

Excerpts from *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism* by Catharine Beecher

My Dear Friend,

...The object I have in view, is to present some reasons why it seems unwise and inexpedient for ladies of the non-slave-holding States to unite themselves in Abolition Societies...In the sense in which Abolitionists explain the terms they employ, there is little, if any, difference between them and most northern persons. Especially is this true of northern persons of religious principles. I know not where to look for northern Christians, who would deny that every slave-holder is bound to treat his slaves exactly as he would claim that his own children ought to be treated in similar circumstances; that the holding of our fellow men as property, or the withholding any of the rights of freedom, for mere purposes of gain, is a sin, and ought to be immediately abandoned; and that where the laws are such, that a slave-holder cannot *legally* emancipate his slaves, without throwing them into worse bondage, he is bound to use all his influence to alter those laws, and, in the meantime, to treat his slaves, as nearly as he can, *as if* they were free.

I do not suppose there is one person in a thousand, at the North, who would dissent from these principles. They would only differ in the use of terms, and call this the doctrine of *gradual emancipation*, while Abolitionists would call it the doctrine of *immediate emancipation*.

As this is the state of public opinion at the North, there is no necessity for using any influence with northern ladies, in order that they may adopt your principles on the subject of slavery; for they hold them in common with yourself...

In regard to the duty of making efforts to bring the people of the Southern States to adopt these principles, and act on them, it is entirely another matter. On this point you would find a large majority opposed to your views. Most persons in the non-slave-holding States have considered the matter of Southern slavery, as one in which they were no more called to interfere, than in the abolition of the press-gang system in England, or the tythe system of Ireland...

The distinctive peculiarity of the Abolition Society is this: it is a voluntary association in one section of the country, designed to awaken public sentiment against a moral evil existing in another section of the country...The principal object of your [the Grimké sisters] proposed tour, I suppose, is to present facts, arguments, and persuasions to influence northern ladies to enrol themselves as members of this association.

I will therefore proceed to present some of the reasons which may be brought against such a measure as the one you would urge...The position then I would aim to establish is, that the method taken by the Abolitionists is the one that, according to the laws of mind and past experience, is least likely to bring about the results they aim to accomplish. The general statement is this.

The object to be accomplished is:

First. To convince a certain community, that they are in the practice of a great sin, and

Secondly, To make them willing to relinquish it.

The method taken to accomplish this is, by voluntary associations in a foreign community, seeking to excite public sentiment against the perpetrators of the evil...by means of periodicals and agents circulating, not in the community committing the sin, but in that which does not practise it.

Now that this method may, in conjunction with other causes, have an influence to bring slavery to an end, is not denied. But it is believed...that it is the least calculated to do the *good*, and that it involves the greatest evils...

It is the maxim then of experience, that when men are to be turned from evils, and brought to repent and reform, those only should interfere who are most loved and respected, and who have the best right to approach the offender...

It is another maxim of experience, that such dealings with the erring should be in private, not in public. The moment a man is publicly rebuked, shame, anger, and pride of opinion, all combine to make him defend his practice, and refuse either to own himself wrong, or to cease from his evil ways.

The Abolitionists have violated all these laws of mind and of experience, in dealing with their southern brethren...They have not approached them with the spirit of love, courtesy, and forbearance.

They are not the persons who would be regarded by the South, as having any *right* to interfere...In dealing with their brethren, too, they have not tried silent, retired, private measures. It has been public denunciation of crime and shame in newspapers, addressed as it were to by-standers, in order to arouse the guilty...

While Abolition Societies did not exist, men could talk and write, at the South, against the evils of slavery, and northern men had free access and liberty of speech, both at the South and at the North. But now all is changed. Every avenue of approach to the South is shut. No paper, pamphlet, or preacher, that touches on that topic, is admitted in their bounds. Their own citizens, that once laboured and remonstrated, are silenced...This is the record of experience as to the tendencies of Abolitionism, as thus far developed...

But suppose the Abolitionists succeed, not only in making northern men Abolitionists, but also in sending a portion of light into the South, such as to form a body of Abolitionists there also. What is the thing that is to be done to end slavery at the South? It is to *alter the laws*, and to do this, a small minority must begin a long, bitter, terrible conflict with a powerful and exasperated majority...How will the exasperated majority act, according to the known laws of mind and of experience? Instead of lessening the evils of slavery, they will increase them...They will make laws so unjust and oppressive, not only to slaves, but to their Abolitionist advocates, that by degrees such men will withdraw from their bounds...Then the numerical proportion of whites will decrease, and the cruelty and unrestrained wickedness of the system will increase, till a period will come when the physical power will be so much with the blacks, their sense of suffering so increased, that the volcano will burst,—insurrection and servile wars will begin. Oh, the countless horrors of such a day!... Will the terrors of insurrection sweep over the South, and no Northern and Western blood be shed?...This is no picture of fancied dangers, which are not near. The day has come, when already the feelings are so excited on both sides, that I have heard intelligent men, good men,

benevolent and pious men, in moments of excitement, declare themselves ready to take up the sword—some for the defence of the master, some for the protection and right of the slave...

Source

Catharine E. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females*. Second Edition (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), 6-9, 53-57, 82-85. Edited by Old Sturbridge Village.

