of medieval Christendom. He had a prophetic role to play, he thought, one foretold long ago by the prophet Isaiah (46:11): “I call a bird of prey from the east, a man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, says the Lord, and I will bring it to pass, I have a plan to carry out, and carry it out I will.”

Although Columbus died a pauper, his dreams unfulfilled, the European discovery of the New World did indeed open a new chapter in the history of Christianity.

America was the land of new beginnings. Europe represented for Americans not only the past (which they were eager to forget), but a corrupt past, whose contamination they wished to escape. Here in America, they could build the Holy Commonwealth. Here they could carry out “a lively experiment,” as Baptist pioneer John Clarke said. And here, in the famous words of Massachusetts Bay’s Governor, John Winthrop, they could be “a city set on a hill,” sending forth the light of the Gospel unto the uttermost ends of the earth.

William Blake, the poet, never came to the New World, but he seemed to understand the mystique of the American promise when he wrote:

Tho’ born on the cheating banks of Thames,
Tho’ his waters bathed my infant limbs,
The Ohio shall wash his stains from me,
I was born a slave, but I shall go free.

One constant theme permeates the history of Christianity in America — from the earliest settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth, through the revivals and great awakenings, through the trauma of civil war and reconstruction, to the explosion of the charismatic movement and seeker-friendly mega-churches in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is the mission of fulfilling God’s purpose in the New World in a new way. In this study, we will examine this theme through three major episodes which were crucial in the shaping of Christianity in America:

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- Puritan Foundations
- The Struggle for Religious Liberty
- The First Great Awakening

PURITAN FOUNDATIONS

The Puritan story began, not in New England, but in Old England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when a number of her subjects protested against the slow pace of reform within the established church. They objected to ministers wearing vestments, to kneeling at communion, to the lack of fervent preaching, and to the ritualism of the Book of Common Prayer. All these were vestiges of popery, they said, and should be replaced by a more biblical pattern of worship. Their enemies referred to these zealous reformers in uncomplimentary terms: the “hotter sort of Protestants,” “hot gospelers,” “precisians,” or “Puritans.”

The Puritan strategy was to work for change from within the Church of England, however slow or difficult that might be. Others, however, were less patient. They were “Puritans in a hurry,” so to speak. They wanted *A Reformation Without Tarrying For Any*, as the title of a book by Robert Brown put it in 1583. They would separate from the manifestly false Church of England and restore what they called “the old, glorious face of primitive Christianity,” by starting all over again.

When King James I came to the throne in 1603, he could barely tolerate the Puritans. The Separatists he could not abide. “I will make them conform,” he said, “or else I will harry them out of the land!”

Indeed, many of the Separatists were driven into exile in Holland. But, after living there some 12 years, a band of these Separatists decided to transplant their community to the New World. In a tearful scene of farewell, their pastor John Robinson bade them adieu: “...The Lord knoweth whether ever we shall see your faces again,” he said. “But I am confident that the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.”

Then on “the tide which stays for no man,” as William Bradford wrote in his journal, they set sail into the unknown, leaving behind friends, families, and everything they had known.

“But they looked not much on such things,” Bradford wrote, “but lifted their eyes to heaven, their dearest country, for they knew they were but strangers and pilgrims in this world.”

Against all odds, the Pilgrim Fathers survived the treacherous ocean voyage to establish the first beachhead of Protestant Christianity in New England. There, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, “in the desert of dismal circumstances,” as Cotton Mather described their situation, their faith was to be shaken but not destroyed. The Pilgrims established a Christian community of courage and faith which many others would emulate. William Bradford, after serving many years

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as governor of Plymouth, looked back on the experience of the Pilgrims: “As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shown to many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation.”

But unlike the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth, the Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony were not Separatists.

“We do not say, ‘Farewell, Babylon! Farewell, Rome!’ But we say, ‘Farewell, dear England! Farewell, the Church of God in England, and the Christian friends there!’ . . . We go to practice the positive part of church reformation and propagate the Gospel in America,” they said.

The Pilgrims had come to light a candle.

The Puritans aimed to build a city set on a hill.

The Puritans exerted an influence on American culture far out of proportion to their numbers. And yet the word “Puritan” has become a derogatory label. H.L. Mencken voiced the popular belief that a Puritan is a person who has “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time!” But nothing could be further from the truth! The Puritans were exuberant about life. They were painters and poets. They wore bright clothes and lived in beautifully decorated houses. They read great books and listened to great music. They drank rum at wedding parties. And far from being prudes, they reveled in the sensuality of married life.

It is ironic that some of the most revolutionary, forward-looking movements in history have taken their cues from the past. Puritanism was a “back to the future” movement which called the people of New England back to God, back to the Bible, and back to the Reformation.

Like Martin Luther and John Calvin before them, Puritans were Augustinian in theology. Salvation was the work of grace which resulted in the miracle of conversion — a turning from sin to trust the promise of forgiveness and justification through Christ’s death on the cross. Conversion required the preparation of the heart, and many Puritans recorded the struggles of their soul in journals and personal diaries. In this way, the Puritans sought to bring every activity and relationship into conformity with the will of God as revealed in His Word, the Bible. William Ames said it beautifully when he defined theology as “the science of living in the presence of God.”

THE STRUGGLE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

But the Puritans were not only interested in personal spiritual renewal. They also wanted to create an ordered and godly society, marked by the unity of faith and public life. For the Puritans, New England was, in effect, new Israel — God’s elect people in covenant with their Creator. All of life was made up of interweaving covenantal relationships. The rule of Christ was intended to prevail in all of them — the family, the congregation, and the commonwealth. On every New England town square stood a school house, a church house, and a meeting

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house, representing the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King.

Many historians have seen the origins of democracy in these structures, as well as the kind of social vision and public theology which has undergirded reforming efforts in our own day, including the civil rights crusade and the pro-life movement.

The Puritan vision dominated New England for a century and more. But from the first there were dissenters — nonconformists who challenged the close alliance between church and commonwealth. Like the Puritans, the dissenters would have a far greater influence on American Christianity than their slender numbers might warrant. Their story is a part of the ongoing struggle for religious liberty.

Someone has said that the Puritans came to New England to worship God in their own way but not in anybody else's! This was somewhat accurate. Competing religious confessions, coexisting within the same political structure, was a radical thought in the seventeenth century. While the Puritans were settling Boston and Salem, the wars of religion were raging between Protestants and Catholics in Europe. The Puritans harked back to an earlier medieval ideal and insisted upon religious conformity within their colony.

One of the first to challenge this principle was Anne Hutchinson, midwife, nurse, and mother of 15 children. Anne was a devotee of the Reverend John Cotton, a Puritan minister who stressed God's initiative and sovereign grace in salvation. This was the common view of all Puritans. But Anne so stressed God's grace, that she left no room for the moral law in the life of the believer. Her position was called antinomianism, which means "against the law," and it seemed to undermine the moral basis of New England society itself. If the Ten Commandments had become obsolete, how could there be laws against adultery, theft, or even murder?

As "a woman of ready wit and a bold spirit," Anne began to hold meetings in her house. Puritan sermons were criticized, and she gave out teachings which she claimed were the result of direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. This was too much for the pastors and magistrates of Massachusetts Bay! Anne Hutchinson was excommunicated and banished from the colony in 1637. Driven to New Netherlands, she and five of her young children were killed in an Indian raid five years later. It was considered by some her "just dessert."

If Anne Hutchinson's theological ideas were unsettling to the Puritans, Roger Williams' doctrine of soul liberty was an outrage! Roger Williams was a brilliant thinker, a graduate of Cambridge University, and sometime minister in both Plymouth and Salem. As a strict Separatist, Williams criticized Puritan congregations for having fellowship with the Church of England. He also criticized the whole system of church/state relations in Massachusetts Bay.

In the Old Testament, he said, God had a national people, the Jews, but now, He has only a congregational people. The state is ordained of God to regulate

the material affairs of life. But civil magistrates have no authority over the souls of their subjects. Williams summed up his ideas in his famous *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution*. God alone is the Lord of the conscience, he argued. The persecutor is a soul-murderer. Religious coercion is never justified.

“Having bought truth dear,” he cried, “we must not sell it cheap — no, not the least grain of it for the whole world.”

Like Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams was found guilty of spreading “diverse new and dangerous opinions” and was exiled from Massachusetts. Leaving behind his wife and small child, he walked southward “in the bitter winter season” of 1636. He wandered in the wilderness “sorely tossed, not knowing what bread or bed did mean.” When he finally arrived in Narragansett Bay, he purchased a parcel of land from the Indians. There he established a new settlement, which he named “Providence,” since God’s providence had guided him through great distress.

Thus Roger Williams became the founder of Rhode Island, the first colony established on the principle of religious liberty. The Puritans of Boston called Rhode Island “the latrine of New England” because it permitted all sorts of religious beliefs and made no religious requirements for citizenship. But the Puritan viewpoint prevailed. Many others, however, would suffer greatly for their faith before religious freedom became the norm in the New World. For instance:

- In 1651, Baptist preacher Obadiah Holmes was publicly whipped for teaching that baptism should be administered by immersion for believers only.
- In 1654, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard, was pressured from office for objecting to infant baptism.
- In 1660, one of Anne Hutchinson’s friends, Mary Dyer, who had become a Quaker, was banished three times. She was finally hanged to death on Boston Common when she would not promise never to return to bear witness to her faith. “Why don’t you stay down in Rhode Island?” her accusers asked. “No,” she replied, “the whole earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.”

After the American Revolution, religious freedom was protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. But the continued existence of slavery posed a terrible dilemma for a people who believed that God alone was Lord of the conscience. Could there be religious liberty without basic human equality, especially when the Constitution itself considered slaves as only three-fourths of a human being?

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On the other side of the bloody conflict (which answered that question by tearing a nation apart), Abraham Lincoln reached back to the original Puritan ideal of God's sovereign plan at work among men and nations: "The purposes of the Almighty are perfect and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance — the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous all together."

Christians in every age have struggled with the difficult task of passing on their faith intact to the rising generation. The Puritans were no exception. By the early eighteenth century, the original Puritan vision of America as "a city set on a hill" had grown dim with age. Could Puritanism survive its own success? While their errand in the wilderness increasingly prospered, their hearts' desire for God seemed to diminish. Cotton Mather observed, "Piety has begotten prosperity, and the daughter has devoured the mother."

A new form of sermon literature called the "jeremiad" appeared as Puritan preachers bemoaned the loss of fervor and zeal in their congregations. On the eve of the first great awakening, the Reverend Samuel Wigglesworth exclaimed: "We have a goodly exterior form of religion, yet this is but the remains of what we once might show, the shadow of past and vanished glory."

In this context, a series of religious revivals swept through the American colonies between 1739 and 1745. This "great and general awakening," as it was called, was to leave an indelible mark on the character of American Christianity.

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

The theologian of the Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, whom Perry Miller once aptly described as "the greatest theologian ever to grace the American scene." The precocious son of a congregationalist minister, Edwards was born in the same year as John Wesley, 1703. Ten years later, he was called to succeed his famous grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as pastor of the Church at Northampton, Massachusetts.

Edwards was an evangelical Calvinist. No one before or since has written so deeply, or with great clarity, on the themes of election, predestination, and justification by faith. The modern critical edition of his writings fill some 20 hefty volumes. But he was not a stuffy academic! He had a great love for, and an almost mystical devotion, to Jesus Christ.

Edwards told of an experience he had in 1737 when riding out into the woods for his health. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the sense of the glory of the Son of God.

"The person of Christ," he said, "appeared ineffably excellent in a flood of tears. Weeping aloud, I felt my soul to be emptied and annihilated; I desired to lie in the dust and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him, to serve Him and follow Him with a divine and heavenly purity."

Edwards was a complete stranger to that separation of “heart” and “head” that has so often plagued evangelical religion.

The Great Awakening came to Northampton in 1734 while Edwards was preaching a series of doctrinal sermons from the letters of St. Paul. Edwards later documented the awakening in his *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*: “A great earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages. Each day the noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder.”

In the course of one year, more than 300 persons were converted. Soon the revival spread to other towns in the Connecticut Valley, then throughout New England and the other colonies.

Jonathan Edwards was the “theologian” of the Great Awakening. But its most effective preacher and promoter was George Whitefield, a friend of John Wesley. It was Whitefield who carried the flame of revival from England to the New World, preaching up and down the eastern seacoast from Georgia to Maine. If Edwards was measured and restrained, Whitefield was exuberant and unpredictable. In Philadelphia, Whitefield preached with great passion to a crowd of more than 20,000. The skeptical Benjamin Franklin heard him and was deeply impressed with his sincerity and eloquence.

Not everyone, of course, was equally impressed. Charles Chauncey, of Boston, dismissed Whitefield as “a raving enthusiast,” whose emotional preaching did far more damage than good. One day the two antagonists happened to meet on the street in Boston.

“I am sorry to see you return,” said Chauncey to Whitefield, to which Whitefield replied, “So is the devil!”

When Whitefield died in 1770, an African American servant girl and poet, Phyllis Wheatley, wrote a famous eulogy about the Great Awakener:

He leaves the earth for heaven’s unmeasured height,
And worlds unknown receive him from our sight;
There Whitefield wings, with rapid course his way,
And sails to Zion, through vast seas of day.

The effects of the first Great Awakening were momentous. The importance of a personal, experiential faith, “heart religion” (as it was called), became a defining characteristic of the evangelical tradition. The necessity of truly knowing God, not merely knowing about Him, would be stressed by later awakeners and evangelists such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and, in the twentieth century, Billy Sunday (who once said, “Going to church don’t make a man a Christian any more than going to a stable makes a man a horse”).

Revivalism became a major feature on the American religious landscape.

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Jonathan Edwards would doubtless have frowned on some later evangelistic techniques, for they showed little appreciation for what he called “the surprising work of God.” Education also benefitted from the Great Awakening. New colleges and schools were begun: Princeton by the Presbyterians in New Jersey, Brown by the Baptists in Rhode Island. Another result was the rise and growth of denominations: Baptists, Presbyterians, and, later, Methodists. In the numbers game, the Baptists became the biggest winners. In 1740, there were 96 Baptist churches in the American colonies. By 1780, there were 457.

The First Great Awakening also spawned a new kind of interdenominational evangelicalism as Christians joined efforts across denominational lines to support Bible societies, missionary movements, and benevolent works of all kinds. Speaking from the courthouse balcony at Philadelphia in 1740, George Whitefield sounded the call for Christian unity:

“Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians?”

“No!”

“Any Presbyterians?”

“No!”

“Any Independents and Methodists?”

“No, no, no!”

“Whom have you there?”

“We don’t know those names here. All who are here are Christians. . . .”

“Oh, is this the case? Then God help us to forget party names and to become Christians in deed and in truth.”

John Wesley 1703-1791

Methodical pietist

"About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed."

In late 1735, a ship made its way to the New World from England. On board was a young Anglican minister, John Wesley, who had been invited to serve as a pastor to British colonists in Savannah, Georgia. When the weather went sour, the ship found itself in serious trouble. Wesley, also chaplain of the vessel, feared for his life.

But he noticed that the group of German Moravians, who were on their way to preach to American Indians, were not afraid at all. In fact, throughout the storm, they sang calmly. When the trip ended, he asked the Moravian leader about his serenity, and the Moravian responded with a question: Did he, Wesley, have faith in Christ? Wesley said he did, but later reflected, "I fear they were vain words."

In fact, Wesley was confused by the experience, but his perplexity was to lead to a period of soul searching and finally to one of the most famous and consequential conversions in church history.

Religious upbringing

Wesley was born into a strong Anglican home: his father, Samuel, was priest, and his mother, Susanna, taught religion and morals faithfully to her 19 children.

Wesley attended Oxford, proved to be a fine scholar, and was soon ordained into the Anglican ministry. At Oxford, he joined a society (founded by his brother Charles) whose members took vows to lead holy lives, take Communion once a week, pray daily, and visit prisons regularly. In addition, they spent three hours every afternoon studying the Bible and other devotional material.

From this "holy club" (as fellow students mockingly called it), Wesley sailed to Georgia to pastor. His experience proved to be a failure. A woman he courted in Savannah married another man. When he tried to enforce the disciplines of the "holy club" on his church, the congregation rebelled. A bitter Wesley returned to England.

Heart strangely warmed

After speaking with another Moravian, Peter Bohler, Wesley concluded that he lacked saving faith. Though he continued to try to be good, he remained frustrated. "I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. ... I fell and rose, and fell again."

On May 24, 1738, he had an experience that changed everything. He described the event in his journal:

"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Meanwhile, another former member of the "holy club," George Whitefield, was having remarkable success as a preacher, especially in the industrial city of Bristol. Hundreds of working-class poor, oppressed by industrializing England and neglected by the church, were experiencing emotional conversions under his fiery preaching. So many were responding that Whitefield desperately needed help.

Wesley accepted Whitefield's plea hesitantly. He distrusted Whitefield's dramatic style; he questioned the propriety of Whitefield's outdoor preaching (a radical innovation for the day); he felt uncomfortable with the emotional reactions even his own preaching elicited. But the orderly Wesley soon warmed to the new method of ministry.

With his organizational skills, Wesley quickly became the new leader of the movement. But Whitefield was a firm Calvinist, whereas Wesley couldn't swallow the doctrine of predestination. Furthermore, Wesley argued (against Reformed doctrine) that Christians could enjoy entire sanctification in this life: loving God and their neighbors, meekness and lowliness of heart, abstaining from all appearance of evil, and doing all for the glory of God. In the end, the two preachers parted ways.

From "methodists" to Methodism

Wesley did not intend to found a new denomination, but historical circumstances and his organizational genius conspired against his desire to remain in the Church of England.

Wesley's followers first met in private home "societies." When these societies became too large for members to care for one another, Wesley organized "classes," each with 11 members and a leader. Classes met weekly to pray, read the Bible, discuss their spiritual lives, and to collect money for charity. Men and women met separately, but anyone could become a class leader.

The moral and spiritual fervor of the meetings is expressed in one of Wesley's most famous aphorisms: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

The movement grew rapidly, as did its critics, who called Wesley and his followers "methodists," a label they wore proudly. It got worse than name calling at times: methodists were frequently met with violence as paid ruffians broke up meetings and threatened Wesley's life.

Though Wesley scheduled his itinerant preaching so it wouldn't disrupt local Anglican services, the bishop of Bristol still objected. Wesley responded, "The world is my parish"—a phrase that later became a slogan of Methodist missionaries. Wesley, in fact, never slowed down, and during his ministry he traveled over 4,000 miles annually, preaching some 40,000 sermons in his lifetime.

A few Anglican priests, such as his hymn-writing brother Charles, joined these Methodists, but the bulk of the preaching burden rested on John. He was eventually forced to employ lay preachers, who were not allowed to serve Communion but merely served to complement the ordained ministry of the Church of England.

Wesley then organized his followers into a "connection," and a number of societies into a "circuit" under the leadership of a "superintendent." Periodic meetings of methodist clergy and lay preachers eventually evolved into the "annual conference," where those who were to serve each circuit were appointed, usually for three-year terms.

In 1787, Wesley was required to register his lay preachers as non-Anglicans. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the American Revolution isolated Yankee methodists from their Anglican connections. To support the American movement, Wesley independently ordained two lay preachers and appointed Thomas Coke as superintendent. With these and other actions, Methodism gradually moved out of the Church of England—though Wesley himself remained an Anglican until his death.

An indication of his organizational genius, we know exactly how many followers Wesley had when he died: 294 preachers, 71,668 British members, 19 missionaries (5 in mission stations), and 43,265 American members with 198 preachers. Today Methodists number about 30 million worldwide.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/denominationalfounders/wesley.html?start=1>

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 38: George Whitefield: 17th c. Preacher & Revivalist

Heavenly Comet

As George Whitefield blazed across England, Scotland, and America, his dramatic preaching caused excitement bordering on panic.

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Perhaps no eighteenth-century religious figure was better known than George Whitefield. He was termed the "marvel of the age"—a preacher capable of commanding mass audiences (and offerings) across two continents, without any institutional support, through the sheer power of his personality. Whitefield wrote best-selling journals and drew audiences totaling in the millions. White and black, male and female, friends and enemies—all flocked in unprecedented numbers to hear the "Grand Itinerant." Wherever he visited, people could do anything, it seemed, but stay away.

Yet time has not been so kind. Today few people have heard of Whitefield, or if they have, they have little sense of his significance. Whitefield founded no movement or denomination. No college or seminary bears his name. Indeed, he deliberately rejected all attempts to found a movement, preferring instead to serve alone as a self-confessed "fool for Christ."

Who was George Whitefield? What was his significance?

Mother and Theater

We begin in the urban center of Gloucester, England, where Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714, the youngest child of Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield. Whitefield's father died soon after, and his mother remarried. The marriage proved disastrous and culminated in a divorce, leaving Elizabeth with seven children and ownership of the Bell Inn.

Of Whitefield's childhood, two facts stand out: his mother's influence and his infatuation with the English theater.

From his mother, Whitefield inherited a strong ambition to be "somebody" in the world, most likely in service to the established Anglican church. He recalled how his mother "endured fourteen weeks' sickness after she brought me into the world but was used to say, even when I was an infant, that she expected more comfort from me than any other of her children. This, with the circumstance of my being born in an inn, has been often of service to me in exciting my endeavors to make good my mother's expectation, and so follow the example of my dear Saviour, who was born in a manger belonging to an inn."

From the stage, Whitefield inherited a dramatic presence that he would later take into the pulpit. As a boy he read plays insatiably and often skipped school to practice for his schoolboy performances. Later in life, though, he would repudiate theater as a false competitor of the church.

But beneath the rejection lay a born actor whose intrinsic need and special gift for dramatic self-expression never disappeared. He would apply the methods and ethos of acting to preaching with revolutionary results. More than any of his peers or predecessors, Whitefield turned his back on the academy to concentrate on perfecting what today we would call "body language." Passion would be the key to his preaching of traditional spiritual truths.

Through the efforts of his mother, young Whitefield was granted a "servitor's" spot at Pembroke College, Oxford: He would put himself through college by waiting on the wealthier Oxford students. The experience of being a mere servant proved humiliating, but Whitefield soon fell in with a group of pious "methodists" led by the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. Soon Whitefield was lost in the rigors of methodist devotions that culminated in a highly personal and emotional "New Birth."

He determined to use the pulpit to bring others to a conversion experience. At Oxford it became clear to Whitefield he was no scholar, but equally clear he was a communicator without peer. With encouragement from the Wesleys he determined to be a missionary to the new Georgia colony.

Electrifying Delivery

In the summer of 1736, while waiting to embark for Georgia, Whitefield was ordained a deacon in the Anglican church and began preaching in and around London. Wherever he spoke, crowds materialized and hung on every word of the "boy preacher's" dramatic delivery.

Though inexperienced in homiletics, Whitefield possessed dramatic sensitivity that quickly vaulted him into a class of his own. Tears, heightened emotions, agitated bodily movement—and above all, an intensely personal encounter with the New Birth—characterized his preaching and his hearers' responses. A prodigious memory for character and dialogue enabled him to transform the pulpit into a sacred theater that represented the lives of biblical saints and sinners to his captivated listeners. Among the enthralled was great British actor David Garrick, who exclaimed: "I would give a hundred guineas if I could say 'Oh' like Mr. Whitefield."

Soon Whitefield's novel preaching and mass audiences came to the attention of the press. Whitefield possessed an instinct for publicity. He knew it mattered little whether journalistic items were written in praise or condemnation (and there was no shortage of the latter). In either case newspapers generated interest, and interest produced crowds, which produced still further journalistic comment.

To augment newspaper coverage, Whitefield published his first sermon in London in 1737: ***The Nature and Necessity of Our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus***. The sermon's theme was not new, but lying behind it was an electrifying delivery. Often Whitefield would employ his vivid imagination to bring home gospel truths.

Once, when preaching on eternity, he invited his startled listeners to imagine heaven: "Lift up your hearts frequently towards the mansions of eternal bliss, and with an eye of faith, like the great St. Stephen, see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man with his glorious retinue of departed saints sitting and solacing themselves in eternal joys, and with unspeakable comfort looking back on their past sufferings and self-denials, as so many glorious means which exalted them to such a crown. Hark! Methinks I hear them chanting their everlasting hallelujahs, and spending an eternal day in echoing forth triumphant songs of joy. And do you not long, my brethren, to join this heavenly choir?"

When Whitefield returned to London from Georgia in late 1738, he found many churches closed to him. He then experimented with outdoor, extemporaneous preaching, where no document or wooden pulpit stood between him and his audience. Whitefield did not invent extemporaneous preaching, but he did bring it to its highest art. Where others felt hesitant or at a loss with no notes, he discovered release.

Whitefield moved outside familiar church buildings and denominations and conceived of revivals as outdoor events staged to compete in the secular marketplace. Revivals could become, in effect, a product—part of a growing "Consumer Revolution." Whitefield would "market" the New Birth not primarily in the churches, but in the public square.

Attracting America

On February 2, 1738, young Whitefield departed for Georgia, intending to follow the Wesleys and become a permanent missionary to the colony. This was not to be. Soon after arrival he concluded his calling was as an itinerant preacher to urban areas throughout the Anglo-American world.

Nevertheless, Georgia would remain important to him as the site of an orphan house he founded for wayward boys. That orphan house became Whitefield's American home. Critics of Whitefield argued that the orphan house was merely a fund-raising excuse to invade the parishes of Anglican priests, but Whitefield showed genuine concern for the needy. Alongside Whitefield's evangelical zeal was a powerful charitable instinct that would leave him personally broke but widely admired, even by skeptics like Benjamin Franklin.

In ways Whitefield never could have predicted, the London campaign of 1739 proved to be a dress rehearsal for even more stunning engagements in North America. His first preaching tour of the American colonies, in 1739–40, generated such response that later scholars dubbed it a "Great Awakening."

Whitefield selected Philadelphia as his first American stop. It was a wise choice—a major port city with a thriving market economy, the most cosmopolitan city in the New World. On November 6, 1739, Whitefield read prayers and preached at Christ Church to a "numerous congregation." Soon churches could not hold the vast crowds that came to hear him, and he took his ministry out of doors, where he was always at his improvisational best. Every stop along Whitefield's trip from Philadelphia to New York and back was marked by record audiences, often exceeding the population of the towns in which he preached. From 8,000 in Philadelphia to nearly 5,000 in the village of Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, Whitefield garnered record audiences and unrivaled offerings for the Georgia orphan house.

In America, news traveled rapidly, and Whitefield was often surprised to discover how crowds "so scattered abroad, can be gathered at so short a warning." The advance work of loyal assistants like William Seward and the cooperation of the Tennent ministers in Pennsylvania served him well. Not only were the crowds unprecedented in size, they were virtually spellbound. "Even in London," Whitefield remarked, "I never observed so profound a silence."

Whitefield also spoke often on the needs of the slave community. Despite his outspoken plea to legalize slavery in Georgia, and his employment of slaves at the orphan house, he increasingly sought out audiences of slaves and wrote on their behalf. Historian Gary B. Nash dates "the advent of black Christianity" in Philadelphia to Whitefield's first preaching tour. Perhaps a thousand slaves heard Whitefield's sermons in Philadelphia, often in private supplemental meetings.

They heard from him that they had souls as surely as the white folk who had enslaved them, and that their master owed them the freedom of religious conscience. Unlike the Wesleys, however, Whitefield was unwilling to concede their right to freedom in this life, showing the tragic limits as well as the noble extent of his charitable concerns.

Some of Whitefield's greatest preaching triumphs were reserved for a whirlwind thirty-nine-day tour of New England towns. Attracted by printed itineraries in the New England press and by word of mouth, audiences grew.

In Boston, he filled the town common repeatedly. At seaport towns such as Marblehead and Salem, and in suburbs such as Charlestown and Roxbury, he generated an enthusiasm verging on panic as crowds "elbowed, shoved, and trampled over themselves to hear of 'divine things' from the famed Whitefield."

On October 17, 1740, Whitefield preached in Northampton, Massachusetts, and stayed with the famed Jonathan Edwards. Edwards attended all of Whitefield's sermons and repeatedly broke down in tears.

Edwards's wife, Sarah, an astute judge of pulpit manner, marveled: "He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator."

The effects, she continued, were spectacular: "It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simple truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob.... A prejudiced person, I know, might say that this is all theatrical artifice and display; but not so will anyone think who has seen and known him."

For his part, Whitefield was much taken with Sarah Edwards, whom he found "adorned with a meek and quiet spirit," a model for the type of wife he hoped to find.

Unfortunately, Whitefield's successes in the pulpit were not matched in his private family life. Like many methodist itinerants, Whitefield was suspicious of marriage and feared a wife would become a rival to the pulpit. When he finally married an older widow, Elizabeth James, the union never seemed to flower into a deeply intimate, sharing relationship.

Trans-Atlantic Awakening

Having conquered England and North America, all that remained for Whitefield was to complete a trans-Atlantic revival by awakening Scotland. In many ways, America and Scotland were kindred spirits in the eighteenth century. Both were Calvinist and perceived themselves on the margins of British civilization. Scotland's principal city, Edinburgh, dwarfed Philadelphia and Boston, yet remained tiny in contrast to London.

Whitefield would make fourteen trips to Scotland and grow steadily in popularity. Of all the Scottish revivals in which Whitefield participated, the most dramatic came on his second visit. Throughout the spring of 1742, Whitefield received news of great spiritual enthusiasm from the small village of Cambuslang, outside of Glasgow.

On June 6, he arrived in Cambuslang just in time to catch the revivals at their peak. He began immediately to preach that morning and evening. His evening service attracted thousands and continued until 2:00 A.M. "There were scenes of uncontrollable distress, like a field of battle.... All night in the fields, might be heard the voice of prayer and praise." Whitefield concluded, "It far outdid all that I ever saw in America."

On Saturday, Whitefield, in concert with area pastors, preached to an estimated 20,000 people in services that stretched well into the night. On Sunday, at a special Communion service in the fields, more than 1,700 communicants streamed alongside long Communion tables set up in tents. Whitefield preached again in the evening—by many accounts, the most powerful sermon of the revival. Later he recalled that wherever he walked "you might have heard persons praying to, and praising, God."

American Hero

Throughout his life Whitefield continued to itinerate widely, ignoring friends and doctors who urged him to protect his ailing body from the rigors of transatlantic travel. With every trip he became more popular. Indeed, much of the early controversy that surrounded Whitefield's revivals disappeared, and former foes like Harvard and Yale Colleges or the Georgia legislature warmed to a mellowed Whitefield. Before his whirlwind tours of the colonies were complete, virtually every man, woman, and child had heard the "Grand Itinerant" at least once.

So pervasive was Whitefield's impact in America that he can justly be styled America's first cultural hero. Before Whitefield, there was no unifying intercolonial person or event. Indeed, before Whitefield, it is

doubtful any name other than royalty was known equally from Boston to Charleston. But by 1750 virtually every American loved and admired Whitefield and saw him as their champion.

As colonial tensions with the Mother Country rose, Whitefield clearly sided with the Americans. When Benjamin Franklin appeared before Parliament, Whitefield attended every session and gave his old friend public support. Franklin would go on to win fame as America's "representative man." Time did not so honor Whitefield.

Final Cry of Thunder

Ignoring the advice of doctors, he continued his 1770 preaching tour in the colonies as if he were still a young itinerant. Late summer found him in New England, insisting to friends that "I would rather wear out than rust out." He ignored the danger signs, in particular asthmatic "colds" that brought "great difficulty" in breathing. Instead of resting, he rode on, preaching more rather than less, depending on the moment of preaching to bring out a "good pulpit sweat" that would grant him one more day's reprieve. The pace continued even after he was "taken in the night with a violent lax, attended with retching and shivering."

On Saturday morning, September 29, Whitefield concluded another successful sermon at Portsmouth and immediately set out for the next stop at Newburyport. Eyewitnesses described him as nearly collapsing, being helped onto his horse, and then plodding on despite the entreaties of friends and admirers.

At a midday stop in Exeter, Whitefield was enjoined to preach, and he complied. One friend, on observing the "oppressive heavings of his bosom," counseled, "Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach." Whitefield ignored the warning and answered with a prayer: "Lord, if I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields, seal thy truth, and come home and die!"

Whitefield's prayer was answered. His last discourse took place mid-afternoon in the fields, atop a hogshead [large barrel]. His text was "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in faith," and his subject was the New Birth.

A listener recounted for the press, "He rose up sluggishly and wearily, as if worn down and exhausted by his stupendous labours. His face seemed bloated, his voice was hoarse, his enunciation heavy. Sentence after sentence was thrown off in rough, disjointed portions, without much regard to point or beauty. [But then] his mind kindled, and his lion-like voice roared to the extremities of his audience.

"He was speaking of the inefficiency of works to merit salvation, and suddenly cried out in a tone of thunder, 'Works! works! A man gets to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand.'" The exhortation would be Whitefield's final public words. The following morning he died.

In Whitefield's Wake

In seeking to understand the reasons for Whitefield's success, several factors come to mind.

First, Whitefield's revivals were a new religious form. They were not really a church, nor were they connected to local communities. Whitefield's audiences defied the term congregation. They changed with every meeting and were routinely enjoined to support their local parishes. In effect, they were the first "parachurch"—a religious association, outside of denominational lines, premised on revival. And central to that revival was the highly personal experience of the New Birth.

Whitefield's itinerant ministry taught him—and "evangelicals" in his wake—that rival churches with visions of national hegemony could be a thing of the past. They were old history—the history of a traditional,

aristocratic, and hierarchical culture. A new religious history, fit for a new consumer age, would have to be voluntary, and this meant popular and entertaining. Whitefield's revivals were just that. In them, churches were not supplanted so much as sidestepped to create larger, trans-local associations.

Whitefield's mode of revivalism—theatrical, passion-based, non-denominational, international, experience-centered, and self-consciously promoted through media—outlived him. Whether or not they knew it, generations of evangelical revivalists, chaplains, youth and student parachurch leaders, and religious philanthropists followed a trail first blazed by George Whitefield.

Unlike many charismatic performers who followed in his footsteps, Whitefield remained undistracted by the allure of sex or wealth. Nor was he obsessed with fame and the need for a new denomination to bear his name. His character matched that of the biblical saints he portrayed, and his vast charitable efforts left him perennially near bankruptcy.

If Whitefield was a promoter, he was also a caring minister who directed his work first at the soul and second at charity, and never one without the other. In this sense, Whitefield was his own finest convert to the New Birth he proclaimed.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 77: Jonathon Edwards: Puritan Pastor & Theologian

A Mind on Fire

Throughout his eventful life, America's theologian was driven by a vision of the beauty in God's sovereignty.

Stephen R. Holmes

A battered file box, deep in the basement of Yale University's Beinecke Library, contains a startling memorial to the final years of Jonathan Edwards's life.

In other similar boxes, stacks of notebooks contain in their neat pages crisp rows of Edwards's spidery handwriting. Their content is remarkable: profound, vivid, masterfully argued, piercingly clear—the fruit of a lifetime of fervent thinking about the nature of God, humankind, and the world. But their physical form is unremarkable.

Not so the notebooks contained in this box. One after another is stitched together from a riot of scrap paper: Half a page of a friend's letter, left blank under the signature. The wide margin of a Boston newspaper. Several large sheets with semi-circles cut out of them.

Across these makeshift pages runs Edwards's cursive script—tiny, cramped. It crawls from edge to edge of the paper, even between the lines of newsprint, wasting no fraction of white space.

These notebooks date from the great theologian's Stockbridge phase—the period between 1751 and 1758. Ejected from his comfortable Connecticut Valley church after 21 years of loyal service, Edwards eked out these years with his wife and seven of their children at a mission church on Massachusetts's western frontier. There, paper was presumably scarce, expensive, or both.

Some of the sheets sewn together in the Stockbridge notebooks were off-cuts from the manufacture of paper fans, which his children decorated and sold to add a few dollars to the family coffer. The other scraps would once have landed in the rubbish pile—but they could not be wasted any more.

In thriving Northampton, the pastor-theologian had enjoyed the resources of a prominent pastorate in a major New England town (though his salary, as he complained, was not always paid on time). Now he wrote his most influential intellectual works on such scraps, between preaching to a small congregation, catechizing converts among the Housatonic Indians and other tribes, and championing these Native Americans' rights against the area's powerful merchants.

The Freedom of the Will, True Virtue, Original Sin—how often, as he scratched out the ideas for these great treatises on the pages of his patchwork notebooks, was his work interrupted by worries about whether there would be vegetables and meat enough for the week's meals, or how he would afford the wood necessary to mend a fence?

Born again through beauty

Timothy and Esther Edwards had 11 children. Jonathan, the fifth, was the only son, born October 5, 1703. If, in New England, to be a minister was to be an aristocrat, he came from good stock. Timothy, a third-generation New Englander, served his East Windsor parish faithfully and ably; Esther's father was Solomon Stoddard, whose decades of ministry in Northampton added luster to an already noble New England family.

What we know of Edwards's childhood suggests that he was religiously serious even then, although he judged himself unconverted: the building of little dens in the woods is hardly unusual behavior for a young boy, but using them to hold prayer meetings alone or with friends certainly is!

Edwards describes his own conversion as an event that was not fundamentally intellectual (that is, about understanding the gospel in any better way) or even moral (that is, about desiring to follow Christ), but aesthetic: doctrines of God's absolute sovereignty, which had appeared "repugnant" to him, suddenly seemed beautiful. Both the defense of Calvinism as an essential part of Christianity, and conceptions of beauty, became lasting features of his theology, which suggests how significant this event was in his life.

He was conscious that he had come to faith in an unusual way, and this concerned him. He records having doubts about his conversion because he could not fit his experience to the standard Puritan maps of the way God leads a troubled soul to salvation.

Distinguished saints

From his conversion onward, Edwards remained fascinated with the problem of how to tell whether a Christian's professed faith was truly real and saving. He contemplated the question throughout the Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, and eventually gave the subject his fullest and most influential treatment in his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746). Why was the question of such concern to him?

First, Edwards inherited a common Puritan concern about "temporary faith." This idea, introduced by John Calvin, is a way of explaining the fact that church members sometimes fall away after years of faithful service, even though the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints ("once saved, always saved") insists that true Christians cannot fall away. The way of squaring this circle was to suggest that there is something that looks like true faith but is not—temporary faith. Thus, finding distinguishing marks of true faith becomes a necessity.

Second, Puritans responded to this problem by identifying a particular set of steps in a particular order as "the" way to salvation. Edwards disagreed with this aspect of the tradition. It fitted neither his own experience nor his pastoral observation. Thus, when he discussed how to identify true faith, he was sometimes aiming a critique at this tradition—a tradition now remote for most modern readers.

Third, in his cultural context, Edwards believed—as many still do—that fallen humanity is inherently religious. There is that within us that desires spiritual fulfillment; as Augustine put it, "thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee." However, while today unsaved "seekers" for religious satisfaction might find it in myriad fashionable religious practices, in Edwards's New England, options were limited. Such seekers likely dwelt in the margins of the church, where they might appear to be zealous Christians while actually not being Christ-centered at all. Thus the issue of genuineness confronted the pastor in unavoidable ways.

So Edwards aimed to identify "The Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God."

The makings of genius

That all lay in the future, however. Meanwhile, Edwards went to the Collegiate School, a new and troubled college, later to be called Yale, to train for the ministry. After graduating, he served, from 1723 to 1726, a Presbyterian congregation in New York. Then he came back to Yale to teach. While there, he suffered serious ill health.

Some time during this period, Edwards read and was deeply influenced by Locke's *Essay Concerning*

Human Understanding.

The precise date is difficult to determine, but a story told by one of his first biographers, which had a precocious, teenaged Jonathan reading it "with great delight and profit," is almost certainly false. (It was based in part on an assumption that a philosophical notebook Edwards kept, *Notes on the Mind*, was written very early in his career. Recent chemical analyses of the inks used in that notebook show that the entries in fact span his adult life. We can also now trace with some exactness when copies of Locke's work arrived at Yale, which again casts doubt on the older story.)

This is important, as Edwards has been painted as a precocious philosophical genius who failed to live up to his early promise when the fetters of anti-intellectual Calvinist theology gripped him. In fact, his philosophical development occurred alongside his theological development, and his thought in each of these areas deeply influenced the other.

Revival!

In 1726, Solomon Stoddard celebrated his eighty-third birthday. His congregation, feeling their pastor needed some assistance, called Stoddard's young grandson to his side. A year later Edwards joined Sarah Pierrepont in what has become a fabled marriage (see p. 23), marked as it was by mutual support and admiration, not to mention a remarkable line of illustrious descendants.

Edwards's ministry was deemed acceptable, and when Stoddard died in 1729, his grandson was called to succeed him. He pastored the congregation for 21 years, through momentous times.

While local revivals of religion were not unusual in New England (Stoddard had seen five in his ministry), what began in Northampton in 1734 was something new. For six months through the winter, the town was seized by a deep and serious concern for religion. More than 300 professed to be converted; in Edwards's words, "the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy. ... There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. ... God's day was a delight ... everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth."

This spirit flowed out from Northampton and touched almost every community in the Connecticut River Valley.

Too soon, it came to an end. Edwards labored to re-ignite the flame, but that work belonged to another. On September 14, 1740 George Whitefield landed at Rhode Island. He announced his reason for coming by preaching six times in the first three days of his visit, and for two years following, religious fervor was common across New England.

Edwards took his part in the preaching, but his more significant contribution, perhaps, was a series of books defending the revivals against both those who would have no emotion in their religion, and those who would have nothing but emotion in theirs.

Sermons that sparked the flame

In Edwards's mind there was no doubt what, under God, led to the beginning of this Great Awakening, and he later published five of his sermons that had sparked the original excitement in 1734. These are carefully argued defenses of various aspects of Calvinist doctrines related to salvation. Each ends with an application, to be sure, but they are mainly composed of theological argument.

Reading them today, we might find it difficult to believe that the hearers remained awake, let alone

responded as they did. Of course, compared to most modern churchgoers, Edwards's congregation would have been more used to following doctrinal sermons. And Edwards himself was clearly an able rhetorician. He also streamlined the form considerably. While his father, Timothy Edwards, had apparently once announced "and sixty-sixthly ..." from the pulpit, Jonathan developed and applied only a handful of points in each sermon.

There is more, however, to the reaction of Edwards's "awakened" hearers. Take his most famous composition, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741).

Rhetorically, "Sinners" is stunning: it recalls a then-current style of sermons preached to condemned criminals just before their execution, during which the minister would stress their imminent encounter with God and exhort them to repent. Such sermons were often published, so most would have recognized the genre.

In a shocking move, Edwards applied this form to his hearers in Enfield, emphasizing the sinfulness of even respectable church folk. As he hammered home the instability of their position before God, whose hand alone held them from immediate death and the judgment that followed, he was in effect comparing them to condemned murderers.

The form of the sermon echoes and reinforces its content in a magnificent way. But that is not the source of its power, or at least not the only source. We can know this because, a few weeks before preaching at Enfield to the accompaniment of the screams of convicted sinners and the joyful weeping of new converts, Edwards had preached virtually the same sermon (we have his manuscript and can see how few amendments were made) to his own flock in Northampton. But his flock responded only, as far as we know, by shaking his hand and saying "fine word, pastor" as they went home to lunch.

All of this reinforces Edwards's own analysis of the revivals: the word is the occasion for awakening, and a necessary one, but the Spirit of God does the work, and he "blows where he wills." His passing could be seen in lasting changes: People made humble, faithful, prayerful, holy. Churches made earnest in worship and hungry for the word. Towns where, to quote Charles Simeon, a century later, "goodness" became "fashionable."

Screams, faintings and other such spectacular phenomena were nothing either way: they did not demonstrate the Spirit's presence, and they did not preclude it either. Such was Edwards's final analysis of the revivals in *The Religious Affections* (1746).

Rejection, exile, and prolific publishing

By the time this work was published, however, the Awakening had subsided. Edwards found it necessary to encourage the nascent transatlantic evangelical community, in print, to unite in prayer that God might renew his work.

On the home front, things were even bleaker, as the Northampton pastor found himself engaged in controversies over church order that would lead to his expulsion from his pulpit (see p. 35). On July 1, 1750, with no post to move on to, Edwards preached his farewell sermon to the church at Northampton.

He explored various possibilities, including a move to Scotland—he would have no problem subscribing to the Presbyterian scheme, he assured his regular correspondents there.

But he eventually accepted a call to Stockbridge, a post combining missionary endeavor among the Housatonic Indians there with pastoral duties to a small church composed of the New Englanders who lived in the town.

In August 1751 he was installed. The family endured just under seven years of hardship there, during which time Jonathan, bearing all the marks of worldly failure in his poverty and dismissal from his pastorate, produced a series of works that make him arguably still the greatest philosopher or theologian to have been born on the North American continent.

His output there was prodigious. Some works were responses to old controversies (the ***Humble Enquiry and Misrepresentations Corrected***, which addressed the disputes which had led to his removal from Northampton).

Others, not intended for publication, reflected his interest in the End Times, with analyses of how wars against Catholic Spain might fulfill prophecies in the Apocalypse (Edwards was of a generation that never thought to question the identification of the Pope as the Antichrist).

Two sets of works are particularly important, however: his private notebooks and his projected defense of Calvinism.

A checkerboard coat

Throughout his life, Edwards wrote copiously in various notebooks, recording quotations, observations, ideas, and arguments on every conceivable subject.

His ***Miscellanies***, the largest and most important of these, are only now being published, a rich mine of general theological fare. But there are others: a book devoted solely to controversial subjects in which he was interested; the ***Blank Bible***, a small Bible in which he sewed a large sheet between every pair of pages, so he could record notes and comments on texts next to them; and so on.

For most of his life (though this seems to have changed somewhat during the Stockbridge years) he took such notes principally to help him develop sermons. When out riding, he would scribble his thoughts on scraps of paper as they struck him, then pin them to his coat. One of his early biographers gives us the wonderful image of the stern Puritan pastor arriving at his door after an intellectually fruitful trip, with his black coat a checkerboard.

Two sets of notebooks are particularly interesting: First, Edwards's belief that everything in nature and history spoke of Christ and his gospel, if only it was rightly understood, shines forth from a series of books on "Images," "Types," or "Shadows" of divine things (see p. 40).

In these he suggests, for example, that springtime's gradual progress is ordained by God to illustrate the gradual increase of the Kingdom on earth, and that the "filth" in which newly born babies are covered is God's way of stressing to us the sinfulness and guilt that is theirs even from birth.

Second, the ***Miscellanies*** are perhaps the center of the notes and can be used to trace the development of ideas that finally appeared in print, or would have, had he lived, as well as his exploration and rejection of other positions. Edwards struggled with concepts and changed his mind regularly on certain issues, all the while striving to be more and more faithful to the gospel of Christ. He recorded the whole process in books we can now read.

The pinnacle

The defense of Calvinism produced three of Edwards's greatest works. Of these, The ***Freedom of the Will*** is perhaps the pinnacle. Had he written nothing else, this one book would have ensured his fame.

The main argument of the book is ethical: he sets out to prove that the Calvinist account of predestined

humanity is—far from a moral abomination—morality's greatest support. Better than the alternative views, it holds human beings responsible for their actions.

On the way to this point, Edwards pauses to develop an argument for why freedom and predestination are essentially compatible. Though a mere introduction to his main argument, this is the most intellectually powerful such defense ever published.

The companion volume, *Original Sin*, is a solid and cogent defense of that controversial doctrine, mostly on biblical grounds.

The third work is one that Edwards never published. To see why, we need to return to the events of his life.

After seven years of exile at Stockbridge, Jonathan Edwards's intellectual stature was finally recognized, and he was invited to become president of the college in Princeton.

At first his humility caused him to balk. But after seeking advice, he accepted and went ahead of his family to the town. Smallpox was then rife, and Edwards received vaccination on February 23, 1758. That science was in its infancy, however, and he contracted the disease. He never recovered.

Voicing the vision

At his death, a work sat on his desk, ready to go to the printer. This was *Two Dissertations*. One part of this book, titled "True Virtue," is a profound theological analysis of ethics. In it, Edwards argues (against all cultural fashions of the day) that goodness can never be separated from godliness; so that which is not done to serve Christ in any way should not be called good.

The book's other part, "A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," is the closest Edwards ever got to expressing the heart and soul of his theology, his piety, and his life.

Why did God create the world? Edwards had worried over this question all his life, recording his successive analyses in the *Miscellanies*. What did God gain by having a creation? What caused his desire to do so?

Edwards traced the question to many of its dead ends, and his mature analysis is profound:

God gains nothing from creating, as God's happiness in himself is so perfect that it cannot be added to. But the perception of the beauty of God's perfection—his glory—is a great good; so God desired there to be intelligent creatures who could see his glory and respond with ecstatic joy, with abundant love, with extravagant praise. Everything that God has done tends toward this single end.

As a young man, Edwards had found faith in Christ when he glimpsed the beauty of God's sovereignty through nature. That vision drove much of what he said and thought thereafter. And now, at last, he found doctrines to express the vision's meaning.

These towering works were the mere run-up to a projected magnum opus. Edwards had in mind a synthesis of Christian doctrine and ethics, arranged historically.

This work would have ranked (there is every reason to suppose) alongside Aquinas's *Summa*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and few others in theological history. But his death, on March 22, 1758, at age 54, killed that Edwardsian *Summa* at its birth.

Jonathan Edwards's last words encapsulated his life. First he spoke of his love for Sarah and urged his

children to find faith in God. Then he asked that he not be given an elaborate funeral but that what money was available be given to charity. And then he looked once more to Jesus.

To those around, it seemed he had lapsed into unconsciousness, and they spoke freely of the loss that the college, and God's church, would have to bear. He heard still, and he spoke one last sentence: "Trust in God, and you need not fear."

To this, his last and briefest sermon, what could or should be added?

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

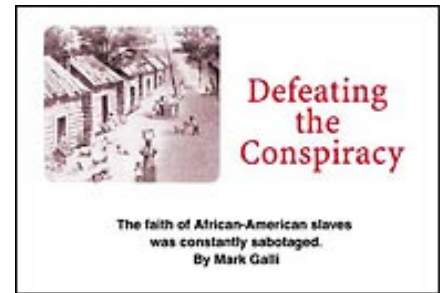
Defeating the Conspiracy

Ignorance, prejudice, and even Bible Christianity joined forces to sabotage the faith of African-American slaves.

Mark Galli

Peter Randolph, a slave in Prince George County, Virginia, until he was freed in 1847, described the secret prayer meetings he had attended as a slave.

"Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation," he wrote, "the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place. ... This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.



"After arriving and greeting one another, men and women sat in groups together. Then there was "preaching ... by the brethren, then praying and singing all around until they generally feel quite happy."

The speaker rises "and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time there fall to the ground 20 or 30 men and women under its influence.

"The slave forgets all his sufferings," Randolph summed up, "except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, 'Thank God, I shall not live here always!' "

It is a remarkable event not merely because of the risks incurred (200 lashes of the whip often awaited those caught at such a meeting) but because of the hurdles overcome merely to arrive at this moment. For decades all manner of people and circumstances conspired against African Americans even hearing the gospel, let alone responding to it in freedom and joy.

No time for religion

The plantation work regimen gave slaves little leisure time for religious instruction. Some masters required slaves to work even on Sunday. Even with the day off, many slaves needed to tend their own gardens, which supplemented their income and diet (others opted to socialize, to dance, or get drunk).

One of the largest obstacles was sheer prejudice. Many masters believed Africans were too "brutish" to comprehend the gospel; others doubted Africans had souls. Anglican missionary to South Carolina Francis Le Jau reported in 1709, "Many masters can't be persuaded that Negroes and Indians are otherwise than Beasts, and use them like such."

Such thinking was combated by men like Puritan Cotton Mather, who, in his tract *The Negro Christianized*, pleaded with owners to treat their "servants" as men, not brutes: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self. Man, thy Negro is thy neighbor."

Other masters believed conversion would make slaves "saucy," since they would begin to think of themselves equal to whites. According to John Bragg, a Virginia minister, slave owners agreed that conversion would result in the slaves "being and becoming worse slaves when Christians." Some even believed "A slave is ten times worse when a Christian than in his state of paganism."

There were legal complications as well. Many masters in colonial America believed if a slave was baptized that, "according to the laws of the British nation, and the canons of the church," he must be freed. Colonial legislatures sought to clear up this matter, and by 1706 at least six had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave "as to his bondage or freedom." It wasn't just economics but a twinge of Christian conscience that prompted the legislation. As Virginia's law put it, it was passed so that masters, "freed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity."

But clergy were in short supply even for whites in the eighteenth-century South. In 1701 Virginia, for example, only half of the forty-some parishes containing 40,000 people were supplied with clergy. And regarding white settlers in Georgia, one missionary said, "They seem in general to have but very little more knowledge of a Savior than the aboriginal natives."

Finally, there were cultural obstacles. In 1701 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was formed, and one of its purposes was to seek the conversion of slaves in colonial America. As an arm of the Church of England, however, it was less than effective with the "target" population. Le Jau described his refined and rational method of teaching African Americans: "We begin and end our particular assembly with the collect. ... I teach them the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Commandments. I explain some portion of the catechism ... "

With culture, prejudice, and injustice joining forces, few slaves were converted. As one missionary reported in 1779 about conditions in South Carolina: "The Negroes of that country, a few only excepted, are to this day as great strangers to Christianity and as much under the influence of pagan darkness, idolatry, and superstition as they were at their first arrival from Africa."

It would, it seemed, take a miracle to turn things around. And a miracle is just what America had already begun to experience.

Black awakening

In 1733, during a local revival instigated by his preaching, Jonathan Edwards noted, "There are several Negroes who ... appear to have been truly born again in the late remarkable season." When the Great Awakening arrived in full—with shouts and groans and spiritual ecstasy—blacks began to swell the crowds coming to hear revival preachers. In Philadelphia, George Whitefield reported, "Nearly 50 Negroes came to give me thanks for what God had done to their souls." In the late 1740s, Presbyterian Samuel Davies said he ministered to seven congregations in Virginia in which "more than 1,000 Negroes" had participated in his services.

Presbyterian theology and Anglican liturgy, however, held little appeal to most blacks. Not until Methodists and Baptists arrived—with their emphasis on conversion as a spiritual *experience*—did black Christianity begin to take off.

John Thompson, who was born a Maryland slave in 1812, said he and his fellow slaves "could understand but little that was said" in the Episcopal service his owner required them to attend. But when "the Methodist religion was brought among us ... it brought glad tidings to the poor bondsman." It spread from plantation to plantation, he said, and "there were few who did not experience religion."

Baptists and Methodists prized spiritual vitality more than education in clergy, so if a converted

African American showed a gift for preaching, he was encouraged to preach, even to unconverted whites. Thus arose the earliest black preachers of repute, men with names like "Black Harry" Hosier, Josiah Bishop, "Old Captain," and "Uncle" Jack.

The Great Awakening, then, planted the seed of a more experiential type of Christianity that blossomed suddenly late in the eighteenth century. Black Methodism in the U. S. grew from 3,800 in 1786 to nearly 32,000 by 1809. Membership in black Baptist congregations increased as well, from 18,000 in 1793 to 40,000 in 1813.

Southern whites were not necessarily comfortable with this. Though a few masters argued that slaves "do better for their masters' profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian love and duty," others kept their slaves distant from the Christian preaching. Francis Henderson, a fugitive slave, said his master had refused him permission to attend a Methodist church saying, "You shan't go to that church—they'll put the devil in you."

And Francis Asbury, the famous Methodist bishop, complained, "We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us."

By 1820, one white Presbyterian minister, Charles C. Jones, could still moan, "But a minority of the Negroes, and that a small one, attended regularly the house of God, and ... their religious instruction was extensively and most seriously neglected."

A slave conspiracy in 1822 and a revolt in 1831 didn't help matters. The conspiracy was led by Denmark Vesey who, as one co-conspirator confessed, "read in the Bible where God commanded that all [whites] should be cut off, both men, women, and children, and said it was no sin for us to do so, for the Lord commanded us to do it." The slave revolt, the bloodiest in U.S. history, in Southampton, Virginia, was led by Nat Turner, a prophet and preacher, who said he had been directed to act by God (see "[God's Avenging Scourge](#)," p. 28). After such incidents, masters were even more reluctant to let blacks gather alone for any reason.

Still, the southern conscience, pricked by northern abolitionist agitation, prompted increasingly more slave owners to take the Great Commission seriously. Slave owners wanted to prove that slaveholding could be a positive good for both owners and slaves.

In 1829, the South Carolina Methodist Conference appointed William Capers to superintend a special department for plantation missions—the first official and concerted effort of the sort. Four years later, Charles Jones began a ministry to evangelize slaves and to convince others to do likewise.

Jones, called "the apostle to the negro slaves" was, in fact, a slave owner. He came from a distinguished Georgia family and eventually owned three plantations and 129 slaves. A man with one compassionate eye and another fierce with purpose, Jones urged his southern brethren to "look to home" first. "The religious instruction of our servants is a duty," he wrote in 1834. "Any man with a conscience may be made to feel it. It can be discharged. It must be discharged ... as speedily as possible." This would not only win the approval of God and their own consciences, he argued, but also the respect of the North.

After the major denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist—split over slavery, efforts to evangelize slaves accelerated. Southern whites were eager to show northerners that a gentle, Christian society—slave and free—could flourish in the South.

According to some southerners they succeeded: by 1845, one southern churchman crowed that the slave mission "is the crowning glory of our church."

Failure of white Christianity

The gospel presented to slaves by white owners, however, was only a partial gospel. The message of salvation by grace, the joy of faith, and the hope of heaven were all there, but many other teachings were missing.

House servants often sneered and laughed among themselves when summoned to family prayers because the master or mistress would read, "Servants obey your masters," but neglect passages that said, "Break every yoke and let the oppressed go free."

One white evangelist to slaves, John Dixon Long, admitted his frustration: "They hear ministers denouncing them for stealing the white man's grain, but as they never hear the white man denounced for holding them in bondage, pocketing their wages, or selling their wives and children to the brutal traders of the far South; they naturally suspect the Gospel to be a cheat and believe the preachers and slaveholder [are] in a conspiracy against them."

The institutional church, in both the North and South, had long before deserted the slaves—even the Methodists, who early on insisted that slave owners, upon their conversion, free their slaves. But by 1804, the General Conference agreed to let Methodist societies in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Tennessee allow their members to buy and sell slaves. And in 1808, the annual conference of the Methodist church authorized each conference to determine its own regulations about slaveholding.

After Denmark Vesey and his fellow conspirators (many of whom were Methodists) were arrested, southern clergy felt constrained by public opinion to affirm the racial status quo. Baptists and Episcopalians in Charleston denied any intention of interfering with slavery. By the early 1800s, the southern churches had completely folded on the issue.

In instance after instance recorded in countless slave narratives, the conversion of masters made matters worse for slaves. As ex-slave Mrs. Joseph Smith explained it, the non-religious owner simply gave slaves Sundays off and ignored them the entire day. But Christian owners, eager for the sanctification of their charges, could not let Sundays pass without due vigilance.

As Smith explained, "Now, everybody that has got common sense knows that Sunday is a day of rest. And if you do the least thing in the world they [the owners] don't like; they will mark it down against you, and Monday you have got to take a whipping."

Some didn't wait until Monday. One slave reported that his master served him Communion at church in the morning and whipped him in the afternoon for returning to the plantation a few minutes late. Susan Boggs recalled the day of her baptism: "The man that baptized me had a colored woman tied up in his yard to whip when he got home. ... We had to sit and hear him preach, and [the woman's] mother was in church hearing him preach."

It is not difficult to see why Frederick Douglass called slaveholding piety "a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action nor bowels of compassion."

Experiencing the real

It is amazing that under these circumstances any slaves found the Christian message convincing. And yet blacks clearly saw the difference—a difference white owners were utterly blind to—between the message of the Bible and the slaveholding culture in which it was taking root. When William Craft's supposedly Christian master sold his aged parents because they were no longer an economic asset, Craft said he felt "a thorough hatred, not for Christianity, but for slaveholding piety."

Slaves, when hearing the Christian message, were struck by something that transcended their culture. Many of them described how they were seized by the Spirit, struck dead (so to speak), and raised to a new life. Such conversions took place in the fields, in the woods, at camp meetings, in the slave quarters, or at services conducted by the blacks themselves.

John Jasper, a famous black preacher in Richmond, for example, was converted while at work as a stemmer in a tobacco factory. He remembered that when "de light broke; I was light as a feather; my feet was on de mount'n; salvation rol'd like a flood thru my soul, an' I felt as if I could knock off de fact'ry roof wid my shouts."

Josiah Henson said he was "transported with delicious joy" when he heard a sermon from the Book of Hebrews that said Christ tasted death "for every man." He exclaimed, "O the blessedness and sweetness of feeling that I was loved!"

Such experiences were so real that nothing masters did or said could shake their Christian confidence.

Of course, this experience of faith was not sustained by the "family prayers" led by the master or mistress, or the formal worship at which both blacks and whites gathered on Sundays. Such formats were heavily proscribed by the sensibilities and fear of white Christians.

In such settings, gifted blacks were sometimes allowed to preach. They were usually limited to assisting white preachers, which included the obligatory admonition at the end of the service for slaves to pay attention to the teachings of the white preacher. One ex-slave said, "We had some nigger preachers but they would say, 'Obey your mistress and master.' They didn't know nothing else to say."

Even when blacks met alone, though, preachers had to be circumspect. As one put it, "If a colored preacher or intelligent free Negro gains the ill-will of a malicious slave, all the latter has to do is to report that said preacher had attempted to persuade him to 'rise' or to run away; and the poor fellow's life may pay the forfeit."

Then, when alone with his black brothers and sisters, he would add, " ... iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free."

Invisible church

Yet it wasn't just the message that was chained by the circumstances, but the very style of worship blacks yearned to express. Sarah Fitzpatrick, an Alabama slave, noted, "White fo'ks have deir service in de mornin', an' niggers have deirs in de evenin', a'ter dey clean up, wash de dishes, an' look a'ter eve'thing. ... Ya' see niggers lack [like] ta shout a whole lot, an' wid de white fo'ks al' round 'em, dey couldn't shout jes' lack dey want to."

Although some southern whites forbade blacks from meeting alone, this didn't stop slaves from taking risks to enjoy their own experience of the Spirit. Ex-slave Charlotte Martin, for example, said her oldest brother was whipped to death for secreting off to a worship service.

Lucretia Alexander explained that after enduring the white preacher's sermon ("Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. ... Do whatsoever your master tells you do to"), her father would hold worship secretly in one of the slave quarters. "That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. ... They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper."

To get a little distance between themselves and their masters, slaves would often meet in woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets, aptly called "hush harbors." Calvin Woods recalled singing and praying

with other slaves, huddled behind quilts and rags, hung "in the form of a little room" and wetted "to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air."

On one Louisiana plantation, slaves would steal off into the woods and "form a circle on their knees around the speaker, who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender's mouth."

Such secrecy was not required everywhere, and in many places and upon a variety of occasions—Sunday worship, prayer meetings, baptisms, and revivals—blacks worshiped alone and in full voice. As one ex-slave put it, referring to camp meetings: "Mostly we had white preachers, but when we had a black preacher, that was heaven."

Frederick Law Olmsted described one New Orleans service he attended in 1860. A man sitting next to him "soon began to respond aloud to the sentiments of the preacher, in such words as these: 'Oh yes!' and similar expressions could be heard from all parts of the house whenever the speaker's voice was unusually solemn, or his language and manner eloquent or excited."

Olmsted also noted "shouts, and groans, and terrific shrieks, and indescribable expressions of ecstasy—of pleasure or agony—and even stamping, jumping, and clapping hands were added."

He then focused on one worshiper: "The preacher was drawing his sermon to a close ... when a small old woman ... suddenly rose, and began dancing and clapping her hands; at first with slow measured movement, and then with increasing rapidity, at the same time beginning to shout 'Ha! Ha!' ... her head thrown back and rolling from one side to the other. Gradually her shout became indistinct; she threw her arms wildly about instead of clapping her hands, fell back into the arms of her companions, then threw herself forward and embraced those before her, then tossed herself from side to side, gasping and finally sunk to the floor, where she remained ... kicking, as if acting a death struggle."

Perhaps it was indeed a death struggle—with an oppressive culture that sought to wring life, physical and spiritual, out of her. But if so, it was one that moved toward resurrection. One ex-slave preacher talked about the effect of such services: "The old meeting house caught on fire. The spirit was there. Every heart was beating in unison as we turned our minds to God to tell him our sorrows here below. God saw our need and came to us."

Many black preachers didn't know a letter of the Bible or how to spell the name of Christ. "But when they opened their mouths," said one ex-slave, "they were filled, and the plan of salvation was explained in a way that all could receive it." Sometimes the exhorter merely related his conversion experience, or how God had comforted him in times of distress. When the preacher was exhausted, he said, the faces of the listeners "showed that their souls had been refreshed and that it had been 'good for them to be there.' "

Confident faith

By the time the guns of Fort Sumter pounded forth in 1860, the number of black Christians below the Mason-Dixon line had grown to an astounding half-million, not counting the thousands who participated secret slave worship. The numbers were uneven across the South: black Christians constituted 20 percent of the black population in South Carolina, but only about 10 percent in Virginia. In some cities, there were black congregations that numbered in the thousands. All in all, this was about double the number of black Christians from the early 1800s, and multiples more than in the early 1700s.

That blacks accepted the Christian gospel is remarkable in itself, considering the stumbling blocks

thrown in their way. Certainly some of the success must be credited to white missionaries—both slave owners and abolitionists—who insisted that slaves hear at least the rudiments of the Christian message.

But the Christianity that finally took hold of black souls, that grew and blossomed in its own distinct way, and that comforted and gave hope to a sorely oppressed people, was a different thing altogether than what whites had imagined. It was in some sense created and nurtured by blacks themselves, who refused to let whites frame their faith.

Instead they discovered for themselves the biblical message, as historian Arnold Toynbee put it, "that Jesus was a prophet who came into the world not to confirm the mighty in their seats but to exalt the humble and the meek."

This not only gave blacks hope but a confidence whites recognized and feared. Francis Henderson described her conversion this way: "I had recently joined the Methodist Church, and from the sermons I heard, I felt that God had made all men free and equal, and that I ought not be a slave—but even then, that I ought not to be abused. From this time I was not punished. I think my master became afraid of me."

Black boldness was due in part to their belief in God's special concern for the poor. As ex-slave Jacob Stoyer put it, "God would somehow do more for the oppressed Negroes than he would ordinarily for any other people."

But blacks were also bolstered by their trust in a coming judgment at which slaveholders would receive recompense. Moses Grandy remembered how during violent thunderstorms whites hid between their feather beds, whereas slaves went outside and, lifting up their hands, thanked God that judgment day was coming at last."

It was, in the end, a confidence in a God who would set things right, either in this age or in the age to come. At age 90, Jane Simpson recalled, "I used to hear old slaves pray and ask God when would de bottom rail be de top rail, and I wondered what on earth, dey talkin' about. Dey was talkin' about when dey goin' to get from under bondage. 'Course I know now."

Mark Galli is the editor of Christian History. To prepare this article, he relied upon Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution (Oxford, 1978)* and Milton Sernett's *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism (Scarecrow, 1975)*.

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From the Archives: Slavery Under Ideal Conditions

Henry Bibb

Mr. Young [a devout Methodist] never was known to flog one of his slaves or sell one. He fed and clothed them well and never overworked them. He allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays was allowed them to cultivate it.

In time, he became deeply involved in debt, and his property was all advertised to be sold by the sheriff at public auction. It consisted of slaves, many of whom were his brothers and sisters in the [local Methodist] church.

The first man offered on the block was an old gray-headed slave by the name of Richard. When they had bid him up to 70 or 80 dollars, one of the bidders asked Mr. Young what he could do, as he looked very old and infirm? Mr. Young replied by saying, "He is not able to accomplish much manual labor, from his extreme age and hard labor in early life. Yet I would rather have him than many of those who are young and vigorous; who are able to perform twice as much labor because I know him to be faithful and trustworthy, a Christian in good standing in my church. I can trust him anywhere with confidence."

This giving him a good Christian character caused them to run him up to near two hundred dollars. His poor old companion [his wife] stood by weeping and pleading that they might not be separated. But the marriage relation was soon dissolved by the sale, and they were separated never to meet again.

After the men were all sold they then sold the women and children. They ordered the first woman to lay down her child and mount the auction block; she refused to give up her little one and clung to it as long as she could while the cruel lash was applied to her back for disobedience. She pleaded for mercy in the name of God. But the child was torn from the arms of its mother amid the most heart-rending shrieks from the mother and child on the one hand, and bitter oaths and cruel lashes from the tyrants on the other. In this way the sale was carried on from beginning to end.

There was each speculator with his handcuffs to bind his victims after the sale, and while they were doing their writings, the Christian portion of the slaves asked permission to kneel in prayer. While bathing each other with tears of sorrow on the verge of their final separation, their eloquent appeals in prayer to the Most High seemed to cause an unpleasant sensation upon the ears of their tyrants. They were soon raised from their knees by the sound of the lash, and the rattle of the chains, in which they were soon taken off by their respective master—husbands from wives, and children from parents, never expecting to meet until the judgment of the great day.

Having thus tried to show the best side of slavery that I can conceive of, the reader can exercise his own judgment in deciding whether a man can be a Bible Christian and yet hold his Christian brethren as property, so that they may be sold at any time in market, as sheep or oxen, to pay his debts.

Henry Bibb (1815-1854), a fugitive slave, became a leading abolitionist. This selection is a condensed excerpt from his 1849 Narrative of the Life and Adventures of an American Slave.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

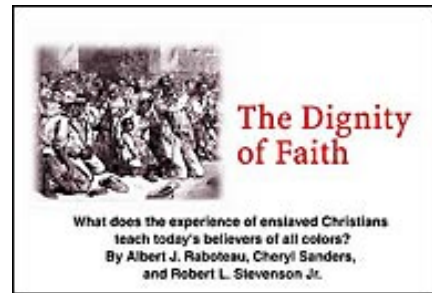
The Dignity of Faith

Albert Raboteau

Link: The Dignity of Faith

Most of us would recall the early centuries of the Church as the era of persecution, when thousands of Christians became confessors or martyrs by suffering or dying for their faith at the hands of the Roman authorities.

And, in a discussion of the topic, we probably would mention the modern waves of persecution that swept over Christians under the antireligious regimes of Communist states in Eastern Europe.



Few, I think, would identify the suffering of African-American slave Christians in similar terms, as a prime example of the persecution of Christianity within our own nation's history. And yet the extent to which the Christianity of American slaves was hindered, proscribed, and persecuted justifies applying the titles **confessor** and **martyr** to those slaves. Like their ancient Christian predecessors, they bore witness to the Christian gospel despite the threat of punishment and even death at the hands of fellow Christians.

For example, slave Christians suffered severe punishment if they were caught attending secret prayer meetings which whites outlawed as a threat to social order. And yet they endured suffering rather than forsake worship.

In 1792 Andrew Bryan and his brother Sampson were arrested and hauled before the city magistrates of Savannah, Georgia, for holding religious services. With about 50 of their followers they were imprisoned and severely flogged. Andrew told his persecutors "that he rejoiced not only to be whipped, but would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ."

Eli Johnson claimed that when he was threatened with 500 lashes for holding prayer meetings, he stood up to his master and declared, "I'll suffer the flesh to be dragged off my bones ... for the sake of my blessed Redeemer."

Slaves suffered willingly because their secret liturgies constituted the heart and source of slave spiritual life, the sacred time when they brought their sufferings to God and experienced the amazing transformation of their sadness into joy.

This paradoxical combination of suffering and joy permeated slave religion, as the slave spirituals attest:

Nobody knows de trouble I see

Nobody knows but Jesus,

Nobody knows de trouble I've had

Glory hallelu!

The mystery of their suffering took on meaning in the light of the suffering of Jesus, who became present to them in their suffering as the model and author of their faith. If Jesus came as the suffering servant, the slave certainly resembled him more than the master.

One source that sustained Christian slaves against temptations to despair was the Bible, with its accounts of the mighty deeds of a God who miraculously intervenes in human history to cast down the mighty and to lift up the lowly, a God who saves the oppressed and punishes the oppressor. One biblical story in particular fired the imagination of the slaves and anchored their hope of deliverance: the Exodus.

Questioned by her mistress about her faith, a slave woman named Polly explained why she resisted despair: "We poor creatures have to believe in God, for if God Almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I heard of his delivering his people from bondage I know it means the poor African."

In the midst of dehumanizing conditions so bleak that despair seemed the only appropriate response, African Americans believed that God would "make a way out of no way." Enslaved, they predicted that God would free them from bondage. Impoverished, they asserted that "God would provide." Their belief in God did not consist so much in a set of propositions as it did in a relationship of personal trust that God was with them: "He will be wid us, Jesus, be wid us to the end."

Compassionate humanity

We might expect that their identification with the biblical children of Israel, with Jesus, and with saints and martyrs might have pushed the slaves toward self-righteousness and racial chauvinism. Instead it inspired compassion for all who suffer, even occasionally for their white oppressors.

William Grimes, for example, a slave who refused to lie or to steal, was unjustly accused and punished by his master. "I forgave my master in my own heart and prayed to God to forgive him and turn his heart," Grimes reported.

When slaves forgave and prayed for slaveholders, they not only proved their humanity, they also displayed to an heroic degree their obedience to Christ's command "Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute and spiritually use you."

Christianity taught the slaves that God had entered into the world and taken on its suffering, not just the regular suffering of all creatures that grow old and die, but the suffering of the innocent persecuted by the unjust, the suffering of abandonment and seeming failure, the suffering of love offered and refused, the suffering of evil apparently triumphant over good. They learned that God's compassion was so great that he entered the world to share its brokenness in order to heal and transform it. The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus began and effected the process of that transformation.

It was compassion, the love of all to the extent of sharing in their suffering, that would continue and bring to completion the work of Christ. All of this of course is paradoxical. All of this is of course a matter of faith.

American slaves accepted that faith. And in doing so they found their lives transformed. No, the suffering didn't stop. Many died while still in bondage. And yet they lived and died with their humanity intact. That is, they lived lives of inner freedom, lives of wisdom and compassion. For their condition, evil as it was, did not ultimately contain or define them. They transcended slavery because they believed God made them in his image with a dignity and value that no slaveholder could efface.

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The "Shrimp" Who Stopped Slavery

the most malignant evil of the British Empire ceased largely because of the faith and persistence of William Wilberforce.

Christopher D. Hancock

Today one of his full portraits hangs in a pub. Another in the same town, Cambridge, hangs in a hotel. Another still, in his old college, St. John's. In each he peers at the world quizzically through small, bright eyes over a long, upturned nose. He was said to be "the wittiest man in England, and the most religious" (Madame de Stael), and one who possessed "the greatest natural eloquence of all the men I ever met" (William Pitt). When he spoke, another quipped, "The shrimp became a whale" (James Boswell). Historian G. M. Trevelyan called this "shrimp" the primary human agent for "one of the turning events in the history of the world."

It's hard to imagine that this man, with the gentle grin and the small, twisted body could move the world in a new direction. Yet William Wilberforce did.

Born on August 24, 1759, the third child of Robert and Elizabeth Wilberforce grew up surrounded by wealth. The Wilberforces had settled in Hull, England, at the beginning of the 1700s and made their wealth in the booming Baltic trade. When William was 9, his father died. The boy was sent to stay with his childless aunt and uncle, who were "great friends of Mr. [George] Whitefield." They exposed their young charge to the evangelical preaching of John Newton, the ex-slave trader. Years later Wilberforce spoke of "reverencing him as a parent when I was a child." Newton's immediate influence, however, was short lived.

Fearing her son might be infected by the "poison" of Methodism, his mother brought him back to Hull and enrolled him at his grandfather's old school at Pockington near York. His education as a gentleman continued among the commercial "aristocracy." He learned to play cards and sing and developed his gift of witty repartee.

He later wrote, "I was naturally a high-spirited boy and fiery. They [his friends] pushed me forward and made me talk a great deal and made me very vain." His grandfather's death in November 1774 left him richer still and more susceptible to the temptations of plenty.

In October 1776, Wilberforce entered St. John's College, Cambridge. His three years there were pleasant but unproductive. He had "unlimited command of money" and little academic pressure from his tutor.

"As much pains were taken to make me idle as were ever taken to make anyone studious," he later complained. His intellectual aspirations were no match for his passion for socializing. His neighbor, Thomas Gisborne, later recalled, "When he [Wilberforce] returned late in the evening to his rooms, he would summon me to join him. ... He was so winning and amusing that I often sat up half the night with him, much to the detriment of my attendance at lectures the next day."

Wilberforce graduated the same year as the hard-working William Pitt (future prime minister). Their friendship grew throughout 1779. Together they watched Parliament from the gallery and dreamed of political careers.

In the summer of 1780, the ambitious Wilberforce stood for election as a Member of Parliament (MP) for

Hull. He was only 21, and one of his opponents had powerful supporters. His chances of winning were slim.

In the campaign, Wilberforce relied on his charm, energy, tact, and powers of persuasion, and in the end, he secured as many votes as his opponents combined. He was to remain an MP, for various constituencies, for another 45 years.

"The first years I was in Parliament," he later wrote, "I did nothing-nothing that is to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object." He frequented the exclusive clubs of St. James and acquired a reputation as a songster and wit who was professionally "careless and inaccurate in method." His fertile mind flitted from topic to topic. His early speeches, though eloquent, lacked focus and passion.

Starting in 1784, however, all that changed.

Birth of a Christian politician

In 1784, after his election as the mp for Yorkshire (one of the most coveted seats in the House of Commons), Wilberforce accompanied his sister Sally, his mother, and two of his cousins to the French Riviera (for the sake of Sally's health). He had also invited Isaac Milner, tutor at Queens' College, Cambridge, an acquaintance. Though friends counted "Wilber" both religious and moral, had he known that Milner's huge frame housed both a fine mathematical brain and a strong "methodistical" [evangelical] faith, it is unlikely he would have invited him. The combination was unimaginable in an English gentleman!

Milner's clear thought and winsome manner were effective advertisements for "serious" Christianity. Wilberforce had the quicker tongue, Milner the sharper mind. As they journeyed, they debated the evangelicalism of Wilberforce's youth.

Over the next months, Wilberforce read Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745) beside an open Bible. His reading and conversations with Milner convinced him of wealth's emptiness, Christianity's truth, and his own failure to embrace its radical demands. Outwardly he looked ever confident, but inwardly he agonized. "I was filled with sorrow," he wrote. "I am sure that no human creature could suffer more than I did for some months."

He considered withdrawing from public life for the sake of his faith. He confided in his friend Pitt, now prime minister. Pitt told him not to withdraw. With "ten thousand doubts," he approached John Newton. The aging saint advised him, "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of his church and for the good of the nation."

Wilberforce's unnatural gloom finally lifted on Easter 1786, "amidst the general chorus with which all nature seems on such a morning to be swelling the song of praise and thanksgiving." He believed his new life had begun.

His sense of vocation began growing within. "My walk is a public one," he wrote in his diary. "My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me." He also increasingly felt the burden of his calling: "A man who acts from the principles I profess," he later wrote, "reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the judgment seat of Christ."

Finding his purpose

His diary for the summer of 1786 charts his painful search for greater discipline and a clearer vocation. He flitted between humanitarian and local causes, between parliamentary and national reform. He studied to correct his Cambridge indolence. He practiced abstinence from alcohol and rigorous self-examination as

benefit, he believed, a "serious" Christian.

After one dinner with Pitt, he wrote in his diary about the "temptations of the table," meaning the endless stream of dinner parties filled with vain and useless conversation. "[They] disqualify me for every useful purpose in life, waste my time, impair my health, fill my mind with thoughts of resistance before and self-condemnation afterwards."

In early 1786, Wilberforce had been tentatively approached by friends who were committed abolitionists. They asked him to lead the parliamentary campaign for their cause. Even Pitt prodded him in this direction: "Wilberforce, why don't you give notice of a motion on the subject of the slave trade?" But Wilberforce hesitated.

The slave trade in the late 1700s involved thousands of slaves, hundreds of ships, and millions of pounds; upon it depended the economies of Britain and much of Europe. Few were aware of the horrors of the so-called "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic, where an estimated one out of four slaves died.

Some Englishmen, including John Wesley and Thomas Clarkson, had taken steps to mitigate the evil. Yet few in England shared the abolitionists' sense that slavery was a great social evil. Some presumed that slaves were a justifiable necessity or that they deserved their plight.

For Wilberforce light began to dawn slowly during his 27th year. His diary for Sunday, October 28, 1787, shows with extraordinary clarity the fruit of prolonged study, prayer, and conversation. He realized the need for "some reformer of the nation's morals, who should raise his voice in the high places of the land and do within the church and nearer the throne what Wesley has accomplished in the meeting and among the multitude."

He also summed up what became his life mission: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners" (i.e., morality).

Later he reflected on his decision about slavery: "So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would; I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."

Enormous foes

Wilberforce was initially optimistic, naively so, and expressed "no doubt of our success." He sought to stem the flow of slaves from Africa by international accord. The strength of his feelings and the support of prominent politicians like Pitt, Edmund Burke, and Charles Fox blinded him to the enormity of his task.

From his deathbed, John Wesley wrote him, "I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you?"

In May 1788, Wilberforce had recovered from another of his periodic bouts of illness to introduce a 12-point motion to Parliament indicting the trade. He and Thomas Clarkson (whom Wilberforce praised as central to the cause's success) had thoroughly researched and now publicized the trade's physical atrocities. But Parliament wanted to maintain the status quo, and the motion was defeated.

The campaign and opposition intensified. Planters, businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists, and even the Crown opposed the movement. Many feared personal financial ruin and nationwide recession if the trade ceased. Wilberforce was vilified. Admiral Horatio Nelson castigated "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce

and his hypocritical allies." One of Wilberforce's friends wrote fearing he would one day read of Wilberforce being "carbonadoed [broiled] by West Indian planters, barbecued by African merchants, and eaten by Guinea captains."

Wilberforce's spirit was indomitable, his enthusiasm palpable. As the slave owners' agent in Jamaica wrote, "It is necessary to watch him, as he is blessed with a very sufficient quantity of that enthusiastic spirit, which is so far from yielding that it grows more vigorous from blows."

The pathway to abolition was fraught with difficulty. Vested interest, parliamentary filibustering, entrenched bigotry, international politics, slave unrest, personal sickness, and political fear-all combined to frustrate the movement. It would take years before Wilberforce would see success.

Prime minister of philanthropy

The cause of the slaves was not Wilberforce's only concern. The second "great object" of Wilberforce's life was the reformation of the nation's morals. Early in 1787, he conceived of a society that would work, as a royal proclamation put it, "for the encouragement of piety and virtue; and for the preventing of vice, profaneness, and immorality." It eventually became known as the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Enlisting support from leading figures in church and state-and King George III-Wilberforce made private morality a matter of public concern.

Laws restricting drinking, swearing, and gaming on Sundays were enforced. "All loose and licentious prints, books, and publications" were suppressed, including Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Wilberforce was criticized for his "priggish" concerns, yet John Pollock, a recent biographer, wrote, "The reformation of manners grew into Victorian virtues and Wilberforce touched the world when he made goodness fashionable."

It has been estimated that Wilberforce-dubbed "the prime minister of a cabinet of philanthropists"-was at one time active in support of 69 philanthropic causes. He gave away a fourth of his annual income to the poor. He also gave an annuity to Charles Wesley's widow from 1792 until her death in 1822. He fought the cause of "climbing boys" (chimney sweeps) and single mothers. He sought the welfare of soldiers, sailors, and animals, and established Sunday schools and orphanages for "criminal poor children." His homes were havens for the marginalized and dispossessed.

Targeting the powerful as the agents of change, Wilberforce made common cause with Hannah More, the evangelical playwright, whose *Thoughts on the Manners of the Great* appeared in 1787. "To expect to reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt," she wrote, "is to throw odors [perfume] on the stream while the springs are poisoned."

Clapham, a leafy village south of London, became a base for a number of these influential people, who became known as the "Clapham Sect." These bankers and diplomats, legislators, and businessmen shared a commitment to a godly life in public service. Their "vital" and "practical" Christianity expressed Wilberforce's vision of an integrated evangelicalism committed to a spiritual and a social gospel. The group's reputation for philanthropy and evangelical fervor spread. Warned one politician, "I would counsel my lords and bishops to keep their eyes upon that holy village."

Wilberforce's public struggles and success must be set against the background of his private joys and pains.

The public man's private side

Wilberforce's health was blighted by weak and painful eyes, a stomach prone to colitis, and a body that for many years had to be held upright by a crude metal frame. In his late 20s, he already wrote from his sickbed, "[I] am still a close prisoner, wholly unequal even to such a little business as I am now engaged

in: add to which my eyes are so bad that I can scarce see to how to direct my pen."

His gloomy doctor reported, "That little fellow, with his calico guts, cannot possibly survive a twelve-month."

He did, though in the process he became dependent on small doses of opium, the nearest thing to an effective pain killer and treatment for colitis known at the time. Wilberforce was aware of opium's dangers and was not easily persuaded to take it. After taking it for some time, he noticed that omitting his nighttime dose caused sickness, sweating, and sneezing in the morning. Opium's hallucinatory powers terrified him, and the depressions it caused virtually crippled him at times.

His notebooks contain anguished prayers: "I fly to thee for succor and support, O Lord, let it come speedily. ... I am in great troubles insurmountable by me. ... Look upon me, O Lord, with compassion and mercy, and restore me to rest, quietness, and comfort in the world, or in another by removing me hence into a state of happiness." In his later years, he showed the long-term effects of opium use, particularly listlessness and amnesia.

His marriage to Barbara Spooner, in 1797, brought him much joy. On the other hand, the financial ineptitude of his oldest son in 1830 (reducing his parents to a peripatetic existence in their children's homes) and the death of his second daughter in 1832 caused his final years to be overshadowed by grief and poverty. (In time three of his four sons became Roman Catholics, one an adversary of Lord Shaftesbury, Wilberforce's successor in many ways).

Wilberforce's life was not without criticism. Some see in his sons' five-volume *Lifemuted* praise of both his evangelicalism and his parenting. Opponents of abolition bitterly denounced both his character and his cause. A Wimbledon man, Anthony Fearon, attempted blackmail (causing Wilberforce to write, "At all events, he must not be permitted to publish"), but the precise grounds are not known.

Through all this, Wilberforce drew spiritual and intellectual strength from the Bible and the Puritans (such as Richard Baxter, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards), and built his evangelical faith on a mildly Calvinist foundation.

Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* continued to shape his spirituality: daily self-examination, and extended times of prayer, regular Communion and fasting, morning and evening devotions, and times of solitude. He also paid careful attention to God's providential provision in his life, the needs of others, and his own mortality.

For all of Wilberforce's appeal to "real" and "vital" Christianity, especially in his best-selling *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System ... Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797), he did not embrace a dull, joyless legalism. His personality alone was too lively for that. As he once wrote to a relative, "My grand objection to the religious system still held by many who declare themselves orthodox churchmen ... is that it tends to render Christianity so much a system of prohibitions rather than of privilege and hopes ... and religion is made to wear a forbidding and gloomy air."

Vocal until death

It is hard to comprehend the extent of Wilberforce's labors and scope of his achievement.

He contributed to the Christianization of British India by securing chaplains to the East India Company and missionaries to India. He worked with Charles Simeon and others to secure parishes for evangelical clergy, thus shaping the future of the Church of England. He helped form a variety of "parachurch" groups: the Society for Bettering the Cause of the Poor (1796), the Church Missionary Society (1799), the British and

Foreign Bible Society (1806), the Africa Institution (1807), and the Anti-Slavery Society (1823).

But his greatest legacy remains his fight against the slave trade, which frustrated him for years. As early as 1789, he achieved some success in having 12 resolutions against the trade passed—only to be outmaneuvered on fine legal points. Another bill to abolish the trade was defeated in 1791 (by 163 to 88) because a slave uprising in Santo Domingo made MPs nervous about granting freedom to slaves. Further defeats followed in 1792, 1793, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1804, and 1805.

But Wilberforce persisted, and finally, on February 23, 1807, a political ruse by Lord Grenville's more liberal administration (pointing out that the trade assisted Britain's enemies) secured its abolition by 283 votes to 16. The House cheered. Wilberforce wept with joy.

Wilberforce became a national hero overnight, and his opponents sharpened their knives. Lord Milton Lascelles spent no less than £200,000 to fight (unsuccessfully) against Wilberforce in the election in 1807.

The next issue was ensuring that the abolition of the slave trade was enforced and that eventually slavery was abolished. This last goal took another 26 years, and Wilberforce's health prevented him from continuing to the end. At age 62, he turned over parliamentary leadership of emancipation to Thomas Foxwell Buxton.

But Wilberforce continued to play a role. In 1823 he published ***An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies***. Three months before his death he was found "going out to war again," campaigning for abolitionist petitions to Parliament. He declared publicly, "I had never thought to appear in public again, but it shall never be said that William Wilberforce is silent while the slaves require his help."

On July 26, 1833, the final passage of the emancipation bill was insured when a committee of the House of Commons worked out key details. Three days later, Wilberforce died. Parliament continued working out details of the measure, and later Buxton wrote, "On the very night on which we were successfully engaged in the House of Commons in passing the clause of the Act of Emancipation ... the spirit of our friend left the world. The day which was the termination of his labors was the termination of his life."

Parliament overruled family preference and designated Westminster Abbey as the place for both his funeral and memorial. Parliamentary business was suspended. One MP recalled, "The attendance was very great. The funeral itself, with the exception of the choir, was perfectly plain. The noblest and most fitting testimony to the estimation of the man."

It is right that Wilberforce is remembered in a church; he was a churchman through and through. But the places where his portrait hangs in Cambridge are in their own ways also fitting. His walk was indeed in the world, though not of it.

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The Shameful Side of History

By David Feddes

Charlemagne's swordpoint baptisms and massacres

First Crusade

At Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II preached, "God wills it!"

Conquest of Jerusalem

- Butchered unarmed Muslims after surrender
- Massacred many Arab Christians
- Burned Jews in their synagogue

Fourth Crusade: Sack of Constantinople (1204)

Inquisition

Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies*

"Set fire to their synagogues... I advise that their houses be destroyed... They must be driven from our country... They are full of the devil's feces... We are at fault in not slaying them."

Salem Witch Trials

Opium Wars

Apartheid

- South African system of racial segregation
- Some missionaries said each race should stay separate and develop its unique identity.
- Some theologians and churches officially defended apartheid.

Rwanda

- Hutu majority murdered 800,000 minority Tutsis, as well as Hutus who helped Tutsis
- 95 percent of Rwandans claim to be Christians
- Some pastors and priests aided in genocide

The shameful side of church history

- Charlemagne's swordpoint conversions
- Crusader atrocities
- Inquisition tortures and burnings
- Luther's tirades against Jews
- Witch trials
- Opium wars
- Apartheid
- Rwandan genocide

The shameful side of American history

- Conquest of native Americans
- Enslavement of Africans
- Imperialism in relation to other nations

Columbus the Christian

- “[The Holy Spirit] with marvelous rays of light consoled me through the holy and sacred Scriptures” and gave “the sweetest consolation.”
- “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.”
- “There are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand.”
- Gave captive girl to one of his men, who beat her into having sex.

Greedy for gold

- Natives age 14 and up had to bring gold dust or 25 pounds of cotton to their Spanish conquerors every 3 months.
- “Whenever an Indian delivered his tribute, he was to receive a brass or copper token which he must wear about his neck as proof that he had made his payment.” (Ferdinand Columbus)
- Any native found without a token would have his hands cut off.

Cortez

“Let us go forth, serving God, honoring our nation, giving growth to our king, and let us become rich ourselves.”

King James Version of Thanksgiving

King James thanked “Almighty God for his great goodness and bounty towards us” for “this wonderful plague among the savages.”

Genocidal General

- In 1763 General Jeffrey Amherst approved sending smallpox-infected blankets as gifts to Indians.
- He wrote of “measures to be taken as would bring about the Total Extirpation of those Indian Nations” and “put a most Effectual Stop to their very Being.”

The first Thanksgiving

Pilgrims seeking religious freedom held a feast to thank God, joined by Indians.

Some untold truths:

- Harvest celebrations were an Indian custom.
- Settlers couldn’t survive without Indian help.
- Most colonists had financial, not religious motives.
- That cordial feast was far from typical.

A less famous feast

In 1623 British officials in Virginia made a treaty with natives near the Potomac River and proposed a toast symbolizing eternal friendship. The chief, his family, advisors, and 200 others drank the toast—and dropped dead of poison.

Enslaving Africans

- In 1618 the Dutch Reformed Synod of Dort banned the sale of Christian slaves and said they “ought to enjoy equal right of liberty with other Christians.”
- Some Dutch Reformed people took this decree seriously. So what did they do?
- Many of the Dutch Reformed dialed back evangelism in slave colonies so that slaves would not convert to Christianity and thus become candidates for liberty.

America’s founding fathers

- The first colony to legalize slavery was not Virginia but Massachusetts.
- In 1720 about one of every four residents of New York City was a slave.
- More than half of those who signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves

Thomas Jefferson

- Blasted King George for the slave trade
- Said of slavery: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever.”
- Tried everything to deal with the problem of slavery—except freeing the 200 slaves that he himself owned.

Patrick Henry

- Called slavery “as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive of liberty.”
- Still he kept buying slaves and never freed them.
- “Would anyone believe that I am a Master of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them.”

Yelping for liberty?

- Samuel Johnson: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”
- Montesquieu mocked the way Europeans and Americans denied the full humanity of black people: “It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christian.”

Confederate foundations

“Our new government’s foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.” (Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens)

The North’s motivations

- Some wanted to stop slavery and free black people on moral grounds.
- Others wanted to limit the spread of slavery in order to keep Western lands free of blacks. One said, “The negro race already occupy enough of this fair continent; let us keep what remains for ourselves and our children.”
- Lincoln fought to preserve the Union, not to free slaves. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed only slaves in enemy territory, not in border states.

Lincoln the liberator

“I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people... there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality... and I as much as any man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

U.S. relations to other nations

- Is the U.S. “the last best hope of earth” (Lincoln), “a city on a hill” (Reagan), and “the light of the world, as Christ called us to be” (Bush, Sr.)?
- When Jesus said, “You are the light of the world,” he was speaking to his disciples, not to American politicians.
- Are U.S. troops always nobler, U.S. leaders more idealistic, U.S. policies more freedom-oriented and less imperialistic?

U.S. foreign relations

- In the 1950s the CIA arranged the killing of Iran’s leader and installed the Shah.
- In the 1980s the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein in Iraq even while he was gassing opponents.
- The U.S. helped Muslim militants like Osama bin Laden against Russians in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. has done much good. It has also used political assassination, military force, and financial bullying to shape other nations.

Planning Study 23

Proposed “a union of Western European nations [to] undertake jointly the economic development and exploitation of the colonial and dependent areas of the African Continent.”

“We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security.”

“We will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... We should cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.”

“For a truly stable world order can proceed, within our lifetime, only from the older, mellowed and more advanced nations of the world—nations from which the concept of order, as opposed to power, has value and meaning.”

This was written right after World War II, when the “mellowed and more advanced nations” had just convulsed the world with the two bloodiest wars in history.

The shameful side of church history

- Charlemagne’s swordpoint conversions
- Crusader atrocities

- Inquisition tortures and burnings
- Luther's tirades against Jews
- Witch trials
- Opium wars
- Apartheid
- Rwandan genocide

The shameful side of American history

- Conquest of native Americans
- Enslavement of Africans
- Imperialism in relation to other nations

Responsible Remembering

- Forgetting the past may doom us to repeat it.
- Recalling the past resentfully can fuel ongoing hatred, conflict, and violence.
- Seeing "our people" in the past as oppressors can trap us in chronic and useless guilt.
- Seeing "our people" in the past as victims can trap us in a victim mentality of excuse-making and playing the blame game.
- Jesus helps us to face the past honestly without being trapped by it.

Redemptive remembering

- "Large areas of 'the World' will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past. Why should they? We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch." (C. S. Lewis)
- Confessing sins of others in past generations can make us self-righteous. We congratulate ourselves that we are much better than they were.
- The cross enables a kind of remembering that produces repentance rather than arrogance, gratitude rather than bitterness, reconciliation rather than revenge, hope rather than despair.

History lessons

- Some who claim to follow Jesus are not really Christians at all.
- Even genuine Christians still have many sins and blind spots.
- God can bring good out of evil.
 - ✠ Many slaves came to know Jesus.
 - ✠ European and American imperialism was evil but resulted in many more people having access to the gospel, and enriched the worldwide church with much diversity.
- We are responsible for our actions now.