



No Compromise with Slavery William Lloyd Garrison (1854)

William Lloyd Garrison was a white New Englander and a very prominent abolitionist, with a reputation for radicalism. He opposed not only slavery but racial discrimination more widely, advocated women's right to participate in the public sphere, rejected the US Constitution as an irredeemably pro-slavery document, and called for the free states to dissolve their political union with the slave states. Raised as a Baptist, in adulthood Garrison became theologically liberal and an unsparing critic of every church that failed to espouse his hardline abolitionism; because of these freely voiced views, he gained a reputation for "infidelity" (meaning, lack of religious faith). Nevertheless, the religious appeals he makes in this speech have a conventional Protestant flavor.

[“Let me define my positions”]

Let me define my positions and, at the same time, challenge anyone 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. [...] I do not know how to espouse freedom and slavery together. [...] 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. [...] 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. [...]

II. Notwithstanding the lessons taught us by Pilgrim fathers and Revolutionary sires at Plymouth Rock, on Bunker Hill, at Lexington, Concord, and Yorktown; notwithstanding our Fourth of July celebrations and ostentatious displays of patriotism—in what European nation is personal liberty held in such contempt as in our own? Where are there such unbelievers in the natural equality and freedom of mankind? [...]

Pass over to the Continent, even into papal-ridden Italy, and there urge the popular pleas in defense of slaveholding, and, from the Vatican, Pope Gregory XVI shall reply: “We urgently invoke, in the name of God, all Christians, of whatever condition, that none henceforth dare [...] to exercise that inhuman traffic by which Negroes are reduced to slavery, as if they were not men, but automata or chattels, and are sold in defiance of all the laws of justice and humanity [...]”

Proceed to Austria and there defend the practice of reducing men to slavery, and the Austrian code shall proclaim: “Every man, by right of nature, sanctioned by reason, must be considered a free person. Every slave becomes free from the moment he touches the Austrian soil or an Austrian ship.”

Finally, enter the Tunisian dominions and there urge the claim of property in man, and Musheer Ahmed Bashaw Bey^a shall reply: “We declare that all slaves that shall enter our kingdom, by land or by sea, shall be free; and further order, that everyone born a slave in our dominions shall be considered as free from the very instant of his birth, and that he shall neither be sold nor bought.”

Thus do I prove that in regard to personal liberty—the right of every man to the ownership of his own body—even Italy, Austria, and Tunis are in advance of this boasted republic and put it to open shame!

III. The abolitionism which I advocate is as absolute as the law of God and as unyielding as his throne. It admits of no compromise. Every slave is a stolen man; every slaveholder is a man-stealer. [...] What right have I to be free that another man cannot prove himself to possess by nature? Who or what are my wife and children that they should not be herded with four-footed beasts as well as others thus sacredly related? If I am white and another is black, complexionally, what follows? [...] “Have we not one Father? Hath not one God created us?” [...]

By this sure test, every institution, every party, every form of government, every kind of religion is to be tried. God never made a human being either for destruction or degradation. It is plain, therefore, that whatever cannot flourish except at the sacrifice of that being ought not to exist. [...] Show me the government which can be maintained only by destroying the rights of a portion of the people, and you will indicate the duty of openly revolting against it. Show me the religion which sanctions the ownership of one man by another, and you will demonstrate it to be purely infernal in its origin and spirit. [...]

“So God created man in his own image—male and female created he them.” This is a death blow to all claims of superiority, to all charges of inferiority, to all usurpation, to all oppressive dominion. [...]

If the slaves are not men; if they do not possess human instincts, passions, faculties, and powers; if they are below accountability and devoid of reason; if for them there is no hope of immortality, no God, no heaven, no hell; if, in short, they are what the slave code declares them to be, rightly “deemed, sold, taken, reputed, and adjudged in law to be chattels personal in the hands of their owners [...]”—then, undeniably, I am mad and can no longer discriminate between a man and a beast. But in that case, away with the horrible incongruity of giving them oral instruction, of teaching them the catechism, of recognizing them as suitably qualified to be members of Christian churches, of extending to them the ordinance of baptism, and admitting them to the communion table, and enumerating many of them as belonging to the household of faith! Let them be no more included in our religious sympathies or denominational statistics than are the dogs in our streets, the swine in our pens, or the utensils in our dwellings. [...]

But if they are men; if they are to run the same career of immortality with ourselves; if the same law of God is over them as over all others; if they have souls to be saved or lost; if Jesus included them among those for whom he laid down his life; if Christ is, within many of them,

^a Ahmad I, bey of Tunis, who abolished slavery in 1846, the first ruler of an Islamic state to do so.

“the hope of glory”—then when I claim for them all that we claim for ourselves because we are created in the image of God, I am guilty of no extravagance but am bound by every principle of honor, by all the claims of human nature, by obedience to Almighty God, to “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them” and to demand their immediate and unconditional emancipation. [...]

[*“The capacity of a nation to commit sin”*]

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. With two thousand million dollars’ worth of property in human flesh in its hands, to be watched and wielded as one vast interest for all the South; with forces never divided and purposes never conflictive; with a spurious, Negro-hating religion universally diffused and everywhere ready to shield it from harm; with a selfish, sordid, divided North, long since bereft of its manhood, to cajole, bribe, and intimidate; with its foot planted on two-thirds of our vast national domains, and there unquestioned, absolute, and bloody in its sway; with the terrible strength and boundless resources of the whole country at its command—it cannot be otherwise than that the Slave Power will consummate its diabolical purposes to the uttermost. The Northwest Territory, Nebraska, Mexico, Cuba, Hayti, the Sandwich Islands, and colonial possessions in the tropics—to seize and subjugate these to its accursed reign and, ultimately, to re-establish the foreign slave trade as a lawful commerce are among its settled designs. It is not a question of probabilities but of time.

And whom will a just God hold responsible for all these results? All who despise and persecute men on account of their complexion; all who endorse a slaveholding religion as genuine; all who give the right hand of Christian fellowship to men whose hands are stained with the blood of the slave; all who regard material prosperity as paramount to moral integrity, and the law of the land as above the law of God; all who are either hostile or indifferent to the anti-slavery movement; and all who advocate the necessity of making compromises with the Slave Power in order that the Union may receive no detriment.

[...] 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? [...]

What then is to be done? Friends of the slave, the question is not whether, by our efforts, we can abolish slavery speedily or remotely—for duty is ours, the result is with God—but whether we will go with the multitude to do evil, sell our birthright for a mess of pottage, cease to cry aloud and spare not, and remain in Babylon when the command of God is “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins and that ye receive not of her plagues.” [...] 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!”

Source: William Lloyd Garrison, *No Compromise with Slavery: An Address Delivered in the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, February 14, 1854* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1854), 4-7, 13-18, 30-31, 34-36, <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbaapc.11000>. African American Pamphlet Collection, Library of Congress. No known copyright restrictions; free to use and reuse.

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