

George Liele: The world's first Baptist missionary

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George Liele, a former slave, not only was the first ordained African American Baptist preacher in America, but also was the world's first Baptist missionary.

In 1750, shortly after the end of the Great Awakening in America's British-controlled colonies, Virginia Loyalist Henry Sharp's slave, Nancy, gave birth to George, a son who took his slave father's name, Liele.

Baby George became one of Virginia's 101,000 African slaves, a result of the 1705 Virginia General Assembly Declaration.

Slaves were "real estate" to their Virginia owners, and they suffered a life of cruelty and punishment—whipping, branding, severing ears, maiming and hanging. If a slave's "correction" caused death, the master was declared "free of all punishment ... as if such accident never happened."

America's African slave trade proved prosperous during the 1730s and 1740s, a time of spiritual revival encouraged by ministers like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, David Brainard and others.

The religious movement awakened the colonists' declining lukewarm faith, bringing them face to face with a living, personal Christ and triggering an avalanche of Baptist growth.

Sometime before 1770, Henry Sharp moved George with him to St. George's Parish (later Burke County) in Georgia. In 1735, the British prohibited black slavery there, but on Jan. 1, 1750, the House of Commons decided to permit slavery.

In fewer than 30 years, Georgia's slave population grew from 500 slaves to 18,000. The slaves' hard work made the Lowcountry's white plantation owners wealthy.

Answered God's call

In Georgia, Sharp became a deacon in the Buckhead Creek Baptist Church, a white congregation led by Pastor Matthew Moore, who encouraged George to attend worship services.

During one Sunday service in 1773, God touched the 23-year-old's heart, calling him to a life of love and ministry to the other slaves on Master Sharp's plantation. George enthusiastically gave his life to Jesus and answered his call to Christ's ministry.

Moore baptized George, accepting him into the church. Sharp's plantation became George's new mission field. He taught the slaves to sing hymns, share the Bible and explain the gospel's saving message.

Impressed by George's innate ministry skills, Buckhead Creek Baptist Church licensed him to preach, and Henry Sharp granted him freedom from slavery.

George soon became a minister and preacher to slaves in Silver Bluff, S.C., south of Augusta, Ga., forming a 30-member congregation of new African American believers. In December 1773, Liele organized the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Ga., the oldest Black church in North America.

Four of his converts—Andrew Bryan, Hannah Bryan, Kate Hogg and Hagar Simpson—formed the church's early membership. When Liele was ordained, he became the first ordained African American Baptist preacher in America.

A few years earlier, on March 22, 1765, Britain passed the Stamp

Act, imposing unfair taxes on angry colonists. When British troops landed in Boston to enforce the act, their actions resulted in the 1770 Boston Massacre, a deadly incident that triggered America's rebellion against Britain.

Five years later, on April 19, 1775, the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The British freed tens of thousands of Black slaves who agreed to fight against the colonists.

Journey to Jamaica

George's former owner, Henry Sharp, fought with the British, dying of battle-sustained injuries in 1783. Fortunately, Sharp had given Liele his manumission papers, documentation that saved Liele from long-term imprisonment when Sharp's children tried to re-enslave him.

Moses Kirkland, a British colonel, helped him after his release from prison. A grateful Liele repaid Kirkland by working for him as an indentured servant. When Kirkland escaped to Jamaica in 1782-1783, George, his wife Hannah and their four children accompanied him.

Kirkland and the Liele family landed in Kingston, Jamaica, where George discovered a ripe mission field of hundreds of thousands of African slaves working the sugar cane plantations. The slaves suffered with cruel owners, back-breaking work and little food. Thousands were starving to death.

George planted a church, baptizing hundreds of professing converts in a nearby river every three months. He never accepted payment, supporting his family through farming and hauling goods by wagon.

For "preaching sedition" and "agitating the slaves," George frequently was imprisoned by Jamaican authorities, once for three years.

By the end of his life, George Liele, referred to as "the Negro slavery's

prophet of deliverance," helped found three Baptist churches: First Bryan Baptist Church and First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Ga., and the first Negro Baptist Church in Jamaica. He also established schools to educate Jamaica's slaves.

Liele encouraged and taught his new converts to preach the gospel to the world.

Author David Shannon wrote: "The Christianity practiced by Liele was not limited to one nation, colony, or ethnic group, but was a faith found and spread through interaction with colonists and national leaders in the Americas and England.

"In turn, this broad vision of Christianity shaped and spread a variety of Christian experience that became widespread and influential in black, white and integrated congregations in Georgia, South Carolina, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone and beyond."

Liele died in 1828 in Kingston, Jamaica, and is buried there in an unmarked grave.

Baptist missionary William Carey often has been called "the father of the modern missionary movement."

But George Liele left America to preach Christ in Jamaica a decade before Carey departed from England to preach in India, earning the title of "the world's first Baptist missionary."