GEORGE WHITEFIELD, AFRICAN-AMERICANS, AND SLAVERY

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On July 19, 1740, George Whitefield wrote in his Journal concerning the effectiveness of his ministry in the area of Charleston, South Carolina: "Indeed, the Word often came like a hammer and a fire." Such a response to his preaching was nothing new. He had, by his own account, preached before enthusiastic crowds that numbered in the tens of thousands on several occasions. At this time, he was particularly excited that his preaching had attracted the interest of the sizable African-American population that inhabited the colony as slaves. He wrote,

Several of the negroes did their work in less time than usual, that they might come to hear me; and many of the owners, who have been awakened, have resolved to teach them Christianity. Had I time and proper schoolmasters, I might immediately erect a negro school in South Carolina, as well as in Pennsylvania. Many would willingly contribute both money and land.

Five and a half weeks later the dream for the Whitefield's school for negroes in South Carolina seemed to have advanced to the point that the school was actually being planned. On August 25, 1740 he wrote of the school again in his Journal,

Mr. Jonathan Bryan came much established. Mr. Hugh Bryan was left sick at home; but his wife came to Charleston. By my advice, they have resolved to begin a negro school. A young stage player, who was convinced when I was at New York last, and who providentially came to Georgia, when Mr. Jonathan Bryan was there, is to be their first master.

By late summer 1740, Whitefield could have been legitimately seen as the foremost champion of the rights of African-Americans. He and his disciples in South Carolina were regarded by the slave-owning establishment with great suspicion. His record as an advocate for the slaves appeared to have been admirable. His preaching in Philadelphia in November, 1739 had drawn large crowds of slaves and has been credited

2Journals, 444.
3Journals, 450.
4For an examination of the interaction between the Bryans and Whitefield and the social implications of their efforts to evangelize the African-American slave population in South Carolina see Harvey H. Jackson, "Hugh Bryan and the Evangelical Movement in Colonial South Carolina," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., XXXIII (1986), 594-614.
with bringing about the advent of black Christianity there. His preaching in Philadelphia was even more popular among the slaves when he returned five months later, in May, 1740. Undoubtedly, his reputation among the slaves increased when he announced his intention to establish two schools for negroes in Pennsylvania, one of which was to be located in Philadelphia.

His Journal entry for May 11, 1740 indicates the tenderness that Whitefield and the Africans, slave and free, felt for each other. Whitefield wrote,

Near fifty negroes came to give thanks for what God had done to their souls. . . . Many of them have begun to read. One, who was free, said she would give me her two children, whenever I settle my school. I believe masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their negroes worse slaves.

More than that, Whitefield here reveals his plan to organize a black congregation in Philadelphia. He continued,

I intended, had time permitted, to have settled a Society for negro men and negro women; but that must be deferred till it shall please God to bring me to Philadelphia again.

During his journey from Philadelphia to Georgia in late 1739, Whitefield revealed his feelings concerning the equality and educability of Africans. On December 27, 1739 he wrote,

. . . I went, as my usual custom is, among the negroes. . . . One man was sick in bed, and two of his children said their prayers after me very well. This more and more convinces me that negro children, if early brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, would make as great proficiency as any white people's children. I do not despair, if God spares my life, of seeing a school of young negroes singing praises of Him Who made them, in a psalm of thanksgiving.

When he completed his journey from Philadelphia to Georgia, Whitefield publicly declared his passionate opposition to the mistreatment of slaves which he observed during his trip through the southern colonies in late November and December, 1739. On January 23, 1740, he published, A Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina Concerning Their Slaves.

The letter indicates that Whitefield was a keenly interested observer of the plight of the slaves. He compared the treatment of many slaves in an unfavorable way to the manner in which the dogs and horses of the

6Nash, 18.
7Journals, 422.
8Journals, 422.
9Journals, 379.
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plantation owners are treated.\textsuperscript{11} He argued that negroes are indeed, by nature, no worse nor no better than whites. Finally, he threatened God's judgment upon those who would keep the slaves from hearing the gospel. In fact, Whitefield suggested that God's judgment had already begun. A recent slave rebellion, an impending threat of military attack on the southern colonies from Spain, and an outbreak of smallpox indicated his wrath.\textsuperscript{12} To Whitefield, the answer to all these problems was spiritual. Whitefield said,

These judgments are undoubtedly sent abroad, not only that the inhabitants of that, but of other provinces, should learn righteousness: and unless you all repent, you must in like manner expect to perish.\textsuperscript{13}

The basis of the problem, in short, was that unconverted masters were mistreating and denying the gospel to their unconverted slaves. If the slaves would be treated properly, the south's problems would disappear.

Despite his undeniable love and concern for the African-Americans which they obviously returned to him, Whitefield's record on racial issues is far from spotless and has led to considerable discussion and confusion. Much attention has been fixed on the fact that by March, 1747 Whitefield wrote complaining that the colony of Georgia continued to prohibit slavery and, thereby, prevented his orphanage, which he had named Bethesda, from prospering. He said, "The constitution of the colony is very bad, and it is impossible for the inhabitants to subsist without the use of slaves."\textsuperscript{14}

He continued by joyfully detailing a plan which allowed him to support the orphanage with slave labor despite the laws of Georgia, writing,

... God has put it into the hearts of my South Carolina friends [Hugh and Jonathan Bryan], to contribute liberally towards purchasing, in [South Carolina] a plantation and slaves, which I purpose to devote to the support of Bethesda. Blessed be God! the purchase is made.\textsuperscript{15}

By December, 1748, Whitefield was no longer content to keep his slaves at a location separate from his orphanage. Luke Tyerman's biography of Whitefield includes an entire letter in which Whitefield threatened to pull the orphanage from Georgia if slavery was not permitted. He says,

... I am determined, that, not one of [my slaves] shall ever be allowed to work at the Orphan House till it can be done in a legal manner, and with the approbation of the Honourable Trustees. My chief aim in writing this is to inform you, that, I am as willing as ever to do all I can for Georgia and the Orphan House, if either a limited use of negroes is approved of, or some more indentured servants be sent from England.

\textsuperscript{11} Works, IV, 31-2.
\textsuperscript{12} Works, IV, 34-5.
\textsuperscript{13} Works, IV, 35
\textsuperscript{15} Tyerman, II, 169
If not, I cannot promise to keep any large family, or cultivate the plantation in any considerable manner.  

Whitefield's tender concern for the plight of slaves coupled with his ardent support for slavery to the point that he bullied the colony of Georgia into legalizing it has caused scholars to struggle. Tyerman describes Whitefield's view as a "distracting compound of good and evil principles." Stuart Henry saw Whitefield's condemnation of the cruelty of slave owners and his later efforts to legalize slavery in Georgia as an example of "the length to which Whitefield was capable of going in supporting prejudice or advantage by the power of a biblical text. . . ." Arnold Dallimore says, "Whitefield's influence, however, with regard to the position of the negro, was both beneficial and harmful. Harmful, in that within eleven years, he owned slaves at Bethesda, and though they received the same treatment as whites, they were, none the less, slaves." Harry S. Stout says, " . . . despite his failures (institutional and personal), his voice of compassion for the slaves continued to ring out and win their enduring adoration."

The remainder of this study will attempt to offer insight into the confusion generated by Whitefield's apparent inconsistencies in relating to African-Americans. Two suggestions will be offered. First, Whitefield's later actions in promoting slavery and owning slaves were essentially consistent with his early concern over the treatment of slaves. Second, Whitefield responded to the slaves in the colonies in a way that is consistent with his admiration for the social ministries of August Herman Francke among groups of needy people in Halle, Germany.

One way that scholars studying Whitefield's life have explained his relationship to African-Americans and the institution of slavery is to see Whitefield's actions after 1747 as being a development in his thought, arguing that Whitefield's view of slavery changed. Stephen Stein, for example, says that Whitefield's effort in 1748 to bring legalized slavery to

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16 Tyerman, II, 206.
17 Stuart Henry maintains that Whitefield was one of the two most influential people in bringing about the legalization of slavery in Georgia. See Stuart C. Henry, George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness (New York: Abingdon Press), 117.
18 Henry, 273. This comment comes at the end of a letter of March 22, 1751, in which Whitefield reflects on the legalization of slavery in Georgia by saying that "some were bought with Abraham's money" and that "some of the servants mentioned by the apostles, in their epistles, were or had been slaves."
Georgia was "markedly out of step with his earlier indictment of the slaveholders." If this is the case, Whitefield changed his view very shortly after 1740. The earliest indication that Whitefield was interested personally in owning slaves actually appears as early as December, 1741. By this time Whitefield had already become the object of controversy and many charges had been leveled against him by numerous opponents. Among the most damaging of these accusations was that he had been dishonest in the use of the considerable amount of money that he had collected for his orphanage.

On December 23, 1741 Whitefield produced a document titled, An Account of the Orphan-House in Georgia. The eight-page Preface of the Account included a brief history of the orphanage and a description of its inhabitants as well as Whitefield's assessment of its current state. It is at this point that he indicated his desire to support the orphanage with slave labor. He stated, "As for manuring more land than the hired servants and great boys can manage, it is impracticable without a few negroes. It will no wise answer the expence [sic]." Here, more than five years before he announced the purchase of his South Carolina plantation and his first slave, Whitefield indicated his desire to own slaves.

The most striking thing about this brief paragraph may seem to be that Whitefield, writing from the same orphanage in which he had penned his Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina . . . , could mention the use of slave labor without offering any note of justification for his change in position. This is, in fact, precisely the point made by Stuart Henry. Henry writes with incredulity,

... a year later the man who had made open attack on slaveholding colonists and written them grave admonition regarding the abuses to which the institution was liable was using all his influence to persuade the trustees of Georgia to allow legal slavery in the colony. The reason was clear enough: The Bethesda orphanage could not be run without slave labor.

The question becomes: was Whitefield guilty, as Stein and Henry accuse, of changing his position of vehement opposition to the institution of slavery for the sake of his own convenience? The answer to that question must come from a careful reading of his open letter of 1740.

One thing that is clear from the Letter is that Whitefield's feelings on slavery were very intense. The mere fact that he wrote the Letter itself suggests that his feelings were strong. His language also conveys his passion. The letter opens with the sentence, "As I lately passed through your provinces, in my way hither, I was sensibly touched with a

23 Works, III, 435.
fellow-feeling of the miseries of the poor negroes."25 After comparing the
treatment that many slaves receive unfavorably to the manner in which
the horses and dogs of plantation owners are treated, Whitefield said,

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 labours.26

In the letter Whitefield went so far as to speak about the equality of
the slaves and their owners. To Whitefield, slave children and adults were
as capable as their masters. He wrote,

... if teaching slaves christianity has such a bad influence on their lives, why are you
generally desirous of having your own children taught? Think you, they are 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 grown
negroes, I am apt to think, whenever the gospel is preached with power amongst them,
that many will be brought effectually home to God.27

Did his passionate feelings about the treatment of slaves and his con­
viction that the slaves were equal to their masters lead him to denounce
slavery itself? The answer is clearly no. Curiously, after describing his anger
at the treatment that many slaves received, Whitefield went on to suggest
that such treatment actually could serve a good purpose. He stated,

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 conse­
quently better dispose their minds to accept the redemption wrought out for them by
the death and obedience of Jesus Christ.28

Close to the beginning of the Letter, Whitefield did address the ques­
tion of whether slavery is a justifiable institution. It is interesting that
though he raised the question of whether slavery could be defended, he
refused to take a position. He said,

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 ... I fear that the generality of you that own negroes
are liable to such a charge. ...29

From this it is clear that the passion that Whitefield expressed in the
Letter was not the result of his feeling that slavery itself was sinful. To
Whitefield there was a much more important issue. His concern was that

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25 Works, IV, 29.
26 Works, IV, 30.
27 Works, IV, 32.
28 Works, IV, 32.
29 Works, IV, 29.
slave owners were sinning in the way they abused their slaves physically, by the beatings imposed on them and by the lack of humane treatment given to them, and spiritually, by the fact that the owners were denying the slaves the opportunity to receive the gospel.

Whitefield's indication in late 1741 that he would like to employ slave labor to support the orphanage, his purchase of a plantation in South Carolina which he used to support the orphanage with slave labor in 1747 and his successful lobbying to legalize slavery in Georgia in 1748 were not inconsistent with the content and purpose of his Letter, written in 1740. By all accounts Whitefield was true to his own principles. His slaves were treated with the utmost humanity and were, of course, offered the opportunity to receive the gospel.30

Much of the confusion that has been generated by Whitefield's actions and statements concerning slaves and slavery may, perhaps, be eliminated through an examination of Whitefield's attitudes and actions toward other disadvantaged groups and the similarity between his social ministries and those of the pietists at Halle. Whitefield was, indeed, often moved to take action on behalf of needy groups of people. The slaves of the southern colonies were by no means the first to benefit from Whitefield's concern and his charitable enterprise.

The first group for whom Whitefield showed his charitable concern was orphaned children. It was less than two weeks after he began his work as the Anglican priest serving the colony of Georgia that Whitefield first mentioned the idea of erecting an orphan house in the colony.31 In his references to the beginnings of the orphanage, Whitefield made it very clear that he was inspired by the charitable enterprises of the German pietists at Halle under the direction of August Herman Francke.

Whitefield became familiar with Francke near the beginning of his Oxford days in the early 1730s. In, A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, Whitefield mentioned that shortly prior to his conversion in 1734, he met with Charles Wesley and received from him a copy of Francke's treatise, Against the Fear of Man.32 Unlike John Wesley, Whitefield was not very careful in keeping records of what books he was reading. It is clear, however, that he read Francke's Pietas Hallensis about the same time that he read Against the Fear of Man.

Just how much of the writings of Francke Whitefield read is also unknown. Francke was well known in England in the early eighteenth century. He had established a relationship with the Society for Promoting

30 Dallimore, I, 509.
31 Journals, 156.
32 Journals, 46. The full title of Francke's work is, Nicodemus: A Treatise Against the Fear of Man. This work was very popular among many Methodists. It was translated, abridged and printed seven times by John Wesley.
Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1699. A number of Francke's works were translated into English by A. W. Boehm, Francke's hand-picked court preacher for Prince George. Boehm, who became a prominent figure in the SPCK, made a career in the early eighteenth century by translating German pietists' works into English. It was almost certainly a 1731 printing of his translation of Against the Fear of Man that Whitefield read in 1734.33

Underlying Francke's charitable, ecumenical and missionary endeavors was his strong conviction that the most important of all the doctrines of Christianity is the doctrine of regeneration. In The Doctrine of Our Lord Jesus Christ Concerning Rebirth, Francke says,

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\ldots \text{no doctrine in Christianity is more necessary than the doctrine of rebirth. This } \ldots \text{if the person is not created anew or born of God, it does not help at all that Christ died for him; nor does it help at all that he has sent the Holy Spirit from heaven.} \ldots \quad 34
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In addition, Francke seems to have shared Philipp Jakob Spener's optimistic, postmillennial eschatology, though Francke never stressed the coming of the millennium to the degree Spener did. Nevertheless, there was a feeling that through works of charity and missions the church could and would accomplish much.

Whitefield's charitable works appear to be based on theological convictions that he shared with Francke. More than that, Whitefield clearly emulated Francke with his efforts to establish the orphanage in Georgia. In the Preface to An Account of the Orphan-House in Georgia, Whitefield's report of his expenditures at Bethesda, he mentioned Francke twice. He said first, \"I resolved in this, as well as in all other respects, to imitate [italics mine] Professor Franck [sic], and make a provision for [additional orphans] also.\" In the last paragraph he said that he prayed that his own project, \"may be rightly stiled Pietas Georgiensis, and like the Pietas Hallensis, or Professor Franck's [sic] Orphan-House at Glaucha, near Hall [sic], become the joy of the whole earth.\"36

Not only had Whitefield read Pietas Hallensis early, he apparently reread it at least once for inspiration. His Journal for September 15, 1739, nearly nineteen months after he first formulated the idea of an orphan house in Georgia, stated,

Was exceedingly strengthened in reading Professor Francke's account of the Orphan House at Halle, near Glauchau. It seems, in many circumstances, to be exactly parallel

34Sattler, 135.
35Works, III, 432.
36Works, III, 438.
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to my present undertaking for the poor in Georgia, that I trust the Orphan House about to be erected there, will be carried on and ended with the like faith and success.\textsuperscript{37}

Francke's charitable enterprises at Halle involved much more than an orphanage. Included in the work supervised by Francke was a widow's home and several schools for the children of the poor. It is not surprising that Whitefield, who was inspired by Francke's efforts, should have dreams for his orphanage that ranged beyond the orphanage itself. In fact, he intimated in two letters that he hoped that a school would be established on the grounds of the orphan house. On November 10, 1739 Whitefield wrote to Howell Harris,

I have had great intimations from above concerning Georgia. Who knows but we may have a college of pious youths at Savannah? I do not despair thereof. Professor Franck's [sic] undertaking in Germany has been much pressed upon my heart. I really believe that my present undertaking will succeed.\textsuperscript{38}

After laying the foundation for the orphanage, Whitefield wrote to James Habersham, the superintendent of the institution, "... on Monday [I] laid a foundation in the name of our dear Lord Jesus for an university in Georgia."\textsuperscript{39}

Whitefield was clearly inspired by the work of August Herman Francke and the Halle pietists. He maintained a close relationship with the Salzburgers, whose settlement at New Ebenezer, Georgia was directly tied to the ongoing missionary efforts of the Pietists at Halle. Whitefield, in fact, supported the German's orphanage in Georgia which began its operation before Bethesda was completed.

In addition to his relationship with the Saltzburgers, Whitefield corresponded with August Herman Francke's son, Gottlieb August Francke, who directed the charitable and missionary enterprises of the pietists at Halle for four decades after the death of his father in 1727. Whitefield and G. A. Francke maintained their correspondence from 1739 until 1769, the year of the younger Francke's death.

It's clear, though, that Whitefield and the Halle pietists were not always in perfect agreement. In the late 1740s Whitefield discussed the issue of slavery itself with the Halle pietists in Georgia as well as with Francke in Germany. Whitefield suggested in a letter to G. A. Francke that he had convinced the Saltzburgers in Georgia of the correctness of his use of slaves. Whitefield indicated that, though the Saltzburgers initially had reservations about his efforts to legalize slavery in Georgia, he had convinced them. G. A. Francke, however, was not convinced and would not agree with him.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37}Journals, 334.
\textsuperscript{38}Works, I, 84.
\textsuperscript{39}Works, I, 185.
\textsuperscript{40}For a detailed treatment of Whitefield's correspondence with G. A. Francke see, Karl Zehrer, "The relationship Between Pietism in Halle and Early Methodism." (translated by James A. Dwyer) Methodist History 17 (1979), 211-224.
After Whitefield set his dreams for his Pietas Georgiensis in motion, he began similar activities among the poor Kingswood colliers at Bristol in England. Like many orphans of his day, these miners faced living conditions that were abominable. Their working conditions were deplorable. Incidents of disease among the colliers were extremely high even by the standard of that age. It was among this group that Whitefield chose to initiate his efforts at field preaching in England.

Though the work that Whitefield began at Kingswood was, for the most part, lost to the Wesleys when Whitefield separated with them over the doctrines of election and Christian perfection, Whitefield had an opportunity to begin some charitable work there. The very first thing he did was to initiate efforts to educate the miners’ children. As he prepared for his next trip to the colonies, he distributed several thousand “little books among the people.” He also began fund raising efforts in an attempt to collect money in subscriptions for the building of a school.

Among the disadvantaged colliers of Kingswood, as in Georgia, Whitefield displayed a deep concern for the need of people who suffered. His concern led him first to preach. Then, after having made inroads, he began to formulate plans to educate his recent converts. Here again his work seems to be based on convictions he shared with the Halle pietists.

Considering the pattern established by Whitefield in his ministry in Georgia and with the colliers at Kingswood, it should not be surprising that, having achieved success among African-Americans, he should attempt to build on what had been achieved through their conversion by thinking of the further benefits that would result from their education. To Whitefield this was natural. His concern for the salvation of the slaves was an indication of his conviction that the doctrine of regeneration was the most important of all the doctrines of Christianity. His desire to gain fair treatment for them and then educate them is a reflection of his own vaguely optimistic view of the eschaton.

It is clear that Whitefield’s initial charitable enterprises were patterned after the Halle institutions. His numerous comparisons between the Georgia orphanage and Francke’s work at Halle testified strongly to this connection. It also appears that the charitable work that Whitefield began at Bethesda served as a pattern for his later charitable efforts among the

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41 Journals, 242.
42 Journals, 240.
43 Like Francke, Whitefield was not greatly concerned with speculation about the kingdom. Though there is no one place in his writings where he deals with the eschaton directly, his early letters do occasionally refer to the advancement of the kingdom. These references normally occur during or shortly after an unusually successful preaching engagement and are the result of Whitefield’s excitement over the massive conversions that have recently taken place. As examples see letters 129 (April 27, 1740) in which Whitefield says, “Our Lord’s kingdom comes with power. It is amazing to see how God is present in our assemblies. . .” and 131 (May 19, 1740) in which he says, “The war between Michael and the dragon has much increased. . . Now I believe our Lord’s kingdom will come with power.”
colliers in England and African-Americans in the colonies. In each case, initial efforts to convert eventually resulted in attempts to educate.

Late nineteenth and twentieth century efforts to explain Whitefield’s attitude and actions toward African-Americans have been made difficult by the events that have taken place since his death. The battle for the freedom of slaves in England, though bloodless, was intense and was won only after decades of diligent effort. The United States, of course, resolved the issue through a war.

Many would like to applaud Whitefield as a humanitarian who was years ahead of his time or condemn him for having a sense of justice but abandoning it for the sake of personal convenience. In fact, George Whitefield was a man of his age. As was the case with the majority of the continental pietists, Whitefield considered himself to be perfectly orthodox in maintaining the doctrines of the Reformation. With the reformers, he held tenaciously to the doctrine of total human depravity. With the pietists he held the conviction that the key to the solution to all of the world’s ills was the conversion of the sinner. He believed that, with the changing of the human heart, social change would be affected.

To Whitefield, the answer to the injustice faced by African-American slaves, did not lie in an attack on the institution of slavery, but in the conversion of the master and the slave. Whitefield was one of many in his day who saw the regeneration of all of the people of the world as both essential and possible. His treatment of African-Americans fit those two convictions: the two convictions to which he gave his whole life.