

Week 7 Documents – Slavery and Manifest Destiny

Frederick Douglass – Fourth of July Oration

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license ... your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy--a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages ... You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation ... is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen ... You can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a three-penny tax on tea; and yet wring the last hard-earned farthing from the grasp of the black laborers of your country. You profess to believe "that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth" [Acts 17:26], and hath commanded all men, everywhere, to love one another; yet you notoriously hate (and glory in your hatred) all men whose skins are not colored like your own ... The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie."

Frederick Douglass – *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

"For of all the slaveholders with whom I have met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists."

"In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them. . .

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the "slave holding religion" of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference--so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slave holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed. I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of "stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in." I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me.

We have men-stealers for ministers, women whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members.

Samuel B. How Dutch Reformed Church in New Jersey 1855.

I. THE HOLDING OF A SLAVE NOT A SIN.

It has been said that " American Slavery is at war with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, natural justice, and Christianity"—"that slavery is a sin against God and a crime against man, etc."* To these bold statements we reply, that the mass of the American people have never considered the holding of slaves as at war with the Declaration of Independence; that the Supreme Court of the Nation has declared that it is not against the Constitution of the United States; and that it is not against natural justice and Christianity, we shall now endeavor to prove. We admit that it is an evil much to be lamented, but we deny that it is a sin against God and a crime against man. . .

That the holding of slaves is not a sin we prove from the following passages of Scripture:

1. 1 Tim. 6: 1-5: "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, that the name of God and his doctrine be riot blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort. If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself."

3. Our third argument to prove that the holding of slaves is not sinful, is derived from Exod. 20: 17.

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's." This precept establishes the right of property, and forbids not only the unjust depriving the owner of his lawful property, but even the secret desire to do so. It strikes down at once into the dust Communism and Socialism. It teaches us that there is a division, and that there are rights of property; that there are masters and that there are slaves, and bids us to respect the right of the master, and not to covet his man-servant or his maid-servant.

The division of property and the security of the owner in the possession of it, lie at the foundation of civilized and Christian life, and where they are unknown man are wandering tribes of barbarians, ignorant, rapacious, and debased. To cultivate the arts and sciences that embellish and exalt human life, and especially to have colleges and churches, the right of property must be respected, and the desire and the attempt to deprive others of property which the law of God and the law of the land have made it lawful for them to hold, is to strike a blow at the very existence of civilization and Christianity. We admit that there are great inequalities in the possession of property and in the conditions of men, and that there are many evils to be deplored. But with all their inequalities and evils, the worst despotism on earth is to be preferred to a state of constant anarchy and consequently of constant warfare . . .

II. REASONS FOR THE PERMISSION OF SLAVERY.

Since God has permitted slavery to exist in his Church, and has made it the subject of special legislation, there must be not only sufficient, but good and wise reasons for his so doing. Should we be unable to discover these reasons, it would be our duty to bow in humble acquiescence, assured that he ever acts with infinite wisdom and goodness. But there are most important reasons for what He has done, some of which we shall now attempt to specify.

Slavery is one of the penal effects of the fall, and of the great wickedness of men. The only effectual remedy for these evils, is the redemption of men from sin by our Lord Jesus Christ; and this redemption is applied to them through the instrumentality of the word, and of the ministers of God which he has given to the Church.