

LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE

EDITOR OF THE CHRISTIAN EXAMINER.

BY REV. SAMUEL J. MAY.

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY GARRISON & KNAPP.

1835.

res. 7585.72 no. 2

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2011 with funding from
Associates of the Boston Public Library / The Boston Foundation

MR. MAY'S LETTER.

To the Editors of the Christian Examiner :—

GENTLEMEN—It was with no little pain that I read, in the July number of the *Examiner*, the remark of the reviewer of Prof. Palfrey's *Sermons* respecting Abolitionists, 'ardent but mistaken philanthropists,' as he calls us; and also the quotation from one of the sermons, to which the remark is prefatory. We are so used to being misrepresented and abused in the common, licentious newspapers, that we have ceased to be disturbed by misrepresentation and abuse from that quarter. It is not, however, a light matter, in our estimation, that a grave periodical like the *Examiner* has lent its extensive influence to fix in the public mind the unjust suspicion, that we intend or wish to interfere in any improper manner with 'the constitution of governments, or the personal rights of individuals.' The language of Prof. Palfrey, too, will doubtless be quoted again as a censure upon those against whom his reviewer has directed the remark, whether he so intended it or not. You will therefore, I trust, permit me to be heard in reply.

The real sentiments and purposes of Abolitionists have been so often, so fully and explicitly stated to our fellow-citizens, that he is inexcusable, who takes up a mere report respecting them, and proceeds therefrom to pronounce our condemnation. This is particularly unbecoming in one of the Unitarian Community, which have so loudly

complained of the injustice of a similar procedure, in reference to their opinions and purposes. I therefore respectfully request the writer of the review before me, to peruse with attention the official accounts of the formation of the New-England Anti-Slavery Society—of the first annual meeting of the Providence Society—the Address of the New-York Anti-Slavery Society—and, more than either, the proceedings of the National Convention held in Philadelphia, December, 1833, with the 'Declaration of Sentiments and Purposes.' Let him read these with care, and then specify, if he is able, one purpose of the Abolitionists, which may not be prosecuted, in perfect consistency with our duties as citizens of this Republic; and in equal consistency with the example of Jesus Christ and his Apostles.

That some measures, adopted by some of the friends of the Anti-Slavery cause, have been ill-advised, may be true. That some sentiments entertained by individuals are incorrect, is very probable. And that language has been used, which is not to be justified, I shall not deny. But I ask, gentlemen, are not such evils incident to all great efforts for the correction of public opinion, or the subversion or amendment of long existing corrupt institutions? How much extravagance of action, and bitterness of language, there was attendant upon the Reformation! Surely the most violent of the Abolitionists have

been tame, in comparison with Luther and Calvin. Nevertheless, the accomplishment of their enterprise is a matter of rejoicing to the whole protestant world, because it undermined the dominion of a spiritual despot, and helped to establish among men certain principles, which are fundamental to all the religious improvement of mankind. But we need not go back from our own age for an example. Who, that loves to see health and happiness prevail—domestic harmony, and public peace and good order—does not feel unfeignedly thankful for what has already been achieved in the cause of Temperance? Yet what wise and good man will hesitate to condemn many things, which have been said and done by some of the ardent advocates of total abstinence?

Those who desire to have mankind advancing in knowledge, righteousness, and in the enjoyment of their rights, should look at the obvious bearing of every new movement. If it be *onward*, if it be to a right result, they surely should not withhold their co-operation, because of any infelicity of manner, in which the movement may have been commenced. It is not the fault of the Abolitionists, that wiser and better men have not long ago espoused the cause of the oppressed, the enslaved Americans. And now, if those who condemn us, will come forward and take this great work into their hands, and do it as thoroughly as it should be done;—and in a better style than we have begun it—my word for it, gentlemen, there is not an Abolitionist I am acquainted with, who would not rejoice to have them take the lead. But slavery must be abolished. If there be any power in truth to correct error, and in light to dispel darkness, slavery shall be abolished. If others will not do the work better than we can, we shall go on doing it as well as we may be able—looking continually unto God for wisdom, resolution and success.

The spirit of reform is often so checked by the reserve, and forbidding aspect of those, who are accounted the wisest and the best, that it forbears to act until the pressure of conviction can be no longer resisted. It then very likely breaks forth from the restraint, in which it has been hardly held, with an impetuosity that may do mischief. Let the blame therefore, in part, at least, be laid upon those who, possessed of the greatest influence in the community, have suffered that

influence to remain on the side of *wrong*, or are tardy in their advocacy of right. They are the men, who do in effect hinder the progress of reform more than any others. They do more to dam up the stream, so that it rises and rises, until it overflows the banks of prudence, and destroys and terrifies, ere it subsides into its destined channel.

I have often heard gentlemen, some of them persons to whom the community looks up with greatest deference, acknowledge that the principles of Abolitionists, most if not all, were correct; but then they have added, 'the violence of language which some of them use is such, that we cannot countenance it, and so are silent.' I have asked in reply, and beg leave here again to ask, do these gentlemen, by their silence, escape being implicated with such as do wrong, ay, with such as use violent, abusive language? Are they not ranked among the *opposers* of abolition principles? And are the opposers less censurable than the advocates? I pledge myself to collect, if it be called for, a hundred fold larger quantity of misrepresentation, virulent abuse, and incendiary matter, from the publications of the pro-slavery party, than can be found in the writings of those who are anti-slavery. I do not believe there was ever a set of men more misrepresented and vilified than the Abolitionists have been. I say this confidently, although I am a Unitarian; and I am solicitous that this declaration should appear before the public in the most respectable Journal of the sect. I do not believe that any set of men, not even the Unitarians, have ever been so much misrepresented and vilified as the Abolitionists. I repeat then the question, already put, what will gentlemen gain by withholding their countenance and co-operation from the anti-slavery cause? They may see, at a glance, they will not escape the suspicion of giving countenance to abusive language and violent actions.

Let any candid man take the common charges, which are alleged against the Abolitionists, those charges which are going the rounds of our newspapers, some of which have now found a place in the Examiner—those charges by the iteration of which the mob has been recently aroused in New-York, to commit the grossest outrages upon the property, the persons, and the indisputable rights of their anti-slavery fellow-citizens—

let any candid man, I repeat, take these charges, and try to find a warrant for them, in the publications of the party accused, especially in those publications, which have issued under the sanction of any Anti-Slavery Society or Convention. I am perfectly willing to abide the result of such an examination. I am sure he will find that we have been most unjustly arraigned before our country, as those who would set at naught her Constitution, and violate her laws. He will find indeed the avowed purpose and the obvious tendency of our measures to be, to procure the repeal, as soon as possible, of all those laws in our land, which are oppressive or derogatory to our colored population—all such as are inconsistent with our principles, as republicans and christians. He will find that we mean, as soon as possible, to procure even the amendment of our Constitution, if it must be understood now to sanction the enslavement, or the degradation of any portion of our countrymen. But then he will find, and it should not be overlooked, that we have solemnly pledged ourselves to our country, and to one another, to seek the great object at which we aim, only by that course of action—by those measures and means, which are explicitly pointed out, and put into our hands for the amendment of any defect in our institutions, or the redress of any grievance, by that sacred Charter of Rights, which we are so wantonly accused of wishing to trample under foot.*

The language of the reviewer, in the passage before me, though not so harsh, implies I suspect, all that is meant by those who reproach us in more unseemly terms. Undoubtedly the writer intended to allege against the Abolitionists as much, at least, as is expressed in that extract from Prof. Palfrey's sermon which he has italicised. He would have it believed by our fellow-citizens, that we are '*rudely disturbing the political relations of society*'—that we are interfering in a very improper manner with the constitution of our government, and the property of individuals.

* Let me again refer my readers to the Anti-Slavery publications, which I have named above; also to the 'First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society'—to the 'Proceedings of the New-England Convention'—to 'the Anti-Slavery Reporter'—to Mrs. Child's 'Appeal'—'Phelps's Lectures'—and indeed to the publications of the Abolitionists generally.

It will not be mistaken by you, for a mere compliment, when I say that such an accusation, alleged in the Christian Examiner, does more to mislead the public mind, than all the scurrilous paragraphs respecting us, that have appeared in our common newspapers. Therefore it is that I am anxious to be heard in reply. There are two counts in the complaint. Let me consider them separately.

The first is, that certain ardent but mistaken philanthropists (i. e. the Abolitionists) 'think they are justified from their abhorrence of slavery, and their zeal for universal emancipation, to interfere with the constitutions of civil government.' Now, if this allegation have any meaning, it is either that our abhorrence of slavery does not warrant our interference in any way, for its abolition; or else that we have supposed it justified our interfering in an improper way. I ask in reply, is not our abhorrence of slavery just? Ought we not to feel an immeasurable, unutterable detestation of a system under which millions of our fellow-beings, most of them our countrymen, are held in a subserviency as entire as that of the domesticated brutes? and have no more protection from injury and abuse than those brutes have? No man of human feelings, I trust, can say that our hatred of such Slavery is too intense, or can be. Well, then, have we a right in this country to expose our views of this abomination, and express our feelings about it; and thus by changing public opinion, and awakening public sympathy, procure its abolition? There are many persons even in New-England, I apprehend, who think we have no such right. This may be the position the reviewer would take. On no subject, perhaps, are the views of men apt to be more indistinct, than on the nature and extent of their rights. Often they are most unreasonable and extravagant in their demands; and about as often we find them pusillanimously doubting, and relinquishing a most sacred right, because, forsooth, the faithful exercise of it may subject them to inconvenience or personal danger. But can we innocently relinquish our right to do our duty? And is it not a matter of the plainest duty to espouse the cause of the oppressed, and those who have none to help them? I know it is insisted by many that we ought not to interfere in behalf of the slaves by any means, because it is no concern of ours what their

condition may be, but wholly an affair of our southern brethren. No concern of ours! Why—are we not men here in New-England, and bound by the ties of common humanity, to take an interest in the sufferings of our fellow-beings? Surely the fact that these are our countrymen does not annul their claim upon us. The right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness is born with man, conferred upon him by his Creator. It is above all price, inalienable. He cannot forfeit it without crime, nor can it be withheld from him without crime. Can we then innocently see this right withheld from any of our race, and not remonstrate, especially where our remonstrance may avail? Slavery in our own country, and no concern of ours! Two millions of our fellow-beings under this Republic, held in the most abject bondage, bought and sold and treated like cattle! and we have nothing to do for them! Is not public opinion the ultimate law of this land, and are we not at liberty to operate on public opinion? Can we then be innocent, so long as we refrain from doing what we may, to change the minds and hearts of this people towards the millions, whom they are trampling under foot? New-England nothing to do with slavery! Why, are not the States of this confederacy mutually pledged to maintain the sacred rights of man; and are we not all implicated in the deep disgrace and the imminent peril of our nation, because of her flagrant violation of her vaunted principles? No concern of ours! Pray are not we of New-England, citizens of the United States, and bound by that relation to consult and labor for the common weal? How then can it be said that we have no concern with that, which is sapping the foundation of our Republic—ay, consuming the very cement of the Union? It appears to me that he can know nothing of the structure of this Confederacy, or cannot have attended to the joint action of its parts, who does not perceive that the continual friction caused by slavery has already destroyed all the harmony of its movements. Indeed, the evils brought even now upon the country by the sin of Slavery are so alarming, that our ‘wise and prudent ones,’ for want, methinks, of faith in God’s promises and power, are appalled into silence. But is it right, is it safe to be silent? Can silence avert the calamities we deprecate? No—no.

Such is not the way by which men have ever been brought out from the dangerous passes, into which iniquity has led them. ‘Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet,’ was the command of God to his prophet—‘show my people their transgressions.’ And when, since that day, I demand, when have national vices been reformed, and national evils averted by silence and inaction? Nay—has it not been because of silence, that the abomination of slavery has been suffered to abide and increase among us even until now? Has it not been because of the inexcusable silence of our statesmen, and orators, and ministers of religion, that Slavery has been perpetuated under our Republic for more than half a century? Surely it could not have borne so long to be spoken of as it deserves to be. Silence is protectress of this, and of every abomination.

Here we may be met with the current assertion, that our National Government has, from the beginning, guaranteed to a portion of the States the privilege of holding slaves. This is not strictly true. Such a guaranty is no where to be found. Not a word appears in the Constitution respecting Slavery. That it meant to sanction it, is a matter of inference only. But what if the framers of this Confederacy had entered into an explicit agreement to enforce the subjection of our colored countrymen? A conventional bargain, though it were made by our venerated Fathers, cannot obliterate a self-evident truth, or abrogate an everlasting principle of right. Who are they that would, with such a plea, set at naught the Almighty, and trifle with his sovereignty? Tell them our boasted Constitution is but a piece of parchment, when put in opposition to Jehovah’s will. And tell them too, (what the people of the land seem to have strangely forgotten,) that the permanency and strength of our confederacy reside not in the plighted faith of its constituent States, but in their fidelity to the unchangeable principles of truth and righteousness. Our duty, therefore, would not be altered in the least by the most explicit guaranty in our Constitution, if it were found there. It would still be our duty to expose the unrighteousness of the compact, and the danger of adhering to it. And we should have a right so to do under those articles of the Constitution, which provide for its own amendment, and for the freedom of speech and of the press.

I trust, Messrs. Editors, I have shown that we Abolitionists have a right, if it be necessary, to interfere even with the constitution of our civil government, if we do so in a proper manner. The only question then which remains to be settled under this head is, whether we have resorted to the proper, lawful means to effect our purpose. Here I must appeal again to the Declaration of Sentiments and Purposes put out by the Convention at Philadelphia, and to the constitutions of the numerous Anti-Slavery Societies, which have been formed in different parts of the country. There will be found, in all these, a uniform disclaimer of any intention or wish or right to interfere for the relief of the slaves by violence, or indeed in any other way than through the medium of public sentiment, and public sympathy.

The second part of the accusation preferred against us by the reviewer is, that we Abolitionists think ourselves justified, from our abhorrence of slavery, &c., to interfere 'with the personal rights and property of individuals.' This blow strikes at the very foundation of the Anti-Slavery cause. It hits the very point, whereon we are at issue with the whole *pro-slavery* party. And the fact, that a respectable writer in New-England, in one of the first periodicals in our country, should bring it as an accusation against those of us, who are pleading for the abolition of Slavery, that we are *interfering with the property or any of the personal rights of individuals*—and that this will undoubtedly pass with the majority of readers even here, as a valid and weighty objection to our procedure—reveals the thick moral darkness which covers even the people of New-England, hiding from their view the *peculiar* enormity of that system of unrighteousness, which is sustained by the strong arm of our Republic. What is it that ought to awaken in the bosom of every man, certainly of every American, especially of every christian, the deepest abhorrence of Slavery? What is it, if it be not that this institution reduces to the condition of *mere chattels* the bodies and souls of millions of men, most of them natives too, of our own country? In the language of one of our southern slave codes, 'Slaves are deemed, sold, taken, reputed and adjudged in law to be **CHATTELS PERSONAL** in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executors, administrators and as-

signs, to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever.' Or in the words of another code, 'A slave is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor; he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire any thing but what must belong to his master.' We grant, of course, that this is law; and we confess that we are ashamed, before all men, to be obliged to acknowledge that it is law in our land. But we will not acknowledge that it is therefore right; or that it ought to be silently acquiesced in. We will not acknowledge that even the law of our own country can make wrong—right; or that it can alienate that which is inalienable; or that it can give away what is not its own. We cannot conceive of a greater sin against God and man, than this reducing of human beings to the grade of mere brutes. It is the specific purpose of Abolitionists to expose to public abhorrence this surpassing wickedness of the slave system. If it is wrong to do so, we are guilty. But we shall persevere until we are persuaded it is wrong. We purpose to use only moral means, facts, arguments, eloquence. Thus we shall continue to 'interfere with the personal rights of individuals,' until the property in question *is restored to its rightful owners*. And who are they? Who but the slaves themselves? They are the individuals, whose property is interfered with, ay,—whose dearest rights, whose ALL is ruthlessly torn from them. We grant that this unparalleled iniquity has the sanction of American Law. But there is a higher sanction than any human Law—and this sanction Slavery has not, cannot have. We point to the law of God—to those everlasting principles of truth and right—and in view of them, solemnly demand of our country to restore to millions of our countrymen their property, the possession of themselves, and the wages of their industry, and all their rights as men.

Can it be, that there are men in *New-England*, capable of writing such an article as the Review in the Examiner, who soberly think that the slaveholders have a 'good title! to their property in the bodies, industry, inalienable rights, souls of their slaves—a title which may not be questioned, disputed'? So it appears. And this reveals to us how great a reformation in public senti-

ment needs to be effected in New-England, which claims to be the most enlightened, and most moral portion our country. Let no one say to us Abolitionists again, 'Why do you not go to the South and preach your doctrines there? We are all right on the subject here.' I am persuaded that the moral influence of New-England is on the side of Slavery. Those sentiments, that state of public opinion which is virtually the basis, the support of the abomination, are about as prevalent here as in any part of the Union. And while this is so, it would be folly for the advocates of abolition to go with their arguments and appeals to the slaveholders themselves. But when the moral influence of New-England shall be expressly on the side of justice, mercy, and the rights of man, then will the advocates of this righteous cause be sustained; and may go throughout the land, not only in the assurance of being heard, but of effecting their object.

Of the prevalence in New-England of pro-slavery sentiments and feelings, I could, if there were room, adduce many proofs. But this one, brought under consideration by the remark of the reviewer, is of itself enough. I presume the idea, which he has expressed, prevails very generally, that the slaves are the property of their masters, property which we have no right to question or dispute. You probably would not be willing to allow me space enough, after all that I have occupied, to discuss this point thoroughly. I will therefore content myself with asking the reviewer one question: Where did the slaveholders get their property in the *inalienable* rights of their fellow-men? A portion of their property of this description, it may be said, came to them by inheritance. But could their fathers transmit to them 'a good title' to that, which they did not themselves rightfully possess? Trace back this species of property to its rise, and you find it originated in an act, which now even our government accounts most flagrant piracy. It originated in the atrocity of the African kidnapper—in theft of the worst kind. And I demand, could the execrable pirates, who stole human bodies from Africa, confer a 'good title' of property in them, to those who were pleased to pay a few dollars for their victims? Is it not a well known principle of common justice, that what was stolen must ever be revertible to him from whom

it was taken, or to his heirs? that it can never become the property of any other? Shall this principle be applied to a man's coat, if it has been stolen, to the covering of his body, and yet be considered inapplicable to his body? Who will say this? It must be however the only plea, by which the slaveholder can even pretend to support his claim.

But suppose I should grant that he who bought the captured African, had a right of property in him; and therefore that while we are at liberty to denounce the one who stole him from his home, and from himself, as the worst of pirates, we ought to leave the purchaser in quiet, undisputed possession of his body and soul. Suppose I should grant this. Still, this concession could not cover over the wrongs done to another portion of the slaves. Nor should it prevent my putting to every slaveholder in the land the questions—how did you come by the property you claim in the human beings, that have been born upon your plantation or in your house? Who has robbed them of their birthright to liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Let the reviewer attempt, on behalf of the slaveholders, to answer these questions satisfactorily to himself—and, I am confident, he will be brought to see his mistake, in supposing the abolitionists are mistaken, because we think we are justified 'to interfere with the property of individuals.' For what can be more easily justified than the attempt, by constitutional, pacific measures, to restore invaluable property to its right owners? Very respectfully,

SAMUEL J. MAY.

Brooklyn, August 10th, 1834.

P. S. In the foregoing, you will observe I have confined myself to the objections implied in the language of the Reviewer. There are other as weighty objections, afloat in the community, which I should be glad to answer on the pages of this work. Allow me to express the hope, that the subject of Slavery will soon come to be fully and freely discussed here. What ought a Christian Examiner to investigate more thoroughly, than an institution which deprives millions of their dearest rights, denies them all intellectual and moral culture, and utterly disregards all their ties of kindred and affection—an institution too, from which is flowing forth over the community pollution and discord, moral and political death? S. J. M.