



*Review of Rev. Henry J. Van Dyke's Discourse on
"The Character and Influence of Abolitionism"*

James R. W. Sloane (1860)

By December 1860, South Carolina was on the verge of secession, and other southern states appeared likely to follow. On December 9, Henry Van Dyke Sr., a white Presbyterian minister in New York City, addressed the political crisis in a sermon, in which he denounced abolitionism as "the chief cause of the strife that agitates, and the danger that threatens, our country." Two weeks later, on December 23, Van Dyke's sermon was countered by one from James Sloane, another white minister in New York City. Sloane belonged to a smaller Presbyterian group than Van Dyke's; Sloane's group, called Reformed Presbyterians, had a history of opposition to slavery dating back to the late 1700s.

In this selection from his sermon, Sloane defends abolitionists by linking them to Protestant and American martyrs. That is, Sloane portrays abolitionism as continuous with the cause for which patriots died during the American Revolution, and he compares abolitionists to dissident Protestant groups who were persecuted by Catholic or Protestant governments: Waldensians and Huguenots in France, recalcitrant English Protestants under "Bloody Mary," and Scottish Covenanters during the Restoration. (Sloane's Reformed Presbyterians were descended from the Covenanters.)

Christianity is, in earnest, in deadly conflict with all forms of wickedness, with every manner of oppression, a conflict which knows neither truce nor compromise until the battle is fought out and the victory won, until the banner of the cross floats in triumph upon every shore and voices are heard in heaven proclaiming, "Now is come salvation; the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ." The language of Christianity is: "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it, and it shall be no more until he comes whose right it is, and I will give it him." It has been the cause of much disturbance for well-nigh two thousand years; it has "set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." It has rent families, nations, churches; produced war, bloodshed, famines, persecutions, pestilences; destroyed art, trade, commerce, manufactures; overthrown proud cities and turned fat lands into barrenness. "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword." Messiah will smite the nations with the rod of his anger until they submit and give that glory to his name which is due.

But who is to blame? God's merciful and beneficent scheme for the amelioration of the condition of society and the salvation of men? Or the wickedness and deceivableness of unrighteousness, which rejects the proffered mercy? Had men not persisted in embracing, and believing, and promulgating the truth, we would never have heard of the persecutions of the early Christians. Had the Waldenses submitted to that lawful authority which was over them and succumbed to the prevailing opinions of the world around them, there would have been no bloody slaughter amid those gloomy Alpine fastnesses. [...] Had there been no Huguenots in France, there would have been no massacre of St. Bartholomew; the world would have been saved that appalling tragedy. Had there been no Puritans in England, the fires of Smithfield never had been kindled!^a

^a *Smithfield was a site in London frequently used for public executions. Sloane is referring to Protestants who were burned at the stake by Queen Mary I when she re-established Catholicism in England.*

Had the Covenanters of Scotland been a little more yielding and inclined to compromise, twenty-eight thousand men, women, and children would not have died for the word of God and the testimony which they held; there would have been no English, no American Revolution. Were there no abolitionists in this country—that is, none who believe slavery a moral wrong and who are determined to act upon that conviction—we would have neither strife nor agitation at the present time.

All this is freely admitted—but what then? Why, then, let us adopt the advice of Messrs. Van Dyke and O'Connor,^b fold our arms, shut our crazy mouths, or open them only to shout hallelujahs to despotism, and vex the air with our huzzahs for the great Diana of American slavery, and accord to the *Dred Scott* decision that black men have no rights which white men are bound to respect. Let us invite Senator Toombs^c to Bunker Hill and wave our hats while he calls the roll of his slaves at the base of the monument, above the ashes of the men who died with the declaration of the great Virginian upon their lips: “Give me liberty, or give me death.” Let us, in the language of one who should have been called anything else but Wise,^d permit slavery to “pour itself out without restraint and find no limit but the western ocean”; or, in the more pious

^b Charles O'Connor was an Irish American Catholic and a lawyer. On December 15, 1860, O'Connor had chaired a meeting of New Yorkers sympathetic to southern slaveholders, during which he blamed the secession crisis on northerners having been led into the “dreadful error” of believing that they had a God-given duty to destroy slavery. Faulting ministers in particular for promoting that error, O'Connor held that “the pulpit [...] should generally be[,] upon such subjects[,] silent.”

“The Crisis in New York,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1860, 1, 8; digital scan available from ProQuest Historical Newspapers. O'Connor's speech is also available in *Proceedings of an Union Meeting, Held in New York: An Appeal to the South* (New York: John H. Duyckinck, 1860), 7-15, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t8x929f2r>.

^c Robert Toombs was a white slaveholder who represented Georgia in the US Senate prior to secession and then became the Confederacy's first secretary of state. Starting in the mid-1850s, a claim circulated among opponents of slavery that Toombs had boasted he would someday call the roll of his slaves at the foot of the Bunker Hill Monument, in Boston. Toombs denied having made the statement.

Sens. Clark and Toombs, *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st sess. (February 20, 1860), 838, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwcglink.html>.

^d Henry Alexander Wise was a white Virginian; he gave the speech from which Sloane quotes in April 1842, as a member of the US House of Representatives. (Sloane misquotes the speech: Wise said “the southern ocean,” not “the western ocean.” However, since Wise was talking about expanding the United States' territorial claims westward to California, the meaning is the same.) Wise's two-decades-old words gained new currency after white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child referenced them in a public letter she wrote to Wise in 1859, while he was governor of Virginia.

Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia (*Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society*, 1860), 7, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t8x929s65>. For contemporary reports of Wise's speech, see “Congressional,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 28, 1842, 187, <https://archive.org/details/767776c2-dbf0-48f8-865b-1a5171739ab7>; Mr. Adams' Speech on War with Great Britain and Mexico, with the Speeches of Messrs. Wise and Ingersoll, to Which It Is in Reply (*n.p.*: 1842?), 5, https://books.google.com/books?id=RwMnOn_pknUC.

but less expressive phraseology of the saintly Palmer,^e [...] grant it “the right, unchallenged by man, to go and root itself wherever Providence and nature may carry it.” Accepting the advice of this follower of one who came to proclaim deliverance to the captive and the opening of the prison doors to them that are bound, [let us] repeal our liberty bills^f until, wherever the stars and stripes are seen to wave, there shall be no hiding place for the flying fugitives; put into our creeds and confessions of faith, as the first fundamental principle of all true religion, the doctrine that slavery is right, and denounce, as the most damnable of all damnable heresies, the belief that it is sinful and morally wrong; lay the very foundations of our churches upon the crushed and bruised body of the slave, and cement them with his blood; declare every church not founded upon this rock, and not adorned with a slaveholding ministry and membership, a mere conclave of fanatics and not worth a farthing candle. Then will the souls of those eminent evangelists of slavery and disunion, Drs. Thornwell^g and Palmer, be made to sing for joy, and the hope of evangelizing the world (the North included) once more dart its cheering beams into the darkness of their present desponding and discouraged condition. That delectable community which they call South Carolina will return to the fold from which she has wandered [...]; agitation will cease, quiet will be restored, and peace will plant her olive upon the hills; King Cotton will ascend the throne from which he has been cast down; our northern summers will be made bright by visits from our southern friends and their bands of happy slaves, our winters less cheerless by the hope of their return. Surely, we are all ready! Who could refuse such requests from pious lips, with the promise of such blessings?

Slavery, I affirm, is the cause of the strife that agitates, and the danger that threatens, our country; this every wise man knows, and every candid man confesses to be true. The strife will cease, the danger will be averted, when the last fetter has fallen from the last slave and liberty [is] proclaimed throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants thereof, and not till then. Build your house upon the shifting sand, and hope that when the rains descend, and the storm beats, and the floods come, it will not fall. Make your home upon the slopes of Vesuvius, and expect that it will not be rocked by the earthquake or swept by the fiery flood when it rolls from its burning crest. But do not expect that a nation can have peace which enslaves men; that a kingdom will stand which violates God's law; that a people can prosper who spoil the poor and oppress the stranger; that you can avert the wrath of heaven with sermons against abolitionism, or turn back the arm of

^e Benjamin Morgan Palmer was a white Presbyterian minister, originally from South Carolina. The words Sloane quotes come from a widely reported sermon that Palmer gave in New Orleans on November 29, 1860, urging southern states to secede in order to preserve their divinely ordained slavery-based culture.

B. M. Palmer, Thanksgiving Sermon, Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, December 29, 1860 (New York: George F. Nesbitt & Co., 1861), 12-13, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t5h99788p>. The publisher misdated the sermon in the title.

^f Sloane is referring to “personal liberty laws,” which several northern states passed in order to hinder enforcement of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

^g Like Benjamin Morgan Palmer, James Henley Thornwell was a white Presbyterian minister from South Carolina. Since the early 1850s, Thornwell had been publicly defending slavery as a Christian institution and denouncing abolitionists as atheistic revolutionaries.

the Almighty when it is stretched out with prayers in which there is no confession of the guilt or promise of repentance toward God; or that your compromises and exhortations to peace will avail when Jehovah rides forth upon the whirlwind, when the Lord thunders in the heavens and the Highest gives his voice: hailstones and coals of fire.

Source: J. R. W. Sloane, *Review of Rev. Henry J. Van Dyke's Discourse on "The Character and Influence of Abolitionism," a Sermon Preached in the Third Reformed Presbyterian Church, Twenty-Third Street, New York, on Sabbath Evening, December 23, 1860* (New York: William Erving, 1861), 35-38, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112041726560>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted to more accurately reflect rhetorical shifts. Some long sentences broken up for readability. Punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. Quotation marks in the source publication omitted or relocated so that they enclose only direct speech or (near-)exact quotations of other texts, not looser paraphrases. An instance of italics omitted where used unnecessarily in the source to underscore a sarcastic tone; italics added to the shortened name of a Supreme Court decision. The term *heaven*, inconsistently but usually lowercase in the source, is consistently lowercase here. Other terms capitalized in the source but converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization are *word*, *creeds*, *confessions of faith*, *liberty bills*, and *western ocean*.

These edited excerpts from Sloane's sermon are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: The sermon to which Sloane was responding is Henry J. Van Dyke, *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism: A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn, on Sabbath Evening, December 9th, 1860* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1860), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t7tm79w7s>.



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