



## Letter from George Liele to John Rippon (1791)

*When British troops left the United States at the end of the American Revolution, thousands of free blacks evacuated with them, many having been emancipated in exchange for supporting the British war effort. Many evacuees were resettled in Nova Scotia, others in British-held Florida or the Caribbean, fewer in England; some later relocated again to the colony of Sierra Leone.*

*Among the evacuees was George Liele, who emigrated from Georgia to Jamaica. In Georgia, Liele had been a pioneering black Baptist preacher; he continued to promote the Baptist movement in Jamaica. In this letter written to John Rippon, a white Baptist minister in London, Liele recounts his conversion and ministry. He also reports briefly on the ongoing ministries of other black Baptist preachers he had known in the United States, some of whom were still there while others had emigrated to Nova Scotia and the Bahamas.*

*Rippon published Liele's letter in edited form. While most of what follows is Liele's voice, the entire third paragraph, indented like a block quote, is an interpolation by Rippon, summarizing a portion of Liele's narrative.*

I was born in Virginia. My father's name was Liele, and my mother's name Nancy; I cannot ascertain much of them, as I went to several parts of America when young and at length resided in [...] Georgia, but was informed, both by white and black people, that my father was the only black person who knew the Lord in a spiritual way in that country.

I always had a natural fear of God from my youth and was often checked in conscience with thoughts of death, which barred me from many sins and bad company. I knew no other way at that time to hope for salvation but only in the performance of my good works. [...But] the Rev. Mr. Matthew Moore, one Sabbath afternoon as I stood with curiosity to hear him, he unfolded all my dark views, opened my best behavior and good works to me, which I thought I was to be saved by, and I was convinced that I was not in the way to heaven but in the way to hell. This state I labored under for the space of five or six months [...] till at length [...] I found no way wherein I could escape the damnation of hell, only through the merits of my dying Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which caused me to make intercession with Christ for the salvation of my poor immortal soul; and, I full well recollect, I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it. [...] I felt such love and joy as my tongue was not able to express. After this, I declared before the congregation of believers the work which God had done for my soul, and the same minister, the Rev. Matthew Moore, baptized me; and I continued in this church about four years, till the evacuation [...]

Desiring to prove my obligations to God, I endeavored to instruct my own color in the word of God. The white brethren, seeing my endeavors and that the word of the Lord seemed to be blessed, gave me a call at a quarterly meeting to preach before the congregation.

*[Editorial interpolation by John Rippon:]* Afterwards, Mr. Moore took the sense of the church concerning Brother Liele's abilities, when it appeared to be their unanimous opinion "that he was possessed of ministerial gifts," and, according to the custom which obtains in some of the American churches, he was licensed as a probationer. He now

exercised at different plantations, especially on those Lord's-day evenings when there was no service performed in the church to which he belonged, and preached "about three years at Brunton Land and at Yamacraw," which last place is about half a mile from Savannah. Mr. Henry Sharp, his master, being a deacon of the church which called George Liele to the work of the ministry, some years before his death gave him his freedom, only he continued in the family till his master's exit. Mr. Sharp, in the time of the war, was an officer and was at last killed in the king's service by a ball which shot off his hand. [...] Some persons were, at this time, dissatisfied with George's liberation and threw him into prison, but by producing the proper papers, he was released; his particular friend in this business was Colonel Kirkland.

At the evacuation of the country, I was partly obliged to come to Jamaica as an indentured servant for money I owed [Col. Kirkland], he promising to be my friend in this country. I was landed at Kingston, and by the colonel's recommendation to General Campbell, the governor of the island, I was employed by him two years; and on his leaving the island, he gave me a written certificate, from under his own hand, of my good behavior. As soon as I had settled Col. Kirkland's demand on me, I had a certificate of my freedom from the vestry and governor, according to the act of this island, both for myself and family. [...] I began about September 1784 to preach in Kingston, in a small private house, to a good, smart congregation—and I formed the church with four brethren from America besides myself—and the preaching took very good effect with the poorer sort, especially the slaves. The people at first persecuted us, both at meetings and baptisms; but, God be praised, they seldom interrupt us now. We have applied to the honorable House of Assembly with a petition of our distresses, being poor people desiring to worship Almighty God according to the tenets of the Bible, and they have granted us liberty and given us their sanction. Thanks be to God, we have liberty to worship him as we please in Kingston.

You ask about those who have been converted to Christ. I think they are about 450. I have baptized 400 in Jamaica. At Kingston, I baptize in the sea; at Spanish Town, in the river; and at convenient places in the country. We have nigh 350 members, a few white people among them [...] We receive none into the church without a few lines from their owners of their good behavior towards them and religion. The creoles of the country, after they are converted and baptized, as God enables them, prove very faithful. I have deacons and elders, a few; and teachers of small congregations in the town and country, where convenience suits them to come together; and I am pastor. I preach twice on the Lord's day, in the forenoon and afternoon, and twice in the week, and have not been absent six Sabbath days since I formed the church in this country. I receive nothing for my services; I preach, baptize, administer the Lord's supper, and travel from one place to another to publish the gospel and to settle church affairs, all freely. I have one of the chosen men whom I baptized, a deacon of the church and a native of this country, who keeps the regulations of church matters; and I promoted a free school for the instruction of the children, both free and slaves, and he is the schoolmaster.

I cannot justly tell what is my age, as I have no account of the time of my birth, but I suppose I am about 40 years old. I have a wife and four children. My wife was baptized by me in Savannah, at Brunton Land, and I have every satisfaction in life from her. She is much the same age as myself. My eldest son is 19 years, my next son 17, the third 14, and the last child a girl of

11 years; they are all members of the church. My occupation is a farmer, but as the seasons in this part of the country are uncertain, I also keep a team of horses and wagons for the carrying [of] goods from one place to another, which I attend to myself with the assistance of my sons; and by this way of life have gained the good will of the public, who recommend me to business and to some very principal work for government.

I have a few books: some good old authors and sermons, and one large Bible that was given me by a gentleman. A good many of our members can read, and all are desirous to learn; they will be very thankful for a few books to read on Sundays and other days.

The last accounts I had from Savannah were that the gospel had taken very great effect both there and in South Carolina. Brother Andrew Bryan, a black minister at Savannah, has 200 members in full fellowship and had certificates, from their owners, of 100 more who had given in their experiences and were ready to be baptized. Also, I received accounts from Nova Scotia of a black Baptist preacher, Brother David George, who was a member of the church at Savannah. He had the permission of the governor to preach in three provinces; his members in full communion were then 60, black and white, the gospel spreading. Brother Amos is at Providence.<sup>a</sup> He writes me that the gospel has taken good effect and is spreading greatly; he has about 300 members. Brother Jesse Galphin, another black minister, preaches near Augusta, in South Carolina, at a place where I used to preach; he was a member of the church at Savannah and has 60 members, and a great work is going on there. [...]

There is no Baptist church in this country but ours. We have purchased a piece of land at the east end of Kingston, containing three acres, for the sum of £155 currency and on it have begun a meetinghouse, 57 feet in length by 37 in breadth. We have raised the brick wall eight feet high from the foundation and intend to have a gallery. Several gentlemen, members of the House of Assembly and other gentlemen, have subscribed towards the building about £40. The chief part of our congregation are slaves, and their owners allow them, in common, but three or four bits per week for allowance to feed themselves, and out of so small a sum, we cannot expect anything that can be of service from them—if we did, it would soon bring a scandal upon religion—and the free people in our society are but poor; but they are all willing, both free and slaves, to do what they can. As for my part, I am too much entangled with the affairs of the world to go on as I would with my design in supporting the cause. This has, I acknowledge, been a great hindrance to the gospel in one way; but as I have endeavored to set a good example of industry before the inhabitants of the land, it has given general satisfaction another way. And, reverend sir, we think the Lord has put it in the power of the Baptist societies in England to help and assist us in completing this building, which we look upon will be the greatest undertaking ever was in this country for the bringing of souls from darkness into the light of the gospel. And as the Lord has put it into your heart to inquire after us, we place all our confidence in you to make our circumstances known to the several Baptist churches in England; and we look upon you as our father, friend, and brother. [...]

Your letter was read to the church two or three times and did create a great deal of love and warmth throughout the whole congregation, who shouted for joy and comfort to think that the

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<sup>a</sup> *The island of New Providence, in the Bahamas (not the city of Providence, Rhode Island).*

Lord had been so gracious as to satisfy us, in this country, with the very same religion with our beloved brethren in the old country, according to the scriptures, and that such a worthy of London should write in so loving a manner to such poor worms as we are. And I beg leave to say that the whole congregation sang out that they would, through the assistance of God, remember you in their prayers. They altogether give their Christian love to you and all the worthy professors of Jesus Christ in your church at London and beg the prayers of your congregation and the prayers of the churches in general, wherever it pleases you to make known our circumstances. I remain with the utmost love, reverend sir, your unworthy fellow-laborer, servant, and brother in Christ,

GEORGE LIELE

**Source:** George Liele to John Rippon, December 18, 1791, qtd. in John Rippon, “An Account of Several Baptist Churches Consisting Chiefly of Negro Slaves [...],” *Baptist Annual Register* 1 (1790-93): 332-337, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015016782453>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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The use of lowercase for the racial labels *black*, *white*, and *creole* reproduces the usage of the source publication. For the sake of modernization, the terms *gospel*, *day* (in *Lord’s day* and *Sabbath day*), and *supper* (in *Lord’s supper*), all capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase; but the terms *Bible* and *House of Assembly*, lowercase in the source, have been capitalized here.

These edited excerpts from Liele’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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