

AN
ADDRESS
TO
CHRISTIANS
OF ALL DENOMINATIONS,
ON THE
INCONSISTENCY OF ADMITTING
SLAVE-HOLDERS
TO
COMMUNION AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

“He that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.”
— Exodus XXI. 16.

“I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor.”
— Psalms cxi. 12.

PHILADELPHIA:
S.C. Atkinson, Printer.
12 Hudson’s Alley.
1831.

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This is a prooftext of Evan Lewis's *An Address to Christians of All Denominations, on the Inconsistency of Admitting Slave-Holders to Communion and Church Membership*, published by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in 1831 in Philadelphia. The text is currently being annotated and will be published in a revised electronic edition. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained; minor typographic errors have been corrected.

This electronic edition has been prepared for the Antislavery Literature Project, Arizona State University, a public education project working in cooperation with the English Server, Iowa State University. Digitalization has been supported by a grant from the Institute for Humanities Research, Arizona State University.

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THE merit of originating the following treatise is due to Ebenezer Dole, a benevolent citizen of Hallowell, Maine, who, from a thorough conviction of the iniquity of slavery, and its utter inconsistency with the precepts of the gospel, was induced to remit fifty dollars to the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, &c. to be awarded to the writer of the best essay on the following subject: "The Duty of Ministers and Churches, of all denominations, to avoid the stain of Slavery, and to make the holding of slaves a barrier to communion and church membership." Three members of the Pennsylvania Society were named by the donor to examine the essays offered, and decide upon their merits. Notice of the offered premium was given in the papers of this city, and copied into others at a distance; and six month; were allowed, from the date of the notice, for the production of essays. The committee of three, after examining those received, awarded the premium to Evan Lewis, the author of the following treatise, which is published by order of the Society. It is submitted to the candid and impartial examination of ministers and professors of religion, of every denomination, with an ardent desire that they may seriously consider the great responsibility that rests upon them, as Christians, to exert their influence in the cause of suffering humanity, that the dark and portentous cloud which hangs over our country may be dispelled by the peaceable, but powerful, agency of christian principles.

ADDRESS TO CHRISTIANS.

The state of slavery in the United States is so totally at variance with the genius of our free institutions, and so repugnant to the spirit and design of the christian religion, that nothing but habit and a long familiarity with the corrupt system, could reconcile republicans to its existence. Its toleration, in this country, presents so broad a contrast between profession and practice, that wise and good men behold the example with grief and astonishment.

When about to enter on the examination of the question of slavery, for the purpose of exhibiting its inconsistency with the precepts of the christian religion, the following questions are naturally suggested:— What is the condition implied by the word *slavery*, in this connexion? What is the nature and character of that system which we are about to examine?

Negro Slavery. What term was ever more familiar to the public ear, and yet what term is so little understood? It has been the theme of many eloquent public speeches, of many parliamentary debates, and of much controversy, at different periods, in pamphlets and periodical prints. Yet, were a mind new to the subject to inquire, what is specifically and practically that state of man, about which so much has been said and written; what is that slavery which exists in the United States and the West Indies, I

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know not in which of the many arguments before the public, an adequate answer would be found.”*

There is, perhaps, no word in the English language which has been used more indefinitely, or applied more variously, than that of slavery. It has been applied to civil disabilities, and to mental degradation. The republican considers all those who are the subjects of despotic governments, in a state of slavery. The Christian moralist applies the same appellation to the controlling influence of the passions, to the subjects of pernicious habits and sinful propensities; while the historian adopt the same term to designate the kind of servitude that existed among the nations of antiquity, which differed as widely from the slavery to which our attention is now directed, as the civil condition of the people of the United States does from that of the subjects of the Russian empire.

To define it accurately, or to give an adequate idea of the precise condition implied by the word in the present essay, will not be so easy as might be supposed. Yet, some attempt to portray, in its genuine colours, and distinctive features, the state of negro slavery in this country, seems necessary to a right estimate of the merit of the question to be discussed.

"Negro slavery, as existing in the United States and British West Indies, appears to be a creature *sui generis*, unknown to the ancients; and, though drawn from the least cultivated quarter of the globe, unknown even there, except in a passing state."** It is a system that finds no counterpart in the annals of the most barbarous nation on earth. In many of its features it is more arbitrary, more oppressive, more cruel and degrading, than the servitude found among the ancients. Slavery in the United States and the West Indies, is the same in its general features and character; and the observations that apply to the one, will be, in most cases, equally applicable to the other.

"The leading idea in the negro system of jurisprudence, (in the West Indies,) is that which was first in the

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minds of those most interested in its formation; namely, that negroes were *property*. They were not regarded as rational or sentient beings, capable of rights; but as chattels, the civil character of which was absorbed in the dominion of the owner."*

Slavery was introduced and established in the colonies in a manner very different from that which is commonly supposed. It was not there originally derived trout, nor is it vet expressly sanctioned or defined by any positive laws;— it stands, for the most part, on the authority of custom alone."

"This custom, though it sprang from the imaginations of the most illiterate, as well as the most worthless of mankind, had two qualities of the sublime: it was terrible and it was simple. Its single, but comprehensive idea was, '*that the slave is the absolute property of the master;*' from which the Buccaneers, though no expert logicians, had clearly deduced the consequence, that they might treat their negroes, in all respects, as they pleased; for, '*a man,*' they naturally argued, '*may do what he will with his own.*' "**

The same idea prevails in regard to the negro slave of the United States. He is treated in all respects as chattels, the *property*, of the master — subject to seizure and sale for the payment of his debts — liable to be separated from all that he holds dear in life, and sold to a stranger, and transported to a distant region, without his consent. Husbands and wives may be torn asunder; parents and children may be separated, at the will and caprice of the owner. The strongest ties of nature, and the most endearing associations of home and of kindred may be severed; and for these abuses of power the slave has no legal redress. He is doomed to hopeless and interminable servitude, and transmits this humiliating condition to his posterity for ever.

The servile condition among the ancients was essentially different in its character from the state of negro slavery. The two conditions have scarcely any thing

*Reeves on the Colonial Slave Laws.

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common, *but the name*. The Helots of Sparta could not be sold beyond the bounds of their little state. "They were the farmers of the soil at fixed rates which the proprietor could not raise without dishonour. Hence they had the power of acquiring wealth."* They were the servants of the state rather than of individuals. "At Athens, where the lenient treatment of slaves was proverbial, the door of freedom was widely open; and those who were unlucky enough to meet a cruel master, might fly to the temple of Theseus, from whence they were not taken without an investigation of their complaints. If the ill treatment was found to be real, they were either enfranchised or transferred to merciful hands."** The slaves of the island of Crete exchanged situations with their masters, once a year, at the feast of Mercury; and cruelty and injustice were prohibited by law. The Egyptian slave might flee to the temple of Hercules, and find safety from the cruelty and persecution of his master. Among the Romans, the authority of the master over the servant was regulated by the same laws as that of the father over his son, with this difference in favour of the servant, that if he were once manumitted, he ever afterwards remained free; while the father might sell his son, a second and a third time into slavery.

The servile class among the ancients were often superior in intellectual attainments to their masters. They were not restrained, by law or usage, from the acquisition of knowledge; neither were they excluded from the privilege of giving testimony, even against their masters. When cruelly treated, they had a right to prefer their grievances to the civil authorities, and the magistrates were bound to hear and redress their wrongs.

But the negro slave of the United States is deprived of all these advantages. He has no rights of his own; they are all merged in the dominion of his master. He is not a competent witness against a white person; has no tribunal to which he can legally resort for justice; no asylum to which he may flee from cruelty and persecution, and find safety. He is, in most cases, no better than an outlaw

* African Observer **Stephen.

in the midst of a civilized and christian community; deprived by legislative enactments of the advantages of intellectual culture; debased and brutalised by a system the most odious and revolting to humanity that the world ever beheld; and stigmatised as unworthy of the common rights of man, because of the degradation which this system must necessarily produce. These, then, are some of the features which distinguish the servile condition known among heathen nations, from the absolute and hopeless slavery of the African race, in this christian country — this land of liberty and equal rights — this asylum for the oppressed of all nations. It is against a system of wrongs the most wanton-of oppression the most galling and degrading to human nature, that the christian minister and christian societies are called upon to bear their testimony to the world. What theme can be more suited to the functions of a christian minister, than such a combination of wrongs and injuries, of cruelty and injustice? What moral pestilence more deserving the interposing influence of christian ministers to check its ravages? Let them, like the mitred Israelite, place themselves between the living and the dead, and stay the plague. It has been said, in palliation of negro slavery, that the law of Moses recognized and sanctioned the practice of holding slaves. Such an argument would be more consistent in the mouth of a Jew than a Christian. Are we to turn from the precepts and authority of our Lord and Master, to the rituals of the Mosaic law which he came to fulfil and to abolish? Shall we leave the dispensation of the gospel, and go back for authority to that dispensation which was permitted only till the time of reformation?

But granting, for the sake of argument, the civil provisions of the law of Moses to be obligatory upon us, the advocates of negro slavery would gain nothing by the admission. For we have already shown that the latter has no parallel in ancient history. If the comparatively mild system of servitude which existed among the Hebrews and the neighbouring nations, was sanctioned by the Jew-

ish law-giver, does it follow that the more cruel and debasing bondage in which the negro race are held in the United States, would also have been tolerated? The many humane provisions contained in the law, in favour of the bond servant, prove the contrary — provisions which, if admitted into our code, would be found incompatible with the present system. That of Deuteronomy, xxiii. 15 and 16, would alone be sufficient to put an end to slavery in this country, and proves the mildness of servitude among the Hebrews. "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, even among you in that place which he shall choose, in one of thy gates where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him." Again: The penalty for man-stealing, by the 21st chapter of Exodus, verse 16th, is death. "And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." The crime is ranked in immediate connexion with the capital offence of *smiting* or *cursing* father or mother, and the same punishment is awarded to each. The 26th and 27th verses of the same; chapter ordains, that "if a man smite the eye of his servant, or his handmaid, so that it perish; or if he smite out his servant's tooth, he shall go free for the eye, or the tooth's sake." Besides, an effectual limit is put to that species of servitude practised among the Hebrews, in the 25th chapter of Leviticus, verse 51, which provides that the servant shall go out free in the year of Jubilee, "both he, and his children with him." This provision is general, and applies to *all* servants, without distinction of nation, country or religion. But the Hebrew servant was to be free at the end of six years, the utmost limit of his servitude, which the law provides. "And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty. Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy flour, and out of thy winepress," &c. (See Deut. xv. 12 to 14.)

If the Mosaic law is to be resorted to in justification of slavery, let us take the whole of it as it was given by the inspired law-giver; and let not the hapless servant be deprived of its lenient provisions in his favour. If we are to be Jews and not Christians, let us at least be consistent Jews, and conform literally to all the instructions of our law-giver.

Do we look for any palliation, much less authority, for the practice of slavery in the precepts of the gospel? We shall search in vain. The religion of Jesus Christ teaches us to do good for evil — to forgive even our enemies — to do in all cases to others as we would wish that they should do unto us — to love the Lord our God with all our heart *and our neighbour as ourselves*.

The gospel dispensation was announced to the Jews in fulfilment of the declaration of the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach glad tidings unto the meek: *he hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.*" — Isaiah lxi. 1. — Luke iv. 18. And the spirit and precepts of the Christian religion are in harmony and accordance with this first public testimony of our Lord. If we fulfil the injunction of our religion, to do to others as we would wish them to do unto us — if we love our neighbour as ourselves, can we consign him and his posterity to hopeless and interminable slavery? Nay, are we not walking in the footsteps of the Scribes and Pharisees, who bound heavy burdens upon men's shoulders, and would not move them with one of their fingers? And if we thus actively and knowingly violate the precepts of the gospel, and the commands of Jesus Christ, can we be Christians? Can we with any colour of justice call ourselves the disciples of Him who came to preach deliverance to the captive, and the opening of the prison doors to them that were bound?

But the case of Onesimus has been "alleged to give an implied sanction to negro slavery," because Onesimus was a slave, and he was sent back to his master, a christian convert, without any injunction to alter his condition.

To this it has been replied, that christianity, in this, as in many other cases, has provided, without express precepts, a sure and inoffensive corrective of all oppressive institutions, by the gradual influence of its liberal and benignant maxims; which did, in point of fact, dissolve the bonds of slavery in most parts of the christian world.— Hence, it is assumed on the one hand, and admitted on the other, that the state of Onesimus was substantially the same with that of negro slavery; an assumption without any evidence, and grossly contrary to the fact. And until it is shown by something stronger than the coincidence of a vague general appellation, that the case of Onesimus and that of negro slavery are in moral considerations the same, it is false reasoning to infer the lawfulness of the one, from the supposed toleration of the other.

If, then, the negro slavery of the United States and the West Indies has no parallel in the practice of the nations of antiquity — if the servitude which existed among the ancients, was gradually abolished in Europe by the operation of the mild but effectual influence of Christianity and if the modern system of negro slavery finds no support in the scriptures, either of the Old or New Testament; and is directly at variance with the spirit and design of the gospel of Christ, how can christian societies, and christian ministers absolve themselves from the duty imposed upon them by their profusion or calling, of endeavouring, by every means in their power, to lessen the evils of slavery, and finally to effect its total abolition? That such a duty is obligatory upon them, scarcely admits of a doubt. For what are the legitimate objects of christian societies? The most obvious and important designs of such associations appear to be, to promote the cause of truth and righteousness in the world — to extend the Redeemer's kingdom among men — to turn people from darkness to light, and from the power of satan unto God. Can truth be promoted by the toleration of slavery? Can *righteousness* exist in connexion with wrongs, injustice and oppression? Can the Redeemer's kingdom be extended in the hearts of those who bind heavy burdens upon their fellow men, which neither we nor our

fathers were willing to bear? Can those men be turned from darkness to light who will not permit the slave to be taught to read the volume of inspiration, while the lash of the task-master is still sounding in their ears? Can *they* be rescued from the power of satan, who permit the dearest ties in nature to be broken by members of religious societies? Are men's hearts turned unto the God of love, who made of one blood all the families of the earth, when those who assume the name of Christians turn a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed, and regard not with feelings of compassion the agonizing tears of the mother, when torn from the offspring of her love? Can these things be tolerated by the professors of that religion which breathes peace on earth and good will to all men — which, in its nature and design, is gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits?

The enormity and magnitude of the evils of slavery in the United States — its demoralizing tendency upon the community, where it prevails to any considerable extent — and the tremendous and appalling consequences to this favoured nation which must result from its continuance, would furnish ample materials to fill a volume. The limits of this essay will not permit me to discuss these points at large. But when we reflect that there are now little short of two millions of this degraded cast within our borders, and that their number is rapidly increasing; in some of the States in a ratio much higher than that of the white inhabitants, — that there are born in the United States, annually, about seventy thousand human beings in the condition of slaves for life;— the subject demands the solemn consideration of every christian philanthropist, to mitigate its horrors, and to devise the most effectual means for its extinction.

What means would be better adapted to the end — what course more consistent with the doctrines and precepts, the spirit and tendency of the christian religion, than for religious societies and christian ministers to join heart and hand for the accomplishment of this important object? The powerful and extensive influence which religious associations exercise over the minds of the people would

give efficiency and force to their exertions in the righteous cause. Every man who reflects coolly on the subject would feel that their testimony against slavery was just, and founded in the eternal principles of rectitude and truth, which the ever varying circumstances of this world cannot alter. Hence the voice of conscience, on the one hand, would second the labours of religious instruction, on the other, and the iniquity of slavery would be seen and felt by all classes of professors. More good would thus be effected by associating religion with abolition, (and what association can be conceived more natural,) than can be accomplished by benevolent individuals alone, or by abolition societies, or associations of statesmen and politicians. These are limited and partial in their operation. They are confined in their influence to small portions of the community, and cannot so generally, and effectually influence public opinion, as the united efforts of religious Societies. For religion comes home to the feelings, and to the domestic circle of almost every man of influence in our country. It is the business of every man's life to prepare for that state of retribution which awaits us when done with time. And all are more or less subject to the influence of those important duties, and high responsibilities which religion presents for their consideration. Let then the clergy from the pulpit bear a faithful and fearless testimony against the practice of holding their fellow creatures in bondage — let them describe in the solemn and impressive language of inspiration, the unlawfulness of the gain of oppression — the sinfulness of grinding the face of the poor, and causing the objects of redeeming love to languish in interminable bondage. Let religious Societies exclude from membership all who will not emancipate their slaves — let them make it a *sine qua non*, their admission to communion and church fellowship. Let them interpose the powerful agency of religion to the further progress of this moral pestilence — let them plant their standard upon this ocean of bitter waters, and say, hitherto shaft thou come, but no further, and here shall thy polluted waves be stayed — let them preserve their own pure camp from the leprosy of slavery, and show

to the world an example of christian philanthropy, which will be felt and approved by the pious, the benevolent, and the wise in every section of our country-let them do all these things, and the nurse of slavery will ere long be removed from our borders.

It is not necessary to define the manner of excluding slave holders from the advantages of membership in religious Societies. Each Society has its own code of discipline, or form of church government. If the principle should be adopted that the holding of slaves should be a barrier to communion or church fellowship; the mode of acting would be regulated by the same rules as in other cases of admission or exclusion from membership. The example of the Society of Friends proves the importance of the measure to the cause in general, and its salutary effects upon the community. It is about seventy years since the Society in this country made it a part of their discipline that none of their members should hold slaves.

Among the first advocates of the measure in Pennsylvania, were Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford. These men may be considered the pioneers in the great and glorious work of emancipation. They bore a fearless testimony against the slavery of the African race, at a time when public opinion was opposed to abolition; and we have reason to believe that they were instrumental in opening the eyes of many to the iniquity of slavery. After them followed Benezet and Woolman in the same cause — men whose universal philanthropy, and christian benevolence shone conspicuous in every important action of their lives. For many years the testimonies of such men as Lay and Sandiford were received by some of their brethren as the ebullitions of fanaticism, or the vagaries of a heated imagination. But the voice of truth and philanthropy was heard by many with calmness and impartiality. A consciousness of the unlawfulness of holding mankind in bondage was extended among the members — other advocates of the cause of emancipation were raised up, and justice at length triumphed in the utter extinction of slavery in the Society. Benjamin Lay lived to see the accomplishment of the desire of his heart — the

adoption of a rule of discipline of the yearly meeting of Pennsylvania for disowning all those who would not free their slaves. When informed of this conclusion, by a friend who called to see him for the purpose of giving him the information, "The venerable and constant friend and advocate of that oppressed race of men, attentively listened to the heart-cheering intelligence, and after a few moments reflection on what he had heard, he rose from his chair, and in an attitude of devotional reverence, poured forth this pious ejaculation; *Thanksgiving and praise be rendered unto the Lord God*. After a short pause he added — *I can now die in peace.*"* He lived but a few weeks after this event.

From that period to the present time, the Society of Friends have been proverbial for their opposition to slavery. They have revived the subject from year to year in their annual assemblies. The younger members have been trained under the influence of a settled aversion to the system. The testimony against slavery has become identified with their religion, influencing their habits, and giving a direction to their actions. The consequence is, that the whole weight of their influence as a religious association, has been exerted to loose the fetters of the captive. To this influence, in a great measure, Pennsylvania owes the honor of having been the first State in the Union to pass a law for the abolition of slavery. The first act of legislation, expressly designed for the extinction of slavery was passed by the general Assembly of Pennsylvania March 1, 1780. The example has been followed successively by Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, New York, and New Jersey. In five other States, slavery is prohibited by the Constitution.

A cursory view of the effects produced by the decided stand taken by the Society of Friends, against the iniquitous practice of holding mankind in bondage, will be sufficient to show the vast and incalculable influence which would be brought into action, were the more numerous bodies of christians in our country to unite their efforts in the same cause. The Methodists have done much in this

*Life of Benjamin Lay, by Roberts Vaux.

good work. Though they have not fully incorporated abolition with their religion — though they have not in all cases, made the holding of slaves a barrier to communion and church fellowship; yet their preachers have not ceased to proclaim the important truth, that all men ought of right to be free. They have often boldly and conscientiously discharged their duty as christian ministers, by portraying in glowing colours the sinfulness of slavery. They have opened their mouths for the dumb, and plead the cause of the poor and the oppressed. They have broken the jaws of the wicked, and plucked the spoil out of his teeth. Wherever the influence of this Society has extended, the cause of the degraded African, has found able and efficient advocates. Through their means many thousands have been restored to their rights; and a direction given to public opinion, in many places, unfavourable to slavery. It is devoutly to be wished, that they would advance yet one step further, and cleanse their camp from the unclean thing that still remains—that they would make no compromise with slavery, but wash their hands of the pollution.

Great credit is also due to the Presbyterians in the Western States. Some of them have laboured with a noble and disinterested perseverance in the cause of emancipation. Their resolution appears to be formed, never to cease their efforts, until their Society is purged from the stain of slavery. If this consummation should be achieved, which we ardently hope, and confidently believe will eventually crown the labours of those christian philanthropists who have engaged in the work, the cause of abolition will acquire a moral force and preponderance in the community which will be felt in every section of the country.

The Baptists, too, in some parts of the Western States have taken up the question of slavery as a religious duty. I regret that my information is so limited in regard to the labours of these two last named Societies. It appears that they design to accomplish the total exclusion of slaveholders from communion and church membership in their respective Societies. How far they have progressed in their endeavours to cleanse their camp from so foul a pollution,

I am unable at present to say. But every friend to humanity can join in cordial approbation of their efforts in the righteous cause, and in the hope that they may persevere until they see, as did the pious Lay, their labours crowned with success — see of the travail of their souls, and be satisfied.

Every individual in the community should be encouraged to the performance of his duty to the cause of emancipation however small may be his means of usefulness for by individual faithfulness, great results have often been produced; and apparently insignificant causes have sometimes effected important reformatations. Thomas Clarkson was engaged to devote his life to the cause of abolition, by being called upon to write a prize essay on the subject of slavery. When he first turned his attention to the question to be discussed, he knew not where to begin. He was totally ignorant of the subject upon which he was about to write. He was destitute of the means of acquiring the knowledge necessary to enable him to discuss the question of slavery. He knew not to whom to apply for information, or where to procure the necessary authorities. In this hopeless condition, he saw in a window, as he passed along the streets of London, Anthony Benezet's account of Guinea. He bought the book, and found it to contain a clue to all the authorities he required. He engaged in the contest for the prize, and obtained it; and from this small beginning became the principal instrument for the accomplishment of the abolition of the British slave trade. Again. The labours of those who conscientiously engaged in the cause of abolition as religious duty, gave a tone to public opinion in the northern and middle states, which resulted in the enactment of laws for the total extinction of slavery in those states. To the same cause may be attributed the ordinance of 1787, by which slavery has been forever excluded from the States and Territories North and West of the river Ohio. Their rapid and unexampled advance in wealth and population, fully establishes the wisdom of the measure.

These, and similar examples show the importance of individual faithfulness in the performance of every duty. It

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is by such means that all great and important reformations of abuses have been effected: for society can only act efficiently by means of individuals. Let each man labour in his own particular sphere, and the influence of his example will extend to those with whom he is connected in civil or religious society. And thus organised associations may be brought to act efficiently in a collective capacity.

Let then every Christian minister, and every religious association, and each individual member of a religious society endeavour to eradicate the stain of slavery from our land, by the effectual operation of the lenient principles of Christianity. Let the voice of justice and humanity be heard from every pulpit, and resound from the walls of every church — let the fiat of universal emancipation be issued from every Conference, Synod, and General Assembly throughout the country, — let the pious associations of the present age, for distributing the Scriptures, and communicating a knowledge of the Christian Religion to distant regions, proclaim freedom to the captive, and the work ere long, be accomplished. Slavery will soon cease to be a curse upon our country, and a disgrace to our nation. Then will the blessing of him that was ready to perish, come upon us, and the soul of the emancipated slave will be made to sing for joy.