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George, David

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George, David
1742-1810
Baptist
Sierra Leone

David George was an early African American promoter of mission. With energy and dedication, George urged the importance of mission at a time when Protestant Christianity was far from committed to it and when the organizational basis for mission was virtually nonexistent. With indomitable will and a preparedness to take risk that was born of faith, he became leader of the outreach to Africa that opened a new chapter in the modern history of the continent.

George was born to slave parents on a plantation in Essex County, Virginia. At an early age he ran away but soon after passed into the hands of a new master in South Carolina. He converted to evangelical Christianity and became a colleague of the black preacher George Liele, a veteran missionary to Jamaica and the Bahamas. When the American Revolutionary War broke out in 1776, George joined the British side and in 1782 was demobilized with other black loyalists to Nova Scotia, Canada, where he continued his preaching activity. He impressed the British authorities with his leadership qualities, and he was appointed a leader of an expedition to repatriate the black loyalists to West Africa. They made landfall in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in March 1792, the commencement of what the English evangelical cause, led by William Wilberforce, termed “a Christian experiment.” It established in tropical Africa a bridgehead from where the trade in slaves could be attacked and the rest of the continent reached for the gospel.

In Freetown George combined the roles of preacher, community leader, official representative with the British authorities, humanitarian campaigner against the slave trade, and lightning rod for missionary awakening among Baptists in England, where he visited in 1793. He and William Carey were thus active at about the same time, though George by then had accumulated an abundance of field experience. By the time of George’s death in Freetown the cause was virtually assured-this was four years after the Williamstown (Massachusetts) Haystack Prayer Meeting, an event that lit the American missionary impulse. The success of the Sierra Leone “Christian experiment,” in which George’s hand was so prominent, led to the abolition of the slave trade and the peaceful, economic mobilization of Africa for commerce, civilization, and Christianity.

Lamin Sanneh

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