

## **Emancipation Theology and the British West Indian Plantocracy**

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In a previous paper, I looked at the role of the Bible in the British abolition of slavery. Evangelical Protestants, led by the Quakers and the Clapham Sect, launched a massive campaign against slavery during the latter part of the eighteenth right into the early half of the nineteenth century, which eventually resulted in the emancipation of the slaves of the British empire. Most of these slaves were in the British West Indies: now the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, together with Guyana in South America. In this reflection, I will be looking at the way in which the ruling planter class in the Caribbean responded to the idea that the slaves should be instructed in the Bible, how the slaves resisted oppression, and how the evangelical missionaries fared in the West Indian colonies.

### ***Missions among the Slaves***

Quite paradoxically, though the home missionary societies in Britain were populated with anti-slavery supporters, the missionaries in the British West Indian colonies sang a contrary tune. While the anti-slavery movement in the mother country was propagating its Biblical arguments against slavery, the situation in the West Indies among those very evangelical churches was radically different. The missionaries did not work towards the emancipation of the slaves; on the contrary, they took pains to prove to the ruling planters – the plantocracy – that their exposition of scripture was specifically geared to keep the slaves in docile contentment with their

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bondage. Nevertheless, the missionaries still made a biblical contribution towards the anti-slavery cause. However, that contribution came about because of the doctrine of equality within the Christian message itself and not on account of any deliberate abolitionist activity on the part of the missionaries: it was the message of human equality within the divine economy which, more than anything else, supported the slave in his struggle for emancipation. Mary Turner argues that from the outset the missionaries in Jamaica were little more than religious appendages of the plantation economy. She states:

The Onesimus story was hammered home in sermons and classes; a Wesleyan missionary asked a class of boys, Was (Onesimus) a good and dutiful slave? No, he was a very bad one, for he was a thief and runaway. And how did the slave behave himself after his repentance and conversion to Jesus Christ? He behaved himself well and was profitable to his master.<sup>1</sup>

Coupled with this, the missionaries sought to ingratiate themselves with the plantocracy. Turner notes:

A mission family in Jamaica employed domestics, usually free coloured servants or hired slaves, on the same scale as respectable whites, and had a cook, a cleaner, and probably a boy to look after the garden and the horse. They spent three times as much on servant hire as their London colleagues, whose families however large, had only one servant. But the Wesleyan missionary committee's strictures on this point were ignored.<sup>2</sup>

It is because of these kinds of issues that the early missionaries to the British West Indies have given credence to the charge that they were agents of the system of oppression and exploitation that ravaged the exiled people of Africa. It is predominantly this factor which makes the story of emancipation, when viewed from within the West Indian milieu fundamentally different from that of Britain.

This attitude on the part of the missionaries, however, has to be understood against the backdrop of the conditions under which they worked. Because they could not perform their ministerial duties without licences from the government in the colony, and in order to make things easier for

themselves, Wesleyan, Moravian and Baptist missionaries in Jamaica supported the planters. Turner argues:

The missionaries . . . tended to respond to the “aristocratic embrace” and identify their interests with the interests of their patrons. Their class origins, to a degree, encouraged this tendency. They were recruited from the sons of small traders, skilled workers, and farmers who made up the bulk of their parent churches . . . To become a missionary represented, for most of them, a distinctly upward social step.<sup>3</sup>

Even if Turner’s socio-psychological analysis were to be queried, the facts of the missionaries’ conduct remain. The biblical concepts of emancipation did not find any outlets in the mouths of missionaries. Because they already had to exert so much energy to struggle for their own liberty to minister in the colonies, it might have been too much to expect them to fight also for the freedom of the slaves. The missionaries laboured in constant dread of the plantocracy.<sup>4</sup> Even within Britain, during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, religious freedom for Dissenters was an issue of debate. Turner remarks:

Measures of this freedom, it will be recalled, had been portioned out during the eighteenth century by the Toleration Acts, but full freedom for Dissenters was not accorded until 1812, within the memory of most of the missionaries and all their mentors, after sharp political rights for all (Protestant) denominations were granted only in 1828.<sup>5</sup>

The dread of the planters on the part of Methodist missionaries was clearly demonstrated in 1824 when the Methodist missionaries in Jamaica publicly repudiated the anti-slavery cause. The home missionary society rebuked them soundly for it.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the Baptist Resistance of 1831 that the missionaries in Jamaica became decidedly anti-slavery.<sup>7</sup> Life on a West Indian plantation was a turbulent experience. Humiliated to the level of the lowest of beasts, the slave had to survive by his cunning, his wits and his grit. Ever in mortal dread of the slave, the planters launched a reign of terror in the Caribbean, too nauseating to be documented in any single body literature. Consequently the West Indian colonies were the scene of many a slave revolt.

The 1831 slave uprising in Jamaica, after it was crushed, forced the missionaries to take sides. The slaves had conducted themselves with

amazing tolerance and restraint: “they fought the only whites who attacked them, while whites who offered no opposition met with no harm.” Yet when they were subdued they were met with insane savagery.<sup>8</sup> These incidents made the missionaries realize that in order to maintain the trust of the slave and to keep their membership from falling away they had to support the slaves in their fight for freedom.<sup>9</sup>

In the West Indies, the missionary churches provided the slaves with a community of brotherhood and equality which was in stark contrast to the kind of life experienced by slaves on the plantations. Foremost among the aspects of brotherhood and equality experienced by the converted slaves was their participation in the various responsibilities of the congregational life of the church on a free and voluntary basis. This was notably so in the case of the Baptists of Jamaica. The Baptist church in Jamaica was pioneered by George Liele (also spelt “Lysle” by some historians), an ex-slave from Georgia, USA.<sup>10</sup> This kind of church life provided the slaves with a standard of dignity that was not found within the slave system. Even in the case of the churches pastored by missionaries from Britain, there was this sense of brotherhood. F.R. Augier, S.C. Gordon, D.G. Hall and M. Reckford note that the “missionaries in the West Indies were to all intents and purposes saying for the first time that a European was the ‘brother’ of a Negro slave.”<sup>11</sup> There is little doubt that the evangelical churches provided the slaves with an egalitarian community which supplied an affirmation of their worth and dignity as human beings.

Perhaps the most important product of this affirmation of dignity and equality, was the development of the leadership skills of slaves who were members of evangelical churches. Again the Baptists of Jamaica were a good example of this. In December 1791, Liele wrote:

I began, about September 1784, to preach in Kingston, in a small private house, to a good smart congregation, and I formed the church with four brethren from America besides myself, and the preaching took very good effect with the poorer sort, especially with slaves. The people at first persecuted us both at meetings and at baptisms, but, God be praised they seldom interrupts us now. We have applied to the Honourable House of Assembly, with a petition of our distresses being poor people, desiring to worship Almighty God according to the tenants of the Bible, and they have granted us liberty, and given us their sanction . . . I have baptized four hundred in Jamaica . . . We have nigh three hundred and fifty members: a few white people among them, one white brother of the

First Battalion of Royals from England, baptized by Rev. Thomas Davis . . . I have deacons and elders, a few; and teachers of small congregations in the town and country, where convenience suits them to come together, and I am pastor.<sup>12</sup>

This culture, which promoted equality and leadership within the church, undermined the rationale of the inferior status of the slave. The planter society recognised this. As Augier and his colleagues carefully point out: “This was certainly alarming to some, ‘What will be the consequences,’ asked the *Demerara Royal Gazette*, ‘When to that class of men is given the title “beloved brethren” as is actually done.’”<sup>13</sup> In Trinidad, concerns were expressed over the leadership roles filled by slaves. In 1816, Governor Woodford wrote Lord Bathurst, the Colonial Secretary:

I shall not fail; to adhere the tenor of your Lordships instructions as to the missionary and Methodist preachers; one of the former has been for some time seeking to establish a right to administer the sacraments of the church and perform the offices of the proctor; my present principal objection to the Methodist preacher is that he teaches and allows the slaves to preach.<sup>14</sup>

Because the slave system was an institution dependent upon the degradation of its “drudges” and its “chattel,” it could not tolerate any overt or official confession of the genuineness of the slaves’ humanity.

As the missionaries continued their ministry among slaves in the various Caribbean colonies, the Bible continued to play a distinctive role in strengthening the resolve of the slave to shake off the strangle hold the planter had upon his life. Though the missionary did not tell them so, as their literacy in the English tongue increased, the slaves saw for themselves that the very Bible the planter possessed, affirmed the dignity, freedom and equality of all humans under God. It was this that caused the plantocracy to tremble.

### ***Reaction of the Plantocracy***

Any doubts about the threat the Bible posed to the West Indian slave system ought to be removed when one considers the persistence of planter resistance against the slaves' receiving Scriptural instruction. Winsome Gibson-Davis comments about the experience of George Liele, in her thesis, "The 'Colonial Church Union' in Jamaica." She states:

his success, however, was short-lived. Slave-owners became disturbed about the words of hymns and about his biblical texts. The were, it seems, very upset with hymns with words such as,

"Shall we go on in sin  
Because thy Grace abounds,  
Or crucify the Lord again  
And open all his wounds?  
We will be slaves no more  
Since Christ has made us free,  
Has nailed our tyrants to the cross  
And brought us liberty,"

which his congregations sometimes sang.<sup>15</sup>

This fear about the slaves' receiving biblical teaching was expressed by an act passed by the Council of Jamaica in 1807. The act declared:

Be it therefore enacted, and ordained by the Common Council of the city and parish of Kingston . . . that from and after the first day of July next, no person not being duly authorized, qualified and permitted, as is directed by the laws of this island, and of Great Britain, and in the place mentioned in such licence, shall, under pretence of being a minister of religion of any sect or denomination, or of being a teacher or expounder of the gospel, or other parts of the Holy Scriptures, presume to preach, or teach, or offer up public prayer, or sing psalms in any meeting or assembly of Negroes, or persons of colour within this city and parish.<sup>16</sup>

Such a law was particularly significant when it is borne in mind that George Liele took care to ensure that all slaves had the permission of their masters before they were baptized or admitted into the membership of the church, and that the other missionaries bent over backwards to teach the slaves to be in subjection to their masters.<sup>17</sup>

Resistance on the part of the planters was sharpened as proof of their fears was shown: the biblical perspectives of the slaves with respect to human rights and emancipation were exactly as the planters had anticipated. This proof came through the actions of the slaves of Demerara. Under the plantation practice the only regular day the slaves had to themselves was Sunday. And even this was sometimes limited – especially at harvest times. Sunday, however, was the day the slave farmed his small plot to provide for himself and family (if he was allowed to have one), and it was also the day on which he did his trading. So, market day for the slave was Sunday morning. When the missionaries began to preach about the importance of assembling for worship on Sundays, the slaves began to leave the plantation and go to church without permission of their masters. Then they went a step further: they started demanding that Saturdays be given them as their market day, so that Sunday might be set apart entirely for worship and religious activities. This demand on the part of the slaves was interpreted by slave owners as a direct proof that the missionaries had come to preach doctrines from the Bible that would upset the slave system.<sup>18</sup> Proclaiming the biblical principle of setting one day out of the seven for rest and worship was seen to be very subversive the slave institution. This tension was illustrated by the proclamation issued by Governor Murray in Demerara in 1823. It stated:

The existence of a misconception, of a very serious nature, which appears to prevail amongst the Negroes in some districts, and particularly on the estates on the East coast; leading them to consider the permission of their masters unnecessary to authorise their quitting the estate on Sundays, for the purpose of attending Divine Worship – a misconception of so injurious a tendency as to render the most active measures necessary, effectually to eradicate it . . .

Murray then went on in his proclamation to urge planters to refuse Sunday passes only in cases of emergency and to send white observers to church services “to judge of the doctrine forth to his slaves.”<sup>19</sup>

The opposition to the ministry of the missionaries took a very ugly turn when in 1816, on the island of Barbados, the Methodist chapel was torn down. A handbill announcing the incident boasted:

***“Great the signal Triumph over Methodism, and total destruction of the Chapel!!”***

Bridge Town, Oct. 21

The inhabitants of this island are respectfully informed that, in consequence of the unmerited and unprovoked attacks which have repeatedly been made upon the community by the Methodist Missionaries (Otherwise known as agents to the villainous African society), a party of respectable gentlemen formed the resolution of closing the Methodist concern altogether. With this view, they commenced their labours on Sunday evening, and they have the greatest satisfaction in announcing, that, by destruction of the chapel. To this information they have to add, that the missionary made his escape yesterday afternoon, in a small vessel, for St. Vincent; thereby avoiding that expression of the public feelings towards him personally, which he had so richly deserved. It is hoped, that, as this information is circulated throughout the different islands colonies, all persons who consider themselves true lovers of religion will follow the laudable example of the Barbadians, in putting an end to Methodism and Methodist Chapels throughout the West Indies.<sup>20</sup>

*Negro Slavery* noted that the demolition of the chapel took two full nights to accomplish, yet it met with no opposition from the local authorities.

On the following day, a proclamation was issued by the governor offering a reward of 100 pounds to anyone who supplied information leading to a guilty conviction for the crime. Then on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the day after the governor's proclamation, the vandals released another of their own. They threatened any prospective informers: "they shall receive that punishment which their crimes will justly deserve." The publication then proceeded to inform its readers that those who committed the act were "of the first respectability, and were supported by the concurrence of nine-tenths of the community." They claimed their motives were "patriotic and loyal," and that they were acting to protect the interests of the Church and State. They ended with the following astonishing remarks: "with a fixed determination therefore, to put an end to Methodism in this island, all Methodist preachers are warned not to approach these shores: as, if they do it will be at their own peril. God save the king and the people."<sup>21</sup>

### ***The Legacy of John Smith***

No case illustrates more vividly the hostility of the plantocracy to the religious instruction to their slaves as the painful tale of John Smith. His ministry brings into sharper focus the distinctive role of the Bible in the emancipation cause from within the West Indian context. The words of the Bible operated quietly in the mind of the slave and undergirded a resolve not to acquiesce to the yoke of bondage. Theological concepts that could have been proclaimed from the housetops of Britain, from the moment they entered the vicinity of the Caribbean Sea, had to be whispered in the secret chamber – and even this was deemed dangerous. Anyone who dared to breach this unethical code risked their neck. John Smith was born in 1790 at Rothwell, Northamptonshire, and during the course of his life, came under the influence of the evangelical movement. Cecil Northcott, in his biography of John Smith, *Slavery's Martyr*, states:

The independent Chapels of inner London were Smith's educational as well as spiritual homes. Their pulpits were manned by eloquent Bible expositors who regularly explored and authorised version of the Scriptures twice on a Sunday and at least once weekday evening.<sup>22</sup>

The effect of this type of evangelical preaching produced in the life of Smith the same sort of dedication that had been found in men like John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. Northcott continues,

In 1810 he "met the Lord" through a discourse on Isaiah 55 by an eminent London divine, Dr. John Liefchild. It "dispelled my fears," he said, "eased my conscience and gave me confidence in the mercy of God." He was soundly converted.<sup>23</sup>

John Smith, then, was a full-blooded evangelical. His unique ministry was of such a kind that it demonstrated the dangerous power of biblical preaching over the slave system. *Negro Slavery* had reported around 1824, reflecting on the previous and current events transpiring in Demerara, that the planters in Demerara were rather a vicious lot. The pamphlet stated:

The planters of Demerara have, in general, shewn themselves pre-eminently hostile to the religious instruction of their slaves. To prove this it would be only necessary to read the colonial journals, which have been filled from time to time with the most violent abuse from those who made the attempt to instruct them.<sup>24</sup>

It was into this milieu that John Smith and his wife Jane walked.

Early in 1817, John Smith arrived in Demerara as a missionary sent out by the London Missionary Society. This society was predominantly a Congregationalist organization. On 25 January he was introduced to the governor of the colony, Major-General John Murray. Smith noted: "his Excellency frowned upon me. He asked me what I had come to do, and how I proposed to instruct the Negroes. I answered: 'By teaching them to read; by teaching Dr. Watt's catechisms; and by preaching the gospel in a plain manner.'" The governor's reply to this revelation was: "If you ever teach a Negro to read and I hear of it, I will banish you from the colony immediately."

Northcott is of the view that missionaries of the North London Missionary Society, "unlike the placid and more biddable clergy of the English and Scottish established churches," were "anti-establishment, speaking with the voice of the slave rather than that of masters, and inclined to listen to London advice rather than that of the governor."<sup>25</sup> Yet, the instructions from the London were extremely favourable to the status quo. Smith's seniors had instructed him:

Not a word must escape you in public or in private, which might render the slaves displeased with their masters or dissatisfied with their station. You are not sent to relieve them from their servile condition, but to afford them the consolidation of religion . . .<sup>26</sup>

From all appearances, Smith complied with these requirements although the scenes of misery around him constantly tore at his heart. Time and again Smith recorded the savagery of plantation life. To Smith, the witness of the Bible was plainly against what he saw before him.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even the plantocracy knew that there was an inconsistency between slavery and Christianity. C. Sylvester Horne points out: "to attempt to make the Negroes

Christians was, in the eyes of the planters of those days, criminal; and yet many of these men themselves professed to worship according to the Christian faith.” Horne then quoted from the identical passage of the *Royal Gazette* that Augier and his colleagues cited. The article was published in 1808 in Demerara. The *Royal Gazette* warned: “it is dangerous to make slaves Christians without giving them liberty . . . will not the Negro conceive that by baptism, being made a Christian, he is as credible as his Christian white brethren?” Horne argues that the planters saw that they could not consistently teach their slaves the doctrines of Christianity and remain their owners. “To introduce Christianity was to introduce the spirit of freedom and to hasten the day of emancipation.”<sup>28</sup> The attitude of the planters was a grudging testimony to the influence of the biblical witness against the slavery they practised. Though there were some who tried to prove that West Indian slavery was in accord with the principles of the Bible, those who ran the plantation knew better. In the practical out-working of the slave system they never acted upon that premise.

Bethel Chapel at Le Resouvenir on the east coast of Demerara became the focal point of the religious life of the slaves – not only of Le Resouvenir, but also of a much wider area of that part of the coast. At Bethel, Smith expounded the Bible and performed his pastoral duties. His ministry was so well received by the slaves that the planters became nervous and attempted to curb his influence by finding extra jobs for the slaves to do on Sundays.<sup>29</sup>

There was no doubt about the fact that the planters feared the preaching of John Smith. His services were frequently visited by white informers who, like the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, came “that they might find an accusation against him.” Northcott claims, however,

the fact that he was being listened to and watched by white planters, as well as Governor’s emissaries, was no deterrent to Smith. He pursued his simple unadorned approach to his ministry, expounding the story of Exodus and the entry into the promise Land with an almost naive boldness. Every Negro slave and every plantation manager knew what the story meant for Demerara.<sup>30</sup>

It seemed as though Smith was walking a pastoral tight rope. Though he did not deliberately put into the heads of the slaves the idea of resisting slavery, he did not shirk his responsibility of preaching the Bible – and there were

certain sections of the Bible that dealt with the theme of divine deliverance from oppression.

Matters came into a head when on the 18 August 1823, the slaves believing that London had proclaimed emancipation, began to be agitated at not being set free. What had really occurred, was that the British Parliament had adopted measures for the amelioration of the condition of the slaves. The bill was passed in May of that year. Instructions for its implementation arrived in Demerara on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July. The bill called for the abolition of the practice of “driving” the work gangs on the sugar plantations with the cart whip, the end to the flogging of women, slaves to be given time for religious and moral instruction, and the selling of slaves away from colonies to which they belonged, to be abolished.<sup>31</sup> At long last – after 260 years – the British had mustered the courage to enact legislation to remove a few of the atrocities of the slave system.

But there was more. In another dispatch, Murray learned of more laws along the path of amelioration. Northcott says: “by mid-August, therefore, Murray knew the strength of Whitehall’s proposals for reforming the lot of the slaves.” This latter dispatch called for marriages to be established, mothers to be exempted from field work, and families not to be split up and sold separately. Flogging was to be reduced to three stripes.<sup>32</sup> This stipulation on flogging alone was enough to drive planters into a state of trauma. On one occasion, Smith and his wife each counting silently recorded lashes given to one slave as 141 and 140 respectively – only a difference of one between them. Northcott, quoting from Smith’s journal writes:

- 30 April 1821. I was induced to reckon the lashes and counted 105 stripes on one individual – Philis, for running away.
- 1 May. Hearing 86 lashes.
- 2 May. Eighty-one lashes.
- 3. 34 lashes and then 72 more.<sup>33</sup>

Such was a bit of the everyday life on the plantations of that part of the British Empire.

Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, Murray had made no public proclamation about the new measures to be adopted. The slaves, overhearing the whispers among the whites but being still kept in the dark, began to believe that “freedom had come” and that the governor and the planters were keeping it

from them. By the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, the slaves were in rebellion. The following day, Smith was arrested as the instigator of the plot and was imprisoned.

Instead of bringing Smith before a civilian court, Murray arraigned him before a military tribunal. This, apparently, was but the tip of an iceberg of legal irregularities in the Smith trial. Chief Justice Charles Wray of the colony of Demerara and Essequibo was forced to sit simply as a member of the tribunal. He was the only lawyer around them. Northcott observes:

Henry Brougham in the House of Commons castigated Murray's conception of martial law as "entirely unknown to the law of England," and therefore an illegal court in Demerara. He recognized the authority of a Mutiny Act and the trial of military persons before military tribunals, but to bring a civilian before a military tribunal such as the Demerara Court was, was contrary to English legal practice.<sup>34</sup>

Northcott also claims that the witnesses against Smith included that of convicted felons who were offered pardon on exchange for incriminating testimonies against the missionary.<sup>35</sup> But the tribunal was also concerned about biblical issues. During the cross-examination of the slave, Bristol, the Judge Advocate asked the following questions and got the subsequent replies:

Was it also read to you why Moses went to deliver the children of Israel? - - Yes, because they were slaves under Pharaoh.  
Did he read Exodus to you? - - Yes.  
Did he read Joshua to you? - - Yes.  
Do you recollect any particular chapter from Exodus? - - No.  
Do you recollect the purport of any chapter? - - No.  
Do you recollect anything from Joshua? - - Joshua was the person who let the children of Israel after Moses was dead.<sup>36</sup>

Another portion of scripture the tribunal was interested in was Luke 19:41, 42, from which Smith had preached a sermon. The text contained the incident of the Lord's weeping over Jerusalem, and in the subsequent verses a warning about the judgement that would follow them because their rejection of God.<sup>37</sup>

Smith was sentenced to death. Then quite paradoxically, he was recommended for mercy by the very ones who condemned him. As Northcott observes:

“Is it possible,” asked Brougham in the House of Commons, “to draw any other inference from this marvellous recommendation than that they distrusted the sentence to which it was attached?” Brougham saw the Court in full flight with guilty consciences for having “dared to take this innocent man’s life. Nothing in the trial is so astounding as this recommendation to mercy coming from persons who affected to believe him guilty of such enormous crimes.”<sup>38</sup>

All the evidence indicates that the trial was a farce. Horne observes:

Paris, one of the authors of the plot, declared that one of the prosecutors had prevailed upon them to swear to certain false accusations against the missionary. The evidence was abundant that Mr Smith had earnestly and systematically discouraged all violence, and had counselled patient obedience to their masters. He had even offended many of the more ardent slaves, and had run the risk of being counted an enemy of their freedom.<sup>39</sup>

In spite of this, the tribunal wrung its vengeance out on Smith. Yet it was reluctant to face the possible repercussions from London if it executed Smith by means of its corrupt process of law. Smith’s reprieve was granted. His sentence was commuted to banishment “from Demerara and the West Indies.” Unknown to London, he had died eighty days earlier, on 6 February 1824.

Even over Smith’s dead body, Governor Murray was taking no chances. He ordered that Smith be buried at 4 a.m. the following morning and that no one be allowed to follow the corpse to the graveside. Later he agreed to a compromise: Mrs. Jane Smith and a friend were permitted to meet the body of John Smith at the grave. To this date no one knows for sure where John Smith was buried. The most popular tradition in Guyana is that Smith’s grave is somewhere on the grounds of the St. Phillips Church in Georgetown.

When the news of Smith’s death reached Britain, there was a strong outcry against the carryings-on of the West Indian plantocracy. British public opinion was turned against slave holders in a new wave of protest.<sup>40</sup> It became perfectly clear that it was futile to expect the planters to be benevolent to the slaves. If Smith, a white Englishman, met such ferocity from the planters; then there was no hope for the slave.<sup>41</sup>

Back in Demerara, the planters, in the aftermath of Smith's trial, were reminding themselves of the dangers biblical preaching posed to the rationale of slavery. According to Northcott, *The Colonist* of 18 February 1824, warned:

If we expect to create a community of reading, moral, churchgoing slaves we are woefully mistaken. It is not the smallest matter of surprise that a Negro slave, who has been taught that all men are equal in a religious point of view, should wish the same principle to prevail in politics.

Then reporting the sentiments of *Guiana Chronicle* of 27 February 1824, Northcott points out:

If this kind of preaching, said the *Guiana Chronicle*, was not to be tolerated, then the missionary system must go for the "independent missions" are a threat to the feeling of mutual dependence and attachment which united master and slave and which, as it was the firmest basis of our security, was the fairest and most promising source of substantial benefit improvement to slave.<sup>42</sup>

The missionary way of preaching the Bible was too powerful for the slave system to withstand. Though they carefully instructed the slaves in their Christian responsibility to be respectful to their masters, other parts of the Bible still taught the slaves about freedom. Northcott's findings about the slaves of Demerara are virtually identical to Turner's about the slaves in Jamaica: missionary instruction had assisted the slaves in developing moral strength to exercise restraint in their quest for liberty. Northcott says that the Demerara affair was "a nonviolent insurrection."<sup>43</sup> Even the report of Governor Murray, corroborated this to some extent. The Committee of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition for Slavery reported:

Governor Murray himself, writing on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1823, when affairs had already assumed a "peaceable aspect" testified that he had not heard of any whites having being deliberately murdered by the misguided slaves. On one plantation where the whites resisted, two of them were killed. But it does not appear that, except in this instance, the insurgents took the life of a single individual, or that they demolished a single house, or set a fire a single cane piece.<sup>44</sup>

All of this demonstrates the true source of the hostility of the planters towards the missionaries: to preach the message of the Bible to the slaves was a dangerous thing. Though there was no evidence that John Smith had incited the resistance, it seemed evident that his exposition of the Bible had assisted the slaves in developing a free and independent spirit that rejected the *raison d'être* of the slave institution. The power of the Bible's witness against such oppressiveness is the legacy John Smith, "slavery's martyr," has left us.

### ***Scripture's Role in Emancipation***

Unquestionably, there were biblical arguments in support of the abolition of slavery. The evidence indicates that these arguments were quite credible and were not forced interpretations of the Bible. From the time of George Fox in 1671 to early 1770s, it was among the Quakers that a theology of biblical perspectives on slavery developed, but it was Granville Sharp's publications of 1776 that made a clear breakthrough in the field of anti-slavery exegesis.

From the period of 1780s, the Anglican evangelicals took the lead in the further development and propagation of anti-slavery theology. Granville Sharp, himself an evangelical, laid the foundation for this. Other Christians, especially those from the wider evangelical community, also participated in contributing towards a deeper understanding of the biblical witness about the subject. All of this led to a distinctive theology of emancipation that was clearly recognizable by the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

In the West Indies, however, the evangelical missionaries ministering among the slaves did not voice these biblical anti-slavery concepts. Planter resistance was fierce. Yet the missionaries persisted in their preaching of the gospel to the slaves, and the message of the Bible itself supported the slave in his quest for freedom, and dislodged the entrenchment of the slave plantation culture.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1982), 77.
2. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 26.

3. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 66.
4. Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, 3 vols. (Liverpool: Nuttall, Fisher and Dixon, 1808-1811; reprinted by London: Frank Cass, 1971), 1: 443-454.
5. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 69.
6. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 110, 112-115.
7. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 148-173.
8. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 160.
9. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 170.
10. George Liele, Excerpts from a letter written in 1791; reprinted in *The Journal of Negro History* 1 (January 1916), 72.
11. F.R. Augier, S.C. Gordon, D.G. Hall and M. Reckford, *The Making of the West Indies* (London: Longmans and Green, 1960), 140.
12. Liele, Excerpts from a letter, 71,72.
13. Augier, et al., *The Making of the West Indies*, 140.
14. "Governor Woodford to Lord Bathurst," n.d.; in *Documents on British West Indian History, 1807-1833*, ed. Eric Williams (Trinidad Publishing Co., 1952), 241,242.
15. Winsome Gibson-Davis, "The Colonial Church Union in Jamaica," (M.C.S. thesis, Regent College, 1981), 2. The song was a testimony of redemption from the powers of evil in the imagery of liberation from slavery.
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