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“Make the Slave’s Case Our Own,” Speech by Susan B. Anthony, ca. 1859

We are assembled here, this evening, for the purpose of discussing the question of American Slavery: – – The startling fact that there are in these United States, under the sanction of this professedly Christian, Republican Government, nearly Four millions of human beings now clanking the chains of Slavery. — Four millions of men and women and children, who are owned like horses and cattle, – and bought and sold in the market. — Four millions of thinking, acting, conscious beings, like ourselves, driven to unpaid toil, from the rising to the setting of the sun, through the weary [*end of first page*] days and years of their wretched life times.

Let us, my friends, for the passing hour, make the slave’s case our own. As much as in us lies, let us feel that it is ourselves, and our kith and our kin who are despoiled of our inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that it is our own backs that are bared to the slave driver’s lash. That it is our own flesh that is lacerated and torn. That it is our own life blood that is poured out.

Let us feel that it is our own children, that are ruthlessly torn from our yearning mother hearts, and driven into the “coffle gang,” through burning suns, and drenching rains, to be sold on the auction block to the highest bidder, and worked up, body and soul, on the cotton, sugar and rice plantations of the more remote south.

That it is our own loved sister and daughter, who are shamelessly exposed to the public market, and whose beauty of face, delicacy of complexion, symmetry of form, and grace of motion, do but enhance their monied value, and the more surely victimize them to the unbridled passions and lusts of their proud purchasers.

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Could we, my friends, but make the slave's case our own—could we but feel for the slave, as bound with him (Heb 13:3)— could we but make the slave our neighbor, and “love him as ourself” (Mt 22:39), and do unto him as we would that he should do unto us (Lk 6:31)— how very easy would be the task of converting us all to Abolitionism.

If, by some magic power, the color of our skins could be instantly changed and the slave's fate made really our own, then would there be no farther need of argument or persuasion, or rhetoric or eloquence. Then would we, everyone, with heart and soul, and tone and action, respond to the truth and the justice of the glorious doctrine of “immediate and unconditional emancipation,” as the right of the slave and the duty of the master. Were we, ourselves, the victims of this vilest oppression the sun ever shone upon—no appeal to the Bible or Constitution, no regard for peace and harmony in our religious or political associations, no blind reverence for “Union” either in church or state, could for a moment quiet our consciences, silence our voices, or stay our action. Priests, Presidents, Bishops and Statesmen, laymen and voters, synods, general assemblies and conferences, congresses, supreme courts and legislatures, if standing between us and liberty, would all be swept away, without one thought or care of consequences. What to us would then be the venerated Books, idolized parchments, time worn creeds and musty statutes of the Fathers? All, all of them would sink into utter insignificance. Freedom, God's priceless boon to man, outweighs them all. “Liberty or Death” is now our watchword.

But we are wont to contemplate this question of slavery from quite another, and an opposite, standpoint. We look upon the slave, as a being all unlike ourselves. The sallow hue of his skin, the curl of his hair, the flattened features of his face, together with the fact that he has for so many generations been the victim of the white man, seem conclusive evidence to the

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masses, that a condition that would be torture worse than death to us, is quite endurable, nay, congenial to him.

Then, too, we quiet our consciences with the thought that these poor creatures, however wronged and outraged there condition here, are yet, infinitely better off than they would be in their African homes across the Atlantic. Their Fathers were wild beasts living in tents, on the hills of Congo, the arid plains of Soudan, or the coasts of Guinea. And there, in their native own land, were they hunted like beasts of prey, and made to drag out their lives in a hopeless bondage to their more powerful, warlike and treacherous neighbors.

Though slaves here, subject to the will of a master, with no hope of freedom but in death, their condition is still far better than it could be in their father land, where reigns the night of heathenism were all, all is shrouded in the thick gloom of ignorance, superstition. Here, the slave is surrounded by the elevating, refining influences of civilization. Here the blessed privileges of Christianity are extended to him. Here the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached to him.

And here, though his life, on earth, shall be one of utter wretchedness, disgust, and loathing, he may take to his crushed and bleeding spirit the Christian hope of eternal rest, of unfading glory – the Christian faith, that the white winged messenger of Death will but usher him into the immediate presence of the Father of all, where there will be no clanking of chains, no torturing “cat o nine tails,” no red hot branding irons, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

Just think of it, my friends, a civilization elevating and refining, that makes slaves and chattels of one sixth portion of its own children, and with iron heel, crushes out their every spark of manhood. A civilization that, by statute law, denies to every sixth man, woman and child, all its educational, industrial, social and political rights and privileges. Such is our boasted

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American civilization, that prates of elevating and refining the very victims it tramples in the dust. Heaven defend the benighted children of Africa from such a civilization!

Here, too, the slave enjoys the blessed privileges of Christianity. Think of it: A Christianity that traffics in human beings, that barter God's image for filthy lucre. And here is the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to the poor slave. Think of it! A Gospel that transforms every sixth child of God into chattel. A Gospel that sells Jesus Christ himself in the person of the slave auction block. What a profanation. What blasphemy! Such a Gospel can be none other than that of the bottomless pit. And sooner will the true Christ take to his bosom the children of the heathendom's midnight darkness than allow one of these slave-holding (illegible word in original text) to slip into the light of his presence.

Again, it is argued that we of the North are not responsible for the crime of slave holding, that the guilty ones dwell in the South and lord it over the rice swamps of Georgia, the tobacco fields of Virginia, and the sugar and cotton plantations of Louisiana and the Carolinas. Thus, do we put the slave's case far away from us, forgetting that he is a human being like ourselves, forgetting that we ourselves are bound up with the slave-holder, in his guilt, forgetting that we of the North stand pledged to the support of the Federal Government, the tenure of whose existence is vested in the one idea of protection to the slave-holder, in his slave-property, forgetting that by the terms of the unholy agreement of the Fathers of our union, the only property represented on the floor of Congress, is the slave-holders property in man, forgetting that every loyal citizen of the North, himself or through his representatives, swears to support the United States Constitution, by whose special provision, the slave holder is not only secured the right to own slaves, and give them a three-fifths representation in the legislation of the nation, but every such loyal citizen is solemnly bound to return fugitive slaves to their masters, to buckle on his armor

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and go down to Kentucky, Tennessee or any of the fifteen slave states and aid in putting down insurrections and in shooting down men and women, for no other crime save that of hating slavery and loving liberty. Nay! More than all, forgetting that we of the North, welcome slave-holding priests to our pulpits, and slave-holding laymen to our church conferences. Think of it, professing Christians- members of any and all of our popular churches here at the North – you talk about not being responsible for the crime of slave holding, while religiously you shake hands with the southern slave-holders, the perpetrators of every vile deed in crime’s black category.

The Scotch Covenanters or Reformed Presbyterians is the only evangelical church in all the nominally free states of the North that can consistently claim freedom from all sanction of, or compromise with slavery, “the sum of all villainies.” The Old Scotch Covenanters refuse church fellowship not only to slave-holders, but to churches that fellowship slave-holders. They also refuse to take the oath of allegiance to the United States Government, and thus are theoretically and practically Abolitionists and thus are the doers of the commands of Jesus: “Remember them in bonds, as bound with them” (Heb 13:3). “Break every yoke and let the oppressed go free” (Isa 58:6).

But as a nation, we do deny the manhood of the slave, both politically and religiously. And it is this failure to recognize the slave’s humanity that keeps him in his chains.

From the very hour of the foundation of this government has slavery been considered a national curse. Able statesmen and shrewd politicians have denounced in the halls of legislation and labored to defeat its merciless purpose. Pious divines have hurled at its monster head the thunderbolts of God’s wrath, and prayed their Avenger to drive it from the land.

And yet after seventy years of such labors and such prayers, what do we see? Why, the number of slaves increased from a half a million to nearly four millions, the number of slave

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states from six to fifteen, one thousand millions of dollars pours out of the public treasury for the purchase and conquest of new slave territory – all the United States territories, at first, consecrated to freedom, then thrown open, every foot of them, to the desecrating tread of the slave-holders – the nominally free states, by the late decision of the Supreme Court, made the home of the slave-holder and his slave property. And an entire nation, which at the beginning could but blush and hang its head that it held within its wide embrace so foul a thing as slavery, now glorying in its shame, crying “great is Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28, 34).

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