



The Negro Christianized
Attributed to Cotton Mather (1706)

Published anonymously, this tract is believed to be the work of Cotton Mather, a prominent white Puritan minister in Massachusetts. The tract urges masters to try to convert their slaves to Christianity and offers resources for doing so. Mather was a slaveholder himself; one African man he held in slavery, called Onesimus, taught Mather a technique for vaccinating against smallpox.

[Why masters should Christianize their slaves]

Truly, to raise a soul from a dark state of ignorance and wickedness to the knowledge of God, and the belief of Christ, and the practice of our holy and lovely religion—’tis the noblest work that ever was undertaken among the children of men. [...] And such an opportunity there is in your hands, O all you that have any Negroes in your houses: an opportunity to try whether you may not be the happy instruments of converting the blackest instances of blindness and baseness into admirable candidates of eternal blessedness. Let not this opportunity be lost if you have any concern for souls, your own or others; but make a trial whether by your means, the most brutish of creatures upon earth may not come to be disposed, in some degree, like the angels of heaven, and the vassals of Satan become the children of God. Suppose these wretched Negroes to be the offspring of Ham (which yet is not so very certain); yet let us make a trial whether the Christ who dwelt in the tents of Shem have not some of his chosen among them. Let us make a trial whether they that have been scorched and blackened by the sun of Africa may not come to have their minds healed by the more benign beams of the Sun of righteousness.

It is come to pass by the providence of God, without which there comes nothing to pass, that poor Negroes are cast under your government and protection. You take them into your families; you look on them as part of your possessions; and you expect from their service a support, and perhaps an increase, of your other possessions. How agreeable would it be if a religious master or mistress, thus attended, would now think with themselves: “Who can tell but that this poor creature may belong to the election of God! Who can tell but that God may have sent this poor creature into my hands, that so one of the elect may, by my means, be called and, by my instruction, be made wise unto salvation! The glorious God will put an unspeakable glory upon me if it may be so!” [...]

Show yourselves men, and let rational arguments have their force upon you [...]

First, the great God commands it and requires it of you to do what you can that your servants may also be his. It was an admonition once given: “Masters, know that your Master is in heaven” (Eph. 6:9). You will confess that the God of heaven is your Master. If your Negroes do not comply with your commands, into what anger, what language, perhaps into a misbecoming fury, are you transported? But you are now to attend unto the commands of your more absolute Master, and they are his commands concerning your Negroes too. [...]

Secondly, with what face can you call yourselves Christians, if you do nothing that your servants also may become Christians? [...] Are they worthy to be counted Christians who are content

though a part of their families remain heathen, who do not know God nor call upon his name? [...] What is he who is willing that those of his own house remain strangers to the faith and wretched infidels? [...] If thou wilt name the name of Christ in denominating thyself a Christian, then depart from this iniquity of leaving thy servants to continue the servants of iniquity. It will be found a maxim that fails not, that no man can really and heartily be of any religion without some desire to have that religion propagated. [...] It is natural for men to promote their own religion. Shall Christians fall short of Mahometans or of idolaters? The pagan Japonians were too much in the right on it, when they concluded a certain worldly generation of Europeans to be no Christians because they declined the doing of anything for the propagation of Christianity. The Christians who have no concern upon their minds to have Christianity propagated never can justify themselves. They say they are Christians, but they are not [...] Householder, there are servants pertaining to thy household. It is a mighty power which thou hast over them—a despotic power, which gives thee numberless advantages to call them and lead them into the way of the Lord. [...]

Thirdly, the condition of your servants does loudly solicit your pains to Christianize them, and you cannot but hear the cry of it if you have not put off all Christian compassion, all bowels of humanity. When you see how laboriously, how obsequiously, your Negroes apply themselves to serve you, to content you, to enrich you—what? have you abandoned all principles of gratitude or of generosity? A generous mind cannot but entertain such sentiments as these: “Well, what shall I do to make this poor creature happy? What shall I do, that this poor creature may have cause to bless God forever for falling into my hands!” [...] The state of your Negroes in this world must be low and mean and abject, a state of servitude. No great things in this world can be done for them. Something, then, let there be done towards their welfare in the world to come. [...]’T]is a most horrid and cursed condition wherein your servants are languishing until Christianity has made saving impressions upon them. [...] Very many of them do, with devilish rites, actually worship devils or maintain a magical conversation with devils. And all of them are more slaves to Satan than they are to you, until a faith in the Son of God has made them free indeed. [...] Pity, pity the souls of your Negroes, which cry unto you, “Have pity on us, O our masters; have pity on us, whom the holy God has justly delivered over into a woeful slavery to the powers of darkness. And, oh! do something, that the light of salvation by the glorious Lord Jesus Christ may arrive unto us.” [...]

Fourthly, [...] Christianity does marvelously befriend and enrich and advance mankind. The greatest kindness that can be done to any man is to make a Christian of him. Your Negroes are immediately raised unto an astonishing felicity when you have Christianized them. [...] Though they remain your servants, yet they are become the children of God. Though they are to enjoy no earthly goods but the small allowance that your justice and bounty shall see proper for them, yet they are become heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ. Though they are your vassals and must with a profound subjection wait upon you, yet the angels of God now take them under their guardianship and vouchsafe to tend upon them. [...]

Yea, the pious masters that have instituted their servants in Christian piety will, even in this life, have a sensible recompence. The more serviceable and obedient and obliging behavior of their servants unto them will be a sensible and a notable recompence. Be assured, sirs: your servants will be the better servants, for being made Christian servants. [...] Were your servants well tinged

with the spirit of Christianity, it would render them exceeding dutiful unto their masters, exceeding patient under their masters, exceeding faithful in their business, and afraid of speaking or doing anything that may justly displease you. [...] But many masters whose Negroes have greatly vexed them with miscarriage may do well to examine whether heaven be not chastising of them for their failing in their duty about their Negroes. Had they done more to make their Negroes the knowing and willing servants of God, it may be God would have made their Negroes better servants to them. Sirs, you may read your sin in the punishment. [...]

[Responses to objections]

It has been caviled by some that it is questionable whether the Negroes have rational souls or no. But let that brutish insinuation be never whispered anymore. Certainly, their discourse will abundantly prove that they have reason. Reason shows itself in the design which they daily act upon. The vast improvement that education has made upon some of them argues that there is a reasonable soul in all of them. [...] They are men, and not beasts, that you have bought, and they must be used accordingly. 'Tis true they are barbarous. But so were our own ancestors. The Britons were in many things as barbarous, but a little before our Savior's nativity, as the Negroes are at this day if there be any credit in Caesar's *Commentaries*. Christianity will be the best cure for this barbarity.

Their complexion sometimes is made an argument why nothing should be done for them. A gay sort of argument! As if the great God went by the complexion of men in his favors to them! As if none but whites might hope to be favored and accepted with God! Whereas it is well known that the whites are the least part of mankind. The biggest part of mankind, perhaps, are copper-colored, a sort of tawnies. And our English that inhabit some climates do seem growing apace to be not much unlike unto them. [...] The God who looks on the heart is not moved by the color of the skin, is not more propitious to one color than another. Say rather, with the apostle: "Of a truth, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation, he that feareth him and worketh righteousness is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Indeed their stupidity is a discouragement. It may seem unto as little purpose to teach as to wash an Ethiopian. But the greater their stupidity, the greater must be our application. If we can't learn them so much as we would, let us learn them as much as we can. A little divine light and grace infused into them will be of great account. And the more difficult it is to fetch such forlorn things up out of the perdition whereinto they are fallen, the more laudable is the undertaking. There will be the more of a triumph if we prosper in the undertaking. [...]

"Well, but if the Negroes are Christianized, they will be baptized, and their baptism will presently entitle them to their freedom; so our money is thrown away." Man, if this were true—that a slave bought with thy money were, by thy means, brought unto the things that accompany salvation, and thou shouldest from this time have no more service from him—yet thy money were not thrown away. That man's money will perish with him who had rather the souls in his family should perish than that he should lose a little money. And suppose it were so, that baptism gave a legal title to freedom. Is there no guarding against this inconvenience? You may, by sufficient indentures, keep off the things which you reckon so inconvenient.

But it is all a mistake. There is no such thing. What law is it that sets the baptized slave at liberty? Not the law of Christianity; that allows of slavery, only it wonderfully dulcifies, and mollifies, and moderates the circumstances of it. Christianity directs a slave, upon his embracing the law of the Redeemer, to satisfy himself that he is the Lord's freeman though he continues a slave. [...] The baptized, then, are not thereby entitled unto their liberty. [...]

[Suggestions for how to Christianize slaves]

A catechism shall be got ready for them, first a shorter, then a larger, suited unto their poor capacities.

They who cannot themselves personally so well attend the instruction of the Negroes may employ and reward those that shall do it for them. In many families, the children may help the Negroes to learn the catechism, or their well-instructed and well-disposed English servants may do it [...] In a plantation of many Negroes, why should not a teacher be hired on purpose to instill into them the principles of the catechism? Or, if the overseers are once catechized themselves, they may soon do the office of catechizers unto those that are under them. However, 'tis fit for the master also personally to enquire into the progress which his Negroes make in Christianity, and not leave it entirely to the management of others.

To quicken them unto the learning of the catechism, it would be very well to propose unto the Negroes agreeable recompences and privileges to be received and enjoyed by them when they shall have made a good progress in it. Sirs, a Mahometan will do as much as this comes to for anyone that will embrace his Alcoran. Oh, Christians, will not you do more for your generation than the children of this world for theirs.

[...]

[A prayer to be taught to slaves]

O great God, thou hast made me and all the world.

Make me truly sorry for my sinning against my Maker.

Let thy glorious Christ save me, and help me to know and to take his great salvation.

Teach me to serve thee, O Lord. And make me a blessing unto those that have me for their servant.

Bring me to a part in heaven, among thy children, forevermore. Amen.

[...]

[Excerpts from a catechism for slaves]

Q. What is the misery of our present condition?

A. My heart is full of sin; my life is full of sin; I am under the wrath of God for sin; I am a slave to sin and Satan.

Q. Who is there to save us from our misery?

A. Jesus Christ is my great Savior, and there is none but he to save me. [...]

Q. Whom do you now choose to serve?

A. My Savior shall be my Master; he is a good Master; he has bought me to serve him, and he will make me a child of God.

Q. If you serve Jesus Christ, what must you do?

A. I must love God, and pray to him, and keep the Lord's day. I must love all men and never quarrel, nor be drunk, nor be unchaste, nor steal, nor tell a lie, nor be discontent with my condition.

[...]

Q. What is the fifth commandment?

A. Honor thy father and mother.

Q. What is the meaning of it?

A. I must show all due respect unto everyone; and if I have a master or mistress, I must be very dutiful unto them. [...]

Q. What is the tenth commandment?

A. Thou shalt not covet.

Q. What is the meaning of it?

A. I must be patient and content with such a condition as God has ordered for me.

[...]

[Biblical verses for slaves to memorize]

If the Negroes might learn to read the sacred scriptures, which make wise unto salvation, vast would be the advantage thereof unto them. Until that might be accomplished, would it not be advantageous unto them to make them learn by heart certain particular verses of the scriptures? These, among the rest:

All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord, and shall glorify thy name. (Ps. 86:9)

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) [...]

Servants, be obedient unto them that are your masters—as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord and not unto men; knowing that whatsoever good thing any man does, the same shall he receive of the Lord. (Eph. 6:5-8)

Source: [Cotton Mather], *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Negro_Christianized_an_Essay_to_Excite.html?id=4xZhAAAAcAAJ. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings and subheadings (in square brackets) added by Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability and a more compact presentation. An erroneous biblical citation corrected. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, typography (italics and all caps), and the formatting and placement of biblical citations modernized, regularized, or Americanized (except for the antiquated spelling of some names). Elided vowels and ampersands spelled out.

The capitalizing of *Negro* reproduces the usage of the source publication. The racial label *whites*, although capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase, along with many other words that are capitalized in the source per antiquated convention. Among these are other race-related terms (*tawnies*, *copper-colored*, *complexion*, *color*, and *skin*), terms for authority figures (*master*, *mistress*, *sir*, *teacher*, *overseer*), and religious terms (including *heaven*, *providence*, *gospel*, *heathen*, *idolater*, *pagan*, *devil*, *apostle*, *catechism*, *sacred scriptures*, and *fifth* and *tenth commandment*, as well as pronouns referring to God).

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