McGever, Sean. *Ownership: The Evangelical Legacy of Slavery in Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2024. 196pp. + 35pp. (back matter).

I have mixed feelings about this book. It is an excellent guide to the views of Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield about slavery. Furthermore, it provides excellent background on slavery and Christian attitudes toward that institution in the transatlantic world of the eighteenth century, and it is accurate about the general failure of Christianity's approach to slavery in history.

Yet there remains a sort of distortion, perhaps not so much from the author's intent but from a selective focus. Edwards and Whitefield had no problems with slavery, and Whitefield unfortunately actively supported the institution as a means of enriching Georgia and funding his own ministry there. Wesley opposed slavery later in life, but the author faults him for not doing so earlier. Slavery, admittedly an important issue, is the be-all and end-all of this presentation. The book's tone is far from harsh; so, I commend it as an informative study. The chief failure, which results from its design, is to look at the whole ministry of these men in relation to one distinct failing. McGever, for example, relates the encounters of these men with slaves and faults them for not reckoning (or at least not commenting on) their enslaved condition. Yet each man preeminently saw all the people they met as sinners in need of salvation more than any other aspect of their condition. One could note, for example, the correspondence between Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin in which the evangelist turned the conversation to the gospel wherever he could, regardless of what topic they discussed. There is a danger of skewed perspective. Many Christians who have admired the heroism of Martin Luther in defending the gospel have been appalled to learn of Luther's negative comments about Jews later in life. Yet we should not judge Luther on the whole in respect to one of his great failings any more than David ceased to be a man after God's own heart because of his great sin with Bathsheba.

There is also a point of usage that is open to question, the use of "enslaved" as a verb and "enslaver" to describe slave owners. This usage is not unique to this book but in line with contemporary literature. Technically, Whitefield and Edwards were not "enslavers," those who placed people in slavery, but "slave masters" or "slave owners," neither of which is a commendable label.

However, there are numerous virtues to this book. McGever offers an excellent summary of English/Christian views of slavery at that time (49–61): (1) slavery is ordained by God; (2) slavery is the result of sin; (3) slave acquisition has limits (through war or purchase); (4) slaves must obey, and masters must be temperate; (5) slaves deserve spiritual freedom; and (6) slave conversion does not emancipate the slave. Such a summary provides readers with the context for understanding the events of that era. Likewise, although the author rightly faults Whitefield for supporting the introduction of slavery into Georgia, he also demonstrates that Georgia's initial prohibition of slavery was not on humanitarian grounds (68–69). Also commendable and helpful is the concise section on the background and development of Quaker anti-slavery sentiment (124–33), perhaps the first example of systematic Christian opposition to slavery.

Also of value is the discussion of the legacy of these men. McGever notes how, unfortunately, American Methodists backed away from Wesley's condemnation of slavery and learned to accommodate the institution. On the other hand, McGever points out how the second generation of

Edwardsean theologians (known as the New Divinity school or Hopkinsians)—including Edwards's own son—became committed abolitionists. In fact, as McGever notes, this shift emerged from Edwards's own theological principles, notably his description of virtue as "disinterested benevolence toward Being in general." Students who have puzzled over this definition will appreciate the author's explanation of the concept as "the key ethical mandate to glorify God by seeking the ultimate good of another person without consideration about how it benefits or does not benefit yourself" (154). One needs only to add seeking the ultimate good of God to see how Edwards's principle reflects Christ's teaching of the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36–40). This concept led some Edwardsean theologians to condemn slavery where their predecessors had tolerated it.

Whatever criticisms I have mentioned, I must stress that McGever has a point. Considering some surprisingly mild comments by a few contemporary evangelicals about slavery that the author cites (6–7), Christian attitudes toward slavery are far from a being simply a historical curiosity. White Christians unfortunately tend to see slavery as an issue dead and buried, not realizing its long-term impact on American history even to the present. Although few modern Christians would use the views of Whitefield and Edwards to defend slavery, the fact is that their attitudes on occasion have historically served as a precedent to those favoring slavery.[1] McGever's book highlights how Christ's command to love one's neighbor is always to guide Christians regardless of the era in which they live.

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[1] On the legacy of pro-slavery attitudes, one might point out the comment of a southern writer in the Civil War era who noted with satisfaction how George Whitefield was a slaveowner. See Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout, "The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 73.