



*Address [...] to All the Churches of Jesus Christ  
throughout the Earth*

Presbyterian Church in the CSA (1861)

*After the Civil War began, the largest body of Presbyterians in the southern states broke their ties with northern Presbyterians to become the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. In this statement announcing its formation, the new denomination defends slavery as divinely approved and racial hierarchy as divinely ordained. When the Confederacy was defeated and federal rule restored, the denomination renamed itself the "Presbyterian Church in the United States," remaining separate from the northern "Presbyterian Church in the United States of America." These two branches of Presbyterianism would not remerge until 1983.*

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, to all the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the earth, greeting: Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied upon you!

Dearly beloved brethren: It is probably known to you that the presbyteries and synods in the Confederate States, which were formerly in connection with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, have renounced the jurisdiction of that body and dissolved the ties which bound them ecclesiastically with their brethren of the North. [...] The church, therefore, in these seceded states presents now the spectacle of a separate, independent, and complete organization, under the style and title of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. In thus taking its place among sister churches of this and other countries, it seems proper that it should set forth the causes which have impelled it to separate from the church of the North [...]

The antagonism of Northern and Southern sentiment on the subject of slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the federal union and involved us in the horrors of an unnatural war. [...] Here we may venture to lay before the Christian world our views, as a church, upon the subject of slavery. We beg a candid hearing.

In the first place, we would have it distinctly understood that, in our ecclesiastical capacity, we are neither the friends nor the foes of slavery; that is to say, we have no commission either to propagate it or to abolish it. The policy of its existence or non-existence is a question which exclusively belongs to the state. We have no right, as a church, to enjoin it as a duty or to condemn it as a sin. Our business is with the duties which spring from the relation: the duties of the masters, on the one hand, and of their slaves on the other. These duties we are to proclaim and to enforce with spiritual sanctions. The social, civil, political problems connected with this great subject transcend our sphere, as God has not entrusted to his church the organization of society, the construction of governments, nor the allotment of individuals to their various stations. The church has as much right to preach to the monarchies of Europe and the despotism of Asia the doctrines of republican equality as to preach to the governments of the South the extirpation of slavery. This position is impregnable, unless it can be shown that slavery is a sin. [...] Is slavery, then, a sin?

In answering this question as a church, let it be distinctly borne in mind that the only rule of judgment is the written word of God. [...] The question, then, is brought within a narrow compass: Do the scriptures directly or indirectly condemn slavery as a sin? If they do not, the dispute is ended, for the church, without forfeiting her character, dares not go beyond them.

Now, we venture to assert that if men had drawn their conclusions upon this subject only from the Bible, it would no more have entered into any human head to denounce slavery as a sin than to denounce monarchy, aristocracy, or poverty. The truth is, men have listened to what they falsely considered as primitive intuitions, or as necessary deductions from primitive cognitions, and then have gone to the Bible to confirm the crochets of their vain philosophy. They have gone there determined to find a particular result, and the consequence is that they leave with having made, instead of having interpreted, scripture.

Slavery is no new thing. It has not only existed for ages in the world, but it has existed, under every dispensation of the covenant of grace, in the church of God. Indeed, the first organization of the church as a visible society, separate and distinct from the unbelieving world, was inaugurated in the family of a slaveholder. Among the very first persons to whom the seal of circumcision was affixed were the slaves of the father of the faithful, some born in his house and others bought with his money. Slavery again reappears under the Law. God sanctions it in the first table of the Decalogue, and Moses treats it as an institution to be regulated, not abolished; legitimated and not condemned. We come down to the age of the New Testament, and we find it again in the churches founded by the apostles under the plenary inspiration of the Holy Ghost. These facts are utterly amazing if slavery is the enormous sin which its enemies represent it to be. It will not do to say that the scriptures have treated it only in a general, incidental way, without any clear implication as to its moral character. Moses surely made it the subject of express and positive legislation, and the apostles are equally explicit in inculcating the duties which spring from both sides of the relation. They treat slaves as bound to obey and inculcate obedience as an office of religion—a thing wholly self-contradictory if the authority exercised over them were unlawful and iniquitous.

[...W]e have said enough, we think, to vindicate the position of the Southern church. We have assumed no new attitude. We stand exactly where the church of God has always stood—from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the Reformers, and from the Reformers to ourselves. We stand upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. Shall we be excluded from the fellowship of our brethren in other lands because we dare not depart from the charter of our faith? Shall we be branded with the stigma of reproach because we cannot consent to corrupt the word of God to suit the intuitions of an infidel philosophy? [...] If so, we shall take consolation in the cheering consciousness that the Master has accepted us. [...] Others, if they please, may spend their time in declaiming on the tyranny of earthly masters; it will be our aim to resist the real tyrants which oppress the soul—sin and Satan. These are the foes against whom we shall find it employment enough to wage a successful war. And to this holy war, it is the purpose of our church to devote itself with redoubled energy. We feel that the souls of our slaves are a solemn trust, and we shall strive to present them faultless and complete before the presence of God.

Indeed, as we contemplate their condition in the Southern states, and contrast it with that of their

fathers before them and that of their brethren in the present day in their native land, we cannot but accept it as a gracious providence that they have been brought in such numbers to our shores and redeemed from the bondage of barbarism and sin. Slavery to them has certainly been overruled for the greatest good. It has been a link in the wondrous chain of providence, through which many sons and daughters have been made heirs of the heavenly inheritance. [...T]he general operation of the system is kindly and benevolent; it is a real and effective discipline, and, without it, we are profoundly persuaded that the African race in the midst of us can never be elevated in the scale of being. As long as that race, in its comparative degradation, coexists side by side with the white, bondage is its normal condition.

As to the endless declamation about human rights, we have only to say that human rights are not a fixed but a fluctuating quality. Their sum is not the same in any two nations on the globe. The rights of Englishmen are one thing, the rights of Frenchmen another. There is a minimum without which a man cannot be responsible; there is a maximum which expresses the highest degree of civilization and of Christian culture. The education of the species consists in its ascent along this line. As you go up, the number of rights increases, but the number of individuals who possess them diminishes. As you come down the line, rights are diminished, but the individuals are multiplied. [...] Now, when it is said that slavery is inconsistent with human rights, we crave to understand what point in this line is the slave conceived to occupy. There are, no doubt, many rights which belong to other men—to Englishmen, to Frenchmen, to his master, for example—which are denied to him. But is he fit to possess them? Has God qualified him to meet the responsibilities which their possession necessarily implies? His place in the scale is determined by his competency to fulfil its duties. [...] The truth is, the education of the human race for liberty and virtue is a vast providential scheme, and God assigns to every man, by a wise and holy decree, the precise place he is to occupy in the great moral school of humanity. The scholars are distributed into classes, according to their competency and progress. [...]

Brethren, we have done. We have told you who we are and what we are. We greet you in the ties of Christian brotherhood. We desire to cultivate peace and charity with all our fellow Christians throughout the world. We invite to ecclesiastical communion all who maintain our principles of faith and order. And now we commend you to God and the word of his grace.

**Source:** *Address of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, to All the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the Earth* ([Augusta, GA?]: Published by order of the Assembly, [1861?]), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/dul1.ark:/13960/t1fj38w73>. Public domain.

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