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Wesley, Whitefield, a Philadelphia Quaker, and Slavery

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“Wesley” and “Whitefield.” The two names are well known among those interested in the eighteenth century, theology, preaching, Methodism, or Calvinism. I remember meeting a “Mr. Whitfield” in Edinburgh one day as I chose a new route to walk home from the University. He had a sailboat in his front “garden,” and that was the topic that began our conversation. After exchanging names I commented on his name being the same as that of a rather famous preacher. He acknowledged not only knowing about George Whitefield, but being distantly related. His family, however, had changed the spelling to “Whitfield” to end the incessant mispronunciation of “White-field” with the long “i.” He didn’t seem to know much about George’s life or theology, only the inheritance of the name, and I do not recall running into him again. George, on the other hand, I have run into and he always provides interest, whether from his amazing preaching, which even impressed Benjamin Franklin, or his eye problem (he was “cross eyed”) caricatured in cheap plays as “Dr. Squintem,” or his numerous transatlantic travels under harsh and dangerous conditions, or his “Calvinistic Methodism” which many conceive to be a kind of oxymoron.

The relationship between John Wesley and George Whitefield is well known. It goes back to the Holy Club in Oxford and provides numerous glimpses into the style and personality of each man. While Whitefield was not part of the cadre of Holy Club members that accompanied Wesley to America in 1736, their lives intersected at other key points.
It was Whitefield who introduced Wesley to "field preaching," that practice which Wesley almost initially rejected as inconsistent with the inherent goodness of the gospel, but which became the hallmark of his reaching the common folk. It was Whitefield who bequeathed so many new converts into the care of Wesley (while Whitefield sojourned again to America) that organization was needed, and the foundations of the Methodist group dynamic were laid. It was Whitefield into whose arms Wesley fell when he discovered that his love, Grace Murray, had been persuaded by Charles (without consulting John) to suddenly marry someone else. Wesley and Whitefield embraced and sobbed together as true brothers when words were inadequate to describe the ache; they could share the deep pain.

It was Whitefield who later broke their agreement to avoid coming out in public and revealed their core doctrinal difference on predestination by preaching it. Wesley countered by preaching and publishing his rejection of predestination in his now famous sermon entitled "Free Grace." It was Whitefield with whom Wesley agreed to heal that breech, which would certainly hurt the cause of Christianity through disunity, by the pact that whoever died first, the other would preach his funeral as a final and lasting testimony to the unity of their love and the gospel. And Whitefield conducted a significant ministry in Georgia after Wesley's return to Britain. It is one aspect of Whitefield's time in Georgia that constitutes the central concern of this essay.

The Slavery Divide

Predestination was not the only issue on which Wesley and Whitefield disagreed. That difference has been vindicated by history in that there are still respectable strands within Christianity that side with each man. The other difference, however, is not one that history looks upon so charitably. Rather, it designates one of the men as simply a man of his time and culture without the insight to see beyond, and the other man as beyond his time, transcending his culture and even generating good within it. The issue is slavery.

It would be interesting to do a major comparison of Wesley and Whitefield on slavery, but it is sufficient here to say that Whitefield supported slavery and even owned slaves. Wesley completely rejected slavery and preached and wrote against it. When we bring in a third character, the interaction, disagreement and development become even more interesting.
and profitable. The person who influenced both men on the issue of slavery was Anthony Benezet, a Philadelphia Quaker.

Benezet was born in France of Hugenot parents in 1713. Because of persecution, the family fled in 1715, living in London for sixteen years and then settling in Pennsylvania. Although his parents became staunch Moravians, Benezet joined the Quakers as a young man and remained a "convinced Friend" for the rest of his life. His circle of friends came to include the noted Quaker John Woolman, Benjamin Franklin, and Benjamin Rush, the first Surgeon General under George Washington. Benezet was primarily an educator, teaching in Germantown and Philadelphia from the age of twenty-six. He was one of the earliest to teach black persons, establishing an informal school of evening classes in his home in 1750 and finally persuading Quakers to establish a school for black children. His concern for the slave is evidenced from 1754 when he began to write against slavery and the slave trade. A similar concern can be seen in his support of a group of war refugees, the "Acadians," who were exiled from Nova Scotia, and his advocacy of peace with Native Americans.

Benezet's antislavery activity included the writing of some eight tracts on the subject and a pattern of extensive correspondence with persons he judged could be helpful in this cause. His influence on John Wesley is clear, important, and relatively unknown. He was the pivotal influence on Wesley's decision to enter the antislavery cause in 1772, culminating in Wesley publishing his influential tract *Thoughts Upon Slavery* in 1774. More than half of Wesley's tract is taken directly from Benezet's 1771 tract *Some Historical Account of Guinea*. Frank Baker details the relationship of the two pieces in his fine article "The Origins, Character, and Influence of John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*."  

Unfortunately, Benezet's influence on George Whitefield was not as successful. It is true that Whitefield was initially opposed to slavery. Benezet remembers, "He at first clearly saw the iniquity of this horrible abuse of the human race, as manifestly appears from the letter he published on that subject, addressed to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia North & South Carolina [sic] in the year 1739 after his first Journey thro' those Colonies." 2 However, after continued exposure to slavery, White-

--- 166 ---

1Published in *Methodist History*, Vol. 22, January, 1984, 75-86.
2Benezet to Lady Huntingdon, March 10, 1775, p. 2 (Haverford Collection, 852).
field completely changed his view. The dramatic change is recorded in his now famous letter to Wesley in 1751.

Reverend and Very Dear Sir: Thanks be to God that the time for favoring the colony of Georgia seems to be come. Now is the season for us to exert our utmost for the good of the poor Ethiopians. We are told that even they are soon to stretch out their hands to God; and who knows but their being settled in Georgia may be overruled for this great end? As for the lawfulness of keeping slaves, I have no doubt, since I hear of some that were bought with Abraham's money and some that were born in his house. I also cannot help thinking that some of those servants mentioned by the apostles in their epistles were, or had been, slaves. It is plain that the Gibeonites were doomed to perpetual slavery; and, though liberty is a sweet thing to such as are born free, yet to those who never knew the sweets of it slavery, perhaps, may not be so irksome. However this be, it is plain to a demonstration that hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes. What a flourishing country might Georgia have been had the use of them been permitted years ago! How many white people have been destroyed for want of them, and how many thousands of pounds spent to no purpose at all! Though it is true that they are brought in a wrong way from their own country, and it is a trade not to be approved of, yet, as it will be carried on whether we will or not, I should think myself highly favored if I could purchase a good number of them in order to make their lives comfortable, and lay a foundation for breeding up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. I had no hand in bringing them into Georgia, though my judgment was for it, and I strongly importuned thereto; yet I would not have a Negro upon my plantation till the use of them was publicly allowed by the colony. Now this is done, let us diligently improve the present opportunity for their instruction. It rejoiced my soul to hear that one of my poor Negroes in Carolina was made a brother in Christ. How know we but we may have many such instances in Georgia! I trust many of them will be brought to Jesus, and this consideration, as to us, swallows up all temporal inconveniences whatsoever.

I am, etc.,
George Whitefield

3Quoted in Benezet's letter to Lady Huntingdon. Whitefield's complete letter is in David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.
What went wrong? Why did Wesley respond so positively to Benezet’s influence and bring a huge number of his followers to bear witness against slavery, yet Whitefield acquiesced to the prevailing view of his age? While we may never know all the answers to these questions, it is possible to trace the thinking of the two men and even read Benezet’s evaluation and conclusion on Whitefield’s slavery position.

As a preface to that discussion, and with the Wesley/Whitefield slavery contrast in mind, it is remarkable that Wesley and Benezet never met personally (they knew each other only through writing), but Whitefield and Benezet were personal friends. Born in 1713 and 1714, respectively, Anthony Benezet and George Whitefield knew each other in London, where the Benezet family lived until 1731. There was a strong friendship and respect between Whitefield and Stephen Benezet, Anthony’s father. Once settled in Pennsylvania, Stephen and Judith Benezet hosted Whitefield when he was in their area. After Stephen’s death this opportunity fell to Anthony Benezet. As late as 1770, shortly before Whitefield’s death, he lodged with Anthony.4 Because of their strong difference of opinion on slavery, one wonders if they discussed the issue or if they corresponded when separated. Did either attempt to persuade the other? Fortunately, there is some key correspondence which sheds light on these questions.

Brookes indicates that when Whitefield was still alive, Benezet corresponded with Whitefield’s patroness, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, about the wrongness of slavery and was assured that she had not proposed it, but would prohibit it. If this is the case, it is interesting that Benezet addressed Whitefield’s patroness, as well as Whitefield himself.5 It is also interesting that at Whitefield’s death there were still slaves at the Orphanage, and the Countess inherited them. If this correspondence occurred before 1770, either Lady Huntingdon did not convey her wishes to Whitefield or he did not follow them.

Whitefield’s Change of Position

This background gives the setting for two revealing letters from Benezet to Lady Huntingdon after Whitefield’s death. These letters

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5Brookes, 97. Although Brookes indicates that this correspondence with the Countess occurred before Whitefield’s death, documentation is not given and it may be that Brookes is referring to the letters Benezet sent to her in 1774 and 1775, after Whitefield’s death.
clearly answer the questions about Benezet's interaction with Whitefield regarding slavery, as well as his assessment of Whitefield's position and rationale. In 1774, four years after Whitefield's death, Benezet wrote Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, an impassioned eight-page letter. He wrote to her because she had become the director (functioning from England) of the orphanage and had the undisputed authority to deal with slavery policy there.

Benezet's correspondence indicates at least two factors that seem to have influenced Whitefield to move from his 1739 opposition of slavery to his 1751 position of support. One of his primary ministry concerns was the Orphan House in Georgia, which he viewed both as a ministry of compassion and a tool of evangelism. However, keeping it afloat financially was an ongoing concern to him. One means of support was the land, some 640 acres. If properly cultivated, it could be financially productive. However, the intense labor of cultivation seemed to be a problem, and Whitefield believed that the climate in Georgia was too hot for strenuous physical labor by white people. His commitment to the orphanage coupled with the prevailing view of the landowners of the south convinced him that black laborers, because of their previous African climate, were well suited to such labor. He began to think that slavery was necessary if the land was to be cultivated and cultivation was necessary to the survival of the orphanage. The result was that he rejoiced when slavery became legal in Georgia, and, as indicated above, became a slave owner. Further, he believed that, by bringing Africans into contact with Christian Europeans, slavery provided a means of preaching the gospel to them. This was an additional justification for slavery. Whitefield kept some fifty slaves on the acres of rice and flax that sustained the orphanage.

The other factor influencing Whitefield's change of view, according to Benezet was the principle of attenuation. In his second letter to Lady Huntingdon, 1775, we receive invaluable insight into Benezet's view of Whitefield. Early in the letter Benezet makes the strong point that good people initially respond to evil with clear disdain, but from ongoing exposure they begin to practice and defend the same evil. He wrote:

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6Benezet to Lady Huntingdon, March 10, 1775, p. 1. This theme is also found in Benezet's tracts. See Epistle of 1754, paragraph 6, and Benezet's Short Account, p. 4.
7Brookes, 97.
Many well disposed people are ready as their first prospect of some prevailing evils to say, with one of old, “Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?” and yet from a repeated sight & habit of that which flatters self, which soothes [sic] our pride & interest, we are too often gradually drawn into the practice & defence of that which we at first [...] looked upon with abhorence. This I have observed to be more particularly the case with respect to the bondage of the Negroes.8

It appears that Benezet is setting the stage for describing what specifically happened in Whitefield’s thinking. On page two of the letter he continues:

I have more than once conversed on this interesting subject with my esteemed friend George Whitefield deceased. [...] after residing in Georgia & being habituated to the sight & use of Slaves, his judgment became so much influenced as to pali­ate, & in some measure, defend the use of Slaves. . . .

Benezet’s assessment is that, through continued exposure to slavery, Whitefield, like so many others, became accustomed to and accepting of what had previously been abhorrent to him. He became attenuated to this moral evil. Benezet’s response to Whitefield’s attenuation is not left in question. He states, “this was a matter of much concern to me, and which I repeatedly, with brotherly freedom, expressed to him.” However, Whitefield did not change his opinion and amazingly, their relationship did not suffer. Benezet expresses unusual charity and tolerance in his conclusion, “Nevertheless I esteemed & loved him, having long had opportunity to observe his zeal for what he apprehended truth required.”

“Now is the season for us to exert our utmost for the good of the poor Ethiopians”9

Having failed to persuade Whitefield to oppose slavery, Benezet directed his influence to others after Whitefield’s death. More to the point, he was aware of the weight of Whitefield’s position and interested in “damage control.” He desired to counter Whitefield’s influence on those concerned in the orphanage. Relating specifically to Whitefield’s 1751 letter to Wesley, he reasoned:

8Benezet to Lady Huntingdon, March 10, 1775, p. 1. This theme is also found in Benezet’s tracts. See Epistle of 1754, paragraph 6, and Benezet’s Short Account, p. 4.

9Ibid., pp. 2-3, quoting Whitefield to Wesley, March 22, 1751.
What particularly causes me now to remark upon his sentiments is, lest his approbation thereof should have any influence upon those who now [my emphasis] have the management of his interest in Georgia, some of whom, I apprehend, are like minded, if not yet more inclined to favour the use of & slavery of the Negroes than he was. There is particularly in the Collection of his letters, published since his decease, one wrote from Bristol, the 22 March 1751, which I am apprehensive may give much strength, & be a standing plea to such who catch at every thing, much more a letter wrote by a person of so much weight, to defend their favorite Diana by which they have their wealth. His reasonings in that letter appear to me, & indeed to everyone with whom I have reasoned upon it, to be very inconclusive, rather beging [sic] the question: for tho’ the spiritual advantage of the Slaves is pleaded, yet it plainly appears that the temporal advantage, resulting from their labour, is the principal motive for undertaking to defend the practice.

Citing Whitefield’s words to Wesley, “it is plain to a demonstration that hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes,” Benezet uses a similar phrase to counter argue and uncover what he believes to be Whitefield’s true motive. He asserts, “...from the whole of this letter, it is clear, to a demonstration, that the main aim of his desire of purchasing Slaves was the pecuniar advantage arising therefrom & the outward advancement & prosperity of the province.”

Attempting to find a balance between criticism and charity, Benezet adds, “However we may in general retain an esteem & love for individuals, yet we must not suffer ourselves to be blinded by ill grounded pretences, founded on those selfish motives too apt, if not thro’ divine help particularly guarded against, to intrude in a time of weakness upon the heart, of even otherwise valuable persons.”

He then cites John Wesley, who also lived and did physical labor in Georgia, to refute the climatic need for slaves, referring to part of Wesley’s tract, Thoughts Upon Slavery: “As to the plea that hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes, the contrary is asserted by John Wesley, from his own experience in the piece intituled [sic] Thoughts on Slavery which I herewith send at page 41.” He encloses his republished, annotated edition of Wesley’s tract.

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10 Ibid., 2-4.
11 Ibid., 4.
After closing the letter, Benezet could not resist adding another lament about Whitefield. Whitefield had made the statement that, whether one liked it or not, the trade will continue. In reaction, Benezet levels his most pointed response: "Indeed we may expect this trade will continue, whilst those who have been the particular objects of the notice of the nation, as promulgators of the Gospel reason in this manner, instead of bearing their Christian Testimony, against the outrageous violation of the rights of Mankind." There is no doubt that Benezet’s phrase "the particular objects of the notice of the nation, as promulgators of the Gospel" is a clear reference to Whitefield’s celebrity status and makes a dramatic contrast to Wesley, who used his celebrity status and position of leadership to influence people in support of the antislavery cause. To Benezet, the entire matter has to do with speaking truth in the face of a horrid evil, or as Wesley termed the slave trade, that "execrable trade" and slavery, the "sum of all villanies." There is no question that Benezet loved and had great respect for Whitefield, but still he was constrained to speak truth, even to oppose his friend because "... where the lives and ... [the] welfare of so vast a number of our Fellow Creatures is concerned, to be silent ... would be criminal."

Benezet not only disagreed with Whitefield, but he also did his utmost to persuade him—to no avail. While his regard for this fellow Christian was not diminished, he had no qualms about confronting him in life about the inconsistency in the practice of his faith or about exposing his rationale and its weakness after death. He also did not hesitate to use his friendship with Whitefield and the weakness in Whitefield’s argument to persuade Lady Huntingdon to work for the cause of the slaves. He believed he was called to bring an end to slavery and he would do whatever he could.

Conclusion

Wesley and Whitefield intersected at many points in their lives and the two of them also intersected with Benezet at the crossroad of slavery. What can be learned from their relationships and decisions can instruct

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12Ibid., p. 7.
13Wesley, Thoughts Upon Slavery.
14Benezet to Lady Huntingdon, March, 1775, p. 7.

— 172 —
thoughtful people of the present age in regard to looking beyond their culture and deeper than the accepted hermeneutic of the majority. Whitefield used Scripture to endorse slavery by citing biblical examples in which slavery was not condemned. Benezet and Wesley saw beyond such use of oft-quoted examples to the larger biblical call to love and treat others as one desires to be treated. This reflects the hermeneutic that Tertullian encouraged—the challenge of every age is to view individual texts of Scripture in light of the whole of Scripture and to see the penetrating truth of Scripture and be led to higher mores rather than using Scripture as a prooftext to support one’s bias and practice.

The example of being faithful in using one’s gifts and being passionate to make a difference in the world is one to be followed. Believers are to speak truth in the face of differing opinions, but do so with unfeigned charity. All three were great men, followers of their consciences and they made a difference in the world. It is hoped that the clearer glance from the perspective of history will enable us to take the best from their lives and model our lives from the truth they lived into.