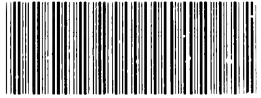


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Slavery

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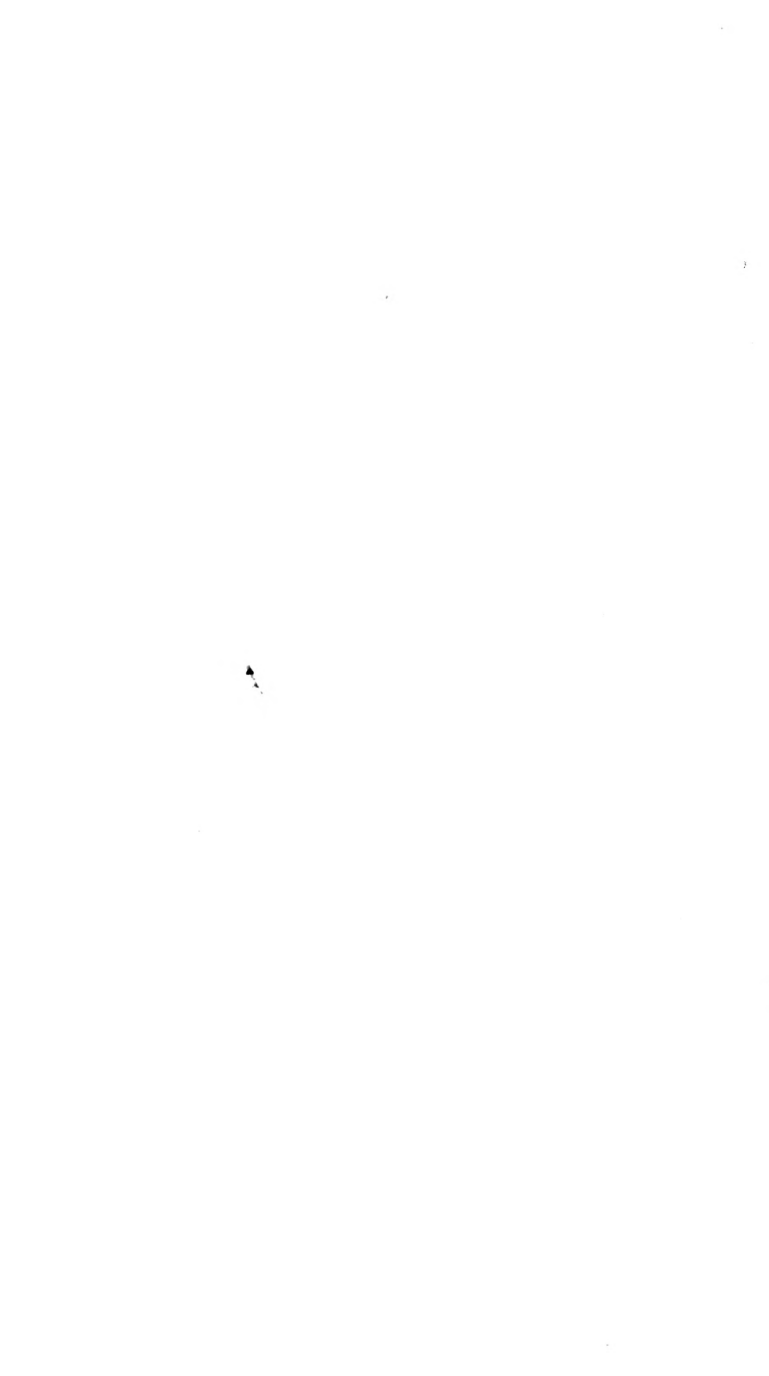
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CHURCH ACTION ON SLAVERY.

On the 31st of March, 1857, the following paper was adopted by the Session of the Presbyterian Church at Harlem :

WHEREAS, The General Assembly of 1839 did “most solemnly refer to the lower judicatories the subject of slavery, leaving it to them to take such order thereon as in their judgment would be the most judicious, and adapted to remove the evil ;” and this injunction has never been recalled, but has been renewed and repeated, as appears in the records of the Assemblies of 1843, 1846, and 1850 :

And whereas the General Assembly of 1818 did unanimously “consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature, as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ ;” and, after exhorting “those portions of our Church and country where the evil had been entailed upon them, to continue, and, if possible, increase their exertions to effect the *total abolition* of slavery,”

did declare, that “The manifest violation or disregard of the injunction here given, in its true spirit and intention, ought to be considered as just ground for the discipline and censures of the Church:”

And whereas the General Assembly of 1846 did declare that “The system of slavery as it exists in these United States, viewed either in the laws of the several States which sanction it, or in actual operation and results in society, is *intrinsically* an unrighteous and oppressive system, and is opposed to the prescriptions of the law of God, to the spirit and precepts of the Gospel, and to the best interests of humanity:” and yet the representative of the Presbytery of Hanover in Virginia, in the Assembly of 1856, did, in a solemn address before that body, require the same to take notice that “He and the ministers whom he represented, consented to be recognized as slaveholders in the Christian Church, and as accepting that system of slavery:”

And whereas the General Assembly of 1850 did resolve, that “The holding of our fellow-men in the condition of slavery, except in those cases where it is unavoidable by the laws of the State, the obligations of guardianship, or the demands of humanity, is an offence in the proper import of that term as used in the Book of Discipline:” but the representative from the Presbytery of Winchester in Virginia, in the Assembly of 1855, in an official report, printed in the Minutes of that body, did notify the

Assembly and all the churches, that the exceptions stated in that resolution were considered to cover at least the vast majority of cases, if not every case, of slaveholding in the land ; and in an address to their constituents, published after the adjournment of the Assembly, united in by the body of representatives from the Southern States, the same thing was avowed in terms more unqualified and at greater length :

Therefore, *Resolved*. That believing with the General Assembly, the system of slavery as it exists in the United States, to be intrinsically an unrighteous and oppressive system, opposed to the law of God, the spirit and precepts of the Gospel, and the best interests of humanity, we believe that neither silence nor inaction ought to be maintained by the Assembly or the lower judicatories, when whole bodies of ministers and churches avow themselves to be slaveholders, accepting that system of slavery. And believing, according to the true spirit and intention of the Assembly, that the holding of our fellow-men in the condition of slavery is an offence in the proper import of that term as used in the Book of Discipline, we consider that the manifest perversion of the exceptional language of the Assembly, and the open and avowed commission in the churches of the offence thus defined, calls for language that none can misinterpret, and for action from which wrong-doers within its jurisdiction cannot escape.

Resolved, That we believe all men are created equal, and that no man can, without guilt before God, voluntarily hold another as a slave, or without such guilt exact his labor without wages, or separate husband and wife, or parent and child, or sell his fellow-being as a slave.

Resolved, That we feel it our duty to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them, and that we sympathize with our unhappy countrymen who are held in slavery under cruel laws—praying that the Lord would give them freedom and that their oppressors may be brought to repentance.

Resolved, That we lament the spectacle exhibited in the last General Assembly, when a representative of our own Presbytery arose in his place, and by elaborate argument endeavored to sustain those doctrines of slaveholders which are regarded by good men as most offensive and unchristian, and which are palpably contrary to the repeated and solemn declarations of the General Assemblies of our Church: and that in our opinion, that course of our representative has imposed on the Presbytery at this time the most solemn obligation to adopt such measures as shall prove before the next General Assembly that these churches are not, and will not be, responsible for the guilt of slaveholding, or for the sentiments of those who defend it.

Resolved, That a copy of the foregoing preamble and resolutions be sent up to the Presbytery.

THE ACTION OF PRESBYTERY.

MINUTE ON SLAVERY, ADOPTED BY THE FOURTH PRESBYTERY OF NEW YORK, APRIL 20, 1857.

THE Fourth Presbytery of New York, having received a memorial from the session of the Church at Harlem, on the subject of slavery in its relations to the Presbyterian Church—

Resolved, That we record as our judgment on this subject :

1st. That in the difficult and responsible position in which our branch of the Church is placed by Divine Providence, in relation to the subject of slavery, we need to cultivate a spirit of brotherly love and forbearance, and to invoke earnestly the guidance of that wisdom from above, which is first “pure, then peaceable, full of mercy and good fruits.”

2d. That as a Presbytery, we protest against that interpretation of the action of the last General Assembly, held in the city of New York, which represents us as receding from the anti-slavery position and testimony of the Church.

3d. That though in unavoidable circumstances the external relation of slaveholding may exist

without involving the master in the sin and guilt of the system of slavery, yet, that a continuance of the relation can be justified only so far as the slaveholder also uses all just and Christian means for removing the evil from both Church and State.

4th. That the system of slavery is neither to be viewed as an institution of natural or revealed religion, nor is it kindred to civil government, nor to the relation of husband and wife, nor to that of parents and children, nor yet is it merely a legal claim or right to service ; but that, on the contrary, the system of slavery, so far as it gives to man the right of property in man, reducing the slave and his posterity to the condition of chattels, dependent on the will of the owner, so far as it annuls the rights of marriage, so far as it forbids the general and Christian education of the slave, and debars him from the reading of the word of God, is a system which is essentially opposed to the rights of man, to the welfare of the republic, to the clear position of our Church, and to the principles of the Christian religion.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
AT CLEVELAND, JUNE 3D, 1857, ADOPTED THE FOLLOW-
ING PAPER :

THE General Assembly, in view of the memorials before them and of the present relations of the Church to the subject of Slavery, feel called upon to make the following exposition of principle and duty:—

The Presbyterian Church in these United States has, from the beginning, maintained an attitude of decided opposition to the institution of slavery.

The Synod of New York and Philadelphia, in 1787, two years before the organization of the General Assembly, declared that they did “highly approve of the general principles in favor of universal liberty that prevail in America, and the interest which many of the States have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery;” and did “recommend it to all their people, to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and state of civil society in the parts where they live, to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America.”

In 1793, while the constitution of the Presbyterian Church was in process of formation and publication, the action of the Synod, just referred to, was approved by the General Assembly and republished by its order.

The Assembly of 1815 declared, "that, although in some sections of our country, under certain circumstances, the transfer of slaves may be unavoidable, yet they consider the buying and selling of slaves by way of traffic, and all undue severity in the management of them, as inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel. And they recommend it to the presbyteries and sessions under their care, to make use of all prudent measures to prevent such shameful and unrighteous conduct."

The Assembly of 1815 "expressed their regret, that the slavery of the Africans and of their descendants still continues in so many places, and even among those within the pale of the Church;" and called particular attention to the action of 1795, with respect to the buying and selling of slaves.

In 1818, the Assembly unanimously adopted a report on this subject, prepared by Dr. Green of Philadelphia, Dr. Baxter of Virginia, and Mr. Burgess of Ohio, of which the following is a part:

"We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature: as utterly inconsistent with the

law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ, which enjoin, that ‘all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do even so to them.’ Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system; it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the Gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity. Such are some of the consequences of slavery—consequences not imaginary, but which connect themselves with its very existence. The evils to which the slave is *always* exposed often take place in fact, and in their very worst degree and form; and where all of them do not take place—as we rejoice to say that in many instances, through the influence of the principles of humanity and religion on the minds of masters, they do not—still the slave is deprived of his natural right, degraded as a human being, and exposed to the danger of passing into the hands of a master who may inflict upon him all the hardships and injuries which inhumanity and avarice may suggest.

“From this view of the consequences resulting from the practice, into which Christian people have most inconsistently fallen, of enslaving a portion of their *brethren* of mankind—for God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth—it is manifestly the duty of all Christians who enjoy the light of the present day, when the inconsistency of slavery, both with the dictates of humanity and religion, has been demonstrated and is generally seen and acknowledged, to use their honest, earnest, and unwearied endeavors to correct the errors of former times, and as speedily as possible to efface this blot on our holy religion, and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom, and if possible throughout the world.”

The Assembly also recommended “to all members of our religious denomination, not only to permit but to facilitate and encourage the instruction of their slaves in the principles and duties of the Christian religion;” and added: “We enjoin it on all Church Sessions and Presbyteries, under the care of this Assembly, to discountenance, and as far as possible, to prevent, all cruelty of whatever kind in the treatment of slaves; especially the cruelty of separating husband and wife, parents and children, and that which consists in selling slaves, to those who will either themselves deprive these unhappy people of the blessings of the Gospel, or who will transport them to places where the

Gospel is not proclaimed, or where it is forbidden to slaves to attend upon its institutions.”

The foregoing testimonials on the subject of slavery were universally acquiesced in by the Presbyterian Church up to the time of the division in 1838.

In the year 1846, the General Assembly made a declaration on the subject, of which the following is the introductory paragraph :—

“ 1. The system of slavery, as it exists in these United States, viewed either in the laws of the several States which sanction it, or in its actual operation and results in society, is intrinsically an unrighteous and oppressive system, and is opposed to the prescriptions of the law of God, to the spirit and precepts of the Gospel, and to the best interests of humanity.”

In 1849, the Assembly explicitly reaffirmed the sentiments expressed by the Assemblies of 1815, 1818, and 1846.

In the year 1850 the General Assembly made the following declaration :—

“ We exceedingly deplore the working of the whole system of slavery as it exists in our country, and is interwoven with the political institutions of the slaveholding States, as fraught with many and great evils to the civil, political, and moral interests of those regions where it exists.

“ The holding of our fellow-men in the condition

of slavery, except in those cases where it is unavoidable, by the laws of the State, the obligations of guardianship, or the demands of humanity, is an offence in the proper import of that term, as used in the Book of Discipline, chap. 1, sec. 3, and should be regarded and treated in the same manner as other offences."

Occupying the position in relation to this subject which the framers of our Constitution held at the first, and which our Church has always held, it is with deep grief that we now discover, that a portion of the Church at the South has so far departed from the established doctrine of the Church in relation to slavery, as to maintain that "it is an ordinance of God," and that the system of slavery existing in these United States is Scriptural and right. Against this new doctrine we feel constrained to bear our solemn testimony. It is at war with the whole spirit and tenor of the Gospel of love and good will, as well as abhorrent to the conscience of the Christian world. We can have no sympathy or fellowship with it; and we exhort all our people to eschew it as serious and pernicious error.

We are especially pained by the fact, that the Presbytery of Lexington, South, have given official notice to us, that a number of ministers and ruling elders, as well as many church members, in their connection, hold slaves "from principle" and "of choice," "believing it to be according to the Bible

right," and have, without any qualifying explanation, assumed the responsibility of sustaining such ministers, elders, and church members, in their position. We deem it our duty, in the exercise of our constitutional authority "to bear testimony against error in doctrine, or immorality in practice, in any Church, Presbytery, or Synod," to disapprove and earnestly condemn the position, which has been thus assumed by the Presbytery of Lexington, South, as one which is opposed to the established convictions of the Presbyterian Church, and must operate to mar its peace and seriously hinder its prosperity, as well as bring reproach on our holy religion; and we do hereby call on that Presbytery to review and rectify their position. Such doctrines and practice cannot be permanently tolerated in the Presbyterian Church. May they speedily melt away under the illuminating and mellowing influence of the Gospel and grace of God our Saviour.

We do not, indeed, pronounce a sentence of indiscriminate condemnation upon all our brethren who are unfortunately connected with the system of slavery. We tenderly sympathize with all those who deplore the evil, and are honestly doing all in their power for the present well being of their slaves, and for their complete emancipation. We would aid and not embarrass such brethren. And yet, in the language of the General Assembly of 1818, we would "earnestly warn them against

unduly extending the plea of necessity; against making it a cover for the love and practice of slavery, or a pretence for not using efforts that are lawful and practicable to extinguish this evil."

In conclusion, the Assembly call the attention of the Publication Committee to this subject, and recommend the publication, in a convenient form, of the testimony of the Presbyterian Church touching this subject, at the earliest practicable period.

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