



Letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick Douglass: Transcript

Note: This is an exact transcription. It includes the grammar, punctuation, and spelling of the time. It also reflects the informality we all use when writing letters and emails. English grammar and spelling have changed over time and will continue to evolve. The rules are never final.

Frederick Douglass Esq.

(July 9, 1851)

Sir –

You may perhaps have noticed in your editorial reading of a series of articles that I am furnishing for the *Era* under the title “Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life among the lowly” – In the course of my story, the scene will fall upon a cotton plantation – I am very desirous here to gain information from one who has been an actual laborer on one - & it occurs to me that in the circle of your acquaintance there might be one who would be able to communicate to me some such information as I desire – I have before me an able paper written by a southern planter in which the details & *modus operandi* are given from *his* point of sight –

I am anxious to have some more from another standpoint – I wish to be able to make a picture, which shall be graphic & true to nature in its details. Such a person as Henry Bibb, if in this country might give me just the kind of information I desire. You may possibly know of some other person – I will (subj -) (?) to this letter a list of questions which in that case, you will do me a favor by enclosing to the individuals with a request, that he will at earliest convenience answer these –

For some weeks past I have received your paper thru the mail & I have read it with great interest – desire to return my acknowledgements for it – it will be a pleasure to me at sometime, when less occupied to contribute something to its columns –

I have noticed with regret your sentiments on two subjects – the church - & African colonization - & with the more regret, because I think you have a considerable share of reason for your feelings on both these subjects – but I would willingly if I could modify your view on both points.

- In the first place you say the church is “pro slavery – There is a sense in which this may be true – The American church of all denominations rather as a body comprises the best and most conscientious people in the country – I do not say it comprises *none but these* – or that none such are found out of it – but only that if a census were taken of the present and most highly principled men & women of our country the *majority* of them must be found to be professors of religion in some of the various Christian denominations-- This fact has given to the church great might in this country – the general & predominant spirit of intelligence & probity & piety of its majority has given it that degree of weight that it has the *power* to decide the great moral questions of the day – Whatever it unitedly and decidedly sets itself against as a moral evil it *can* put down –

In this sense the church is responsible for the sin of slavery – Dr. Banus has beautifully and briefly expressed this on the last page of his work on slavery when he says, “not all the force *out of* the church could sustain slavery an hour, if it were not sustained *in* it –

It then appears that the church has the *power* to put an end to this evil and does not do it – In this sense she may be said to be pro slavery – But the church has the same power over intemperance & Sabbath breaking – and sin of all kind – no doubt if the moral power of the church were brought up to the N Testament point of view it is sufficient to put an end to all these too.

But I would ask, would you consider it a fair representation of the christian church in this country to say it is pro intemperance – pro Sabbath breaking & pro everything else it might put down if it was in a higher state of moral feeling?

If you should make a list of all the abolitionists of the country I think you would find a majority of them in the church – certainly some of the most influential & effective ones are ministers –

I am a minister’s daughter – a minister’s wife & I have six brothers in the ministry – (one is in Heaven) - & I certainly ought to know something of the feelings of ministers – I was a child in 1821, when the Missouri question was agitated & one of the strongest & deepest impressions on my mind were my father’s sermons & prayers - & the anguish of his soul for the poor slave at that time – I remember his preaching drawing tears down the hardest faces of the old farmers – I remember his prayers night & morning in the family for “poor oppressed bleeding Africa” that the time for her deliverance in the family might come – prayers offered with strong crying & tears which indelibly impressed my heart & made me what I am from my soul the enemy of slavery – Every brother I have has been in his sphere a leading anti slavery man – (one of them was to the last hour of his life the bosom friend & counsellor of Lovejoy & all have known & heard of the man -) As for myself and husband we have lived on the border of a slave state for years & we have never for years shrunk from the fugitives – we have helped them with all we had to give – I have received the children of liberated slaves into a family school & taught them with my own children - & it has been the influence that we found *in the church* & by the altar that has made us do this – Gather up all the sermons that have been published on this offensive & unchristian law & you will find that those in its favor against it are numerically more than those in its favor - & yet some of the strongest opponents have not published their sermons – out of thirteen ministers who meet with my husband mostly for discussion of moral subjects only three are found who will acknowledge or obey this law in any shape.

After all my brother, the strength & hope of your oppressed race does lie *in the church* – In hearts united to Him of whom it is said, He shall spare the souls of the needy - & precious shall their blood be in His sight – Everything is against you – but *Jesus Christ* is for you - & He has not forgotten his church misguided and erring tho it may be – I have looked all the facts over with despairing eyes –

I see no hope except in Him – This movement must and will become a purely religious one – the light will spread in churches – the tone of the feeling will rise – christians north and south will give up all connection with & take up their testimony against it and thus this work will be over.

(Harriet Beecher Stowe)

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