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EXTINCTION OF SLAVERY.

A

DISCOURSE

IN

COMMEMORATION

OF THE

EXTINCTION OF SLAVERY

IN

THE BRITISH COLONIES,

ON THE 1st OF AUGUST, 1838.

BY JOHN R. BEARD.

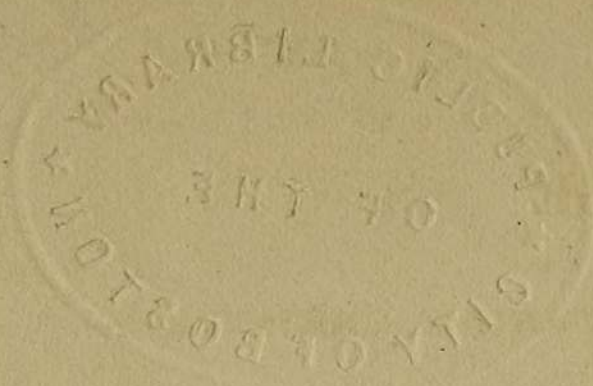
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TO
THE CONGREGATION OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS
ASSEMBLING FOR WORSHIP
IN THE
GREENGATE CHAPEL,
SALFORD,
THIS DISCOURSE
PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THEIR COMMITTEE,
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED,
BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE
PASTOR AND FRIEND.

SALFORD, AUG. 8th., 1838.

EXTINCTION OF SLAVERY.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed in him—‘If ye continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’—They answered him—‘We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou—“Ye shall be made free?”’—Jesus answered them—‘Verily, verily I say unto you, whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the son abideth ever. If the son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.—JOHN viii, 31-36

WE are now far advanced in the second century since Europe began to display on a grand scale, the more intellectual and moral results of the influence under which she lay during the dark and preparatory period usually designated the middle ages. It is not a figure of rhetoric to say, that the time has been one of unparalleled brilliancy. Athens had the age of her Pericles, Rome of her Augustus. In other nations civilization has reached for the day its culminating point, and shone with distinguished lustre. But all previous eras of light fell short of the one we are now contemplating, at least in the multiplicity of its grandeurs. One age the arts have embellished; another has been ennobled by letters. The spiritual element of humanity was resplendently kindled on the banks of Jordan, in the midst of surrounding twilight: and scarcely in any country has the dire lust of ambition failed to light the funeral pile of its false glory, and seduce men to kneel even at the immolation of their fellows. But the passing age borrows its honours from the wide circle of human thought, feeling and enterprise. It has not

only thrown light on old worlds, but discovered new. Unsatisfied with the range in which the mind had exerted its faculties, it has opened out other regions before not only unseen but unsuspected; and of a far higher grandeur, and far richer in good and in hope than any previous discovery, except that of him who brought immortality to light. For the period is distinguished as much by the originality as by the variety of its discoveries. It has called whole sciences into existence, and given a new character and a wider application to sciences which its predecessors imagined they had brought to perfection. Without dwelling on the achievements it has made in the severer and the physical sciences, by which man's dominion over the globe and over the production of the necessities and the luxuries of life has been incalculably augmented,—I will refer to some of its discoveries which bear a more immediate connexion with the moral and intellectual interests of man.

Under the good providence of God, and cultivated by human skill, the earth has in every age abounded in resources serviceable to our race; but the distribution of these resources took place almost by blind chance, apart from general rules; nay, almost apart from intelligence of any kind. A new era comes; minds are busy with the causes and the distribution of the wealth of nations; a superior intellect throws its powers into the chaos of thought, and a science is forthwith created, tending in its general results to bring about a practical recognition of the brotherhood of man.

Human rights had indeed been objects of contemplation, but on no grand and comprehensive scale, with no quickening principles. Clanship, citizenship, nationality; the sympathies even of the wiser part went not beyond these narrow generalisations. A new spirit comes into the mind of Europe. Christianity extricates itself from the trammels in which Heathenism had for centuries held it, and teaching the doctrine of man's spiritual equality, it expands the speculations of philosophy so as to embrace the whole of humankind. The science of morality undergoes a new birth. History serves for new and higher purposes. International rights are acknowledged,

which gives rise to international law ; and the way is prepared for the settlement of the disputes of empires, by the peaceful arbitration of reason, instead of murderous appeals to arms.

Combined with this recognition of a human brotherhood, Christianity called into existence in the heart of Europe, that spirit of general good-will and tenderness, which is its own chief characteristic. Hence the word humanity ceased to represent mental culture, and came to mean all that is kindly and generous in human nature. The thinkers, who are the real rulers of humankind, began to feel an impartial interest and some times a lofty enthusiasm for all that wear the human form. Benevolence in the heart lead to beneficence in the life; and a warm, practical, active humanity asserted the rights, vindicated the wrongs, and maintained the interests of the whole human family. Christian love became more and more every year an operative principle in the great European commonwealth. It breathed in its poetry. It kindled the eloquence of its prose. It was sometimes the moving power in cases where even batteries were successfully worked against the outward form of Christianity itself. And large portions of the Christian world, especially in this country, became in consequence instinct with a new and holy spirit, and were moved by noble and comprehensive aims: Clarkson, Wilberforce and Smith appeared, and gathering up and concentrating the noble impulses which lived around them, they directed their humane and generous energies to one end, and slavery received a fatal blow. The weapon by which it was struck could not have been fabricated in any previous age: it required the searching, analytical spirit of reason, which dissolving all interests and institutions, came to the primary and fundamental notions which involve the equality of human kind; and it required the mild, generous and loving spirit of the gospel, which not only affirms but also asserts and vindicates the brotherhood of man. The emancipation of the slave is due to reason and feeling liberated from heathen corruptions and feudal trammels, by the genius of Christianity. It is due, in other words, to the quickening power which the benevolence of the gospel infused into

the nations of Europe, nor least into our own. The light which enabled men to see the rights of the slave, and the power which impelled them to maintain those rights, both came from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ; both are a natural consequence of the influence on society of the heroism of his philanthropy. In no other nation but the British, could the achievement have been made. Intellect is powerful and active with others, and benevolence is not wanting; but no where else is reason informed by so pure and intense an inspiration of spiritual power and holy love. Wisdom could have discovered the rights of the slave, and eloquence talked attractively of them; but the love of Christ only was of potency enough to break his chains and bid the captive go free. Throughout the generous conflict, from the first word uttered in his behalf to the abolition of the direful traffic; thence to that emancipation which though a step onwards, was little better than the prolongation of slavery in a mitigated form, up to its extinction in our colonies at the present hour, which I believe to be a token of doom to slavery in general,—you will find that the light, the impulse, the power have proceeded directly or indirectly from the spirit and principles of the religion of Jesus.—‘The truth shall make you free.’—The truth of Christ, the great truth that God is the Father of all mankind, and he himself a common Saviour; this truth partly in its own form, partly in guises with which philosophy has invested it, and still more in the tender and enkindling charity which it tends to diffuse abroad—has made a herd of slaves into a nation of brothers.

Nor has the operation been restricted to this continent. Christianity lifted its voice in the midst of the slaves themselves. Its missionaries could not offer them the words of eternal life without at the same time throwing out ideas, principles and representations; without kindling a spirit, which sooner or later could not fail to dissolve slavery. And the great tide of ideas which has its moving impulse in this land, finds many and every day increasing channels by which to flow to the remotest regions. Thus the voice which here grew indignant at the wrongs of the negro, and the pen which drew the frightful picture,

were carried by the press into the islands where so many of the unfortunate race have suffered and perished. The result was an awakening on their part to a dim and vague perception of their rights, which joined with an instinctive sense of the calamities they endured, grew in time to a distinct perception of their relative position towards God and man, and gave birth to a silent but determined resolution to seize the first opportunity which offered for the vindication of their rights. In a word, Christ appeared among them, and they were free. The light of his gospel kindled their minds, the warmth of his love moved their hearts—their frames swelled into the proportions of humanity, and burst their chains. There was danger in the continuation of their servitude. The mother country had grown too wise and too benevolent to shield oppression, and the emancipation of the slave ensued; the result of irresistible influences. In the great ordinations of Providence the year of jubilee had come, and vain and idle was the resistance of the puny arm of self-interested injustice.

I wish truth allowed of a somewhat different record—allowed me to say that injustice spontaneously undid the negro's chain. Large was the debt which she owed the race, for terrible were the ills she had inflicted on it. But when have the unjust voluntarily surrendered their ill-gotten possessions? When have they repaired the wrongs they did? It is of the nature of injustice to add insult to injury, and to carry the evil passions even to hatred and revenge, should the injured make an effort in self-defence. And too much of this character has been the conduct of the slave-owners. They first doomed their slaves to inevitable wretchedness and depravity, and then pleaded their condition in justification of their own turpitude. But God himself has set limits to evil doing. The scourges of humanity are not, as they appear to be, in the hands of the wicked. There is a controlling power. Outraged humanity utters the voice of God, and the lash is still, and the slave walks in freedom.

Among the triumphs of the period of which I have spoken, proud and numerous though they are, the noblest in my opinion is the Extinction of Slavery in the British

Colonies. I am not now thinking so much of the generous expenditure of thought, feeling and effort which the conquest demanded and received, nor of the princely ransom which this Empire paid, but simply of the act itself. It was the extinction of slavery. And what is the discovery of a whole circle of the sciences compared with this? If the triumphs of humanity are limited to the increase of mere physical good, and the aggrandizement of the few, the advantage they achieve is but of a dubious kind, inasmuch as it leaves our higher nature untouched, and engenders on the side of the privileged class pride and scorn, and in the despised many, envy, malice and depravity. The earth was given not to a part but to the whole of humankind. The earth was mainly designed to call into existence, foster and perfect the intellect, the heart and the soul of man; and every achievement must be measured by the degree in which it gives effect to those great purposes of Providence. The tendencies are but too many and too powerful which go to create invidious distinctions, to pamper these and famish those; to honor and degrade; to refine and brutalize; to enrich and impoverish; to save and to ruin. And science itself has not seldom lent an influence to the few which they have used for the increase of their domination over the many. Even philosophy has been degraded into an apologist of oppression, and has too often proved the active assailant of that Faith which is, and will more and more prove to be, the living fountain of human liberty, as well as of human happiness. And if therefore the age we contemplate had merely widened and brightened the circle of human intelligence, it would have deserved far less honor than it has gained by breaking in pieces the chains of the slave. The extinction of slavery is a God-like work; for slavery is the absence of all rights and the presence of all wrongs. It is the denial to a fellow-creature of the most peculiar and precious attribute which God has given us; it is the nullification of the will; it puts cramps on the moving power, and thereby annihilates all spontaneousness of action, renders thinking useless or baneful, and ends by destroying the faculties and depraving the character.

It is evil enough for one man to be at the bidding of another in regard to his outward acts. The weight of a little finger on personal liberty is to one who has the spirit of a man, an insufferable burden. Nor will Christianity fail eventually to remove and bear away every social burden which an imperfectly understood sense of brotherhood yet leaves amongst us. But the real evil of slavery is in the bond which it imprints on the soul; its destruction of human rights, and consequent supercession of human duties, and in the depravity to which such a condition must conduct. Whatever is unnatural is not only unjust but destructive. Nature is nothing more than the Deity in operation; and whosoever opposes the laws of the human mind or the laws of the human body, sets himself in hostility to the will of God, and to his beneficent ordinations; and if he continue in his course, can do no other than bring ruin on himself and his fellows. But slavery is the great act of human rebellion. It is not merely injustice towards man, but open and manifest hostility to God. No truth can be clearer than that God designed each man to be a self-willing, self-controlling, and self-acting being. Was this his intention in respect of any man? If so, in respect of each and all. What are the faculties he has bestowed on the race? Every faculty declares its own function—in other words, declares the design and will of God. And has he not given us a power to feel, to think, to judge, to will, to act? I hear speak of differences between races of the human family, and am told of permanent peculiarities of conformation attaching to some. It may be so, it may not be so, I know not whether, and I am not solicitous upon the point; for I care little what may be the complexion of the skin, or the contour of any member of the body; it is enough for the establishment of the grand fact of human brotherhood, that mind in all races, and all individuals, ever remains essentially the same, in each of its great characteristics. Was the being ever found, much less the race, who, provided he be sane, could not feel, reason, love, hope, and fear? Did ever the negro mother allow her infant to be wrested from her arms without a pang at her heart? Into the

bosom of the negro youth did no warm emotions, no bright visions descend? Were there in him no movements, no promptings of the will? Did he not, at least in his early days, feel impelled with vague aspirations after a better fate? Your own instruments of coercion and torture shall answer the question. Why the lash—why the dungeon and the gallows? They are designed to put force on the will, to make the slave do what he would not do; and the terror which they bear is a measure of the opposing power of injured humanity, and of the divinity which stirs within it. The slave owner then is self-convicted of treason to the Father of human kind. God gave his children powers by which they might think, feel, and act. Slavery does its utmost to supersede their functions. God designed men to act as a consequence of thinking; Slavery endeavours to make them act not only without thinking, but in opposition to their thoughts, their wishes, their will. It puts out the light of God, in the soul, destroys the eye of the mind in order that it may lead the blind whither it wills. And with the extinction of the light, it has destroyed responsibility. Where there are no mental rights there can be no duties, and where right and duty are abolished, depravation must ensue. You have taken away the the governing power which God gave, no other can be substituted, and no result can come but confusion and dismay. Morality, religion,—all that is good and hopeful in man and for man, has no reality with the slave. Words of the brightest import, relations of the dearest kind, part with their meaning and their value. It is only needful that you should realise in full the condition of slavery, for you to bring on the slave the prostration of his mind, the petrification of his heart, the death of his soul, and the perversion of his whole being to sin, crime, and misery. Destroy the will, fetter the will of a human being, and you have effected his ruin. Therefore is slavery a dire calamity;—therefore, because being hostile to God's arrangements and designs, it robs humanity of its qualities, and brings on the extinction of the soul, an extinction which is not the annihilation of the human being—Oh, well if it were!—but the withering of every

better quality, and the quickening into rank luxuriance of what is low, base, degrading, baneful, and wretched.

Whence we may learn the proper ground for the joy we feel in the extinction of slavery. It is not merely in the completion of a great act of national justice. It is not in the triumph of virtuous and holy enterprise. It is not in the ceasing of the lash. It is not that the last severance between husband and wife, and mother and child, has taken place. It is not that the slave has now free power of locomotion and entire control over the labor of his hands, or the skill of his intellect. These are great things—but there is a greater. The Son has made the slaves free, and they are free indeed. These are but the outward tokens of a new inward birth. The mind has been emancipated; the will is unshackled. He who before was in the social frame as though he had no mind to guide him and no soul to save, is now as free to think, determine, and act as the master whose yoke he bore. He has entered on the great heritage of humanity, its inalienable birth-right,—liberty of thought and action. The movements of his will are henceforth unimpeded by outward appliances. Hence will arise a consciousness of power, which will give birth to self-respect, and self-respect is the parent of every virtue. His cry, and the cry of injured and wounded benevolence, have gone up to God, and he has sent his word and broken down the barriers which kept the slave out of the sphere of humanity; and now those islands which have so long echoed with the shrieks or moaned with the subdued murmurs of suffering thousands, will calmly and joyously take their position in the career of individual and national improvement. Humanity will resume its rights in the bosom of its inhabitants; and the outgrowth of the kinder human feelings in every breast, is the awakening of the inspiration of the Divinity. New and powerful impulses will be felt, holier aims will be formed. The whole action of the mind will be more intense and efficient. First of all, natural affection will become more pure, tender, and operative. Domestic ties will be dearer in their bonds, and more impulsive in their influence. Out of the felt relations of the parental character, personal

virtues will take a new meaning, receive a fresh life, expand to fuller energy, and issue in nobler results. And social virtue is but a reflexion of domestic and personal excellence; hence truth, justice, and mercy. While the religious sentiment, long repressed and almost overpowered, will start forth into vigor, and assume its natural control over the heart and the life. Thus the interests of eternity, as well as those of time, are comprehended in the good we now commemorate. A nation has been new born for all the higher purposes of humanity. The mild and benignant aspect of the schoolmaster, and the holy and affectionate countenance of the minister of Jesus Christ, glowing with thankfulness at the sight of the new creation, will be seen in the place of the fierce and malignant slave-driver, with his frightful instruments of torture, and detestable retinue of attendants. Even the face of the country will shine with a more smiling and brighter glow. Industry, enterprise, skill, will bring each its share of effort for the increase of individual and general good. The usual haunts of men will be busier and happier. New cities will come into being. Commerce will multiply its resources. The arts of life will be cultivated, the aid of the sciences will be sought; and ere long, the refinements of civilized existence will address the imagination, or kindle the heart, or rouse and stir the intellect.

I exult in the change. I anticipate the future with delight. I do not, indeed, suppose that the good will be unmingled. Too terrible has the evil been to allow the good to be realized apart from some disorder, and some distress. But reason enough is there for the friends of humanity to congratulate each other in the mere recognition of brotherhood, which the extinction of slavery implies. It is now practically allowed that the slave has rights. This admission, made on so large a scale, made by so powerful a people, will have an effect on slavery throughout the world. Our trans-atlantic brethren have already felt the appeal. They will feel it yet more powerfully. The slave in their own country is becoming aware of the admission, and before many years slavery will either be destroyed in the United States, or,—which

God avert—it will bring desolation and dismay over that flourishing and happy country. O that they may learn the things which belong to their peace, and wipe out in time this foul stain on their national character!

The admission will go forth, working less obvious, but most important results. Servitude of all kinds has been shaken to its base. 'I saw Satan, like lightning, fall from heaven'—the Saviour's exultation may be again taken up. Individuals—nations—are awakening to a sense of their common brotherhood; and when this recognition is complete, each one will know and maintain his own rights, and know and respect the rights of his neighbor. Already men are beginning to feel that liberty stands not in any form of government, nor freedom from outward control, but in the self-moved action of an enlightened mind, and in a benevolent and holy heart. The Son is making the nations free, and when under the influence of his truth, they will be free indeed.

Meanwhile, great is the work which has to be done. Many relations of life are but imperfectly understood, and, consequently, the duties connected with them are either neglected, or insufficiently discharged. What jealousy and heart-burning is there between the employer and employed in our own country. Agitation, combination, threats, even violence, are employed; and now the master is in servitude, and now the men. Yet are they brothers, their interests not incompatible, their duties reciprocal, their object the same, their means not dissimilar. Ignorance, and ill-feeling—its foster child—are the causes of the disturbance. Let force and fraud be discontinued; let reason and fraternity assume their place; let each seek the other's, as well as his own good, and the interests of all will be furthered. O, that the spirit of brotherhood may descend on these agitated elements, bringing peace, liberty, and prosperity!

And how in religion can there be entire liberty, till the State has ceased to smile on one sect and frown on another; till the path to honor and emolument ceases to be the narrow road of religious favoritism, and becomes the broad highway of social life?—And what are creeds but the manacles of churches? Forms of belief are not

only moulds into which the intellect is pressed and crushed, but being made in each case essential passports to heaven, they prove cramps to the heart; and thus bind the whole man in spiritual servitude. The power of the priesthood has, indeed, since the advent of Luther, lost much of its more gross and palpable influence. The thunders of the Vatican have long since been spent, and its Potentate, once the terror of Europe, is a poor old man, to be pitied and prayed for. But there is a religious spirit abroad—its influence is not least in our own land—which by the employment of fear, the fear of error, the fear of hell,—fears which eventuate in the fear of the priest,—as effectually fetters, distorts, and paralyses the mind as the brute terrors of the Papacy of old. But bounds are set to its progress. In face of it stands in mild, but awful array, the great principles of the Gospel, that God is a Father, and men all brethren; and I doubt not but that the Son will, in time, make the slaves of fear, free with the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

And in private life there is many a bond which requires to be broken. Slavery stands in the servitude of the mind rather than the body; and wherever the right of free thought and free speech is interfered with, whether by act, deed or look, there is a spirit of oppression and a spirit of bondage. And how often do minds, conscious of superior power, lord it over their inferiors. How painfully do those who are more or less elevated in life, make their lowlier brethren feel the difference of their position. The pride of aristocracy, running through all grades, all shadows of all grades in social life, as it is both an inhuman and anti-christian feeling, infuses bitterness and excites jealousy and strife throughout the commonwealth. This is an ill bequest of heathen and feudal influences, from which Christianity has yet to free the world; and in no country is the liberating efficacy of the gospel more needed than in our own. Aristocracy involves the essential ideas of servitude; master and servant; superior, inferior; patron, dependent:—they are different forms of the same thing, varying only in degree, and all are hostile to the rights of brotherhood and the designs of the Common Father. This influence yet

offers a formidable resistance to the gospel, and is likely to prove the last stronghold of the spirit of bondage unto fear; but its doom is written in the councils of heaven, and its time will come.

History is the basis of my hopes. The past is a pledge of the future. A new order of things has evidently come forth and begun its career. Christianity has infused a new spirit into society, by which it is working out its own regeneration. Ancient institutions with all their forms of bondage, are dissolving under its influence, and sending forth shoots and branches and foliage of finer proportions and nobler strength. The spirit of liberty consecrated in representative governments, recognised and honored in universal toleration, displayed in freedom and active energy of thought, softened, enriched and benevolently directed by the love of Christ, and carried on the pinions of Christian morality to the extremities of the earth and the very outcasts of society;—the spirit of liberty,—the offspring of the great principles of the religion of Jesus, has informed the mind of the civilized world with elements of change and improvement, of which man has never before had experience, and gives promise of the approach of the period when war shall be no more, servitude no more, domestic and social tyranny no more: when injustice shall hide its head, the greater disparities of society disappear; and in place of the rule of the lower passions, and the prevalence of outward law, and its associates fraud, force and punishment, there shall be peace and concord, and domestic and social love, and individual self-governing virtue; each man being a law to himself, and owning no superior but conscience and God. This is the period which prophets foresaw and foretold: this is the realisation of the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of Christ, of which the evangelical history gives us the assurance; this is what every true disciple anticipates in fulfilment of the promise that the truth should make its followers free, and in answer to the yearnings of his heart, and the prayers he puts up to the wise and benign Governor of the Universe. Then men shall no longer hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, for the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the channels of the

sea. Then rival sectarists will have no other aim than to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, and to labor together for the edification of the body of Christ. Then no distinctions will be acknowledged but such as character creates, and no character be esteemed, which is not distinguished by the virtues and graces of the gospel. Then freedom of thought will be fostered not cramped, and freedom of speech will be too generally practised to become the object of special attention. Then that man will be most esteemed who contributes most to the great treasury of human thought, who can most effectually touch the springs of human action, and kindle in the breast the ennobling and delightful sympathies of love and piety. Then domestic intercourses will be dignified by mutual respect, as well as endeared by the reciprocation of kind offices; and from their homes worshippers will bring to the house of God mellowed social affections, and devout gratitude, steadfast trust, smiling hope, which they will lay on the altar of a common Father, and receive back again purified from the dross of earth, to become the living principles of their individual and relative existence.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly; come, realize all these our hopes, our fervent desires; and come not last into our own hearts, and there establish thy kingdom on everlasting foundations.

AMEN.



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