

To Justify the Abolishment of Slavery

The concept of slavery was an integral part of nineteenth-century America; those who sought its end, often confronting religious leaders, were considered radicals.

Abolitionists, both blacks and whites inside and outside the Christian mainstream, often concerned themselves with other contemporary issues, such as the banning of alcohol. Their varied goals often canceled each other out: those who could be persuaded to an anti-slavery stance often were unable to support another civil rights cause, such as granting equal rights to women.

Abolitionists found support and

*"Where human law 'oerrules
Divine,
Beneath the sheriff's hammer fell
My wife and babes,—I call them
mine,—
And where they suffer, who can
tell?
The hounds are baying on my
track,
O Christian! will you send me
back?"*

—Lyrics to anti-slavery hymn "The
Fugitive Slave to the Christian"
(1844)

The "Pictorial Illustration of Abolitionism" (1865) concludes with the statement warning that abolitionism "commenced by dividing the Church; it ended by dividing the Union."

justification for their cause in the same Bible used to support slavery. Abolitionist Angelina Grimké referred to her Bible as "my dictionary."

One abolitionist strategy involved "outing" slaveholders among church congregations. William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), founder of *The Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper, eventually renounced his own church for its pro-slavery stance.

Others took a more direct approach. Nat Turner, a Virginia slave, believing an eclipse to be a sign from God, gathered fifty men and hacked to death fifty-five members of slave-owning families. Horrified Virginians demanded an end to slavery and the deportation of all blacks; the measure missed passage by seven votes.

The Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1850, called for a fine of one thousand dollars for any person who helped a runaway slave. Clergymen argued against the law, referring to the Old Testament: "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto



And he that stealeth a man,
and selleth him, or if he be
found in his hand, he shall
surely be put to death.

—Exodus 21:16

And hath made of one blood
all nations of men for to
dwell on all the face of the
earth, and hath determined
the times before appointed,
and the bounds of their
habitation.

—Acts 17:26

And the heart of the Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken by Moses.

—Exodus 9:35

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

—Matthew 7:12

For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

—Romans 13:9

“When my countrymen shall burn their Bibles, and rescind their famous Declaration of Independence, and reduce themselves to colonial dependence upon the mother country, I will find both time and patience to reason with them on the subject of human rights.”

—William Lloyd Garrison,
“The Cause of Emancipation”
(1839)

Frontispiece engraving from the abolitionist anthology *The Liberty Bell* (1839)

thee . . .” (Deuteronomy 23:15). Many runaway slaves aimed for Canada, traveling via The Underground Railroad, a secret network of sympathizers running from the South to the North.

In a critique of minister Josiah Priest’s *Bible Defense of Slavery* (1853), a *Baltimore Sun* editorialist blasted back: “Bible defence of slavery! There is no such thing. . . . Slavery is recorded in the Bible and approved, with many degrad-

ing characteristics. War is recorded in the Bible, and approved, under what seems to us the extreme of cruelty. But are slavery and war to *endure* for ever because we find them in the Bible? or are they to *cease* at once and for ever because the Bible inculcates peace and brotherhood?”

Many abolitionists, rather than debating the issue, put their biblical interpretations into action through freeing, harboring, and

The Bible Tells Me So



The Liberty Bell
The darkness of her life

assisting for
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People and



LITTLE EVA CONVERTING TOM.
In that moment a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her heathen soul.

"In that moment a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her heathen soul."—nineteenth-century illustration from the influential anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* (1852), in which Little Eva converts Topsy. Eliza's husband, George, escapes using the Underground Railroad, by which an estimated sixty thousand slaves escaped between 1830 and 1860. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed that the novel was inspired by a vision, thus written by God.

ple should treat one another, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31), which were used to promote abolition, have also come in handy in debates over the sanctuary movement, abortion, liberation theology, and civil rights. Many see these as fundamental lessons of the Bible.

9) assisting former slaves. Many Christian abolitionists saw the Civil War as God's punishment for the toleration of slavery by the Southern church.

Many verses defining how peo-

"The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and athelism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake."

—Dr. James H. Townwell, religious and educational leader of South Carolina (1850)

9
 Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

—Deuteronomy 23:15-16

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:28

Abolitionist woodcut (1837)

