

Thomas R. Dew Defends Slavery

(Thomas R. Dew was a professor of political economy at the College of William and Mary.)

It is said slavery is wrong, in the *abstract* at least, and contrary to the spirit of Christianity. To this we answer . . . that any question must be determined by its circumstances, and if, as really is the case, we cannot get rid of slavery without producing a greater injury to both the masters and slaves, there is no rule of conscience or revealed law of God which *can* condemn us. The physician will not order the spreading cancer to be extirpated although it will eventually cause the death of his patient, because he would thereby hasten the fatal issue.

So, if slavery had commenced even contrary to the laws of God and man, and the sin of its introduction rested upon our heads, and it was even carrying forward the nation by slow degrees to final ruin-yet if it were *certain* that an attempt to remove it would only hasten and heighten the final catastrophe . . . then we would only be found to attempt the extirpation but we would stand guilty of a high offense in the sight of both God and man if we should rashly made the effort. But the original sin of introduction rest[s] not on our heads, and we shall soon see that all those dreadful calamities which the false prophets of our day are pointing to will never, in all probability, occur.

With regard to the assertion that slavery is against the spirit of Christianity, we are ready to admit the general assertion, but deny most positively that there is anything in the Old or New Testament which would go to show that slavery, when once introduced, ought at all events to be abrogated, or that the master commits any offense in holding slaves. The children of Israel themselves were slaveholders and were not condemned for it. All the patriarchs themselves were slaveholders; Abraham had more than three hundred, Isaac had a "great store" of them; and even the patient and meek Job himself had "*a very great household.*" When the children of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, they made one whole tribe "hewers of wood and drawers of water," and they were at that very time under the special guidance of Jehovah; they were permitted expressly to purchase slaves of the heathen and keep them as an inheritance for their posterity; and even the children of Israel might be enslaved for six years.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find not one single passage at all calculated to disturb the conscience of an honest slaveholder. No one can read it without seeing and admiring that the meek and humble Saviour of the world in no instance meddled with the established institutions of mankind; he came to save a fallen world, and not to excite the black passions of man and array them in deadly hostility against each other. From no one did he turn away; his plan was offered alike to all-to the monarch and the subject, the rich and the poor, the master and the slave. He was born in the Roman world, a world in which the most galling slavery existed, a thousand times more cruel than the slavery in our own country; and yet he nowhere encourages insurrection, he nowhere fosters discontent; but exhorts *always* to implicit obedience and fidelity.

What a rebuke does the practice of the Redeemer of mankind imply upon the conduct of some of his nominal disciples of the day, who seek to destroy the contentment of the slave, to rouse their

most deadly passions, to break up the deep foundations of society, and to lead on to a night of darkness and confusion! " Let every man " (says Paul) "abide in the same calling wherein he is called. Art thou called *being* a servant? Care not for it; but if thou mayest be made free, use *it* rather" (I *Corinth. vii.* 20,21) . . . Servants are even commanded in Scripture to be faithful and obedient to unkind masters. "Servants," (says Peter) "be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle but to the froward. For what glory is it if when ye shall be buffeted for your faults ye take it patiently; but if when ye do will and suffer for it, yet take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (I *Peter ii.* 18,20). These and many other passages in the New Testament most convincingly prove that slavery in the Roman world was nowhere charged as a fault or crime upon the holder, and everywhere is the most implicit obedience enjoined.

We beg leave . . . to address a few remarks to those who have conscientious scruples about the holding of slaves, and therefore consider themselves under an obligation to break all the ties of friendship and kindred-dissolve all the associations of happier days to flee to a land where this evil does not exist. We cannot condemn the conscientious actions of mankind, but we must be permitted to say that if the assumption even of these pious gentlemen be correct, we do consider their conduct as very unphilosophical; and we will go further still: we look upon it as even immoral upon their own principles.

Let us admit that slavery is an evil; and what then? Why, it has been entailed upon us by no fault of ours, and must we shrink from the charges which devolves upon us, and throw the slave, in consequence, unto those hands of those who have no scruples of conscience-those who will not perhaps treat him so kindly? No! This is not philosophy, it is not morality; . . .

Look to the slaveholding population of our country and you everywhere find them characterized by noble and elevated sentiments, by humane and virtuous feelings. We do not find among them that cold, contracted, calculating *selfishness*, which withers and repels everything around it, and lessens or destroys all the multiplied enjoyments of social intercourse. Go into our national councils and ask for the most generous, the most disinterested, the most conscientious, and the least unjust and oppressive in their principles, and see whether the slaveholder will be passed by in the selection

Is it not a fact known to every man in the South that the most cruel masters are those who have been unaccustomed to slavery. It is well known that Northern gentleman who marry Southern heiresses are much severer masters than Southern gentlemen. . . .There may be many cruel masters, and there are unkind and cruel fathers too; but both the one and the other make all those around them shudder with horror. We are disposed to think that their example in society tends rather to strengthen than weaken the principle of benevolence and humanity.

Every one acquainted with Southern slaves knows that the slave rejoices in the elevation and prosperity of his master; and the heart of no one is more gladdened at the successful debut of the young master or miss on the great theater of the world than that of either the young slave who has grown up with them and shared in all their sports, and even partaken of all their delicacies, or the aged one who has looked on and watched them from birth to manhood, with the kindest and most affectionate solicitude, and has ever met from them all the kind treatment and generous sympathies of feeling, tender hearts . . .

We have often heard slaveholders affirm that they would sooner rely upon their slaves' fidelity and attachment in the hour of danger and severe trial than on any other equal number of individuals; and we all know that the son or daughter who has been long absent from the parental roof, on returning to the scenes of infancy, never fails to be greeted with the kindest welcome and the most sincere and heartfelt congratulations from those slaves among whom he has been reared to manhood. . .

A merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe than the Negro slave of the United States . . . Why, then, since the slave is happy, and happiness is the great object of all animated creation, should we endeavor to disturb his contentment by infusing into his mind a vain and indefinite desire for liberty--a something which he cannot comprehend, and which must inevitably dry up the very sources of his happiness.

The fact is that all of us, . . . are too prone to judge of the happiness of others by ourselves --we make *self* the standard and endeavor to draw down everyone to its dimensions--not recollecting that the benevolence of the Omnipotent has made the mind of man pliant and susceptible of happiness in almost every situation and employment. We might rather die than be the obscure slave that waits at our back--our education and our habits generate an ambition that makes us aspire at something loftier, and disposes us to look upon the slave as unsusceptible of happiness in his humble sphere, when he may indeed be much happier than we are, and have his ambition too; but his ambition is to excel all the other slaves in the performance of his servile duties, to please and to gratify his master, and to command the praise of all who witness his exertions.

It has been contended that slavery is unfavorable to a republican spirit; but the whole history of the world proves that this is far from being the case. In the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, where the spirit of liberty glowed with the most intensity, the slaves were more numerous than the freemen. Aristotle and the great men of antiquity believed slavery necessary to keep alive the spirit of freedom. In Sparta the freemen were even forbidden to perform the offices of slaves, lest [they] might lose the spirit of independence. In modern times, too, liberty has always been more ardently desired by slaveholding communities

. . . . The menial and low offices being all performed by the blacks, there is at once taken away the greatest cause of distinction and separation of the ranks of society. The man to the north will not shake hands familiarly with his servant, and converse and laugh and dine with him, no matter how honest and respectable he may be. But go to the south, and you will find that no white man feels such inferiority of rank as to be unworthy of association with those around him. Color alone here is the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy, and all who are white are equal in spite of the variety of occupation And it is this spirit of equality which is both the generator and preserver of the genuine spirit of liberty.

[From *The Pro-Slavery Argument: As Maintained by the most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States, Containing the Several Essays, on the Subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew.* (Charleston: Walker, Richards, 1852) pp. 451-62. Some paraphrasing has been added to the original.]