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The Attempt to Abolish Slavery in Virginia

METHODISTS PETITION AGAINST SLAVERY November 8, 1785

To the Honourable the General Assembly of the State of Virginia; The Petition of the under-written Electors of the said State.

Humbly Sheweth: That your Petitioners are clearly and fully persuaded that Liberty is the Birthright of Mankind, the right of every rational Creature without exception, who has not forfeited that right to the laws of his Country: That the Body of Negroes in this State have been robbed of that right without any such Forfeiture, and therefore ought in Justice to have their right restored: That the Glorious and ever Memorable Revolution can be Justified on no other principles, but what do plead with greater force for the Emancipation of our Slaves; in proportion as the Oppression exercised over them exceeds the Oppression formerly exercised by Great Britain over these States. That the Argument, “They were Prisoners of War, when they were Originally purchased” is utterly invalid, for no right of Conquest can Justly subject any Man to perpetual Slavery, much less his posterity: That the Riches & Strength of every Country consists in the number of its Inhabitants who are Interested in the support of its Government; and therefore to bind the Vast Body of Negroes to the State by the powerful ties of Interest will be the highest Policy. That the Argument drawn from the difference of Hair, Features and Colour, are so beneath the Man of Sense, much more the Christian, that we would insult the Honourable Assembly by enlarging upon them.—That the fear of the Enormities which the Negroes may commit, will be groundless, at least if the Emancipation be gradual, as the Activity of the Magistrates and the provision of Houses of Correction where Occasion may require, will easily Suppress the gross, flagrant, Idleness either of Whites or Blacks. But above all, that deep Debasement of Spirit, which is the necessary Consequence of Slavery, incapacitates the human Mind (except in a few instances) for the Reception of the Noble and enlarged principles of the Gospel; and therefore to encourage or allow of it, we apprehend to be most opposite to that Catholic Spirit of Christianity, which desires the Establishment of the Kingdom of Christ over all the World, and produces in the Conduct every Action consonant to that Desire. That of Consequence, Justice, Mercy and Truth, every Virtue that can Adorn the Man or the Christian, the Interest of Religion, the honour & real Interest of the State, and the Welfare of Mankind do unanswerably, uncontrollably plead for the Removal of this grand Abomination; And therefore that we humbly entreat the Honourable the Assembly, as their Superior Wisdom may dictate to them, to pursue the most Prudential, but effectual Method for the immediate or Gradual Exterpation of Slavery: And your Petitioners, as in Duty bound shall ever pray &c.

PETITION IN FAVOR OF SLAVERY

November 10, 1785

To the honorable the General Assembly of Virginia, The Remonstrance and Petition of the free Inhabitants of the County of Pittsylvania.

Gentlemen, When the British Parliament usurped a Right to dispose of our property without our Consent, we dissolved the Union with our Parent State, and established a Constitution and form of Government of our own, that our property might be secure in future; in Order to effect this we risked our Lives and Fortunes, and waited through Seas of Blood. Divine Providence smiled on our Enterprize, & Crowned it with Success, and our Rights of Liberty and Property are now as well secured to us as they can be by any human Constitution or form of Government,

But notwithstanding this, we understand an Attempt is now afoot to dispossess us of a very important part of our property. An Attempt made by the Enemies of our Country, Tools of the British Administration, and supported by certain deluded Men among us, TO WREST FROM US OUR SLAVES by an Act of the Legislature for a General Emancipation of them. They have the Address indeed to cover their Design with the Veil of Piety and Liberality of Sentiment. But it is unsupported by the Word of God, and Productive of Ruin to this State.

It is unsupported by the Sacred Scriptures. Under the Old Testament Dispensation, Slavery was permitted by the Deity himself. For thus it is recorded, Leviticus Chap. 25 Verses 44, 45, 46. Both they, Bond Men and Bond Maids which thou shall have, shall be of the Heathen that are round about you; of them Shall ye buy Bond Men and Bond Maids.—Moreover, of the Children of the Strangers, that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they beget in your Land, and they shall be your Possession; and ye shall take them as an Inheritance for your Children after you, to Inherit them for a Possession; they shall be your Bond Men forever.”—This Permission to Possess and Inherit Bond-men we have Reason to believe, was continued through all the Revolutions of the Jewish Government down to the Advent of our Lord. And we do not find that either he or his Apostles abridged it. The Freedom which the Followers of Jesus were taught to expect, was a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin & Satan and from the Dominion of their Lusts and Passions, But as to their OUTWARD CONDITION whatever that was before they embraced Christianity, whether BOND or FREE, it remained the same afterwards. This St. Paul hath expressly told us (1 Cor. Chap. 7 Ver. 20) where he is speaking directly to this very Point; “Let every Man Abide in the same Calling wherein he is called”; and at Ver 24 “Let every Man wherein he is called, therein abide with God.” Thus it is evident, that the said Design is unsupported by the Divine Word.

It is also ruinous to the State. For it involves in it, and is productive of Want, Poverty, Distress and Ruin to the free Citizens;—Neglect, Famine, & Death to the helpless black Infant and superannuated Parent; the Horrors of all the Rape, Murders, Roberies, and Outrages which a vast Multitude of unprincipled, unpropertied, vindictive and Remorseless Banditti are capable of perpetrating;—inevitable Bankruptcy to the Revenue, & Consequently Breach of public Faith, & Loss of Credit with foreign Nations;—and lastly, sure and final Ruin to this now free and flourishing Country.

WE therefore your Remonstrants and Petitioners do Solemnly adjure and humbly pray you, that you will Discountenance and utterly reject every Motion and Proposal for emancipating our Slaves;—that as the Act lately made, empowering the Owners of Slaves to liberate them, has been, and is still, in Part, productive of many of the above pernicious Effects, you will immediately and

totally repeal it—and that as many of the Slaves liberated by the said Act have been Guilty of Thefts and Outrages, Insolences & Violences Destructive to the Peace, Safety, & Happiness of Society, you will make effectual Provision for the due Government of them in Future.

And your Remonstrants & Petitioners will ever pray, &c. &c.

JAMES MADISON TO GEORGE WASHINGTON
Richmond, November 11, 1785

. . . The pulse of the House of Delegates was felt on Thursday with regard to a general manumission by a petition presented on that subject. It was rejected without dissent but not without an avowed patronage of its principles by sundry respectable members. A motion was made to throw it under the table, which was treated with as much indignation on one side, as the petition itself was on the other. There are several petitions before the House against any step towards freeing the slaves, and even praying for a repeal of the law which licenses particular manumissions.

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