

Samuel Davies

A. The Great Awakening furthered religious freedom.

1. Americans commonly look to Thomas Jefferson and the Bill of Rights as guaranteeing religious freedom. But this work was the result of many years' development.
2. Many of the earliest settlers (Pilgrims, Puritans) came to America for religious freedom but did not always allow other groups the same freedom.
3. Some like Roger Williams and the Baptists of Rhode Island and the Quakers of Pennsylvania furthered this cause.
4. It was really in the Awakening, though, that religious freedom became nearly universal in North America – as illustrated by the career of Davies.

B. Ministry of Samuel Davies

1. Trained in a “log college” like that of William Tennent, he was a New Light Presbyterian pastor in Virginia; Davies oversaw Hanover Presbytery (originally virtually the whole colony). He was the one who established Presbyterianism in the South and introduced the Awakening to the region.
2. He was a powerfully eloquent preacher, perhaps the first real hymn writer in America (e.g., “Great God of Wonders”), and a poet – e.g., from his poem “A Minister’s Reflection on the Death of One of His People”:

Almighty Grace, my soul inspire,
And touch my lips with heav’nly fire!
Let faith, and love, and zeal arise!
O teach me that divinest art,
To reach the conscience, gain the heart,
And train immortals for the skies!

3. He preached, an observer said, “like the ambassador of some great king.”
4. He produced a great effect.
 - a. One man said you would see a mother rocking her cradle with one hand while studying her catechism with the other or farm boys studying their lessons while their plow horses ate lunch.

- b. Many Baptists of Virginia and the Carolinas later credited their conversion to the preaching of Davies.
 - c. He was responsible for some of the first widespread conversion of slaves to Christianity.
5. He visited England to help raise money for Princeton College, and serving briefly as president there before dying at age thirty-seven.

C. Davies and Religious Liberty

1. In some colonies such as Virginia and New York, the Anglican Church was established, and non-Anglicans had to try to exist as “dissenters” who were “tolerated.”
2. Davies fought to have the British Act of Toleration applied fully to the colonies.
 - a. Francis Makemie had successfully done this earlier in New York.
 - b. Davies sought to move cautiously. He did not seek confrontation but tried to cooperate with authorities as much as he could.
 - c. When visiting Britain on behalf of Princeton, he took the opportunity to advocate religious toleration to authorities.
 - d. He won greater religious liberty in Virginia for dissenters.
3. After his death, the leaders of the Hanover Presbytery were among the supporters of Jefferson’s efforts to establish religious liberty in Virginia.
4. Influence of Davies on Patrick Henry
 - a. As a young man, Henry heard Davies preach. He at least appreciated Davies’ eloquence.
 - b. Twenty years after hearing Davies’ passionate call to defense of the land in the French and Indian War, Patrick Henry gave the famous “Liberty or Death” speech. Many historians note similarities between Davies’ sermons and Henry’s speech.