

George Whitefield's troubled relationship to race and slavery

By [Thomas S. Kidd](#)

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2014 demonstrated that, whatever the significance of Barack Obama's two terms as our first African American president, we have hardly moved beyond national struggles over race and class. Failures to indict white policemen accused of the unjust killings of black men precipitated protests and online shouting matches about racial inequality, or just how to talk about race. Christians participated in (hopefully) profitable discussions such as the December 16, 2014 "[A Time to Speak](#)" event, hosted by Pastor Bryan Lorritts of Fellowship Memphis at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel.

In a notable coincidence, December 16 was also the 300th birthday of George Whitefield, the most important evangelist of the Great Awakening of the 18th century, and a thoroughly problematic figure on the topics of race and slavery.

Whitefield grew up in Gloucester, England, and confronted the living reality of slavery when he began to visit America in the late 1730s. By 1740, the young Whitefield was not only drawing crowds in the tens of thousands to his outdoor sermons, but he was prepared to indict southern slave masters for their abuses of slaves in his published "Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina." Whitefield also demonstrated personal interest in African Americans who responded to his preaching, believing that they not only had an eternal fate, but that they could become serious (and educated) Christians.

By the mid-1740s, however, Whitefield became connected with slave masters who had converted under his ministry, and though he never publicly retracted his criticisms of the institution, he complied with his wealthy friends' offers to give him slaves and a South Carolina plantation. More importantly, Whitefield became convinced that he needed slaves to work at a Georgia plantation to fund the operations of his Bethesda orphanage, outside of Savannah, which was the great charitable project of his career.

The problem was that Georgia trustees had banned slavery from the colony. Whitefield thought the ban was silly and destined to be overturned, and thus he became arguably the colony's leading proponent of slavery's legalization. Georgia did eventually permit slavery, but evidence suggests that Whitefield had already allowed slaves to work on his Georgia property before the ban was lifted.

Here is a man who was the most tireless gospel preacher of his era, and who seemed to care a great deal about orphans and African American converts. But he also became one of colonial America's staunchest advocates for slavery's expansion. Are we permitted to admire such a man, in spite of his glaring blind spots? (The question is hardly limited to Whitefield: we might ask the same about slaveowning historical figures from George Washington to Stonewall Jackson.)

I do admire Whitefield because of his passionate commitment to the gospel, but his relationship to slavery represents the greatest ethical problem in his career. It represents an enduring story of many Christians' devotion to God but frequent inability (or unwillingness) to perceive and act against social injustice. Instead of condemning Whitefield as irredeemable, I would suggest that we let his faults—which we can see more clearly with 300 years of hindsight—caution us instead. Even the most sincere Christians risk being shaped more by fallen society than by the gospel.

Lest we wag our finger at figures like Whitefield, we should be reminded of the enormous difficulties of thinking outside of our cultural box. As much as I wish it were otherwise, if I had been born into a white southern slaveowning family in the Revolutionary era, I would almost certainly have died believing that slavery was a morally acceptable institution, too.

We should also watch out for the kind of over-individualizing of Christianity to which Whitefield succumbed. And if you believe, as I do, that every person has a soul and an eternal destiny, then it is easy to understand why Whitefield called incessantly on his hearers to be born again. It is a uniquely important spiritual issue.

But that singular focus helped to blind Whitefield to the sin inherent within the Atlantic slave system, from the mass stealing and sale of African captives to the pervasive abuses of slaves in the Americas (a reality that a younger Whitefield had seen more clearly). As important as the individual's standing before God remains, it must not blind Christians to the social injustices around us.

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