

Sarah Osborne and the Rise of Evangelical Christianity

Sarah Osborne witnessed first-hand what life was like in Colonial America in the 18th century. She, and her family, left their homeland of Great Britain for the pursuit of a better life. Osborne witnessed the bittersweet struggles of her fellow colonists, and even experienced these struggles herself. She was surrounded by the rising number of humanitarian and enlightenment thinkers. She witnessed the American Revolution. She became a citizen of a new, independent nation. But most importantly, she, a mere woman in poverty, would embrace a new movement in Christianity that would enable her to take her place in society as one of the many great, yet unsung leaders of American Christianity.

Living in the Puritanical North, Sarah was raised by parents who were adherents to the established Congregational Church. Christians at the time thought that all humanity inherited a curse of sin from Adam and Eve, and thus, children were “born into sin”, or sinners from even before their birth. “...yet thou hast revealed tem to babes an even to me the most ignorant and vile of all creatures whose deep rooted enmity against thee and they Laws broke out into action as soon as i was capable of any the first I can remember of actual sins which I was guilty of...” (Brekus 33) Sarah saw herself as a wicked, inferior sinner from the beginning of her life because of the religious teaching of the day. Scientifically, women were also seen as “inferior, underdeveloped versions of men,” and were more susceptible to sin and damnation. (Breakus 54)

As cities increased in size, Colonial America began to shift from a barter system of trade to a monetary mercantile capitalist economy. The philosophical Enlightenment movement that

had swept Europe also began to take shape in the Colonies, and society's view of humanity began to change. This adoption of humanitarian values also found a subtle home in the charismatic and empowering Evangelical movement within American Christianity. "Not only did the Enlightenment have a much stronger impact on eighteenth century Protestantism than we have realized, but it also gave women a powerful new vocabulary to justify their religious authority". (Brekus 173) Although women were still thought to be lesser men, women were seen more and more as capable mentors and educators, and that their religious practice and adherence validated their ability to teach the young, especially about Christianity. Women's published authorship also began to slowly grow. "Sarah believed that a "feminine" voice was humble and self-denying, but at a time when few women lived to see their names in print, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of her letter's being published." (Brekus 183) Thomas Prince regarded Sarah's letter as a "model of true grace" because of its "insight into the meaning of a Christian life." (Brekus 183)

The Evangelical movement began to gain speed because of its inclusion of women in the roles of teaching and authoring published works to help others find Christ. At the same time, contrary to popular Calvinist theology embraced by both Anglicans and Puritans, Evangelicals offered assurance of one's salvation. "They confidently proclaimed that believers could feel and know whether they had been transformed by divine grace." (Brekus 101) Evangelicals placed an emphasis on this personal narrative of salvation, and that this "testimony" was the evidence in which one had gained salvation. Women were encouraged to share their testimony as the Evangelical movement flattened church hierarchy, allowing once oppressed voices to have a

greater share in the life of the local congregation, as well as in evangelism, because, after all, their view of salvation encompassed all persons, so all persons must come to know Christ.

In line with the missionary component of Evangelicalism, the gospel was spread to all ages and all economic classes. Perhaps another great importance of Evangelicalism is the crossing of contrived racial boundaries, and the mission to convert African slaves in America. While Sarah, like most adherents to the Christian faith, struggled with the ideology of slavery. Sarah did hold to the notion of racial inferiority, but "... like most evangelicals at the time she also believed that they were spiritually equal in the sight of God." (Brekus 174) Sarah raised Bobey, her slave, from a young age. She instilled in him his place in society as "property", but Sarah also educated the child in household labor and tasks, and insured he knew that God was his highest master. Sarah saw the liberating quality of evangelicalism, and felt that all persons should be able to read the bible. Sarah taught Bobey to read because she "refused to allow a child in her household to grow up without being able to read the Bible for himself." (Brekus 174) Although Sarah had taken the time to teach Bobey to read and prayer, she still did not escape the popular thought of the day. Sarah sold Bobey in the slave trade, a decision that she later struggled with, but deemed it was for the better.

In her later years, more steadfast in her faith and assurance of her own salvation, Sarah began to hold prayer and bible study meetings at her home. She held these meetings as much as 5 times a week, including a night when women came, a night when youth came, a night when White men came, and a night when Black men came. "Sarah Osborn's prayer meetings were controversial – women were not supposed to aspire to religious leadership – but her decisions to

invite blacks into her home was greeted with greater hostility than she had ever before encountered.” (Brekus 250) Although women’s testimony was encouraged, the actual leadership in the church by women was still not acceptable, especially in the Congregationalist communities. “Deacon Coggshell, one of her warmest supporters, began to worry that she had pushed the boundaries of her evangelism too far... he wanted her to stop praying aloud in front of black men. Despite their race, they were still men...” (Brekus 264). But Sarah felt a calling to share her testimony, teach people to read the bible, and to convert all persons to Evangelical Christianity. Although she knew she was ruffling the feathers of the established church, Sarah wrote “Let me but please God and tis enough”. (Brekus 264)

Lastly, another reason why Evangelical Christianity grew during this time period was for its support of the American Revolution and independence from the British Crown. “The Christian belief in the second coming and the Enlightenment ideal of progress were so intertwined during the Revolutionary years that it is hard to disentangle them.” (Brekus 301) The secular thought was that independence was progress and a step in the right direction for the people of the Colonies, and Evangelicals saw the revolution as a part of the last days before Christ’s return. While Anglicans and Catholics dwindled in numbers because of their groups’ inability to support the revolution due to hierarchical restraints, Protestants, mainly Evangelicals, increased in membership because of the overwhelming revolutionary sentiment embraced by adherents. Evangelicals believed that God was calling for a new nation to rise up. Sarah wrote “...when millions repent; when a nation, is born in a day!” (Brekus 304) But, we are not really sure where she stood on the issue of revolution. “While others used this text to portray the Revolution as the fulfillment of divine prophecy, she may not have meant nation literally. The difficulty in

determining her meaning, however, points to the protean power of millennial language to unite people during the Revolutionary years.” (Brekus 305)

Sarah lived quite a life. But, she is an example for all of us. It's not easy to question one's philosophy, let alone your beliefs. Many people today will inadequately articulate their political and faith convictions to the notion “that's how I was raised.” If Sarah would have clung to a Puritanical view of religion, perhaps we would never know she existed. Perhaps the diary, the letters, and the bible studies she led that reached many people in early America may have never happened. But, the climate was right for change. Influence of many factors, both religious and secular, led to rise of the Evangelical movement, and along with it, the uplifting of voices of those, who generations earlier, were kept silent by both religious and secular authority. Because Sarah dared to take on the individualist ideology of her new nation, and because she read the bible for herself, and because she was able to step away from some of the values and traditions of her upbringing, we have a glimpse into this epic time of religious fervor in early America. Sarah made a journey from silent woman, to bold proclaimer of her conversion and salvation, demonstrating the power of the Evangelical movement in uplifting the individual, and why the movement grew so rapidly during the 18th century.