

1850-1859. Brooklyn Minister Discusses Resistance to Slavery

Henry Ward Beecher, a white man, was a minister at the Plymouth Congregationalist Church in Brooklyn, New York and a leading opponent of slavery in the 1850s. He was also the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1848, 1856 and 1859, to protest against the evil of slavery, Beecher raised money in his church to purchase the freedom of slaves. Because of his popularity as a minister, many of his sermons were published. Beecher believed it was necessary to oppose the Fugitive Slave Law and the extension of slavery into the west. He thought it was a mistake to actively oppose slavery in the South or encourage slaves to run away. The following passages are excerpts from his writings in 1850 and 1859.

A. A Response to the Compromise of 1850

“There are two incompatible and mutually exclusive principles brought together in the government of this land . . . These elements are slavery and liberty . . . One or the other must die. . . . The South now demands room and right for extension. She asks the North to be a partner. For every free state she demands one for slavery. . . . It is time for good men and true . . . to stand for God and humanity. No compromise will help us which dodges the question, certainly none which settle it for slavery . . . There never was a plainer question for the North. It is her duty to openly and firmly, and forever to refuse to slavery another inch of territory. . . . It is her duty to refuse her hand or countenance (help) to slavery where it now exists. It is her duty to declare that she will under no consideration be a party to any further inhumanity or injustice. . . . If the compromises of the Constitution include requisitions (rules) which violate humanity, I will not be bound by them, not ever the Constitution shall make me unjust . . .”

B. Should Righteous Men Break Unjust Laws?

“Nothing could be more mischievous (wrong) than the prevalence of the doctrine that a citizen may disobey an unjust burdensome law . . . How can we as good citizens subscribe to such wholesome doctrines and yet openly resist the Fugitive Slave Laws? . . . Every citizen must obey a law which inflicts injury upon his person, estate and civil privilege (rights), until legally redressed (corrected); but no citizen is bound to obey a law which commands him to inflict injury upon another. We must endure but never commit wrong. . . . Let no man stand uncommitted, dodging between day light and dark on this vital principle. . . . Obedience to laws, even though they sin against me; disobedience to every law that commands me to sin.”

C. The Future of Slavery in the United States

“Our policy for the future is plain. All the natural laws of God are warring upon slavery. Let it go to seed. . . . Shut it up to itself and let it alone. We do not ask to interfere with the internal policy of a single State by constitutional enactment. . . . We only ask that a line be drawn about it. . . . that it be fixed and forever settled that slavery must find no new sources (or) new fields. . . .”

D. Response to John Brown's Call for a Slave Rebellion and the attack on Harpers Ferry.

“ We have no right to treat the citizens of the South with acrimony (anger) and bitterness because they are involved in a system of wrong doingThe preaching of discontent among the bondsmen of our land is not the way to help them No relief will be carried to the slaves or to the South as a body by any individual or organized plans to carry them off or to incite them to abscond (runaway). . . . If we would benefit the African in the South we must begin at home. No one can fail to see the inconsistency between our treatment of those amongst us who are in the lower walks of life and our professing of sympathy for the Southern slave . . . We must quicken all the springs of feeling in the free states on behalf of human liberty . . . We must maintain sympathy and kindness toward the South You should care for both the master and the slave . . . You ought to set your face against and discountenance (oppose) anything like an insurrectionary spirit.