



LESSON THREE: HOW COULD WHITEFIELD HAVE OWNED SLAVES?
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Christian biographers are always tempted to avoid the less attractive aspects of their subject's character. George Whitefield himself recognized this tendency, noting how some biographies of Christian heroes "have given us the bright, but not the dark side of their character. This, I think, proceeded from a kind of pious fraud, lest mentioning persons' faults should encourage others in sin."

George Whitefield was no perfect man. Undoubtedly the most glaring flaw in his life was that he not only owned slaves, but he encouraged slavery's introduction in colonial Georgia, where it was originally banned. Evidence even suggests that Whitefield allowed slaves to come to his Bethesda property in Georgia before the colony had actually made them legal, although Whitefield denied doing so.



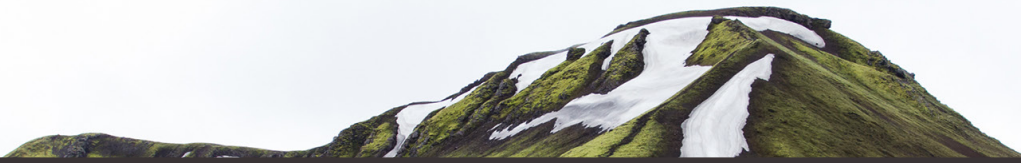
SLAVERY IN COLONIAL AMERICA

Of course, the dismay we feel over Whitefield's slave owning is not unique. A number of other 18th-century figures that many of us admire, from Jonathan Edwards to George Washington, also kept people as slaves. (On Edwards, see Thabiti Anyabwile's "[Jonathan Edwards, Slavery, and the Theology of African Americans](#).") On slavery and slave owning, Whitefield and many of his Anglo American contemporaries failed to break free from the sin-tainted cultural blinders common to their time. More challenging, perhaps, is the fact that they did not find clear commands forbidding slave owning in Scripture, which often seems to accept certain kinds of slavery rather than prohibiting it outright (Leviticus 25 and Ephesians 6:5-9).

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As [this article](#) at *Encyclopedia Virginia* shows, when Whitefield first encountered American slavery in his evangelistic tours, he published a [stinging 1740 letter](#) against the southern slave masters for abusing their slaves and keeping them ignorant of Christianity:

“As I lately passed through your provinces, in my way hither, I was sensibly touched with a fellow-feeling of the miseries of the poor negroes. . .I must inform you, in the meekness and gentleness of Christ, that I think God has a quarrel with you, for your abuse of and cruelty to the poor negroes. Whether it be lawful for Christians to buy slaves, and thereby encourage the nations from whence they are brought to be at perpetual war with each other, I shall not take upon me to determine; but it is sinful, when bought, to use them as bad as, nay worse than [animals]: and whatever particular exceptions there may be, (as I would charitably hope there are some) I fear the generality of you that own negroes, are liable to such a charge; for your slaves, I believe, work as hard, if not harder, than the horses whereon you ride. These, after they have done their work, are fed and taken proper care of; but many



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negroes, when wearied with labour in your plantations, have been obliged to grind their own corn after they return home.

Your dogs are caressed and fondled at your tables; but your slaves, who are frequently [called] dogs or beasts, have not an equal privilege: they are scarce permitted to pick up the crumbs which fall from their masters' tables; nay, some, as I have been informed by an eye-witness, have been, upon the most trifling provocation, cut with knives, and have had forks thrown into their flesh: not to mention what numbers have been given up to the inhuman usage of cruel taskmasters, who by their unrelenting scourges have ploughed upon their backs, and made long furrows, and at length brought them even to death itself.

'Tis true, I hope, there are but few such monsters of barbarity suffered to subsist amongst you: some, I hear, have been lately executed in Virginia for killing slaves; and the laws are very severe against such who at any time murder them.

And perhaps it might be better for the poor creatures themselves, to be hurried out of life, than to be made so miserable as they generally are in it. And indeed, considering what usage they commonly meet with, I have wondered, that we have not more instances of self-murder among the negroes, or that they have not more frequently risen up in arms against their owners. Virginia has been once, and [Charleston, S.C.] more than once, threatened in this way.

And though I heartily pray God, they may never be permitted to get the upper hand; yet, should such a thing be permitted by providence, all good men must acknowledge the judgment would be just. For is it not the highest ingratitude, as well as cruelty, not to let your poor slaves enjoy some fruits of their labour?

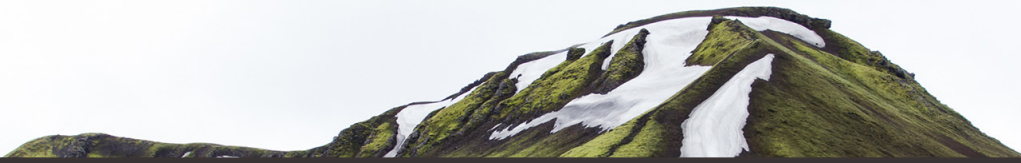
When passing along, while I have viewed your plantations cleared and cultivated, many spacious houses built, and the owners of them faring sumptuously every day, my blood has frequently almost run cold within me, to consider how many of your slaves had neither convenient food to eat, nor proper raiment to put on, notwithstanding most of the comforts you enjoy, were solely owing to their indefatigable labours. The Scripture says, “Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn.” Does God take care of oxen? And will he not take care of the negroes also? Undoubtedly he will.”

Unfortunately, Whitefield never condemned slavery per se. Instead, he believed that benevolent Christian slave masters should evangelize their slaves and treat them generously. Christian slaves, likewise, should accept their lot and work hard for their masters.

Whitefield devoted a great deal of time to raising money for his Bethesda orphanage in Georgia. But Bethesda's location, and Whitefield's friendship with a number of southern plantation owners, made him interested in developing farms around the orphanage to make it self-sustaining. He believed that neither Bethesda nor Georgia would prosper without the use of slave labor, which had already become integral to the economies of the other English southern colonies. So he advocated for Georgia's trustees to legalize slavery, and had his representatives purchase slaves to work Bethesda's fields.

How did Whitefield justify slavery? Here's his explanation from a [1751 letter](#):

He is the father of mercies, and the God of all consolation. He can bring light out of darkness, and cause the barren wilderness to smile. This I trust will be verified in Georgia. Thanks be to God, that the time for favoring that Colony seems to be come. I think now is the season for us to exert our utmost for the good of the poor Ethiopians [Africans]. We are told, that even they are soon to



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stretch out their hands unto God. And who knows but their being settled in Georgia, may be over-ruled for this great end? As for the lawfulness of keeping slaves, I have no doubt, since I hear of some that were bought with Abraham's money, and some that were born in his house. And I cannot help thinking, that some of those servants mentioned by the Apostles in their epistles, were or had been slaves. It is plain, that the Gibeonites were doomed to perpetual slavery, and though liberty is a sweet thing to such as are born free, yet to those who never knew the sweets of it, slavery perhaps may not be so irksome. However this be, it is plain to a demonstration, that hot countries cannot be cultivated without negroes. What a flourishing country might Georgia have been, had the use of them been permitted years ago? How many white people have been destroyed for want of them, and how many thousands of pounds spent to no purpose at all? . . . Though it is true, that they are brought in a wrong way from their own country, and it is a trade not to be approved of, yet as it will be carried on whether we will or not I should think myself highly favored if I could purchase a good number of them, in order to make their lives comfortable, and lay a foundation for breeding up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. You know, dear Sir, that I had no hand in bringing them into Georgia; though my judgment was for it, and so much money was yearly spent to no purpose, and I was strongly importuned thereto, yet I would not have a negro upon my plantation, till the use of them was publicly allowed in the colony. Now this is done, dear Sir, let us reason no more about it, but diligently improve the present opportunity for their instruction. The trustees favor it, and we may never have a like prospect. It rejoiced my soul, to hear that one of my poor negroes in Carolina was made a brother in Christ. How know we but we may have many such instances in Georgia ere it be long? . . . I trust many of them will be brought to Jesus, and this consideration, as to us, swallows up all temporal inconveniencies whatsoever.

Why did Whitefield not “get it”? How could he not see the fundamental immorality of slavery? His failure to do so reminds us that our surrounding culture can powerfully shape our ethical standards, no matter how sincere our faith. We should also remember that Whitefield had few associates who had come out against slavery yet. John Wesley’s *Thoughts on Slavery*, for example, did not appear until after Whitefield’s death. The celebrated slave trader turned abolitionist John Newton, author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” only experienced conversion in 1748, and did not go public with his anti-slavery views until 1788. Certain Quakers and Lutherans actively opposed slavery during Whitefield’s life, but they did not exercise much influence on him. One wonders if Whitefield (or Edwards) might have developed more active reservations about slave owning if they had lived a generation later, when many Anglo American evangelicals, both white and black, started to enlist in the anti-slavery movement.