



A Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina

George Whitefield (1740)

George Whitefield was a white Anglican priest, based in England but widely traveled, who became famous as a revivalist. He did multiple preaching tours in Britain's North American colonies and established an orphanage in the fledgling colony of Georgia. Presented here are selections from an open letter that Whitefield wrote to southern slaveholders during his first American preaching tour, after journeying by land from Pennsylvania to Georgia. In the decade after he wrote the letter, Whitefield successfully lobbied Georgia's governing trustees to legalize slavery in the colony for economic advantage, and he became a slaveholder himself.

As I lately passed through your provinces on my way hither, I was sensibly touched with 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 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 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 your 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 eyewitness, 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 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, 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 who reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. [...] 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 were 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 upon 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? 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 vast difference between civilizing and Christianizing a negro. A black as well as a white man may be civilized by outward restraints and afterward 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 in 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 that whenever the gospel is preached with power amongst them, 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. 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 fulness 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.

Source: *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* [...] (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 4:35-41, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433068206212>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted. Spelling, punctuation, typography (italics and all caps), and some capitalization modernized or Americanized. A preposition converted to modern usage (*in my way* → *on my way*). A verb converted to the subjunctive mood (*was* → *were*). In two instances, the conjunction *that* has been relocated within a sentence for clarity. The use of lowercase for *negro* and the racial labels *black* and *white* reproduces the usage of the source publication. The words *Christian*, *Christianity*, and *Christianize*, lowercase in the source, have been capitalized here for the sake of modernization. The use of lowercase for *scripture* replicates the source, but the divine epithet *Providence* has been converted from lowercase to capital.

These edited excerpts from Whitefield’s letter are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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