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Presbyterian Synod P92

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AN ADDRESS

TO THE

PRESBYTERIANS OF KENTUCKY,

PROPOSING A PLAN

FOR THE

INSTRUCTION AND EMANCIPATION

OF

THEIR SLAVES.

BY A COMMITTEE OF THE SYNOD OF KENTUCKY.

NEWBURYPORT:

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1836.

FOR the purpose of promoting harmony and concert of action on this important subject, the Synod do

Resolve, That a committee of ten be appointed to consist of an equal number of ministers and elders, whose business it shall be to digest and prepare a plan for the moral and religious instruction of our slaves, and for their future emancipation, and to report such plan to the several presbyteries within our bounds, for their consideration and approval.

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Committee.

The committee would respectfully request every preacher to read this address to his congregation on some Sabbath. The object of the Synod in appointing a committee to prepare a plan, is stated to be to "promote harmony and concert of action on this important subject;" and this can only be effected by presenting the plan with the reasons urging its adoption, before every member of our Church.

ADDRESS.

DEAR BRETHREN :—

The will of Synod has made it our duty to lay before you “a plan for the moral and religious instruction, as well as for the future emancipation, of the slaves” under your care. We feel the responsibility and difficulty of the duty to which the church has called us, yet the character of those whom we address strongly encourages us to hope that labor will not be in vain. You profess to be governed by the principles and precepts of a holy religion; you recognise the fact that you have yourselves “been made free” by the blood of the Son of God; and you believe that you have been imbued with a portion of the same spirit which was in “Him who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor.” When we point out to such persons their duty, and call upon them to fulfil it, our appeal cannot be altogether fruitless. But we have a still stronger ground of our encouragement, in our firm conviction that the cause which we advocate is the cause of God, and that his assistance will make it finally prevail. May He “who hears the cry of the poor and needy,” and who has commanded to let the “oppressed go free,” give to each one of us wisdom to know our duty, and strength to fulfil it.

We earnestly entreat you, brethren, to receive our communication in the same spirit of kindness in which it is made; and permit neither prejudice nor interest to close your minds against the reception of truth, or steel your hearts against the convictions of conscience. Very soon it will be a matter of no moment whether we have had large or small possessions on the earth; but it will be of infinite importance whether or not we have conscientiously sought out the will of God and done it.

We all admit that the system of slavery, which exists among us, is not right. Why, then, do we assist in pepe-

tuating it? Why do we make no serious efforts to terminate it? Is it not because our perception of its sinfulness is very feeble and indistinct, while our perception of the difficulties of instructing and emancipating our slaves is strong and clear? As long as we believe that slavery, as it exists among us, is a *light evil* in the sight of God, so long will we feel inclined to pronounce every plan that can be devised for its termination, inexpedient or impracticable. Before, then, we unfold our plan, we wish to examine the system, and try it by the principles which religion teaches. If it shall not be thus proved to be an abomination in the sight of a just and holy God, we shall not solicit your concurrence in any plan for its abolition. But if, when fairly examined, it shall be seen to be a thing which God abhors, we may surely expect that no trifling amount of trouble or loss will deter you from lending your efforts to its extermination.

Slavery is not the same all the world over; and to ascertain its character in any particular state or country, we must examine the constituents and effects of *the kind of slavery which there exists*. The system as it exists among us, and is constituted by our laws, *consists of three distinct parts—a deprivation of the right of property, a deprivation of personal liberty, and a deprivation of personal security*. In all its parts it is, manifestly, a violation of the laws of God, as revealed by the light of nature, as well as the light of revelation.

1st. *A part of our system of slavery consists in depriving human beings of the right to acquire and hold property*. Does it need any proof to show that God has given to all human beings a right to the proceeds of their own labor? The heathen acknowledge it—every man feels it. The Bible is full of denunciations against those who withhold from others the fruits of their exertions. “Wo unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor’s service without wages, and giveth him not for his work.”* Does an act which is wrong, when done once and toward one individual, become right because it is practised daily and hourly, and towards thousands? Does the just and holy One frown

* Jeremiah, xxii, 13. See also James, v, 4; Lev. xix, 13; Deut. xxiv, 14, 15

the less upon injustice, because it is systematically practised, and is sanctioned by the laws of the land? If the chicanery of law should enable us to escape the payment of our debts, or if a human legislature should discharge us from our obligations to our creditors, could we, without deep guilt, withhold from our neighbors that which is their due? No: we all recognise the principle, that the laws of the God of nature can never be replaced by any legislature under heaven. These laws will endure, when the statutes of earth shall have crumbled with the parchments on which they are enrolled—and by these laws we know that we must be judged, in the day in which the destinies of our souls shall be determined.

2d. *The deprivation of personal liberty forms another part of our system of slavery.* Not only has the slave no right to his wife and children, he has no right even to himself. His very body, his muscles, his bones, his flesh, are all the property of another. The movements of his limbs are regulated by the will of a master. He may be sold, like a beast of the field—he may be transported, in chains, like a felon. Was the blood of our Revolution shed to establish a false principle, when it was poured out in defence of the assertion, that “all men are created equal;” that “they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” If it be a violation of the rights of nature to deprive men of their *political freedom*, the injustice is surely much more flagrant when we rob them of *personal liberty*. The condition of a subject is enviable compared with the condition of a slave. We are shocked at the despotism exercised over the Poles. But theirs is a political yoke, and is light compared with the heavy personal yoke that bows down the two millions of our colored countrymen. Does European injustice lose its foul character, when practised with aggravations in America?

Still further, the deprivation of personal liberty is so complete that it destroys the rights of conscience. Our system, as established by law, arms the master with power to prevent his slave from worshipping God according to the dictates of his own conscience. The owner of human

beings among us may legally restrain them from assembling to hear the instructions of divine truth, or even from ever uniting their hearts and voices in social prayer and praise to Him who created them. God alone is Lord over the conscience. Yet our system, defrauding alike our Creator and our slaves, confers upon men this prerogative of Deity. Argument is unnecessary, to show the guilt and madness of such a system. And do we not participate in its criminality, if we uphold it?

3d. *The deprivation of personal security is the remaining constituent of our system of slavery.* The time was, in our own as well as in other countries, when even the life of the slave was absolutely in the hands of the master. It is not so now among us. The life of a bondman cannot be taken with impunity. But the law extends its protection no further. Cruelty may be carried to any extent, provided life be spared. Mangling, imprisonment, starvation, every species of torture, may be inflicted upon him, and he has no redress. But, not content with thus laying the body of the slave defenceless at the foot of the master, our system proceeds still further, and strips him in a great measure of all protection against the inhumanity of any *other* white man who may choose to maltreat him. The laws prohibit the evidence of a slave against a white man from being received in a court of justice. So that wantonness and cruelty may be exercised by any man with impunity, upon these unfortunate people, provided none witness it but those of their own color. In describing such a condition, we may well adopt the language of sacred writ: "Judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off; for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. And the Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment."

Such is the essential character of our slavery. Without any crime on the part of its unfortunate subjects, they are deprived for life, and their posterity after them, of the right to property, of the right to liberty, and of the right to personal security. These odious features are not the excrescences upon the system—they are *the system itself*—they are its essential constituent parts. And can any man believe that such a thing as this is not sinful—that it

is not hated by God—and ought not to be abhorred and abolished by man?

But there are certain *effects*, springing naturally and necessarily out of such a system, which must also be considered in forming a proper estimate of its character.

1. Its most striking effect is, *to deprave and degrade its subjects by removing from them the strongest natural checks to human corruption.* As there are certain laws impressed upon the elements, by which God works to preserve the beauty and order of the material creation; so there are certain principles of human nature, by which he works to save the moral world from ruin. These principles operate on every man in his natural condition of freedom—restraining his vicious propensities, and regulating his deportment. The fires of innate depravity, which, if permitted to burst forth, would destroy the individual and desolate society, are thus, measurably, repressed; and the decencies and enjoyments of life are preserved. The wisdom and goodness of God are thus seen in implanting in man a sense of character, a desire for property, a love for distinction, a thirst for power, and a zeal for family advancement. All these feelings, working in the mind of individuals, (though not unmixed with evil,) combine to promote their own happiness, and the welfare of communities; and they are inferior in the good which they produce, only to those high religious principles which constitute the image of God in the soul of man. The presence of these principles only can compensate for their absence. Whenever, then, these natural feelings are crushed or eradicated in any human being, he is stripped of the nobler attributes of humanity, and is degraded into a creature of mere appetite and passion. His sensuality is the only cord by which you can draw him. His hopes and fears all concentrate upon the objects of his appetites. He sinks far down toward a level with the beast of the field, and can be moved to action only by such appeals as influence the lunatic and the brute. This is the condition to which slavery reduces the great mass of those who wear its brutalizing yoke. Its effects upon their souls are far worse than its effects upon their bodies. Character, property, destination, power, and family respectability,

are all withdrawn from the reach of the slave. No object is presented to excite and cultivate those higher feelings, whose exercise would repress his passions and regulate his appetites. Thus slavery deranges and ruins the moral machinery of man—it cuts the sinews of the soul—it extracts from human nature the salt that purifies and preserves it, and leaves it a corrupting mass of appetite and passion.

2. *It dooms thousands of human beings to hopeless ignorance.* The acquisition of knowledge requires exertion; and the man who is to continue through life in bondage, has no strong motive of interest to induce such exertion; for knowledge is not valuable to him, as to one who eats the fruits of his own labors. The acquisition of knowledge requires also facilities of books, teachers, and time, which can be only adequately furnished by masters; and those who desire to perpetuate slavery will never furnish these facilities. If slaves are educated, it must involve some outlay on the part of the master. And what reliance for such a sacrifice can be placed on the generosity and virtue of one, who looks on them as his property, and who has been trained to consider every dollar expended on them as lost, unless it contributes to increase their capacity for yielding him valuable service? He will have them taught to work, and will ordinarily feed and clothe them so as to enable them to perform their work to advantage. But more than this, it is inconsistent with our knowledge of human nature to expect that he will do for them. The present state of instruction among this race answers exactly to what we might thus naturally anticipate. Throughout our whole land, so far as we can learn, there is but one school in which, during the week, slaves can be taught. The light of three or four Sabbath schools is seen, glimmering through the darkness that covers the black population of a whole state. Here and there a family is found, where humanity and religion impel the master, mistress, or children, to the laborious task of private instruction. Great honor is due to those engaged in this philanthropic and self-denying course; and their reward shall be received in the day when even a cup of cold water, given from Christian motives, shall

secure a reeompense. But, after all, what is the utmost amount of instruction given to slaves? Those who enjoy the most of it, are fed with but the crumbs of knowledge which fall from their master's table—they are elothed with the mere shreds and tatters of learning.

Nor is it to be expected that this state of things will become better, *unless it is determined that slavery shall cease*. The impression is almost universal, that intellectual elevation unfits men for servitude, and renders it impossible to retain them in this eondition. This impression is unquestionably eorrect. The weakness and ignorance of their vietims is the only safe foundation on which injustice and oppression ean rest. And the effort to keep in bondage men to whom knowledge has imparted power, would be like the insane attempt of the Persian tyrant, to ehain the waves of the sea, and whip its boisterous waters into submission. We may as soon expect to fetter the winds, seal up the clouds, or extinguish the fires of the voleano, as to prevent enlightened minds from reeoovering their natural eondition of freedom. Henec, in some of our states, laws have been enaeted, prohibiting, under severe penalties, the instruction of the blaeks; and even where sueh laws do not exist, there are formidable numbers who oppose, with deep hostility, every effort to enlighten the mind of the negro. These men are determined that slavery shall be perpetuated; and they know that their universal education must be followed by their universal emanepiation. They are then aeting wisely, aecording to the wisdom of this world, when they deny education to slaves—they are adopting a measure necessary to sceure their determined purposc. It is, however, policy akin to that which once induced the ruffian violators of female ehastity to cut out the tongue, and cut off the hands of their vietim, to disable her from uttering or writing their names. She had to be maimed, or they would be brought to justiee. It is sueh policy as the robber exhibits, who silenees in death the voiees that might aeuse him, and buries in the grave the witnesses of his crimes. He is determined to pursuc his oeenpation, and his safety in it requires that he should not indulge in the weakness of keeping a conseience. How horrible

must be that system, which, in the opinion of even its strongest advocates, demands as the necessary condition of its existence, that knowledge should be shut out from the minds of those who live under it—that they should be reduced as nearly as possible to the level of brutes or living machines—that the powers of their souls should be crushed! Let each one of us ask, can such a system be aided or even tolerated without deep criminality?

3. *It deprives its subjects, in a great measure, of the privileges of the gospel.* You may be startled at this statement, and feel disposed to exclaim, “our slaves are always permitted and even encouraged to attend upon the ordinances of worship.” But a candid and close examination will show the correctness of our charge. The privileges of the gospel, as enjoyed by the white population in this land, consist in *free access to the scriptures, a regular gospel ministry, and domestic means of grace.* Neither of these is, to any extent worth naming, enjoyed by slaves, as a moment’s consideration will satisfactorily show. The law, as it is here, does not prevent *free access to the scriptures*—but ignorance, the natural result of their condition, does. The Bible is before them, but it is to them a sealed book. “The light shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehendeth it not.” Like the paralytic, who lay for years by the pool of Bethesda, the waters of healing are near them, but no kind hand enables them to try their efficacy. Very few enjoy the advantages of a *regular gospel ministry.* They are, it is true, permitted generally, and often encouraged, to attend upon the ministrations specially designed for their masters. But the instructions communicated on such occasions are above the level of their capacities. They listen as to prophesyings in an unknown tongue. The preachers of their own color are still farther from ministering to their spiritual wants—as these impart to them, not of their knowledge, but their ignorance: they heat their animal feelings, but do not kindle the flame of intelligent devotion. It has been proposed by some zealous and devoted friends of the colored race, to supply the deficiency of gospel ministrations among them, by the employment of suitable missionaries, who may labor exclusively among

them. We need not here speculate on the probable results of such a scheme if carried into effect, in a community where there is no intention to emancipate; for before there is found among us benevolence enough to adopt and execute it, on a scale large enough to effect any highly valuable purpose, the community will be already ripe for measures of emancipation. Such a spirit of kindness towards this unfortunate race as this scheme presupposes, can never co-exist with a determination to keep them in hopeless bondage. Further, there are no houses of worship exclusively devoted to the colored population. The galleries of our own churches, which are set apart to their use, would not hold the tenth part of their numbers—and even these few seats are, in general, thinly occupied. So that, as a body, it is evident that our slaves do not enjoy the public ordinances of religion. *Domestic means of grace* are still more rare among them. Here and there a family is found, whose servants are taught to bow with their masters around the fireside altar. But their peculiarly adverse circumstances, combined with the natural alienation of their hearts from God, render abortive the slight efforts of most masters to induce their attendance on the domestic services of religion. And if we visit the cottages of those slaves who live apart from their masters, where do we find them reading their Bibles and kneeling together before a throne of mercy? Family ordinances of religion are almost unknown among the blacks. We do not wish to exaggerate the description of this deplorable religious condition of our colored population. We know that instances of true piety are frequently found among them; but these instances we all know to be awfully disproportionate to their numbers, and to the extent of those means of grace which exist around them. When the missionaries of the cross enter a heathen land, their hope of fully christianizing it rests upon the fact that they can array and bring to bear upon the minds of these children of ignorance and sin, all those varied means which God has appointed for the reformation of man. But while the system of slavery continues among us, these means can never be efficiently and fully employed for the conversion of the degraded sons of Africa. Yet

“God hath made them of one blood” with ourselves; hath provided for them the same redemption; hath in his providence cast souls upon our care; and hath clearly intimated to us the doom of him, who “seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him.” If by our example, our silence, or our sloth, we perpetuate a system which paralyzes our hands when we attempt to convey to them the bread of life, and which inevitably consigns the great mass of them to unending perdition, can we be guiltless in the sight of Him who hath made us stewards of his grace?

4. *This system licenses and produces great cruelty.* The law places the whip in the hands of the master, and its use, provided he avoid destroying life, is limited only by his own pleasure. Considering the absolute power with which our people are armed, it must be acknowledged that the treatment of their dependants is, in general, singularly humane. Many circumstances operate here to mitigate the rigors of perpetual servitude; and it is probably the fact, that no body of slaves have been ever better fed, better clothed, and less abused, than the slaves of Kentucky. Still they have no security for their comfort but the humanity and generosity of men, who have been trained to regard them not as brethren, but as mere property. Humanity and generosity are, at best, poor guarantees for the protection of those who cannot assert their rights, and over whom law throws no protection. Our own condition we would feel to be wretched indeed, if no law secured us from the insults and maltreatment *even of our equals*. But superiority naturally begets contempt; and contempt generates maltreatment, for checking which we can rely not on virtue, but only on law. There are, in our land, hundreds of thousands clothed with arbitrary powers over those, whom they are educated to regard as their property, as the instruments of their will, as creatures beneath their sympathy, devoid of all the feelings which dignify humanity, and but one remove above cattle. Is it not certain that many of these hundreds of thousands will inflict outrages on their despised dependants? There are now, in our whole land, two millions of human beings, exposed, defenceless, to every