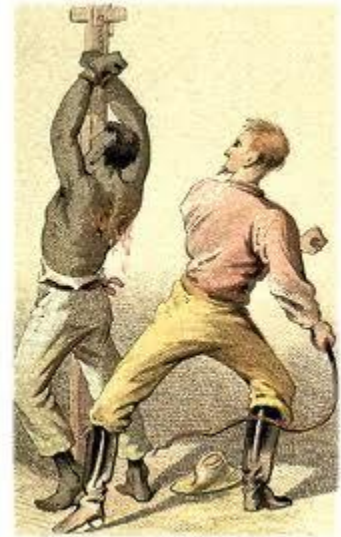


In 1740, Slavery in America was Strongly Rebuked by Evangelist George Whitefield

(Paul G. Humber, 2016)



Evangelist George Whitefield rebuked American mistreatment of slaves in 1740, more than a century before the American Civil War? His heart throbbed for the plight of slaves in America, and this emanated from a heart full of Christ and the Gospel. Many people do not realize the great impact Whitefield had on America. He was a central figure in the Great Awakening, preached to thousands upon thousands of Americans up and down the east coast. His impact in England similarly was huge.



It is very likely that he also motivated William Wilberforce, who for 20 year battled against slavery in England. The same eventually led the British Parliament to abolish the slave trade. At the age of 9, he was influenced by his uncle and aunt, William and Hanna Wilberforce, his adoptive parents, who, in turn, had been friends of George Whitefield.

Whitefield wrote the letter I myself digitized and share here.¹ Whitefield's compassion toward the "Negroes"² was developed at least 67 years before Wilberforce's bill against the slave trade was passed. If Wilberforce deserves credit, so does Whitefield. Both were devout Christians. The younger became "one of the most hated men in England. On different occasions his life was physically threatened by West Indian sea captains."³ Even "Admiral Lord Nelson wrote from his flagship Victory to condemn 'the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies!'"⁴

Many decades earlier, Whitefield himself was also despised in America for publishing his views against the despicable treatment of "Negroes." Why are not more people aware of this great man? Could it be that he is not much considered by secularists because of his evangelical zeal for the Lord Jesus Christ?

The article cited (cf. 3rd footnote) continued, "Finally at 4 o'clock in the morning on 4 February the Abolition Bill was passed in the House of Lords. On 22 February 1807 it passed the second reading in the House of Commons. A new generation of statesmen inspired by Wilberforce's tenacious example rose up to speak in favour of the Bill. The motion to abolish the slave trade was carried by an overwhelming 283 votes to 16 against! The Parliamentarians leapt to their feet with great cheers and

¹ A facsimile of part of an April 17, 1740 publication of it was found at http://www.encyclopediaofvirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00003029mets.xml.

² A term that by no means was meant to be derogatory.

³ See <http://www.reformation.org/index.php/history/145-william-wilberforce-setting-the-captives-free>

⁴ See footnote 3. One of the author's great-grandfathers trained on Nelson's Victory ship!

gave Wilberforce the greatest ovation ever seen in British history. William bent forward in his seat, his head in his hands, tears of gratitude streaming down his face that this long crusade of 20 years had been crowned with success by Almighty God.”

I would like to encourage Americans of all colors, and our friends across the sea, to appreciate Wilberforce’s forerunner, George Whitefield. The footnoted article continues, “In 1824 Britain passed a Bill ranking slave trading with piracy and punishable by death. In spite of all the opposition, the groundswell of anti-slavery opinion was mobilizing and finally, in 1833, while Wilberforce lay dying, a runner was sent to his house to inform him that his lifetime campaign of 59 years was now fully successful. By an act of Parliament, all 700,000 slaves in British overseas territories were set free!”

Continuing, “The fulfillment of his labours was the end of his life. The body of William Wilberforce was buried in Westminster Abbey. There the memorial states, “He relied, not in vain, on God; But in the process, he was called to endure great verbal abuse and great opposition: He outlived, however, all enmity: . . . through the merits of Jesus Christ, his only Redeemer and Savior, (Whom, in his life and in his writings he had desired to glorify), he shall rise in the resurrection of the just.”

In another publication⁵, we see these words, “This was the period of English history that has become known as the Great Awakening. A spiritual revival was sweeping across the land, fueled by the preaching of men like George Whitefield and the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and in Wales, Howell Harris. There is little doubt that this widespread revival of true Christian faith not only held back England from the revolution and anarchy that plagued France toward the end of the century, but also prepared the ground for the two great causes that Wilberforce would later take up as his life’s work. Though Wilberforce himself probably never met Whitefield (1714–1770), his ministry had a profound impact on the Wilberforce family. Wilberforce’s Uncle William and Aunt Hannah had been converted under Whitefield’s ministry. They counted Whitefield among their close friends, and he often visited them at their home in Wimbeldon, Lauriston House. ... No less an authority than the popular 19th century preacher C.H. Spurgeon wrote memorably of the qualities that drew people to Whitefield: ‘Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. He lived. Other men seemed to be only half-alive; but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force.’”

Whitefield letter shows him to be a man way ahead of his time. For example, Darwin’s books, written more than 100 years after Whitefield’s letter, viewed the “Negro”, on the evolutionary scale, as being between the Caucasian and a gorilla⁶. Whitefield, in his 1740 letter (below), puts the “Negro” on the same level with the Caucasian—which is exactly where he should be. Here is Whitefield’s letter:

A LETTER TO THE INHABITANTS OF MARYLAND, VIRGINIA, NORTH and SOUTH-CAROLINA by GEORGE WHITEFIELD, Savannah, Jan. 23, 1740:




⁵ See <http://www.newleafpublishinggroup.com/store/images/lookinside/journey-wilberforce.pdf>.

⁶ Darwin wrote, “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time, the anthropomorphous apes . . . will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro [sic] or Australian and the gorilla. See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London: John Murray, 1901), pp. 241-242.

As I lately passed through your provinces, in my way hither, I was sensibly touched with a

A Letter from the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITE-FIELD, to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina.

 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. 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. Whatever be the Event, I must inform you, in the Meekness and Gentleness of Christ, that I think God has a

fellow-feeling of the miseries of the poor Negroes. Could I have preached more frequently among you, I should have delivered my thoughts to you in my public discourses: but, as 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, is uncertain: but

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 whence they are brought to be at perpetual war with each other, I shall not take upon me to determine; but sure I am it is sinful, when bought, to use them as bad as, nay worse than brutes: 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 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 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 task-maskers, 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 masters 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 Charles-Town 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 labor?

When passing along, whilst 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 labors. 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. "Go to, now, ye rich men, 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 who reaped, are entered into the ears of the LORD of Sabaoth. We have a remarkable instance of God's taking cognizance, and avenging the quarrel, of poor slaves, 2 Sam. 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 to-day, as he was yesterday, and will continue the same for ever. He does not reject the prayer of the poor and destitute, nor disregard the cry of the meanest Negroes: their blood which has been 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.

But this is not all. Enslaving or misusing their bodies, comparatively speaking, would be an inconsiderable evil, was proper care taken for 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 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 upon your holy religion? What blasphemous notions must those have, that make such an objection, 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? Nay, may not I 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 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 further, if the 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 nowise. 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 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.

Not long since, God hath been pleased to make some of the Negroes in New-England, vessels of mercy; and some, 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; 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 for other wicked things. For near two years last past, he has been in a remarkable manner contending with the people of South-Carolina: their houses have been depopulated with the small pox and fever, and their own slaves have risen up in arms against them. 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 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 enemy 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." 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. W.

In a sermon on Jeremiah 23:6, Whitefield preached these words directly to "Negroes": "Here then I could conclude; but I must not forget the poor Negroes; no, I must not. Jesus Christ had died for them, as well as for others. Nor do I mention you last, because I despise your souls; but because I would have what I shall say, make the deeper impression upon your hearts. O that you would seek the Lord to be your righteousness! Who knows but he may be found of you? For in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female, bond nor free; even you may be the children of God, if you believe in Jesus. Did you never read of the eunuch belonging to the queen of Candace? A Negro like yourselves. He believed. The Lord was his righteousness. He was baptized. Do you also believe, and you shall be saved. Christ Jesus is the same now as he was yesterday, and will wash you in his own blood. Go home then, turn the words of the text into a prayer, and entreat the Lord to be your righteousness. Even so, come Lord Jesus, come quickly, into all our souls! Amen, Lord Jesus, Amen and Amen!"

