

George Whitefield Admonishes Southern Slaveholders (1740)

George Whitefield GEORGE WHITEFIELD (PRONOUNCED WHITFIELD)

WAS AN ENGLISH PREACHER and one of the founders of Methodism.

He was said to have a voice like a trumpet, calling people to change their ways. In 1738, Whitefield began to preach in Georgia. His rousing sermons in Georgia and throughout the British colonies helped to spark a religious revival movement that some scholars have called the "Great Awakening." After Whitefield wrote this letter, newspapers around the British colonies reprinted it, and Benjamin Franklin published a pamphlet that included it and two other of Whitefield's letters.

To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, As I recently passed through your provinces in my way hither, I was sensible touched with a fellow-feeling of the miseries of the poor Negroes. Could I have preached more frequently amongst you, I should have delivered my thoughts in my public discourses; but as my business here required me to stop as little as possible on the road, I have no other way to discharge the concern which at present lies upon my heart, than by sending you this letter. How you will receive it I know not. Whether you will accept it in love, or be offended with me, as the master of the damsel was with Paul, for casting the evil spirit out of her, when he saw the hope of his gain was gone, I am uncertain.¹ Whatever be the event, 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 whom they are bought to be at perpetual war with each other, I shall not take upon me to determine. Sure I am, it is sinful, when bought, to use them as bad, nay worse, than as though they were brutes; and whatever particular exceptions there maybe (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 Negroes when wearied with labor 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 styled dogs or beasts, have not an equal privilege. They are scarcely permitted

to pick up the crumbs which fall from their masters' tables.² Nay, some, as I have been informed by an eyewitness, have been, upon the most trifling provocation, cut with knives, and had forks were 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 plowed upon their backs, and made long furrows, and at length brought them even to death itself. It's true, I hope there are but few such monsters of barbarity suffered to subsist amongst you. Some, I hear, has 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 once, and Charlestown more than once been 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 labor? When, passing along, 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 or proper raiment to put on, notwithstanding most of the comforts you enjoy were solely owing to their indefatigable labors. The Scripture says, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn."³ Does God take care of oxen? And will he not take care of the Negroes also? Undoubtedly he will. Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you! Behold the provision of the poor Negroes, which have reaped down your fields, which is by you denied them, crieth; and the cries of them which have reaped, are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth!⁴ We have a remarkable instance of God's taking cognizance of, and avenging the quarrel of poor slaves, 2 Samuel 21:1. "Then there was a famine in the days of David, three years, year after year; and David enquired of the

Lord. And the Lord answered, it is for Saul and his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites." Two things are here very remarkable. First, that these Gibeonites were only hewers of wood and drawers of water, or in other words, slaves like yours. Secondly, that this plague was sent by God many years after the injury, the cause of the plague, was committed. And for what end was this and such like examples recorded in Holy Scripture? Without doubt, for our learning, upon whom the ends of the world are come. For God is the same today as he was yesterday, and will continue the same forever. He does not reject the prayer of the poor and destitute, nor disregard the cry of the meanest Negroes! The blood of them spilt for these many years in your respective provinces will ascend up to Heaven against you. I wish I could say it would speak better things than the blood of Abel.⁵ But this is not all. Enslaving or misusing their bodies would, comparatively speaking, be an inconsiderable evil, was proper care taken of their souls. But I have great reason to believe that most of you, on purpose, keep your Negroes ignorant of Christianity; or otherwise, why are they permitted through your provinces, openly to profane the Lord's Day, by their dancing, piping, and such like? I know the general pretense for this neglect of their souls is that teaching them Christianity would make them proud, and consequently unwilling to submit to slavery. But what a dreadful reflection is this on your Holy Religion? What blasphemous notions must those that make such an objection have of the precepts of Christianity? Do you find any one command in the gospel that has the least tendency to make people forget their relative duties? Do you not read that servants, and as many as are under the yoke of bondage, are required to be subject, in all lawful things, to their masters; and that not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward?⁶ Nay, may I not only appeal to your own hearts, whether deviating from the laws of Jesus Christ is not the cause of all the evils and miseries mankind now universally groan under, and of all the vices we find both in ourselves and others? Certainly it is. And therefore, the reason why servants generally prove so bad is because so little care is taken to breed them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But some will be so bold perhaps as to reply that a few of the Negroes have been taught Christianity, and, notwithstanding, have been remarkably worse than others. But what

Christianity were they taught? They were baptized and taught to read and write: and this they may do, and much more, and yet be far from the Kingdom of God; for there is a vast difference between civilizing and Christianizing a Negro. A black as well as a white man may be civilized by outward restraints, and afterwards break through those restraints again. But I challenge the whole world to produce a single instance of a Negro's being made a thorough Christian, and thereby made a worse servant. It cannot be. But farther, if teaching slaves Christianity has such a bad influence upon their lives, why are you generally desirous of having your children taught? Think you they are any way better by nature than the poor Negroes? No, in no wise. Blacks are just as much, and no more, conceived and born in sin, as white men are. Both, if born and bred up here, I am persuaded, are naturally capable of the same improvement. And as for the grown Negroes, I am apt to think whenever the Gospel is preached with power amongst them, that many will be brought effectually home to God. Your present and past bad usage of them, however ill-designed, may thus far do them good, as to break their wills, increase the sense of their natural misery, and consequently better dispose their minds to accept the redemption wrought out for them, by the death and obedience of Jesus Christ. God has, not long since, been pleased to make some of the Negroes in New England vessels of mercy; and some of them, I hear, have been brought to cry out, "What shall we do to be saved?" in the province of Pennsylvania. Doubtless there is a time, when the fullness of the Gentiles will come in.⁷ And then I believe, if not before, these despised slaves will find the Gospel of Christ to be the power of God to their salvation, as well as we. But I know all arguments to prove the necessity of taking care of your Negroes' souls, though never so conclusive, will prove ineffectual, till you are convinced of the necessity of securing the salvation of your own. That you yourselves are not effectually convinced of this, I think is too notorious to want evidence. A general deadness as to divine things, and not to say a general profaneness, is discernible both in pastors and people. Most of you are without any teaching priest. And whatever quantity of rum there may be, yet I fear but very few Bibles are annually imported into your different provinces. God has already begun to visit for this as well as other wicked things. For near this two years past, he has been in a

remarkable manner contending with the people of South Carolina. Their houses have been depopulated with the smallpox and fever, and their own slaves have rose up in arms against them.⁸ These judgments are undoubtedly sent abroad, not only that the inhabitants of that, but of other provinces, should learn righteousness. And unless you all repent, you all must in like manner expect to perish. God first generally corrects us with whips; if that will not do, he must chastise us with scorpions. A foreign enemy⁹ is now threatening to invade you, and nothing will more provoke God, to give you up as a prey into their teeth, than impenitence and unbelief—let these be removed, and the sons of violence shall not be able to hurt you. No, your oxen shall be strong to labor; there shall be no decay of your people by epidemical sickness; no leading away into captivity from abroad, and no complaining in your streets at home. Your sons shall grow up as young plants, and your daughters be as the polished corners of the temple; and to sum up all blessings in one, then shall the Lord be your God.¹⁰ That you may be the people who are in such a happy case, is the earnest prayer of.

Your sincere well-wisher and servant in Christ,

G.Whitefield Savannah, January 23, 1740

From George Whitefield, Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield (Philadelphia, 1740), 13–16.

Discussion Questions 1. What does this letter tell you about Whitefield's beliefs about the Christian God and the duties of Christians?

2. What do you think slaveholders' response to this letter might have been? What might slaves have agreed with in this letter? What might they have disagreed with?