



## Slavery's Opponents and Defenders

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Excerpt from Thomas R. Dew, "An Essay on Slavery" (1832)

It is said slavery is wrong, in the *abstract* at least, and contrary to the spirit of Christianity. To this we answer . . . that any question must be determined by its circumstances, and if, as really is the case, we cannot get rid of slavery without producing a greater injury to both the masters and slaves, there is no rule of conscience or revealed law of God which *can* condemn us. The physician will not order the spreading cancer to be extirpated although it will eventually cause the death of his patient, because he would thereby hasten the fatal issue.

So, if slavery had commenced even contrary to the laws of God and man, and the sin of its introduction rested upon our heads, and it was even carrying forward the nation by slow degrees to final ruin—yet if it were *certain* that an attempt to remove it would only hasten and heighten the final catastrophe . . . then we would only be found to attempt the extirpation but we would stand guilty of a high offense in the sight of both God and man if we should rashly make the effort. But the original sin of introduction rest[s] not on our heads, and we shall soon see that all those dreadful calamities which the false prophets of our day are pointing to will never, in all probability, occur.

With regard to the assertion that slavery is against the spirit of Christianity, we are ready to admit the general assertion, but deny most positively that there is anything in the Old or New Testament which would go to show that slavery, when once introduced, ought at all events to be abrogated, or that the master commits any offense in holding slaves. The children of Israel themselves were slaveholders and were not condemned for it. All the patriarchs themselves were slaveholders; Abraham had more than three hundred, Isaac had a "great store" of them; and even the patient and meek Job himself had "*a very great household.*" When the children of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, they made one whole tribe "hewers of wood and drawers of water," and they were at that very time under the special guidance of Jehovah; they were permitted expressly to purchase slaves of the heathen and keep them as an inheritance for their posterity; and even the children of Israel might be enslaved for six years.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find not one single passage at all calculated to disturb the conscience of an honest slaveholder. No one can read it without seeing and admiring that the meek and humble Saviour of the world in no instance meddled with the established institutions of mankind; he came to save a fallen world, and not to excite the black passions of man and array them in deadly hostility against each other. From no one did he turn away; his plan was offered alike to all—to the monarch and the subject, the rich and the poor, the master and the slave. He was born in the Roman world, a world in which the most galling slavery existed, a thousand times more cruel than the slavery in our own country; and yet he nowhere encourages insurrection, he nowhere fosters discontent; but exhorts *always* to implicit obedience and fidelity.

What a rebuke does the practice of the Redeemer of mankind imply upon the conduct of some of his nominal disciples of the day, who seek to destroy the contentment of the slave, to rouse their most deadly passions, to break up the deep foundations of society, and to lead on to a night of darkness and

confusion! “Let every man” (says Paul) “abide in the same calling wherein he is called. Art thou called *being* a servant? Care not for it; but if thou mayest be made free, use *it* rather” (I *Corinth. vii.* 20, 21) . . . Servants are even commanded in Scripture to be faithful and obedient to unkind masters. “Servants,” (says Peter) “be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle but to the froward. For what glory is it if when ye shall be buffeted for your faults ye take it patiently; but if when ye do well and suffer for it, yet take it patiently, this is acceptable with God” (I *Peter ii.* 18, 20). These and many other passages in the New Testament most convincingly prove that slavery in the Roman world was nowhere charged as a fault or crime upon the holder, and everywhere is the most implicit obedience enjoined.

Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology” [October 1, 1858?]

Suppose it is true, that the negro is inferior to the white, in the gifts of nature; is it not the exact reverse justice that the white should, for that reason, take from the negro, any part of the little which has been given him? “Give to him that is needy” is the christian rule of charity; but “Take from him that is needy” is the rule of slavery.

#### PRO-SLAVERY THEOLOGY.

The sum of pro-slavery theology seems to be this: “Slavery is not universally *right*, nor yet universally *wrong*; it is better for *some* people to be slaves; and, in such cases, it is the Will of God that they be such.”

Certainly there is no contending against the Will of God; but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases. For instance we will suppose the Rev. Dr. Ross\* has a slave named Sambo, and the question is “Is it the Will of God that Sambo shall remain a slave, or be set free?” The Almighty gives no audible answer to the question, and his revelation--the Bible--gives none--or, at most, none but such as admits of a squabble, as to it’s meaning. No one thinks of asking Sambo’s opinion on it. So, at last, it comes to this, that *Dr. Ross* is to decide the question. And while he consider[s] it, he sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread that Sambo is earning in the burning sun. If he decides that God Wills Sambo to continue a slave, he thereby retains his own comfortable position; but if he decides that God will’s Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?

But, slavery is good for some people!!! As a *good* thing, slavery is strikingly peculiar, in this, that it is the only good thing which no man ever seeks the good of, *for himself*.

Nonsense! Wolves devouring lambs, not because it is good for their own greedy maws, but because it [is] good for the lambs!!!

\* Note: The minister referred to was the Reverend Frederick A. Ross (1796-1883), pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama, and author of *Slavery Ordained of God* (1857) despite the fact that he emancipated his own slaves. The book comprises speeches and letters of Dr. Ross that defend slavery as biblical, American slavery as a beneficent institution, and the slavery agitation by abolitionists as a spur to public discussion—especially regarding its merits on biblical grounds. Ross criticizes abolitionists who argue that slavery is wrong based upon the Declaration of Independence, a document he believed contained “false affirmations” as to the natural equality of man.



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Excerpts from Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* (ca. 1841):  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2922t.html>

Excerpt from George Fitzhugh, "The Universal Law of Slavery" (1857):  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3141t.html>

"The Danger of Insurrection," *Staunton Spectator*, November 29, 1859:  
<http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/teaching/vclassroom/proslavewsht1.html>

"Freedom and Slavery," *Staunton Spectator*, December 6, 1859:  
<http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/teaching/vclassroom/proslavewsht2.html>

"Northern Free Negroes and Southern Slaves," *Staunton Spectator*, January 17, 1860:  
<http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/teaching/vclassroom/proslavewsht3.html>

Firsthand Experience with the "Peculiar Institution":  
 What evidence is cited by each side in these documents?

In opposition to the experience of slavery	In defense of the experience of slavery