

William Lloyd Garrison, No Compromise with Slavery (Excerpt)

An address delivered in the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, February 14, 1854, by William Lloyd Garrison

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Ladies and Gentlemen...All that I can compress within the limits of a single lecture, by way of its elucidation, it shall be my aim to accomplish. I will make a clean breast of it. You shall know all that is in my heart pertaining to Slavery, its supporters, and apologists.

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Let me define my positions, and at the same time Challenge any one to show wherein they are untenable.

- I. I am a believer in that portion of the Declaration of American Independence in which it is set forth, as among self-evident truths, "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." Hence, I am an Abolitionist. Hence, I cannot but regard oppression in every form—and most of all, that which turns a man into a thing—with indignation and abhorrence. Not to cherish these feelings would be recreancy to principle. They who desire me to be dumb on the subject of Slavery, unless I will open my mouth in its defence, ask me to give the lie to my professions, to degrade my manhood, and to stain my soul. I will not be a liar, a poltroon, or a hypocrite, to accommodate any party, to gratify any sect, to escape any odium or peril, to save any interest, to preserve any institution, or to promote any object. Convince me that one man may rightfully make another man his slave, and I will no longer subscribe to the Declaration of Independence. Convince me that liberty is not the inalienable birthright of every human being, of whatever complexion or clime, and I will give that instrument to the consuming fire. I do not know how to espouse freedom and slavery together. I do not know how to worship God and Mammon at the same time. If other men choose to go upon all-fours, I choose to stand erect, as God designed every man to stand. If, practically falsifying its heaven-attested principles, this nation denounces me for refusing to imitate its example, then, adhering all the more tenaciously to those principles, I will not cease to rebuke it for its guilty inconsistency. Numerically, the contest may be an unequal one, for the time being; but the Author of liberty and the Source of justice, the adorable God, is more than multitudinous, and he will defend the right. My crime is, that I will not go with the multitude to do evil. My singularity is, that when I say that Freedom is of God, and Slavery is of the devil, I mean just what I say. My fanaticism is, that I insist on the American people abolishing Slavery, or ceasing to prate of the rights of man. My hardihood is, in measuring them by their own standard, and convicting them out of their own mouths.

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Whatever may be the guilt of the South, the North is still more responsible for the existence, growth and extension of Slavery. In her hand has been the destiny of the Republic from the beginning. She could have emancipated every slave, long ere this, had she been upright in heart and free in spirit. She has given respectability, security, and the means of sustenance and attack to her deadliest foe. She has educated the whole country, and particularly the Southern portion of it, secularly, theologically, religiously; and the result is, three millions and a half of slaves, increasing at the appalling (sic) rate of one hundred thousand a year, three hundred a day, and one every five minutes -- the utter corruption of public sentiment, and general skepticism as to the rights of man—the inauguration of Mammon in the place of the living God—the loss of all self-respect, all manhood, all sense of shame, all regard for justice—the Book styled holy, and claimed to be divinely inspired, everywhere expounded and enforced in extenuation or defence of slaveholding, and against the Anti-Slavery movement—colour-phobia infecting the life-blood of the people—political profligacy unparalleled—the religious and the secular press generally hostile to Abolitionism as either infidel or anarchical in its spirit and purpose—the great mass of the churches with as little vitality as a grave-yard—the pulpits, with rare exceptions, filled with men as careful to consult the popular will as though there were no higher law-synods, presbyteries, general conferences, general assemblies, buttressing the slave power—the Government openly pro-slavery, and the National District the head-quarters of slave speculators—fifteen Slave States—and now, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the consecration of five hundred thousand square miles of free territory forever to the service of the Slave Power!

And what does all this demonstrate! That the sin of this nation is not geographical—is not specially Southern—bus deep-seated and universal. “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.” We are “full of wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores.” It proves, too, the folly of all plasters and palliatives. Some men are still talking of preventing the spread of the cancer, but leaving it just where it is. They admit that, constitutionally, it has now a right to ravage two-thirds of the body politic—but they protest against its extension. This is moral quackery. Even some, whose zeal in the Anti-Slavery cause is fervent, are so infatuated as to propose no other remedy for Slavery but its non-extension. Give it no more room, they say, and it may be safely left to its fate. Yes, but who shall “bell the cat?” Besides, with fifteen Slave States, and more than three millions of Slaves, how can we make any moral issue with the Slave Power against its further extension? Why should there not be twenty, thirty, fifty Slave States, as well as fifteen? Why should not the star-spangled banner wave over ten, as well as over three millions of Slaves? Why should not Nebraska be cultivated by Slave labour, as well as Florida or Texas? If men, under the American Constitution, may hold slaves at discretion and without dishonour in one-half of the country, why not in the whole of it? If it would be a damning sin for us to admit another Slave State into the Union, why is it not a damning sin to permit a Slave State to remain in the Union? Would it not be the acme of effrontery for a man, in amicable alliance with fifteen pickpockets, to profess scruples of conscience in regard to admitting another pilfering rogue to

the fraternity? “Thou that sayest, A man should not steal, dost thou steal,” or consent, in any instance, to stealing? “If the Lord be God, serve Him; but if Baal, then serve him.” The South may well laugh to scorn the affected moral sensibility of the North against the extension of her slave system. It is nothing, in the present relations of the States, but sentimental hypocrisy. It has no stamina—no backbone. The argument for non-extension is an argument for the dissolution of the Union. With a glow of moral indignation, I protest against the promise and the pledge, by whomsoever made, that if the Slave Power will seek no more to lengthen its cords and strengthen its stakes, it may go unmolested and unchallenged, and survive as long as it can within its present limits. I would as soon turn pirate on the high seas as to give my consent to any such arrangement.

I do not understand the moral code of those who, screaming in agony at the thought of Nebraska becoming a Slave Territory, virtually say to the South: “Only desist from your present designs, and we will leave you to flog, and lacerate, and plunder, and destroy the millions of hapless wretches already within your grasp. If you will no longer agitate the subject, we will not.” There is no sense, no principle, no force in such an issue. Not a solitary slaveholder will I allow to enjoy repose on any other condition than instantly ceasing to be one. Not a single slave will I leave in his chains, on any conditions, or under any circumstances. I will not try to make as good a bargain for the Lord as the Devil will let me, and plead the necessity of a compromise, and regret that I cannot do any better, and be thankful that I can do so much. The Scriptural injunction is to be obeyed: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” My motto is, “No union with slaveholders, religiously or politically.”

Their motto is “Slavery forever! No alliance with Abolitionists, either in Church or State!” The issue is clear, explicit, determinate. The parties understand each other, and are drawn in battle array. They can never be reconciled—never walk together—never consent to a truce—never deal in honeyed phrases—never worship at the same altar—never acknowledge the same God. Between them there is an impassable gulf. In manners, in morals, in philosophy, in religion, in ideas of justice, in notions of law, in theories of government, in valuations of men, they are totally dissimilar.

I would to God that we might be, what we have never been—a united people; but God renders this possible only by “proclaiming liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.” By what miracle can Freedom and Slavery be made amicably to strike hands? How can they administer the same Government, or legislate for the same interests? How can they receive the same baptism, be admitted to the same communion-table, believe in the same Gospel, and obtain the same heavenly inheritance? “I speak as unto wise men; judge ye.” Certain propositions have long since been conceded to be plain, beyond contradiction. The apostolic inquiry has been regarded as equally admonitory and pertinent: “What concord hath Christ with Belial? or what fellowship hath light with darkness?” Fire and gunpowder, oil and water, cannot coalesce; but, assuredly, these are not more antagonistical than are the elements of Freedom and Slavery. The present American Union, therefore, is only one in form, not in reality. It is, and it always has been, the absolute supremacy of the Slave Power over the whole country—nothing more. What

sectional heart-burnings or conflictive interests exist between the several Free States? None. They are homogeneous, animated by the same spirit, harmonious in their action as the movement of the spheres. It is only when we come to the dividing line between the Free States and the Slave States that shoals, breakers and whirlpools beset the ship of State, and threaten to engulf or strand it. Then the storm rages loud and long, and the ocean of popular feeling is lashed into fury.

While the present Union exists, I pronounce it hopeless to expect any repose, or that any barrier can be effectually raised against the extension of Slavery.

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While, therefore, the Union is preserved, I see no end to the extension or perpetuity of Chattel Slavery – no hope for peaceful deliverance of the millions who are clanking their chains on our blood-red soil. Yet I know that God reigns, and that the slave system contains within itself the elements of destruction. But how long it is to curse the earth, and desecrate his image, he alone foresees. It is frightful to think of the capacity of a nation like this to commit sin, before the measure of its iniquities be filled, and the exterminating judgments of God overtake it. For what is left us but “a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation”? Or is God but a phantom, and the Eternal Law but a figment of the imagination? Has an everlasting divorce been effected between cause and effect, and is it an absurd doctrine that, as a nation sows, so shall it also reap? “Wherefore, hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men that rule this people: Because ye have said, *We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement* (emphasis added); when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us; for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: Therefore, thus saith the Lord God, Judgment will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet; and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place: And your covenant with death shall be annulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.

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Living or dying, defeated or victorious, be it ours to exclaim, “No compromise with Slavery! Liberty for each, for all, forever! Man above all institutions! The supremacy of God over the whole earth!”