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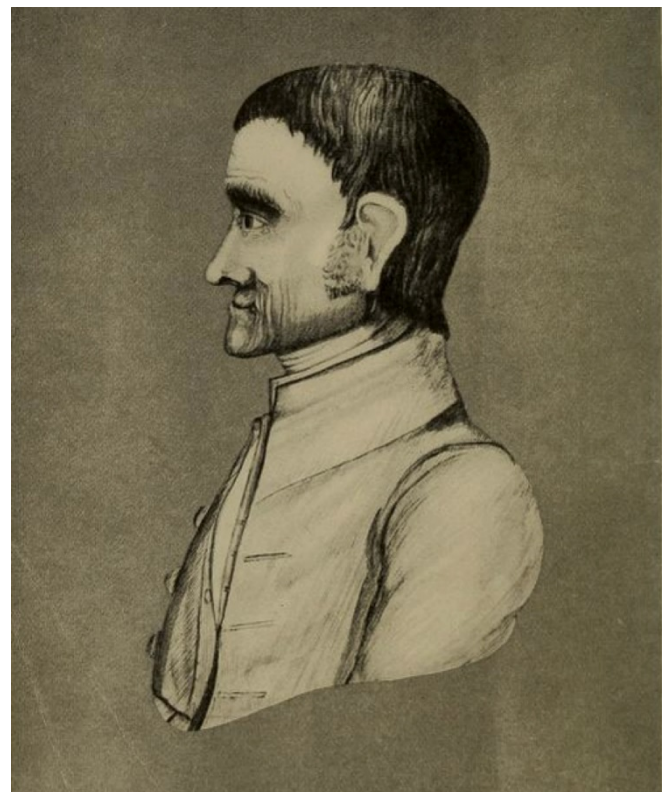
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## Universal Love in More Than the Abstract: John Woolman on Privilege in the Christian Worldview

John Woolman is best known for being a Quaker mystic and prolific abolitionist during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the power of his message remains relevant today. Woolman's passions were vast: he was an "abolitionist, mystic, critic of capitalism, ascetic, pacifist, holy man... spiritual purist."<sup>[1]</sup> He strived toward obedience in every part of his life, but what set him apart as a reformer and as a believer was that he "never thought it would be enough to pronounce abstract principles. The difficult work entailed grappling with the irritating details of his mundane existence, and negotiating with stubborn human beings."<sup>[2]</sup> Woolman's life was committed to the project of loving all of God's children in real ways amidst real problems. The compassion, conviction, selflessness and grace with which he engaged with people is a powerful model of a true Christian life for today's increasingly competitive world. His work speaks directly to contemporary issues of inequality and to a modern church that largely does not know how to talk about privilege. John Woolman's abolitionist and economic writings issued a compelling call to the stewardship of privilege that remains needed today, particularly because he situated his views and social critique squarely in biblical beliefs about the nature of reality, humanity, and happiness. Woolman's efforts for transformation reached for radical economic, social, and personal change that was rooted in metaphysical assertions shifting Christians' understanding of reality from earthly pleasures to those eternal.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

John Woolman was born in Northampton, New Jersey to a Quaker family in 1720.<sup>[3]</sup> He attested to having known the Lord since his youth and specifically



*Portrait of John Woolman in The journal and essays of John Woolman at archive.org*

referenced a particularly powerful moment he had in faith at age 7. Woolman in his *Journal* wrote “I read the 22d Chapter of the *Revelations*: ‘He shewed me a pure River of Water of Life, clear as Chrystal, proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb, *etc.*’ and, in reading it, my Mind was drawn to seek after that pure Habitation, which, I then believed, God had prepared for his Servants.”<sup>[4]</sup> From a young age Woolman was captured by the anticipation of God’s perfect kingdom, and the promise of it influenced both his understanding of the world and his actions within it.

From farmer, to tailor, to shopkeeper and more, John Woolman held many jobs throughout his life and he reflected carefully on them in his *Journal*. However, compelled by his message of harmony and social justice, Woolman eventually set off to travel and preach the gospel and advocate against oppressions.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition to itinerate preaching, Woolman also published several abolitionist papers and a journal of twenty years of his life, in which he documented his thoughts on faith and social justice. He was a committed Christian Quaker and mystic, but his faith was not contained to explicitly religious realms; Woolman’s obedience to God drove him to speak out against many injustices that he saw: slavery, treatment of Native Americans, “rum, war taxes, luxurious living, animal welfare... and, most fundamentally, involvement in globalization and trade.” Throughout his life Woolman took a careful, critical eye to the world and to himself, reflecting on the effects of his actions and challenging anything that he saw as harming people. He has been referred to as the father of the labor reform movement and his call to abolition encouraged the Quakers to become, shortly after his death, the first group in America to stop owning slaves. Woolman’s faithfulness, compassion, and selfless drive made him a powerful force in the eighteenth century and a spiritual voice that remains treasured today. Simply put, John Woolman “lived in another world, but a world that spoke profoundly and prophetically to the world his peers—and we—live in.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## **WOOLMAN’S BELIEFS**

In his day, John Woolman looked around himself and saw people striving for status and luxury, not unlike today. With his intelligent and empathetic eye, he noticed both the harm done by such self-interest and the beliefs that ran through it. He saw humans as being prone to viewing earthly riches as necessary for happiness and self-motivated competition and provision as natural aspects of life. Woolman’s writings flew in the face of such worldly wisdom: he wrote that those who “are in all things taught to prefer the getting of riches and to eye the temporal distinctions they give, as the principal business of this life... readily overlook the true happiness of man, which results from the enjoyment of all things in the fear of God.”<sup>[7]</sup> Essentially, he asserted that self-interest and accumulation of wealth are empty endeavors because humanity’s true happiness comes from living with God as God intended, as modeled by Jesus Christ. Harmony was Woolman’s ultimate goal, and what he contended was the content of a genuinely Christian and happy world.

Believing Christlikeness to be the nature of a happily lived life, Woolman in his preaching and writing challenged believers toward the kind of selflessness exhibited by Jesus in the gospels. He focused in particular on how, in Jesus' life, "one uniform desire for the eternal and temporal good of mankind, discovered itself in all his actions". As a compelling testimony to his statements about real happiness, he pointed back to Christ and many of his followers throughout time who, being united with the Holy Spirit, found that "the desire for the real happiness of mankind" outweighed the "desire of ease, liberty, and, many times, of life itself."<sup>[8]</sup> In Woolman's view, to love another person more than your own life would be to live in truth and joy.

Affection pouring out as action was how John Woolman envisioned a perfect, harmonious society. Participation in this sort of world, in his view, requires an attitude of brotherhood toward all of humanity. In his main abolitionist work, *Considerations on the keeping of Negroes*, Woolman states that: "When we remember that all nations are of one blood... and that the all-wise Being is Judge and Lord over us all, it seems to raise an idea of general brotherhood, and a disposition easy to be touched with a feeling of each other's afflictions."<sup>[9]</sup> It was crucial to Woolman that people cultivate generosity and remain on the lookout for seeds of self-importance. Remembrance was a precious practice to Woolman, as he believed that reflecting on the truth that all are beloved children of God, equal in value, would produce empathy and a sense of being obligated to care for everyone. Alternatively, forgetting this truth and focusing on one's own circumstances in this world over another's causes a sense of superiority and, effectively, justification for dispensing mistreatment.

At the root of Woolman's confidence in asceticism was the firm belief that God takes care of God's children. It was an incredibly counter-cultural belief that, "under all the outward Appearances of Loss, in denying [oneself] of gainful Profits for Righteousness Sake, yet through the Care of him who provides for the Sparrows, he should have a Supply answerable to his infinite Wisdom; *Bread shall be given him, his Waters shall be sure.*"<sup>[10]</sup> This was a comforting message offered to alleviate fears and assure believers that they are, in fact, safe to stop competing for security by accumulating gains – especially those received at the expense of others. He mentioned Adam and Eve, who had "'no house, no tools for business, no garments but what their Creator gave them, no vessels for use, nor any fire to cook roots or herbs.' Nonetheless God had provided them 'means for their happy living in this world.'" From this he concluded that innovation and productivity are good, as is working for survival, but that followers of Christ should be sure to "apply all gifts of divine providence to the purposes for which they were intended," – for the sake of others, and not for advancing oneself in status or luxury.<sup>[11]</sup>

Not only did Woolman encourage generosity, but he saw self-interest as a damaging force that corrupts one's affections and judgement. He asserted that when one's mind is filled with self-importance their "opinions are biased in [their] own favour" and, having become accustomed to their own prosperity while others struggle, settle into their justifications for the circumstances; one's own perceptions become

infected and inaccurate.<sup>[12]</sup> Woolman saw this as dangerous particularly in cases when oppressed peoples are voiceless because they have no power to disturb the privileged person's selfishness, and so that person's mind reconciles the scenario in a muddled perception of oppression. Fallen human nature was central to Woolman's writings, and he saw this nature as drawing people away from harmony with one another and toward selfishness, the hoarding of privileges, and imagined hierarchies among people.

As much as John Woolman's heart broke over the scourge of sin in the world, he also was full of hope that the Holy Spirit purifies people's judgment and enables them to live in harmony with one another. He petitioned Christians to "apply humbly to God for wisdom, that we may thereby be enabled to see things as they are, and as they ought to be," and testified that in the cleansing of minds "the hidden things of darkness may be brought to light, and the judgment made clear: we shall then consider mankind as brethren.... high thoughts will laid aside, and all men treated as becometh the sons of one father, agreeably to the doctrine of Jesus."<sup>[13]</sup> As fiercely as he advocated for just action, he also witnessed to the sovereign power of God to sanctify people's hearts and wills. He encouraged Christians to recognize their fallenness and to pray for truth, and argued that being bound to the Spirit of Christ raises one's view of others such that one would treat others as family in a spirit of compassionate generosity, valuing their wellbeing above earthly Treasures. Finally, Woolman looked forward to when "*old Things are past away, all Things are new, all Things are of God.*"<sup>[14]</sup> He had clung to that vision of newness which he had as a child, a newness founded on all people being in harmony with God and "Desire for outward Riches" being "at an End."<sup>[15]</sup>

## **ON PRIVILEGE**

With Woolman's understanding that a truly happy and human life involves great care for the wellbeing of others by rejecting desire for hoarding gifts, it is thus of utmost importance that those who have received many blessings give them away in service to those without. A loving, equitable spirit must produce the generous care for the wants of humanity that cultivates a harmonious world. In particular he observed that the "good Gifts of God", which were intended to be used for the good of others, are twisted and used by people to gain "Worldly Honour" and luxury while paying workers such a low wage that, even with reasonable hard work they cannot support comfortable living for their families.<sup>[16]</sup> Woolman was an advocate of fair wages and saw luxury as threatening that. A generous spirit and the actions that flow from it were fundamentally important in Woolman's views. He wrote that, if a prosperous person who has enough advantages that they could obtain riches possesses the same mind as Christ, they should feel compassion toward those without much outward success. In particular, they should see themselves as an equal of that person and as being underserving of the advantages that give them an easier life than others.

Woolman encouraged wealthy people to look "into the wants of the poor... and hold forth such a perfect example of humiliation, that the pure witness may be reached

in many minds, and the way opened for a harmonious walking together.”<sup>[17]</sup> In beautiful and simple language, Woolman in his writings describes how seeking the wellbeing of others can be a witness to Christ. The harmony of mankind seems to be, in Woolman’s mind, largely the responsibility of those with the capacity to give. He asserted that when one’s will is “subject to the Will of God... we have nothing in View, but a comfortable Living equally with the rest of our Fellow Creatures” and in turn they will find that “outward Treasures” are only desirable insofar as they provide “Strength to act as dutiful Children in his Service.”<sup>[18]</sup> The more we love the Lord and God’s children, the less we will want to accumulate treasures for ourselves. This certainly does not mean that God wants laziness; Woolman reassured readers and listeners that it is necessary to be diligent in working for survival, but that it is the laying up of earthly treasures that is unfitting to harmonious society.

The call to privileged persons is essentially this: those who have more are commanded to give more. Woolman wrote that “If they who have Plenty love their Fellow Creatures in that Love which is Divine, and in all their Proceedings have an equal Regard to the Good of Mankind universally, their Place in Society is a Place of Care, an Office requiring Attention, and the more we possess, the greater is our Trust, and with an Increase of Treasure, an Increase of Care becomes necessary.”<sup>[19]</sup> He did not criticize those who received greater resources by no selfish work of their own, but rather he declared that the possession of greater blessings and advantages ascribes to people a particular role: a role of care, according to one’s treasure.

In line with selfless love, Woolman encouraged believers to take on others’ wellbeing as our own, even to the point of being eager to accepting responsibility for mending the wrongs done to them. This especially was significant in his abolitionist works, as Americans have always shied away from pursuing racial justice by distancing themselves from blame for current states of oppression. About slaves in the U.S., he wrote “that they are now amongst us, and people of our nation were the cause of their being here; that whatsoever difficulty accrues thereon, we are justly chargeable with, and to bear all inconveniences attending it with a serious and weighty concern of mind to do our duty by them, is the best we can do.”<sup>[20]</sup> He did not focus harshly on blame, but challenged believers by declaring that regardless of history, it is the Christian responsibility to take on others’ hardships as one’s own. Even if a person did not start an injustice that is around them, they still need to do something about it. Fault is irrelevant – God’s justice calls on us to care for others always. In order to prevent apathy toward suffering peoples, Woolman calls readers to “let us calmly consider their circumstances: and the better to do it, make their case ours.”<sup>[21]</sup>

## **WOOLMAN’S EXAMPLE**

Beyond his writings, the life of John Woolman is a compelling model for the stewardship of privileges. He lived a plain, ascetic life and avoided participation in systems of stratification. Woolman’s heart for others is evident in his deep empathy and

in the took responsibility he took for others' lives. Not shying away from this responsibility, he "addressed Quaker slaveholders compassionately, believing that their sin was also his."<sup>[22]</sup> and included himself in his assertions that "Anyone who participated in the slave economy was guilty" because "everyone did, for the web of commerce connected everything."<sup>[23]</sup> John Woolman grew more principled and strict overtime; he would not visit luxurious homes or eat with silver utensils, would walk long distances instead of riding in carriages pulled by overworked horses, and would not purchase items that were made by slaves or underpaid peoples. Radical as he was and seen as "overly scrupulous," the Quakers kept sending him out to share his ideas because of his kind and loving devotion to truth.<sup>[24]</sup>

Taking a critical eye to this historical figure, it is evident that he was often demanding and confrontational, could be self-righteous, and perhaps blew things out of proportion. Declining the hospitality of friends and family due to their furniture certainly requires thought as to whether or not it is effective in kindness. In pursuit of social justice Woolman appears to have neglected his personal relationship and was likely withdrawn from his wife and daughter.

Perhaps John Woolman was too extreme, but his vision of a society saturated with selfless care remains relevant for today. In his desire for "harmonious walking together... "his vision of the perfect society informed his protests against slavery, warfare, the mistreatment of Indians, and unnecessary overseas trade. In the abstract, his project could be summed up easily. He wanted to see the world overtaken by 'universal love.'<sup>[25]</sup> His impact on the world is immense: former dean of Harvard Divinity School, William Sperry, once said "If I were asked to date the birth of social conscience in its present-day form, I think I should put it on... the day John Woolman in a public meeting verbally denounced Negro slavery."<sup>[26]</sup> The practicality and intelligence of his love for humanity should inspire contemporary Christians to take a close look at today's systems and how they affect real people. Issues that weighed heavily on Woolman's heart – capitalism, globalization, racial injustice, stratification and wealth inequality, consumerism, and unfair wages – are still prevalent in today's world. According to the Economic Policy Institute, in 2014 CEOs of the top 350 companies made 271 times the wage of the average worker.<sup>[27]</sup> Woolman's model of stewarding privilege should inspire a reflection on whether or not this state of affairs is compatible with Christ's priorities. America and the world are deeply stratified, and yet the church struggles to know how to talk about privilege. In a climate in which bible school students would scratch out the word "privilege" on a poster advertising an educational event about racism, and a professor would deem the term "unworthy of Christian discourse,"<sup>[28]</sup> Woolman's model of faithfulness can serve as an illuminating and transformative example. His greatest contribution to the church and to faithful discourse is this: if believers truly want to live a life of "universal love" then privilege is, in fact, an utterly Christian subject to discuss.

## FOOTNOTES

- [1] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 8.
- [2] Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom : A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), #96.
- [3] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009),13.
- [4] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 151.
- [5] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 3.
- [6] Tim Stafford, "The Beautiful Biography of John Woolman." *Christian History*, 2008, Accessed April 11, 2018.  
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- [7] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 8.
- [8] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 11.
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- [10] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 453.
- [11] Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom : A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 82.
- [12] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 6.
- [13] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 6.
- [14] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 491.



- [15] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 492.
- [16] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 492.
- [17] Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom : A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 84.
- [18] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 491.
- [19] John Woolman, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 490.
- [20] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 7.
- [21] John Woolman, *Considerations on the keeping of negroes: recommended to the professors of Christianity of every denomination* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, 1754), 5.
- [22] [6] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009) 4.
- [23] Tim Stafford, "The Beautiful Biography of John Woolman." *Christian History*, 2008, Accessed April 11, 2018.  
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- [26] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009) 5.
- [27] Grace Donnelly. "Top CEOs Make More in Two Days Than An Average Employee Does in One Year." *Fortune*, July 20, 2017, Accessed April 17, 2018.  
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- [28] Erin Chan Ding, "Social Media Debate Involving Faith, Race Brews at Moody Bible Institute." *Chicagotribune.com*, March 10, 2015, Accessed April 23, 2018.  
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