

FITCH CHARLES

SLAVEHOLDING

Charles Fitch

Slaveholding

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Charles Fitch

Slaveholding / Weighed in the Balance of Truth

SLAVEHOLDING, & c

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In order that we may understand the duties, which we owe to God and our fellow men, relative to the subject of slavery, it is necessary that we examine the institution, in all its bearings upon the temporal and eternal interests of the enslaved; and ascertain, as far as we are able to do so, the extent of the injuries which it inflicts. To aid my readers in doing this is now my object.

I do not propose however, to gauge this mammoth evil, and show you its exact dimensions; I fully confess to you in the outset, that I am not able so to do. That it is greater, in some of its bearings at least, than any other evil that ever existed among men, and involves more guilt than any other crime ever committed by men, I fully believe, and shall endeavor to show; still the evil has a magnitude which my powers cannot describe; and the guilt a blackness which can never be painted, except by a pencil dipped in the midnight of the bottomless pit.

I am aware, that great complaint has often been made, of those, who have endeavored to rouse the indignation of their fellow men against the wrongs inflicted on the poor slave, that they deal in unjust severity of language. That they have at any time spoken more than the truth, I do not believe – nor can I admit that they have dealt out severity and painted rebuke, in more unmeasured terms, than they have received them from their opponents.

When I remember, too, the long and profound slumberings, even of Christians on this subject, while their brethren were groaning under all the injuries, and cruelties, of iron-handed and steel-hearted oppression; I cannot suppress the feeling, that it was necessary, that those who would arouse them, should break forth as in thunder tones, and gird up all their energies, to shake off the sloth in which their fellow men were bound. They had themselves but just awoke as from a dream, and found that they had long been sleeping, as on the overhanging brink of a burning crater; and when they saw the whole multitude of their fellow countrymen, still asleep in the same situation of fearful peril; who can wonder that they should cry out at the top of their voice, and resort to every possible expedient, to awaken those around them before it was too late? They heard the suppressed and terrific mutterings of the incipient earthquake below, and felt the ground beneath them already giving way, what less could they do, than to lay about them with all their strength, in the use of the first expedient, that seemed calculated to awaken and save? They had no time to devise a multitude of measures, and then choose from among them, such as would be most likely to satisfy those who were unwilling to be awaked. They must do something, and do it then. Previous measures, though entered upon ostensibly for the purpose of arousing men from sleep, had only served as a lull-a-by. The oppressors of their fellow men, were but becoming more secure in their claims of property in God's image – the chains of the slave were getting more and more firmly rivetted, and the whole nation were fast binding themselves in a willing bondage to those, who found it conducive to their ease, and interest, and shameful indulgence, to be permitted to inflict all the wrongs they pleased on their fellow men, with none to utter a single note of remonstrance or rebuke. It was seen that the press was bribed, and the pulpit gagged, and the lips of the multitude padlocked, and nearly the whole population of the free States bound, by chains either of prejudice, or interest, or ignorance, to the tremendous car of Slavery; and those who loved to have it so, had mounted the engine and were driving at rail-road speed, withersoever they would; and when a few awoke, and saw the nation

thus hastening to the precipice of ruin, to be dashed in the abyss below – what less could they do, than to cry STOP – and that too, even at a pitch of remonstrance, which should subject them to the imputation of fanaticism or madness.

It is not unlikely that some of my readers, may regard the language which I shall use as unreasonably severe; and yet I do not believe, nor can I think that any man, after looking candidly at the subject, will believe that it expresses more than the truth.

My design is to draw a parallel between slavery and the evils which stand connected with it, and some of the worst evils and vices and crimes, which are ever found among men, that we may see where slavery ought to be placed in the catalogue of sins.

1. Let us look at the Roman Catholic Church. Much has been said during the last few years, of the efforts which were being made, to bring this country under subjection to the Pope of Rome. Now it is enough to make a man shudder from head to foot, though his nerves were iron, and his sinews brass, to think of the most distant possibility that such a thing may ever take place.

But what are the evils which the Romish Church inflicts, upon such as are brought under her control?

She takes away the Bible from them, and gives them no opportunity, to learn for themselves, the way to heaven. All the religious instruction, which the people can receive, must come orally, from the lips of the priest. Slavery does the same thing precisely, to all who come under its control. They may not read the Bible, nor possess it – and can receive no religious instruction, but what comes orally from the lips of the priest. The Roman Catholic Church depends for its perpetuity, upon the ignorance of the common people. Slavery depends for its perpetuity upon the ignorance, of the enslaved. Hence the great effort to shut out all *knowledge*. The Romish Church robs the laboring classes of large sums of money, to support its pope, and its cardinals, its bishops, and its priests, in idleness and luxury and profligacy. Slavery robs the laboring class of their earnings, to support another set of men in the same mode of life. The Romish Church confiscates the property, and confines, and tortures, and puts to death, such as will not submit to her rule, whenever she has the power of doing so. Slavery does the same things. Not only the property, the whole earnings, but the wife and children, the hands and feet and head, the whole body and soul of the enslaved, are confiscated, and appropriated to the use of men in power. Slavery also has tortures for its victims. It applies the scourge, until the blood runs down their lacerated bodies in streams, and in a multitude of ways inflicts its cruelties, upon such as will not yield an entire submission to its rule. If any refuse to submit longer to their sufferings, and flee, they are followed into their hiding places, and put to death. Others are whipped until death ensues; others are driven to hard labor without proper food or rest, until they sink down and die.

But the Romish Church does not, ordinarily, strip the whole multitude of its victims, of everything that bears the name of property, and take the ownership of themselves out of their hands, and drive them by the scourge to hard labor from the beginning to the end of the year. She does not measure out to them their scanty pittance of food, nor name every rag of clothing which they are permitted to put on, nor mock at all the relations of social life – stealing the child out of the father's arms, or off the mother's breast; and the wife out of the bosom of her husband; and separating them for life, depriving them of all the protection of law, and subjecting them daily to every injury and suffering, which avarice and passion and lust can load upon them. Nor are men, women and children under her influence, like cattle, raised to sell. Such enormities as these are left to be practiced by slavery; and to be legalized in the statute books of a people, who have boastingly regarded themselves, as the most thoroughly christianized nation on which the sun ever shines. I say then, there are points, in which slavery far outdoes the Romish Church in cruelty and guilt; binds heavier burdens, and more grievous to be borne, and lays them on men's shoulders, and will not touch them with a finger. Slavery also like Romanism, cries out against free discussion, and the liberty of the press, and does not hesitate to silence both, so far as she has the power; and to make every possible advance toward it where the power is not possessed. Hence the outrages committed on peaceful citizens, travelling in slaveholding

States; and the efforts to put down discussion, in almost all the States which call themselves free. Hence the destruction of Birney's press in Cincinnati, and the stones cast in the streets of Troy, at the hero Weld, who, like his Master, goes about doing good. Hence all the shameful outrages by which that place has been disgraced, and the still more shameful neglect of the proper authorities to protect peaceful, respectable, high-minded, and pious men, in the exercise of the most noble of all their rights, that of publicly expressing and defending their own opinions. Hence all the excesses practiced in this and several adjoining States, to lay the heaven-born spirit of liberty asleep, even among her own New-England hills. Hence the long, loud, and repeated threats of dissolving the Union, which Southern men have sent up on our ears, and which even some of our Governors have echoed back, in declarations that it is felony for a man to speak what he thinks on a particular subject. Who doubts, that slavery if she could, would go so far in locking up the opinions of men within their own breasts, as ever popery went in the height of her power. She had already, well nigh, taken away the power of free discussion, from those who dare to assert the rights of their fellow men, and would soon have completed the *work*.

2. Let us look at Infidelity. The evil arising from this source is, that it blinds men respecting their duty to God and their own souls, and thus leads them down to hell. It urges itself, however, on no man by force. A spark of honest desire to know the truth and walk in its light, is at all times, abundantly sufficient, to show a man the sophistry and wilful unbelief by which such doctrines are supported; and to warn him of all their snares, and to guide his feet into the path of life. A spark of honesty in the admission of the plainest principles of common sense, will show a man that there is a God, that the Bible is a revelation of his will, and that he will not let the wicked go unpunished, who refuse to repent. He, therefore, who suffers himself to be borne upon the shoals and rocks, and down the cataracts, or into the whirlpools of wilful unbelief, goes there warned of his danger, and with abundant means and opportunities for escape. But slavery wrests the Bible out of the hands of immortal men by force. In the midst of a Christian land, with the clear light of heaven shining all around them, they are shut out from this light, and left to grope their way in darkness down to hell. That I may not be suspected of declaring more than the truth on this point, I will just give a specimen of the laws of slave States touching this point.

'A law of South Carolina, passed in 1800, authorizes the infliction of twenty lashes, on every slave, found in an assembly, convened for mental instruction, held in a confined or secret place, although in presence of a white.' That this cuts them off, and was designed to cut them off from all means of mental instruction, nobody doubts; for who in that State is permitted to give slaves mental instruction in a public place? 'Another law, imposes a fine of a hundred pounds, on any person who may teach a slave to write.' 'In North Carolina, to teach a slave to read or write, or to sell or give him any book, [the Bible not excepted,] or pamphlet, is punished with thirty-nine lashes, or imprisonment if the offender be a free negro, but if a white, then with a fine of three hundred dollars. In Georgia, if a white teach a free negro or a slave to read or write, he is fined five hundred dollars, and imprisoned at the discretion of the Court. If the offender be a colored man, bond or free, he may be fined, or whipped, at the discretion of the Court. A father therefore, may not teach his own children, on penalty of being flogged.' 'This was enacted in 1829.' 'In Louisiana, the penalty for teaching slaves to read or write, is one year's imprisonment. In Georgia also, any justice may, at his discretion, break up any religious assembly of slaves, and may order each slave present to be corrected, without trial, by receiving on the bare back, twenty-five stripes with a whip, switch, or cowskin.' 'In South Carolina, slaves may not meet together, before sunrise or after sunset, for the purpose of religious instruction, unless a majority of the meeting be of whites, on penalty of twenty lashes well laid on. In Virginia, all *evening* meetings of slaves, at any meeting-house, are unequivocally forbidden.' Of course they may not meet in the day time, for then they must labor. Possibly they may on the Sabbath, but their opportunities of doing it even then, are few and far between.

You see, therefore, the strenuous efforts which are made by legislative enactments, to shut out all light from the mind of the slave, and surround him with a thick impenetrable darkness, in the midst of which he must live and die; and from which his eye never can open, till death frees him from the grasp of his oppressor. I am aware, that the privilege of giving oral religious instruction to slaves is, to some extent, granted, and that some slave masters do pretend to teach their slaves the truths of religion. But what is the amount of all this? A writer for the New York Evangelist has, some months since, given us what he terms 'sketches of slavery from a year's residence in Florida,' in one number of which, he speaks on this very point. He had conversed with slaveholders on the subject. One man thought it a very fine thing to give slaves religious instruction. 'I called my slaves together,' said he, 'one Sabbath day, *the only time which I have been able to get this season!!!*

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