

**LETTERS TO CATHERINE E.
BEECHER, IN REPLY TO AN
ESSAY ON SLAVERY AND
ABOLITIONISM**

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Letters to Catherine E. Beecher, in Reply to an Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism by A. E. Grimké

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A. E. GRIMKÉ

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LETTERS

TO

CATHERINE E. BEECHER,

IN REPLY TO

AN ESSAY ON SLAVERY AND ABOLITIONISM,

ADDRESSED TO

A. E. GRIMKE.

REVISED BY THE AUTHOR.

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LETTER I.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF ABOLITIONISTS.

BROOKLINE, MASS. 6 month, 12th, 1837.

MY DEAR FRIEND: Thy book has appeared just at a time, when, from the nature of my engagements, it will be impossible for me to give it that attention which so weighty a subject demands. Incessantly occupied in prosecuting a mission, the responsibilities of which task all my powers, I can reply to it only by desultory letters, thrown from my pen as I travel from place to place. I prefer this mode to that of taking as long a time to answer it, as thou didst to determine upon the best method by which to counteract the effect of my testimony at the north—which, as the preface of thy book informs me, was thy main design.

Thou thinkest I have not been 'sufficiently informed in regard to the feelings and opinions of Christian females at the North' on the subject of slavery; for that in fact they hold the same *principles* with Abolitionists, although they condemn their measures. Wilt thou permit me to receive their principles from thy pen? Thus instructed, however misinformed I may

heretofore have been, I can hardly fail of attaining to accurate knowledge. Let us examine them, to see how far they correspond with the principles held by Abolitionists.

The great fundamental principle of Abolitionists is, that man cannot rightfully hold his fellow man as property. Therefore, we affirm, that *every slaveholder is a man-stealer*. We do so, for the following reasons: to steal a man is to rob him of himself. It matters not whether this be done in Guinea, or Carolina; a man is a *man*, and *as* a man he has *inalienable* rights, among which is the right to personal *liberty*. Now if every man has an *inalienable* right to personal liberty, it follows, that he cannot rightfully be reduced to slavery. But I find in these United States, 2,250,000 men, women and children, robbed of that to which they have an *inalienable* right. How comes this to pass? Where millions are plundered, are there no *plunderers*? If, then, the slaves have been robbed of their liberty, *who* has robbed them? Not the man who stole their forefathers from Africa, but he who now holds them in bondage; no matter *how* they came into his possession, whether he inherited them, or bought them, or seized them at their birth on his own plantation. The only difference I can see between the original man-stealer, who caught the African in his native country, and the American slaveholder, is, that the former committed *one* act of robbery, while the other perpetrates the same crime *continually*. Slaveholding is the perpetrating of acts, all of the same kind, in a *series*, the first of which is technically called man-stealing. The *first* act robbed the man of himself;

and the same state of mind that prompted *that act*, keeps up the series, having taken his all from him: it keeps his all from him, not only refusing to restore, but still robbing him of all he gets, and as fast as he gets it. Slaveholding, then, is *the constant or habitual perpetration of the act of man-stealing*. To make a slave is *man-stealing—the act itself—to hold him* such is *man-stealing—the habit, the permanent state*, made up of *individual acts*. In other words—to begin to hold a slave is *man-stealing—to keep on holding him* is merely a *repetition* of the first act—a doing the same identical thing *all the time*. A series of the same acts continued for a length of time is a *habit—a permanent state*. And the *first* of this series of the *same acts* that make up this *habit* or state is just like all the rest.

If every slave has a right to freedom, then surely the man who withholds that right from him to-day is a man-stealer, though he may not be the first person who has robbed him of it. Hence we find that Wesley says—'Men-buyers are exactly on a level with men-stealers.' And again—'Much less is it possible that any child of man should ever be born a slave.' Hear also Jonathan Edwards—'To hold a man in a state of slavery, is to be every day guilty of robbing him of his liberty, or of man-stealing.' And Grotius says—'Those are men-stealers who abduct, keep, sell or buy slaves or freemen.'

If thou meanest merely that *acts* of that *same nature*, but differently located in a series, are designated by different terms, thus pointing out their different *relative positions*, then thy argument concedes what we

affirm,—the identity in the *nature* of the acts, and thus it dwindles to a mere philological criticism, or rather a mere play upon words.

These are Abolition sentiments on the subject of slaveholding; and although our principles are universally held by our opposers at the North, yet I am told on the 44th page of thy book, that 'the word man-stealer has one peculiar signification, and is no more synonymous with slaveholder than it is with sheep-stealer.' I must acknowledge, thou hast only confirmed my opinion of the difference which I had believed to exist between Abolitionists and their opponents. As well might Saul have declared, that he held similar views with Stephen, when he stood by and kept the raiment of those who slew him.

I know that a broad line of distinction is drawn between our principles and our measures, by those who are anxious to 'avoid the appearance of evil'—very desirous of retaining the fair character of enemies to slavery. Now, our *measures* are simply the carrying out of our *principles*; and we find, that just in proportion as individuals embrace our principles, in spirit and in truth, they cease to cavil at our measures. Gerrit Smith is a striking illustration of this. Who cavilled more at Anti-Slavery *measures*, and who more ready now to acknowledge his former blindness? Real Abolitionists know full well, that the slave never has been, and never can be, a whit the better for mere abstractions, floating in the *head* of any man; and they also know, that *principles, fixed in the heart*, are things of another sort. The former have never done any good in the world, because they possess no

vitality, and therefore cannot bring forth *the fruits* of holy, untiring effort; but the latter live in the lives of their possessors, and breathe in their words. And I am free to express my belief, that *all* who really and heartily approve our *principles*, will also approve our *measures*; and that, too, just as certainly as a good tree will bring forth good fruit.

But there is another peculiarity in the views of Abolitionists. We hold that the North is guilty of the crime of slaveholding—we assert that it is a *national* sin: on the contrary, in thy book, I find the following acknowledgement:—‘*Most* persons in the non-slaveholding 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 tithe-system in Ireland.’ Now I cannot see how the same principles can produce such entirely different opinions. ‘Can a good tree bring forth corrupt fruit?’ This I deny, and cannot admit what thou art anxious to prove, viz. that ‘Public opinion may have been *wrong* on this point, and yet *right* on all those great *principles* of rectitude and justice relating to slavery.’ If Abolition principles are generally adopted at the North, how comes it to pass, that there is no abolition action here, except what is put forth by a few despised fanatics, as they are called? Is there any living faith without works? Can the sap circulate vigorously, and yet neither blossoms put forth nor fruit appear?

Again, I am told on the 7th page, that all Northern Christians believe it is a sin to hold a man in slavery for ‘*mere purposes of gain*,’ as if this was the *whole*