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# OWNERSHIP

THE EVANGELICAL LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN  
EDWARDS, WESLEY, AND WHITEFIELD



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# WHY SLAVERY?

## SLAVERY HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ME

ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2020, I spoke at Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts, at a memorial for a man who never knew me. But I knew him.

George Whitefield died on that day, 250 years before, and his body is buried in a crypt below the church. Tom Schwanda, a theologian from Wheaton College, Mark Noll, a historian from Notre Dame, and I spoke at a (virtual) worship service to commemorate Whitefield's life, legacy, and ministry. The event organizers had invited me to speak on one of Whitefield's favorite topics: the new birth.

The event went well. I gave my talk, then returned to my other commitments. A month later, I received an unexpected package in the mail. It included a generous thank-you note from the church and a gift. I opened the small package with curiosity and was surprised to find a coin. The church had minted a commemorative coin for the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Whitefield's death.

One side of the coin was embossed with the words *Rev. George Whitefield* over a portrait of Whitefield's characteristic round face and crossed left eye. He is wearing his minister's wig, robe, and preaching bands—the classic image of Whitefield.

On the other side of the coin, the outer ring stated, *America's Spiritual Founding Father*. This declaration about Whitefield is common among secular and Christian historians of early America, and as we will

see, its truth is both inspiring and chilling. But it was what was written in the middle of that side of the coin in small font that caught my attention. It was from a letter Whitefield wrote on July 12, 1749:

I am content to wait till the day of judgment for the clearing up of my character: and after I am dead, I desire no other epitaph than this, “Here lies G. W. What sort of a man he was, the great day will discover.”

One of the reasons Whitefield’s words caught my attention was that two months before the memorial, on July 2, 2020, the University of Pennsylvania decided to remove a statue of Whitefield that had been standing on the campus for over a hundred years. In 2006 and 2016 the University denied having any connections to slavery. A team of researchers, led by VanJessica Gladney, presented Whitefield’s enslavement of Black people and his successful efforts to legalize slavery in Georgia. The University of Pennsylvania revisited “what sort of a man” Whitefield was and came to their own conclusion. Whitefield may have been waiting for God’s judgment, but the University of Pennsylvania made their judgment much sooner.<sup>1</sup>

Few Christians, if any, doubt Whitefield’s genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Yet many admirers have come to doubt aspects of “America’s Spiritual Founding Father’s” character—myself included. Still, 250 years ago, at Whitefield’s official memorial, one of his closest friends, John Wesley, didn’t publicize the doubts that the University of Pennsylvania and I have about his character.

The organizers at Old South Presbyterian Church addressed Whitefield’s checkered legacy in their 250th memorial of his death. They titled the several-months-long series of events “The Great Awakening Meets a Just Awakening.” This memorial was quite different from the one John Wesley spoke at shortly after Whitefield’s death. As we’ll see, this funeral was a pivotal moment in evangelical history regarding slavery. Old South Presbyterian Church designed their events to acknowledge the “gap between the inclusive gospel message that Whitefield preached and

his devastating failure to embrace the full personhood of African Americans.” I was proud to be part of a series of events to admire the strengths of Whitefield while also acknowledging the harm he brought to the people he enslaved, the people of the state of Georgia, and so many others. The man who proclaimed the gospel of liberty from slavery to sin held Jeremy, Abraham, Abigail, Fanny, and forty-five other people as slaves to him—and upon his death gave all of them to his top financial donor.

I meet admirers of Whitefield who don’t know about his slaveholding or about his political and doctrinal support for its legality. I am quick to educate them on these details. Yet education is not enough. James Baldwin writes, “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.”<sup>2</sup>

The work of historical retrieval is, in a way, the easy part. The hard part is choosing how I will navigate, and *own*, what happens in my country, in my state, in my city, in my neighborhood, and in my home—*today*.

### HOW COULD CHRISTIANS SUPPORT SLAVERY?

It’s no secret that one of the most glaring embarrassments of Christianity is its complicity with slavery. Most Christian leaders did not question the institution of slavery for nearly eighteen hundred years. When questions were asked, it was just the beginning of a whole host of other questions, some of which remain today. When we look at the first eighteen hundred years of Christianity, most of us want to throw our hands in the air and scream, “How did they miss it?” We can’t imagine Christians today purchasing another person, controlling—frequently by force—their actions, profiting from their labor, and owning their children. How did they miss it? Keep reading; I will show you.

But first—and I write this very cautiously—I urge you to avoid thinking that you are any smarter, holier, or better than the Christians of the first

eighteen centuries. Why? Because assuming that you are innately better than any other human is at the core of the issue of slavery itself.

Rather than asking, “how did *they* miss it back then,” I have a harder question for you to ask yourself: “What am *I* missing right now?” This book highlights the stories of three men from the eighteenth century. You will discover what they missed, what they learned, and the legacy they left—much of which endures today. But before we go back in the past, one of the purposes of this enterprise is to challenge you, as it does me, with a question about the present: “What am *I* missing right now?” The final chapter will bring us back to this question and highlight lessons these three men learned along the way in hopes of shedding light on our path today.

This book will examine how Christians in the eighteenth century began to understand slavery differently than their own predecessors. Today, things progress differently than in the eighteenth century. A major difference is acceleration. In today’s connected age, the issues confronted in the eighteenth century regarding slavery would progress much faster. Accelerating change also accelerates errors, but at this point in our society the speed and expectation of change is permanently faster than it was two centuries ago. This means that we are expected to make changes faster than our ancestors did—and we’d better be correct because it is more difficult to hide today.

For example, sending a letter to Jonathan Edwards and receiving a reply would have taken weeks in his era. The email you receive today, however, might expect a response in a day or two. You might be expected to reply to a text message in a few minutes, and a social media post might draw a response out of you in a few seconds. The expectation of lightning-quick responses in our modern world underscores the importance and benefits of learning from the past. We rarely have the leisure and space to figure out things for ourselves—and maybe that’s a good thing, but only if we know how to choose our response wisely.

You had no choice over when, where, or who you were when you were born. But here you are. One invaluable resource to navigate the life

you've been given is the ability to learn from your predecessors. I have dug deep to find the successes and failures—the convictions to hold on to and the sacred cows to let loose—of a century of Christians who, we must assume, wanted to do the right thing while also navigating their own corrupted natures and environment. The issue of slavery engages deep personal, economic, societal, political, and religious implications—not unlike some of the issues we still face today. In today's accelerated world, we are too busy *not* to stop and learn from the past. It is more urgent than ever.

### WHY DISCUSS SLAVERY NOW?

In my research for this book, I spent time in Savannah, Georgia—a city and a state that play an important part in the story of evangelicals and slavery. When I was there, I already knew what the history books stated. I went to Savannah because I wanted to know what people thought about the history of slavery *now*.

I am White, and I was a stranger to all the people I encountered; these things certainly affected my conversations. I found that the people of Savannah don't want to talk about slavery—at all. No one I encountered wanted to talk about slavery. White people told me in succinct and well-practiced phrases that they knew their predecessors had engaged in a terrible thing—and then moved on quickly to other topics. They tended to highlight good things that are happening in their community now.

The Black people I encountered didn't want to talk about slavery either. I spent several hours in conversation with the director of the African American Cultural Center in Savannah. He helped me understand that discussions about slavery today belittle the dignity of their ancestors. Black people gained their emancipation long ago. The discussion of slavery itself adds a weight to their shoulders even as they continue to face daily challenges due to the color of their skin.

There was a pointed difference in my conversations with White and Black people in Savannah. White folks are embarrassed by the



conversation about slavery. Black folks are worn out by it. When I became curious about early evangelical history regarding slavery, I began discussing it with my friends of color back home. They were genuinely interested in the details and encouraged me to keep doing the research and to write the book you are reading now. They also said they were tired of explaining things related to race to White people like me. They told me that they were excited for me to do the research and believed it was important that I share it with them, but it was more important that I share my research with other people like me—other White people.

Few Americans are naive enough to think that slavery is irrelevant to our present condition. We recognize that personal and systemic race-based inequalities, beliefs, and experiences persist—these are not issues relegated to the past. While most modern Americans reject the ideology that supported slavery, some American Christians champion the history of American slavery as idyllic.

In 1996, Idaho-based pastors Doug Wilson and Steve Wilkins authored a short book titled *Southern Slavery: As It Was*. In their introduction, they wrote, “Southern slavery is open to criticism because it did not follow the biblical pattern at every point.”<sup>3</sup> Regarding Southern slavery, they write, “There has never been a multi-racial society that has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world.”<sup>4</sup> They go on to claim that “slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the [Civil] War or since.”<sup>5</sup> These pastors, promoted by prominent evangelical media outlets, illustrated that slavery is not an issue of the past. In their view, slavery is an ideal social system to aspire to in the present, if done in the way they think aligns with the Bible.

When a 2020 Twitter post revived the opinion of Wilson and Wilkins, Wilson responded on his blog that he stands by the general premises of his initial claim. He added, “The problems [with slavery] became more pronounced as things moved toward the Civil War—e.g., slavery in



Jonathan Edwards's day in New England was not the same sort of thing as slavery in Alabama in 1850."<sup>6</sup> Wilson's focus is on *how* to enslave people in a way that aligns with the Bible, rather than on an outright denunciation of the institution.

John MacArthur has pastored Grace Community Church in Los Angeles since 1969. He leads The Master's University, The Master's Seminary, and the international radio ministry *Grace to You*, and is the author and editor of over one hundred books. MacArthur teaches that Christians should revive a biblical understanding of the institution of slavery and put it into practice today. He explains:

[It is] strange that we have such an aversion to slavery because historically there have been abuses. . . . For many people, poor people, perhaps people who weren't educated, perhaps people who had no other opportunity, working for a gentle, caring, loving master was the best of all possible worlds. . . . Slavery is not objectionable if you have the right master. It's the perfect scenario.<sup>7</sup>

MacArthur believes that slavery is a part of "the best of all possible worlds" and "the perfect scenario" because, as he writes, "neither the Old nor New Testaments condemns slavery as such. Social strata are recognized and even designed by God for man's good."<sup>8</sup> MacArthur celebrates that "the back of the black slave trade was broken in Europe and America due largely to the powerful, Spirit-led preaching of such men as John Wesley and George Whitefield."<sup>9</sup> MacArthur's understanding of Wesley and Whitefield's role in the history of slavery is shallow and misguided, to say the least. MacArthur denounces *how* to enslave people—he is against the "black slave trade"—but believes that the *institution* of enslaving people is "best," "perfect," and "designed by God for man's good." New Testament scholar Esau McCaulley explains that slaveholders of the antebellum South maintained that the two options were "biblical slavery versus bad slavery. The problem was not slavery itself."<sup>10</sup>

While Wilson's, Wilkins's, and MacArthur's views might represent a fringe opinion among American Christians, few modern people are



looking to *any* White Christians to guide society in the right direction regarding race relations. Many people do not trust that White evangelical Christians have learned from their past. James Baldwin explains, “To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”<sup>11</sup> Evangelical Christians like me can learn to use our past when we rightly understand the cold facts of our failures alongside the truths of our triumphs. Learning from the past can help us confront modern slavery directly (e.g., human trafficking, forced prostitution, forced labor, forced marriage) as well as learning how and when to be constructively critical of secular and Christian cultural assumptions in our world today.

### “MEN OF THEIR TIMES”

I remember sitting in the third-story office of my master of letters graduate program supervisor, looking out the window across the ancient and lush St. Mary’s College quad at the University of Saint Andrews. He asked me, “Have you thought about studying the conversion theology of the early evangelicals? It’s surprising, but there are many questions in that topic area that haven’t been examined.” Five years later, I received a PhD in historical and systematic theology from the University of Aberdeen. My thesis was on the conversion theology of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

One of the first steps of PhD research in the United Kingdom is to read *everything* written by the person(s) you are studying. Wesley and Whitefield wrote a lot. This task took me about two years to complete. Prior to my research, I knew very little about Wesley, Whitefield, or any of the other major figures in their era—including Jonathan Edwards.

While I was reading the works of Wesley, Whitefield, and others for the first time, I encountered some things that made me uncomfortable. I remember sitting in the King’s College Divinity Library surrounded by walls of modern and ancient books—the college was founded in

1495. As the saying goes, “If only the walls could speak.” The walls were quiet that day, but the books spoke loudly. I plodded through the writings of Wesley and Whitefield hour after hour. Reading such a high volume of publications is mind-numbing, but from time to time, something catches your attention and you stop. I stopped because I noticed that Wesley and Whitefield wrote about people groups in racist and demeaning ways. I brought my concerns to my supervisor, and he made no excuses for them—he was just as uncomfortable with the comments as I was.

PhD studies must stay very focused on *one* topic, so I couldn’t stop to investigate these disturbing details. My solution was to add footnotes in my thesis. My research was eventually published in my book *Born Again: The Evangelical Theology of Conversion in John Wesley and George Whitefield*, and you can see some of these footnotes there. For example, regarding Wesley’s use of the words *heathen* and *Negroland*, I write, “Wesley’s terminology is left untouched to present his writing in its original form.”<sup>12</sup> Regarding Wesley’s use of the word *popery* [often a derogatory term for Roman Catholics], I write, “Throughout this study, my aim is to present Wesley in his own terms and as a man of his day, despite my anxiousness and discomfort.”<sup>13</sup>

Historian and activist Jemar Tisby writes, “Many individuals throughout American church history exhibited blatant racism, yet they also built orphanages and schools. They deeply loved their families; they showed kindness toward others. . . . very rarely do historical figures fit neatly into the category of ‘villain.’”<sup>14</sup> After studying Wesley and Whitefield, I realized they too didn’t fit one category neatly either. And yet I was uncomfortable labeling them “men of their day” and moving on. My academic path led me to study Jonathan Edwards, another early evangelical, and I found that he fit this assessment too. Authors Christina Edmondson and Chad Brennan write, “If an esteemed theologian like Edwards can have such a disconnect in his life, none of us are immune to falling into similar traps.”<sup>15</sup> I wanted to learn more about these men and their contemporaries because I knew that they

had immense influence on the evangelical legacy I inherited and the life I live.

What does it mean to say that these historical figures were “men of their times”? Neal Conan, host of NPR’s *Talk of the Nation*, interviewed Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard University about Gates’s research on Abraham Lincoln.<sup>16</sup> Gates learned that Lincoln hated slavery, but also used the N-word, told racist jokes, and hoped to send America’s Black people to Africa. Conan opened his interview by stating, “Intellectually, we know that Lincoln was a man of his times, that attitudes towards race were very different in the first half of the nineteenth century.” Gates helped listeners like me see a more complex, and more accurate, picture of Lincoln than before.

Notice, though, how Gates framed his discussion around the phrase “man of his times.” People use this phrase to introduce a suspension of judgment because of a chronological gap. When we say someone was a “man of his times,” we must also answer what man (or woman) and what time we’re talking about. Skeptics like me ask another question: why should we withhold judgment on that person? In Lincoln’s case, his legacy of abolishing slavery immediately brings the credibility required for sympathetic consideration, and Gates, the eminent Black historian, is on hand to guide the conversation, so listeners know they are in trustworthy hands.

Will you be remembered as a man or woman “of your times”? We’ll return to this question at the end of the book. You might answer that you don’t care how you will be remembered. But you *should* care. It’s an important question because it isn’t really about future generations—it’s a question that shapes our present decisions. It helps us think deeply about which beliefs and actions are timeless rather than products of our current location, culture, and era.

Many of us have an older relative whose beliefs and actions we filter. Because they are our relative, we tend to grant more leeway than we would give a stranger. Because we know them better than most, we weigh their strengths against their weaknesses and respond with

calculated patience when we encounter their uncomfortable beliefs and actions. This approach is common with family members; it also works for Gates when he learns more about Lincoln.

Considering how we will be remembered shapes us right now more than it shapes how people in the future will remember us. Imagine if you are that older relative (or maybe you are!). Are your beliefs and actions a reflection of your age, upbringing, and culture? Or are they rooted in something deeper, something timeless? Lincoln's racist jokes reflect prejudice common among some White men in his time, but his belief that slavery is unjust is timeless.

In this book, I want to put you in the shoes of John Wesley because Wesley had the gift of time. Wesley lived the longest (by far) of the three men examined in this book, and he eventually played an important role helping Christians and non-Christians alike to advocate for the timeless truth that no human should own another human. Wesley didn't start his life advocating for this, and if his life had ended earlier (as it did for Whitefield and Edwards), Wesley would be remembered differently. Wesley had the gift of time. Will you?

How long will you live? What if your days had ended when you were half your age? What if your days end when you are twice your current age? As I write this today, I am forty-five years old. While I'm not all that different from when I was twenty-two years old, I have changed in some ways. If I had a chance, I would challenge twenty-two-year-old me in several areas, and I'd give myself lots of advice. I can only wonder how ninety-year-old me might challenge me today. Experience tells me that I would be wise to listen to the older me. What if I don't live that long? Or what if I discovered I only had a few years to live?

The lives of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield provide us a wealth of insight about navigating our lives today as we own what happened in the past in order to better own our decisions today. In this book we'll examine the history of slavery and abolitionism through the stories, cultures, ministries, and families of these three men. We will see their horrendous errors regarding slavery and, in Wesley's

case, eventual correction—because he lived long enough to do so. Wesley’s silence regarding slavery ended when he was seventy-three years old, when he finally shared his *Thoughts upon Slavery*—sixteen years after slave owner Jonathan Edwards died, and four years after slave owner George Whitefield died.

You might think that slavery has nothing to do with you. But it does. By the end of this book my hope is that you will be able to own, with better clarity, the legacy you are writing with your life today.

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