The First Great Awakening and The Apostle to the Opelousas
Joseph Willis

The torch is passed from George Whitefield to Shubal Stearns to Joseph Willis.

Joseph Willis, preached the first Gospel sermon ever preached west of the Mississippi River.

By Randy Willis

“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?”
Psalms 85:6

In 1734, the First Great Awakening began, igniting a fire for revival in the hearts of men called of God to preach the Gospel. Lasting until about 1750, the Great Awakening’s message of rejuvenation and life in the Spirit among churches that were stagnant, dying, or dead lasted even until the nineteenth century and the start of the Second Great Awakening. The results even can be seen today. In the late colonial period, most pastors merely read their sermons, which were theologically deep, but lacked emotion and the call to repentance and salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Leaders of the Awakening, such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, had little interest in merely engaging parishioners' minds; they wanted to see evidence of true repentance and spiritual conversion. Colonists soon saw a change toward more animated and passionate preaching styles, encouraging them to claim the joy of salvation and to share the love of Christ through action.

While Jonathan Edwards sought to engage Native Americans, George Whitefield preached among the colonists. In 1745, Shubal Stearns heard Whitefield’s cry for repentance and left the Congregationalist church. Stearns adopted the Great Awakening's New Light understanding of revival and conversion. This "new awareness" caused a division in the Congregational churches into groups called Old Lights and New Lights. The New Lights claimed the religion of the Old Lights had grown soulless and formal - no longer having the light of scriptural inspiration. The New Lights were zealous in evangelism and believed in a heart-felt conversion. Sadly, by the end of the 1740s, many fervent New Lights concluded that it was impossible for them to reform established churches from within. Therefore, they felt the need to plant new churches to reach the lost and the fallen away. Whitefield said, “Mere heathen morality, and not Jesus Christ, is preached in most of our churches.”

In 1755, Shubal Stearns moved from Virginia to Sandy Creek, Guilford County, North Carolina, “believing that the Spirit urged him to do so.” In Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church he quoted, “Therefore go out from their midst and be separate
from them, says the Lord…” As Stearns and the other New Lights left the Congregationalist church, they became known as Separatists, using 2 Corinthians 6:17 as their guide. “Eighteenth century historian Morgan Edwards wrote of Stearns, “Stearns' message was always the simple gospel”, which was "easily understood even by rude frontiersmen" particularly when the preacher himself felt overwhelmed with the importance of his subject. Most of the frontier people of North Carolina had never heard such doctrine or observed such earnest preaching. The Separatists had great missionary zeal and spread at a rapid pace to the other colonies. Early on, Stearns led the Separatists into North Carolina and established Sandy Creek Church in Guilford (now Randolph) County. Stearns and his followers ministered mainly to the English settlers, and in seventeen years after Stearns arrival, forty-two churches were established from Sandy Creek. Baptist historian, David Benedict wrote in 1813, "As soon as [the Separatists] arrived, they built them a little meetinghouse, and these 16 persons formed themselves into a church, and chose Shubal Stearns for their pastor…” Stearns remained pastor there until his death, and from this "meetinghouse" the South felt the flames of revival – the fan of which was carried by an unlikely missionary.

In 1772, Morgan Edwards wrote that Stearns’ Sandy Creek church had “spread its branches westward as far as the great river Mississippi.” Unfortunately, no branch could cross the mighty Mississippi. After courageously fighting in the American Revolution with Francis Marion “the Swamp Fox,” Joseph Willis was the first person to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ West of the Mississippi River. He was the first successful missionary and church planter to cross the Mississippi River into foreign territory.

Three years after Stearns’ arrival and less than seventy miles from Sandy Creek, Joseph Willis made his entrance into the world. Born to a wealthy plantation owner and his Native American slave woman, Joseph Willis entered life legally as a slave to his own father, but it is clear that his father never considered him as such since he left his vast estate entirely to Joseph. The problem for Joseph was that the family was advised that this part of the will could be overturned, and thus, Joseph would not be freed according to his father’s wishes and causing him to lose most of his inheritance too. A slave could not legally inherit real estate at this time in North Carolina. Therefore, if Joseph was not freed he could not be a legal heir.

Since Joseph’s father Agerton had no other children, this would make Agerton’s eldest brother and Joseph’s uncle "legal heir at law" under the laws of primogeniture in effect until 1784. Agerton had intended the trustee of his will to obtain Joseph’s freedom and then he could obtain his inheritance, but Agerton’s brother Daniel usurped these wishes.
In November of 1787, Joseph’s first cousin John Willis, by then a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina and ironically the eldest son of Daniel, introduced a bill to emancipate Joseph, “… the property of the Estate of Agerton Willis, late of Bladen, deceased.” The bill passed its third reading on December 6, 1787, and Joseph was free. In the same year John Willis helped obtain Joseph’s "legal freedom," 1787, he was appointed one of a committee of five from North Carolina to ratify the Constitution of the United States.

A later deed reveals that Joseph got 320 acres as settlement and court records also reveal Joseph received some personal property as "consideration" for what…he may have acquired by his own industry…” As we are about to see, Joseph Willis could certainly relate to another Joseph, from the Bible, whom later in his life would say in Genesis 50:20, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

At some point, Joseph heard and accepted the call to preach the Gospel. Joseph Willis’ sermons are filled with echoes of thoughts and admonitions from the First Great Awakening preachers Edwards, Whitefield, and Stearns.

In Greenville County, South Carolina, he joined the Main Saluda Church. He attended the Bethel Association, the most influential in the “Carolina Back Country,” as a delegate from 1794 to 1796 with church reports. Main Saluda was declared extinct by 1797, and Joseph became a member of the Head of Enoree Baptist Church. Joseph was a member of Head of Enoree in 1797. All of these churches were Separate Baptist churches which sprang from the First Great Awakening. This revival, the First Great Awakening, would be the early roots that would later greatly influence Joseph Willis’ determination to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ where no man had gone before.

Joseph Tracy, the minister and historian who gave this revival its name in his 1842 book “The Great Awakening,” even saw the First Great Awakening as a precursor to the American Revolution.

In late 1797 or 1798, Joseph Willis made his first trip to Mississippi with Richard Curtis, Jr. As was custom, this trip was made without his family, in order that he could find a safe place to live.

W. E. Paxton records the results of this first trip: "...They sought not in vain, for soon after their return they were visited by William Thompson, who preached unto them the Gospel of our God: and on the first Saturday in October, 1798, came William Thompson, Richard Curtis and Joseph Willis, who constituted them into a church, subject to the government of the Cole’s Creek church, calling the newly constituted arm of Cole’s Creek, ‘The Baptist Church on Buffaloe [sic]."
This church was located near Woodville, Mississippi, near the Mississippi River and east of Alexandria, Louisiana. More than likely, Joseph ventured into Louisiana before returning for his family in 1799, because he immediately took his family to this region to live. Paxton said that the country between Mississippi and South Carolina was "then infested by hostile Indians." Curtis and Willis both were Marion men in the Revolutionary War, and both seemed equal to the fearful task of encountering hostile peoples. It is also possible that Joseph knew at least part of the Cherokee language since, according to family history, he was part Cherokee. After the trip with Curtis to Mississippi in 1798, Joseph returned to South Carolina for his family and sold his property.

At this time, the Code Noir, the “Black Code”, ruled the Louisiana Territory. This decree from King Louis XIV, among other things, regulated the condition of slavery and the activities of free people of color. It also restricted religion to Roman Catholicism, forbidding the exercise of any other religion. The Black Code was in effect until the Louisiana Purchase on April 30, 1803. In January 1797, the governing authorities issued regulations that made it mandatory for children of non-Catholic emigrant families to embrace Roman Catholicism and also forbade the coming of any ministers into the territory except Roman Catholics. Joseph Willis, considered a free person of color because of his mixed heritage, defied this most terrifying rule of law by traveling as far south as Lafayette, Louisiana preaching the Gospel.

The exact date that Joseph preached in Louisiana west of the Mississippi River is not known, but it was before April 30, 1803; the date of the Louisiana Purchase and even before October 1, 1800; the date Napoleon secured Louisiana from Spain. There are three facts that confirm the above statements: 1. Joseph sold all his property in South Carolina in 1799 and is not found there in the 1800 census; 2. In 1813, historian David Benedict wrote in his book A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World,"…Joseph Willis… has done much for the cause, and spent a large fortune while engaged in the ministry, often at the hazard of his life, while the State belonged to the Spanish government." That would place Joseph Willis in Louisiana before October 1, 1800; 3. In 1854, the Louisiana Baptist Associational Committee wrote in Joseph Willis’ obituary, "The Gospel was proclaimed by him in these regions before the American flag was hoisted here." That would have been before April 30, 1803.

In violation of the Code Noir, the “Black Code”, and at the risk of his life Joseph Willis preached the Gospel west of the Mississippi even before Lewis and Clark began their historic journey by traveling up the Missouri River in May of 1804. He preached Jesus west of the Mississippi almost a decade before Abraham Lincoln was born. Joseph Willis preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ west of the Mississippi River by
1800. This would qualify as the first sermon ever preached by an evangelical minister west of the Mississippi River.

He was denied ordination by his own denomination because of racial prejudice. He lost three wives in the wilderness. He lost children to disease and accidents. He faced several murderous attempts on his life. He had to flee barefooted from a Catholic mob set on his destruction because of the message of the Gospel. Once when he was traveling and preaching, he stayed at an inn where several other men were staying. One of these men was sick, and Joseph read the Bible, prayed, and witnessed to him about Christ. The next morning all of the men were gone very early except the sick man. The man told Joseph he had overheard the men talking about Joseph and that they had gone ahead to ambush him. The man told Joseph about another road to take, and Joseph’s life was spared. This was not the first time Joseph received a warning from God to flee. Joseph was fearless as his son, Joseph, Jr., would later often speak. Joseph Jr. often told of his father’s crossing the dangerous Mississippi River at Natchez riding a mule in order to save time to preach Jesus.

According to Paxton, "Joseph was never ‘daunted’ for his was a high calling, a single-mindedness of purpose," "...he was a simple-hearted Christian, glowing with the love of Jesus and an effective speaker," and, "the zeal of Father Willis, as he came to be called by the affectionate people among whom he labored, could not be bounded by the narrow limits of his own home, but he traveled far and wide."

His youngest son, Aimuwell, said before his own death in 1937, "the secret of father’s success was personal work." He said that as a boy he saw his father go to a man in the field, hold his hand and then witness to him until he surrendered to Christ. Near the end of his life and disabled, the two men who drove Joseph in a wagon to the home of his son Lemuel to live out his last days spoke of how he had shared Christ with them on the trip. Joseph Willis was faithful to his Lord to the very end. The old preacher of Jesus, Joseph Willis, died on September 14, 1854, at his son Lemuel’s home in Blanche, Louisiana, between Oakdale and Glenmora.

In 1857, three years after Joseph Willis' death, materialism pervaded the land in America, and the fact that the young were growing up without God, caused many Christians to begin to pray that God would break the love of money over people's lives and send another revival to the nation. "Concerts of Prayer" began to spring up throughout the United States of America and Canada. This materialism was broken in many lives by the Bank Panic of October 1857. Like today, natural disasters were prevalent. Due to the long, hard winter of 1856-1857, transportation and trade transactions were delayed. On October 14, 1857, the extensive banking system of the United States collapsed, a far-reaching disaster bringing ruin to hundreds of thousands of people in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and the industrial centers of the nation. The Panic caused rich men to go broke literally overnight. Suicide and murder increased, as well.
God answered the prayers of the faithful and revival broke out in 1857. In 1858, from February to June, around 50,000 people a week were added to the church - in a nation whose population was only 30,000,000. Across the Atlantic another million were won to Christ by 1865. It spread all over the nation, so glorious that D.L. Moody said at the end of his life in 1899 that he wished to see a revival like that happen again. There was such an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Andrew Murray had to try and bring order to a prayer meeting. Out of this revival came D. L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon, William Booth (founder of The Salvation Army), and many others dedicated to the glory of God. Later, the influences of these great revivals can be heard in the preaching of men like Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and many others.

In the 1850’s, most millionaires in the US lived between Natchez, Mississippi and New Orleans, Louisiana. And prior to the Civil War, Louisiana had more millionaires than any other state in the Union and subsequently more ante-bellum homes than any other. Louisiana escaped much of this economic disaster but sadly also missed much of the 1857 revival. Louisiana’s economy was not dependent on industrial industry like the north. It was during the height of the plantation system in Louisiana, and slavery, the machine which drove the economic force of the region, was a large part of the culture. Although the dreaded Black Code had not been enforced for decades, the Roman Catholic church dominated Louisiana and resisted Protestant efforts of revival.

Joseph told his grandchildren, Polk Willis and Olive Willis, who were tending to him in his last months, that he left North Carolina "with nothing but a horse, bridle and saddle." He also said he was born in Bladen County, North Carolina and that his mother was Cherokee. Many years later Polk and Olive would tell their nephews John Houston Strother and Greene Strother these facts and Greene would later tell them to me and many others. Polk and Olive also spoke of how Joseph Willis would pray for his family and descendants. He would also pray for revival. Is God answering Joseph Willis’ prayers in our generation? Will the revival of 1857, that missed Louisiana, now come and be the answer to Joseph Willis’ prayers? Will it begin in his beloved Louisiana?

The Word of God says "a man reaps what he sows." Joseph sowed the seeds of the Gospel; those seeds are still producing “fruit” in Louisiana and throughout the world today. Over forty of his descendants were ministers and missionaries. Joseph started over fifteen churches in Louisiana, and almost all of them are still in existence and thriving today. Joseph Willis was a bold, fearless crusader for Christ. The Apostle to the Opelousas as he was sometimes called would not listen to defeat and would not allow persecution to deter him from the cause.

What God did through the three Great Awakenings, He can still do today. If Joseph Willis were here today, he would lead the charge.
Will it take economic disaster to bring God’s people to their knees in humility and prayer for revival to come again?

Will we obey His words, “if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NKJV)

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