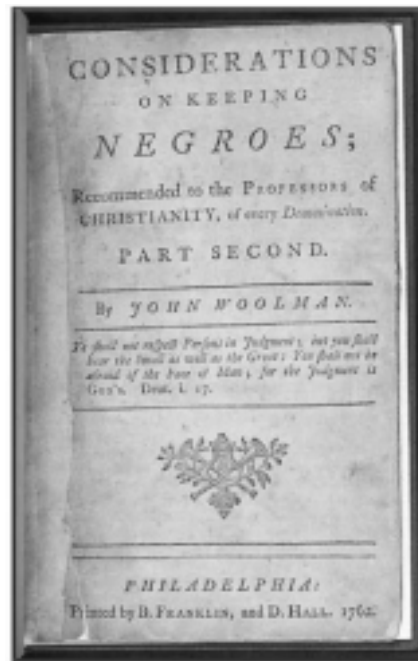


Meetings for Learning – Resources – History and Testimonies

John Woolman (1720-1772)



Woolman's early life

John Woolman was born in Burlington County in West New Jersey, eighteen miles from Philadelphia. The colony of West New Jersey was owned by Quakers, and was established in 1776. William Penn was a trustee along with a number of other Quakers, and they drew up the system of government of the new colony. One of Penn's letters in 1776 records that they intentionally wrote religious liberty and other civil liberties into the documents establishing and governing the colony. Penn travelled in Germany in 1677, and encouraged people of minority religions to emigrate there. The settlement of Burlington had been established by the Quakers' trustees, and it was close to Burlington that Woolman's grandfather emigrated around 1678 to escape from persecution in England. The family had cause to cherish their liberty, and Woolman refers to this in his journal: 'If we were to call to mind our beginnings, some of us may find a time wherein our fathers were under afflictions, reproaches, and manifold sufferings'.¹

Woolman attended school for several years, and he valued reading. His father taught him book-keeping, which facilitated him getting a job as a shop-worker and book-keeper in Mount Holly in 1741. He lived over the shop, and he records sharing the room with Scotch-Irish indentured servants, whom the shop-owner had bought 'from on board a vessel, and brought them to Mount Holly to sell.'ⁱⁱ These people had undertaken to pay for their passage to America in this way, and became 'voluntary slaves' for a set period of time (around four years). However, it was those who were forced into permanent slavery, against their will, and often subjected to extreme brutality, who were the major concern of Woolman's life.

Early encounters with slavery

Early in his employment, Woolman was asked by the shop owner to write a bill of sale for a slave woman. He felt obliged to do as his employer asked, but he told him that it was not fitting with Christianity to do so. Afterwards he regretted that he had not been clearer, and he subsequently refused to write any parts of legal documents involving slaves, unless it was to set them free.

Woolman became a recorded Quaker Minister when he was in his early twenties, and he was subsequently asked to accompany Abraham Farrington on a short journey in the Ministry in 1743. In 1746 he began working as a tailor, and the same year he felt a calling to take a journey southwards into Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, which was slaveholding country. He wrote *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*' as a result of this journey, but it was not published until 1754. Philadelphia Quaker Yearly Meeting paid for the printing and distribution of Woolmans essay, and sent it to every Quaker Yearly Meeting. His friend, Anthony Benezet, had just become a member of the Publications Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Woolman had paved the way with his essay, and Benezet followed with his own extensive almost 30-year pamphleting campaign against slavery. Woolman wrote from his own

personal, moral, human and Christian response to the brutality of slavery. He wanted to persuade people one by one to turn away from slavery by appealing to their better nature.

Working against slavery

Woolman worked against slavery in a number of ways, which differed from and complemented the work of his friend, Anthony Benezet. Woolman worked within the Quaker organization, to bring an end to slave-trading and slave-holding by Quakers. He attended as many monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings as he could, and worked to get minutes recorded which eventually would prohibit slave-holding and slave-trading for all Quakers. On his many journeys he knew when business meetings were being held, and he attended several of these to speak of his concern against slavery. He also visited as many slaveholders as he could, to speak to them personally and privately about the effects of slaveholding on themselves and on their children. He said slavery hardened their hearts, eroded their morals, and was inconsistent with the Christian Religion. It would corrupt the succeeding generations, and would cause calamities to fall on the nation. Woolman wrote: 'The mind being early impressed with vicious notions and practices, and nurtured up in ways of getting treasure, (which are not the ways of Truth) ... frequently prevents due attention to the true spirit of wisdom, so that they exceed in wickedness those before them'.ⁱⁱⁱ He thought slavery would lead to terrible consequences in the future. In his journal, Woolman recorded a particular dream he had on the 7th day of the 2nd month, 1754. This dream appears like a premonition of the civil war. Woolman's writings about slavery often mention judgement or hint at future retribution for the evils of slavery. He had a great sense of foreboding that there would be a terrible price to pay for slavery and for the cruelty inflicted by slavery. His prophetic dream illustrated his fears for the nation.

In 1749, he married Sarah Ellis, and they had one daughter Mary in 1750. His son William, born in 1754, died in infancy. Woolman lived simply, tended his

orchard and did tailoring. He felt that the desire for financial gain was one of the chief causes of slavery. In 1760, Woolman made a second journey into New England. Quaker ships from Newport were heavily engaged in the slave trade. After this journey, Woolman wrote the second part of *Some considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, and he published it and paid for the printing himself in 1762.

Thoughts about power and prejudice

Woolman thought men who had self-interest at heart should not have power over others. He wrote: ‘so long as men are biased by narrow self-love, so long an absolute power over other men is unfit for them.’^{iv} He believed that the human mind is not good enough and wise enough to rule absolutely, and that it was wrong for an adult to be subject to the will of another fallible human being.

Woolman believed that all nations were of one blood and therefore equal. He identified the roots of prejudice as coming from the human tendency to look chiefly at outward things, which leads to some people seeing others as different to and inferior to themselves. ‘Placing on men the ignominious title *Slave*’, he wrote, ‘dressing them in uncomely garments, keeping them to servile labour in which they are often dirty, tends gradually to fix a notion in the mind that they are a sort of people below us in nature, and leads us to consider them as such in all our conclusions about them.’^v

Putting ourselves in the slaves’ shoes

In his earlier tract, Woolman suggested putting ourselves in the slaves’ shoes, to ‘make their case ours. Suppose then that our ancestors had been exposed to constant servitude ... that we had been destitute of the help of reading and good company...that while others in ease have plentifully heaped up the fruits of our labour, we had barely received enough to relieve nature, and being wholly at the command of others, had generally been treated as a contemptible,

ignorant part of mankind'.^{vi} How would we feel?, he asked his readers. The reality for slaves at the hands of their masters, Woolman went on to explain, was much worse.

But his concern was for the slaveholder as well as for the slave. 'He whose will is a law to others, and can enforce obedience by punishment ... his irregular appetites find an open field for motion, and he is in danger of growing hard and inattentive to their convenience who labour for his support, and so loses that disposition in which alone men are fit to govern.' Both slaveholder and slave lost their humanity, in Woolman's view, and both needed to be freed from the oppressive system of slavery.

Witness in daily life

In 1761 Woolman became quite ill, and he thought it was God's punishment for using slave produce. As the indigo used for dye was produced by slaves, he decided to wear undyed clothes. He had also stopped using sugar and other slave-produced goods for the same reason. This did make him seem peculiar at the time, but it was important to him not to be implicated with slavery in any way, nor to economically support unethical slave produce.

Woolman made several journeys over a thirty-year period, usually on foot, and usually to talk to slaveholders and slave-traders. His final journey was to England in 1772. He travelled by steerage, to better understand the sufferings of slaves as they were brought in ships from Africa. When he got to London, he attended Yearly Meeting, and from then on, London Yearly Meeting actively spoke out against slavery and the slave trade in its Epistles. Woolman disapproved of the cruelty to horses, so he walked everywhere. He travelled to the northwest of England, then southeast to York, where he died of smallpox in 1772. His journal was published after his death, and it continues to be a source of inspiration.

Questions for small group discussion or worship sharing or journaling:

- Woolman identified some causes of racial prejudice. Are those causes similar today?
- Woolman offered Job's solution: put yourself in the situation of the other person. Is this a useful method for dealing with big and small problems?
- Woolman stopped using slave-produced goods. He did not wish to be implicated with slavery in any way, nor to economically support unethical slave produce. Is the ethical aspect of consumer goods a factor in your household spending?
- Woolman refused to use sugar or to eat off silver plates, and when he visited Quakers who owned slaves, he insisted on paying the slaves for their labour. Looking back, it is admirable, but it must have made him a challenging and sometimes annoying house guest! Are we prepared to respond positively to Friends who have a deep concern about something, even when it makes us personally uncomfortable?

Further reading:

Phillip P. Moulton (editor), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2007)

James Proud (editor) *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth* (San Francisco, California: Inner Light Books, 2010)

David Sox, *John Woolman, Quintessential Quaker* (York: Sessions Book

Trust, 1991) Reginald Reynolds, *The Wisdom of John Woolman*, (London:

Quaker Home Service, 1972)

Compiled by Julianna Minihan during an Eva Koch Scholarship, 2015, at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, (www.woodbrooke.org.uk)

ⁱ Woolman's *Journal and Major Essays*, ed. Moulton, p. 207. All references are to this book. ⁱⁱ P. 30

ⁱⁱⁱ P. 214

^{iv} P. 221

^v P. 221

^{vi}, P.220