Draft Letter on Slavery (c. 1741)
Jonathan Edwards

Though fragmentary and frustratingly cryptic at points, this document is extremely valuable because it is the only known instance of Edwards speaking explicitly on the issue of slavery and, more specifically, on the enslavement of Africans in the American colonies. Edwards defends the purchase and ownership of slaves provided they fall under the legal definition of a slave, are treated humanely according to law, and are Christianized. He condemns as hypocritical those who denounce slave owning while benefiting from goods produced or imported as a result of the slave trade. Adopting an unusual position, he opposes the extension of the slave trade, that is, enslaving free Africans. He bases his argument on passages taken primarily from the Old Testament regarding God’s allowing the Israelites to buy slaves, and, to a lesser extent, on passages in the New Testament.

Whereas defenders of the slave trade pointed to it as a means of spreading the gospel, Edwards foresees the opposite effect. The chances that prophecies concerning the spread of the gospel to every nation of the world will come true are diminished, he feels, as a result of the resentment caused by European incursions into Africa.

Edwards’ position represented a step toward the immediatism of his New Divinity disciples. Samuel Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards, Jr., would build on and extend Edwards’ views to advocate the complete abolition of slavery and a plan of colonization to evangelize Africa.
(Trask Library, letter draft, fragment, two leaves. The text presented here reflects the incomplete manner in which Edwards sketched out his points for full elaboration later.)

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[Northampton, c. 1741]

If they ben’t partakers of the slaves, they are of their slavery, wherein the injustice, if there be any, consists. Their slavery mainly consists in that slavish cruel labor they are put to.

They are partakers of a far more cruel slavery than that which they object against in those that have slaves here.²

That which is almost altogether by their slavery [. . .]

How ill does it suit for a man to cry out of another for taking money that is stolen, and then taking it of him in that wherein the injustice consists.

If the slaves are unjustly theirs, then their slavery is unjustly theirs, and this they are partakers of.

All the difference there can be, is that they are not so immediate partakers, that it is a step farther off.

No more are we so immediate partakers.

Their argument, if it carries anything, implies that we ought not to be partakers, neither immediately nor remotely. We ought not to be partakers at all. If they don’t mean so, but only mean by so many steps, they would do well to fix the number of steps.

And besides, they don’t know but that they are partakers as immediately as we. They may have their slaves at next step.
Either let them answer them, or let 'em own the matter is well proved, and not go on pretending that those arguments are of no force which they can’t or at least don’t see cause to answer, only to make disturbances and raise uneasiness among people against their minister, to the great wounding of religion. If they do it, and yet don’t answer.

Reproaching their pastor as though he lived in notorious iniquity and indulgence of his lusts—a sin that has no more to be said for it than robbery in the highway—and that which he was not able to vindicate, and had nothing to say for, worth the mentioning. The pastor of the church that has thus been reproached may well insist upon it that his reasons, every one of them, be answered, or otherwise that they be silent for the future. And not only [so], but confess that they were too sudden and rash in casting such reproaches on their pastor, to the great wounding of religion.

Let them also fully and thoroughly vindicate themselves and their own practice in partaking of negroes’ slavery, or confess that there is no hurt in partaking in it, or else let ‘em cease to partake in it for the future, one of the three. For if they still continue to cry out against those who keep negro slaves as partakers of injustice in making them slaves, and continue still themselves notwithstanding to be partakers of their slavery, let ‘em own that their objections are not conscientious, but merely to make difficulty and trouble for their neighbors. Whether or no other nations have any power or business to disfranchise all the nations of Africa. And if they should, whether or no this would not be a greater encroachment on their liberties than even the opposers of this trade themselves do suppose this trade, making those slaves which they offer to sale.
It would have a much greater tendency to sin, to have liberty to disfranchise whole nations.

And let the answers be in writing, that everybody that is so disposed may see what they be, and know whether there be just cause for their boasts when they go about and say the pastor of the church could not answer ‘em, could say nothing that was worth a-saying. ‘Tis an easy thing for a man thus to boast of his victory in a dispute that nobody heard but him, and so is not able to contradict him.

If men are such notable disputants, and have such invincible reasons to offer, and are so able to baffle their minister, let it appear that they are so by their great arguments being written down, to be read by all.

Don’t let some things only be answered and others slipped over in silence.

The practice that prevails in the world of eating and drinking tends to sin, and a world of iniquity is the consequence of it, but we are not therefore to abstain from sin.

And if he should compel him to make a number to sell, will any say that he came honestly by them, or that they were honestly his?

If God’s observing and giving leave for a thing prove that it is not unreasonable in its own nature.

God might, by a special interpretation, execute punishment on a people and make men the executioners. But to make it an established rule in all cases so to treat all mankind, and that after they were become his own people, is a monstrous supposition, if it be in itself unreasonable. All God’s rules that respect treatment of men and war have moral equity in them, otherwise why is it said, “All this law” which is so righteous as “I
set before you” [Deut. 4:8]? A special precept for a particular act is not a rule.

To give leave for a special punishment of the injuriousness of the Egyptians to borrow is quite a different thing from establishing it as a rule that his people might borrow and not pay in all ages. ⁴

Nothing in itself unlawful. ‘Tis unlawful for a man to speak ill of God. ‘Tis unlawful for a man to sell those things. They are in their own nature unlawful to be the subject of commerce.

Woe pronounced against him that uses his neighbor’s work without wages. This makes the Scripture contradict itself.

All mankind were their neighbors then. Especially all of the same religion. Christ reproves the corrupt interpretation of the Pharisees, who thought otherwise.

Neighbor. By this there is no rule that respects the treatment of any of mankind in the moral law, but only the children of Israel.

Hence it was not against any command of the moral law for the Jews to commit adultery with the wives of men of other nations, or to steal from them, or to bear false witness against them. ‘Tis said, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” [Ex. 20:16].

With respect to the glorious times, it does not follow, because things shall be settled in peace. Here is another admirable [. . .] ⁵

Lay down this: If it were once lawful, but now unlawful, and not made unlawful by any new positive law that was not in force then when it was lawful, then it must be because ‘tis unreasonable in its own nature. But if it be unreasonable in its own nature [. . .].

He says we must know in order to any injury to a man. Then we must know in order to killing a man in war, for there is a personal injury.
I say its not being forbidden under such circumstances, expressly allowed before, and so great a crime in it and so general in the world, is a good argument, because ‘tis not conceivable that [. . .]. No other sin generally prevalent that is not expressly mentioned and strictly forbidden. The Apostle speaks of God’s winking at some things that were early was of old, in those times of darkness, which intimates that [God] don’t wink at such things now under the gospel. But this would be to wink at it in the highest degree conceivable.

There is no action without circumstance. But circumstances are included in the very word. Killing a man is not in itself unlawful, but murder is in itself unlawful. So taking away from our neighbor is not in itself unlawful, in itself reasonable or unreasonable.

I answer, [1.] no more of a contradiction than it is that an inanimate commodity may be justly taken out of the hands of the right owner and yet justly kept out of his hands.

2. It supposes that God gave a law that did tend greatly to encourage iniquity in all the nations round about Canaan by his own pleasure. So that instead of their being a light in the earth, a blessing in the midst, it was dangerous for other nations to live near God’s people, which would be a blasphemous way of talking.

The law supposes that they were theirs of whom they bought them, by directing them to buy who were not under laws peculiar to the Jews, and which way came they by them. Otherwise, why did God direct them buy? Why did he not direct them to buy the service of the persons themselves?

It is less supposeable a great deal, than if God had given ‘em leave to go and take others at all times. But to buy a thing is to come by [it]
in a way of valuable consideration, in a way of commutative justice, and supposes that person possessed.

To give liberty to take those that were sui juris what they pleased, is to put 'em into a state of war with all nations.

This supposition, that God gave such a law for a standing rule to his people for a great many ages, is a great reflection on the wisdom, holiness and goodness of God and ought to be abominable to all Christians.
Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of the issue and a transcription of the manuscript, see Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” William and Mary Quarterly LIV (Oct. 1997).

2. JE deleted: “They are partakers of that which is undoubtedly cruel.”

3. JE drew a vertical line through the next four paragraphs.


5. “Here is another admirable” is conjectural for an interlineation squeezed in below line.

6. I.e. early in time, in the days of idolatry before the gospel. See Acts 17:30.

7. JE drew a vertical line through this paragraph.

8. JE drew a vertical line through this paragraph.


1. JE drew a vertical line through the remaining part of the draft.