



Testimony

What about slavery is *un*Christian? American Protestant views: 1690-1760

"Give Ear, ye pitied Blacks, Give Ear!" intoned the Puritan minister Cotton Mather to the enslaved members of his Boston congregation in 1696. "It is allowed in the Scriptures, to the Gentiles, that they may keep Slaves," he told them, yet they could aspire to be "Freemen of the Lord" after death: "It will be but a little, a little, a little while, and all your pains will end in everlasting joys."¹ Mather's sermon expressed the prevalent opinion among most white colonists at the time. Then four years later, also in Boston, the first American anti-slavery tract was published — Samuel Sewall's well-known and widely opposed *The Selling of Joseph*. By 1760 numerous essays and sermons had been written to address two questions: Is slavery Christian? If not, what about slavery is *un*Christian? Is it justifiable as long as slaves are treated humanely and led to Christianity? Is it God's way to bring "heathens" to a Christian land, thus saving their souls? Presented here are brief excerpts from eight religious tracts on slavery from 1696 to 1759 — two by the Puritan minister and slaveholder Cotton Mather, one by the Anglican evangelist George Whitefield (after visiting the southern colonies), and five from abolitionist Quakers (Society of Friends), whose insistent condemnation of slavery was voiced in many pamphlets as the American printing industry flourished in the 1700s.

REV. COTTON MATHER
Puritan 1696

A Good Master Well Served: A Brief Discourse on the Necessary Properties & Practices of a Good Servant, in Every Kind of Servitude

And will not the Scores of **Slaves**, the poor **Blacks**, now also in this Assembly,¹ Give Earnest Heed unto these words of God? Give Ear, ye pitied *Blacks*, Give Ear! It is allowed in the *Scriptures*, to the *Gentiles*, That they *May keep Slaves*; although the Law of *Charity* requires your Owners to Use you as those that have *Reasonable Souls* within you. Yes, 'twould be against the Conscience of any Good man to keep you for *Slaves* if he find himself unable to use you according to that Law of *Charity*. But the most of you have so little cause to desire your being any other than *Slaves* as you are, & where you are, that it would soon make you miserable to be otherwise. You are better *Fed* & better *Clothed* & better *Managed* by far than you would be if you were your *Own men*. All that now remains for you is to become first the *Good Servants of the Lord Jesus Christ*, & then of those that have purchased you. . . .

"It is allowed in the *Scriptures*, to the *Gentiles*, That they *May keep Slaves*"

So, though your *Skins* are of the colour of the *Night*, yet your *Souls* will be washed *White* in the *Blood of the Lamb*, and be Entitled unto an *Inheritance in Light*. Though you are in *Slavery* to men, yet you shall be the *Free-men* of the Lord, the *Children* of God. Though you are Fed among the *Dogs*, with the *Orts* [offal; scraps] of our Tables, yet you shall at length Lie down unto a *Feast* with *Abraham* himself in the Heaven of the Blessed. Been't you Discouraged; it will be but a *Little*, a *Little*, a *Little While*, and all your pains will End in Everlasting Joys.

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¹ Mather's congregation in Boston included slaves, freed slaves, and slaveholders. Mather himself owned slaves.

REV. COTTON MATHER
Puritan 1706

The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity

What *Law* is it, that Sets the *Baptised Slave* at *Liberty*? Not the *Law of Christianity*; that allows of *Slavery*; . . . *Christianity* directs a *Slave*, upon his embracing the *Law of the Redeemer*, to satisfy himself *That he is the Lord's Free-man*, tho' he continues a *Slave*. It supposes (Col. 3:11)² That there are *Bond* [slaves] as well as *Free* among those that have been *Renewed in the Knowledge and Image of Jesus Christ* [i.e., baptized]. . . But is not *Freedom* to be claim'd for a *Baptised Slave* by the *English Constitution*? The *English Laws* about *Villains* or *Slaves* will not say so; for by those *Laws*, they may not be granted for *Life*, like a *Lease*, and passed over with a *Manor* [bequeathed with an estate] like other *Goods* or *Chattels*. . . These *English Laws* were made when the *Lords* [noblemen] & the *Slaves*, were both of them *Christians*; and they stand still unrepealed. If there are not now such *Slaves* in *England* as formerly, it is from the *Lords*, more than from the *Laws*.

"Christianity directs a Slave . . . to satisfy himself That he is the Lord's Free-man, tho' he continues a Slave."

The *Baptised* then are not thereby entitled unto their *Liberty*. Howbeit, if they have arrived unto such a measure of *Christianity* that *none can forbid Water for the Baptising of them*, it is fit that they should enjoy those *comfortable circumstances* with us which are due to them, not only as the *Children of Adam* but also as our *Brethren*, on the same level with us in the expectations of a blessed *Immortality*, thro' the *Second Adam* [Jesus Christ].

JOHN HEPBURN
Quaker 1715

The American Defense of the Christian Golden Rule, or An Essay to Prove the Unlawfulness of Making Slaves of Men

This Practice [of slavery] contradicts Christ's command, who commanded us *To do to all men as we would they should do to us*, or as we would be done by. Now the buying and selling of the *Bodies* and *Souls* of Men was and is the Merchandise of the *Babylonian Merchants* spoken of in the *Revelations*.³ Now the *Tyrannizing* over and making *Slaves* of our *Fellow Creatures*, the *Negroes*, everyone knows or may know, this is not the way they would be done unto. . . .

"I desire the Negro-Masters to inform me, who must answer for all these abominable Sins?"

But to return to the *Servants* of such cruel *Masters*; By this *Description* all may see that they are put under an unavoidable *Necessity* of sinning to maintain *Self-Preservation*, an *Instinct* of *Nature* belonging to all the *Creatures* of *God*; So *self-preservation* puts them to *steal*, *rob*, and *lie*, and many other sinful *Actions*. Nay, some of them, when they see themselves surrounded and trapped with all the *Miseries* aforesaid and many more, then they go into *Despair* and miserably *murder themselves*, and [some?] their *Masters* to get rid of their *Tortures* and miserable *Slavish Life*. . . .

Now for those heinous *Sins*, as *Lying*, *stealing*, *Robbing*, and *Self-Murder*, they cannot escape *Punishment* by the *Justice* of *God*. Now as I have said before, they being put under such *necessity* of sinning, and they themselves being but *Infidels*, I desire the *Negro-Masters* to inform me, who must answer for all these *abominable Sins*?

² Colossians 3:11: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

³ Revelation 18:10-13: Standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, Alas, alas that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come. And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise any more: The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones . . . and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men.

Now the Word *Servant* I understand to be but for a Time, but the Word *Slave* forever. And those than merchandiz'd in Slaves we may find were *Babylon's Merchants*, Rev. 18:13² And those than had Bond Servants under the Law were commanded to let them go free after some Time of Service, and they were not to let them go empty-handed neither, which some of them not observing, the Lord complained by the Prophet *Jeremiah* [34:17] that they *have not hearkened unto me, in proclaiming Liberty every one to his Brother, and every Man to his Neighbour . . .*

Now if anyone should ask one of the Negro's Masters that had a Negro Child and a Child of his own, what Harm the one had done that it should be made a Slave more than the other? that they would not, I believe, be able to answer it; and if they have done us no Harm (as it is evident they have not) then it is very contrary to Scripture, and even to Nature, to make them suffer. . . .

Now I have heard some Men say that they believe they did wrong in getting Negroes, but that they did not know what to do with them now they had got them. For if they let them go free after some Time, if any Mishap befell them, their Estates were obliged to maintain them.⁴ And tho' they seem to acknowledge the Wrong done to them, yet they seem to be very much afraid lest they should be forc'd to help them a little and to seem to rest contented. . . .

"this Practice of making Slaves of Men appears to be so great an Evil to me that, for all the Riches and Glory of this World, I would not be guilty of so great a Sin"

Testimony

Against that

Antichristian Practice

Of making *Slaves of Men*.

Wherein it is shewed to be contrary to the Dispensation of the Law and Time of the Gospel, and very opposite both to

Grace and Nature.

By *Elihu Coleman.*

Mat. 7. 12. *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that Men should do unto you, do ye even so to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

Printed in the Year, 1733.

Now I can truly say that this Practice of making Slaves of Men appears to be so great an Evil to me that, for all the Riches and Glory of this World, I would not be guilty of so great a Sin as this seems to be. And I do believe many would see it so were they not blinded by Self-Interest. . . . And all this is done by Violence which is forbidden in the Scriptures; for there we are commanded to do Violence to no Man. And lastly, it is a hindrance to the spreading of the Gospel among those poor Creatures, for whom (as well as others) our Lord came and laid down his Life, and also hath said that his Gospel should be preached unto all Nations. . . . Now by this Practice [of slavery] they hate the Name of a Christian; for all of us they can get (say they) they make Slaves of, and even Nature itself tells them that it is wrong. . . .

Now I having shown by Scripture the Unlawfulness of this Practice, as it is now in Use, both in the Old Testament and in the New. And now, I would have all to turn their Minds inward to that Divine Monitor or Counselor, placed in the Heart of Man, which is as agreeable to the holy Scriptures (I do believe) as any internal Thing can be to an external one; to which I'll leave my Reader, even to that ever blessed Spirit, One with the Father.

⁴ I.e., if a freed slave became unable to provide for himself or herself, the former slaveholder would be required to financially support the freedman.

REV. GEORGE WHITEFIELD
Anglican 1740

*To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina,
Concerning their Negroes.*

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 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. . . .

“Sure I am it is sinful . . . to use them as bad, nay worse, than as though they were Brutes”

. . . [God] 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*. 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 thro’ 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 in your Holy Religion? What blasphemous Notions must those that make such an Objection have of the Precepts of Christianity? . . .

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 preach’d with Power amongst them, that many will be brought effectually home to God.

BENJAMIN LAY
Quaker 1737

*All Slave-Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates
Pretending to Lay Claim to the Pure & Holy Christian Religion*

Acts 2. It is written, when the time of Pentecost was *fully come*, there was *People of many Nations gathered together, to hear the Apostles, and all heard in their own Tongue the wonderful Works of God.* And if they were now here in *Pennsylvania*, they might hear and see the wonderful Works of the Devil; Men and Women Preaching up the purest Religion in the World, and live in the greatest of Sins at same time, the mother of Enormities, says *B. Lay*. I do firmly believe in the secret of my Soul, before the Lord, that Slave-Keeping and Trading, with what has and now does daily attend and appertain unto it, is as great cause of the Sins of *Sodom* as anything is or ever was in the whole World. . . .

“all Slave-keepers and Traders with them for Gain, were Apostates which pretended to be Christians”

Early this Morning it was given me to see, that all Slave-keepers and Traders with them for Gain, were Apostates which pretended to be Christians; especially in Ministers it is a double Crime, because of their

bad Example to their Flock; for all such have the Mark of the Beast, Whore and False Prophet on them, *Mystery Babylon Mother of Harlots*, let them preach as long as they will or may. . . .

At this Time also it is brought to my Remembrance, with great Thankfulness to my dearest God and Father, Redeemer and Preserver, the great Liberty that I with many Thousands more enjoy in this good Land which to many wise & right considerate People, is much more valuable than natural Life; especially our religious Liberty; with the Plenty of all good Things needful for the Body, which many hundreds of Thousands have been and are deprived of, by the above named vilest, grossest and blackest of all Abominations.

REV. JOHN WOOLMAN
Quaker 1754

Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes

The Wilderness and solitary Deserts in which our Fathers passed the Days of their Pilgrimage are now turned into pleasant Fields; the Natives are gone from before us, and we established peaceably in the Possession of the Land, enjoying our civil and religious Liberties; and, while many Parts of the World have groaned under the heavy Calamities of War, our Habitation remains quiet and our Land fruitful.

“Did not
he that
made
Us
make
Them”

When we trace back the Steps we have trodden and see how the Lord hath opened a Way in the Wilderness for us, to the Wise it will easily appear that all this was not done to be buried in Oblivion; but to prepare a People for more fruitful Returns, and the Remembrance thereof ought to humble us in Prosperity and excite in us a Christian benevolence towards our Inferiors.

If we do not consider these Things aright, but, through a stupid Indolence, conceive Views of Interest, separate from the general Good of the great Brotherhood, and, in Pursuance thereof, treat our Inferiors with Rigour [harshness] to increase our Wealth and gain Riches for our Children, what then shall we do when God riseth up and when he visiteth, what shall we Answer him? Did not he that made Us make Them, and *Did not one Fashion us in the Womb?*⁵

. . . to suppose that One remaining in this happy Condition can, for the Sake of earthly Riches, not only deprive his Fellow Creature of the Sweetness of Freedom (which, rightly used, is one of the greatest temporal Blessings) but therewith neglect using proper means for their Acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, and the Advantage of true Religion, seems, at least, a Contradiction to Reason.

ANTHONY BENEZET
Quaker 1759

Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes

In the present war,⁶ how many of our poor Country men are dragged to Bondage and sold for Slaves: how many mourn a Husband, a Wife, a Child, a Parent, or some near Relation taken from them; and were we to follow them a little farther and see them exposed to sale and bought up to be made a Gain of, what Heart so hard that would not melt with Sympathy and Sorrow: And could we hear the Purchaser, for the sake of Gain, pushing on the Savages [Indians] to captivate our People, what inhuman wretches should we call them, what Punishment should we [say⁷] their Guilt deserved!

“that divine Rule,
*To do unto all Men
as we would they
should do unto us.*”

⁵ Job 31:14-15: What then shall I do when God riseth up? and when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?

⁶ French and Indian War (1754-1763), during which many colonists were captured by the Indian allies of the French, and many sold into bondage.

⁷ Word obscured; illegible.

But while our Hearts are affected for our Brethren and Relations, while we feel for our own Flesh and Blood, let us extend our Thoughts to others, and allow me, gentle Reader! to recommend to thy serious Consideration a Practice that prevails among several Nations who call themselves Christians, and I am sorry to say it, in which we as a Nation are deeply engaged, & which is of such a nature as that nothing can be more inconsistent with the Doctrines and Practice of our meek Lord and Master, nor stained with a deeper Dye or Injustice, Cruelty and Oppression, I mean the SLAVE TRADE, the purchasing and bringing the poor Negroes from their Native Land and subjecting them to a State of perpetual Bondage, and that often the most cruel and oppressive. . . .

Will not the just Judge of all the Earth visit for all this? Or dare we say that this very Practice is not one Cause of the Calamities we at present suffer. And that the Captivity of our People is not to teach us to feel for others, and to induce us to discourage a Trade by which many Thousands are Yearly captivated? Evils do not arise out of the Dust, nor does the Almighty willingly afflict the Children of Men; But when a People offend as a Nation, or in a public Capacity, the Justice of his moral Government requires that as a nation they be punished, which is generally done by War, Famine or Pestilence. I know there are many Arguments offered in favor of the Purchasers, but they are all drawn from Avarice or ill-founded. None will stand the Test of that divine Rule, *To do unto all Men as we would they should do unto us.*

Testimony