

from
**A LECTURE ON THE
ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT
1855**

----- *Frederick Douglass* -----

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was born a slave in Maryland and escaped bondage at age 20. As a free black in the North, he became an active abolitionist, traveling the region and using his outstanding skills as a speaker and writer to rally support for the anti-slavery cause. Douglass delivered this address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in 1855. In the mid-1800s, many middle-class Northern women worked to end slavery by joining moral reform societies, where they established networks of women and learned political organizing skills.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

How might a member of the Garrisonians, the anti-Garrisonians, or the Free Soil Party have countered Douglass's criticisms of their tactics and organizations?

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—

Had I consulted my own health, or the advice of my physician, I should have been elsewhere, and otherwise employed this evening. I am not well, and have not been so for several weeks. I have usually come to this platform to lecture on slavery—that darkest and hugest of all wrongs—the vilest (in the language of John Wesley) that ever saw the sun. But it has pleased the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society to have presented here, during the winter, almost every phase of that terrible wrong; and I have, therefore, selected my topic in view of that fact. It will, probably, amount to the same thing in the end....

The subject of my lecture this evening is, the nature, character, and history of the anti-slavery movement....When I speak of the anti-slavery movement, I mean to refer to that combination of moral, religious and political forces which has long been, and is now, operating and co-operating for the abolition of slavery in this country, and throughout the world. I wish to speak of that movement, to-night, more as the calm observer, than as the ardent and personally interested advocate. For, while I am willing to have it known, that every fibre of my soul is enlisted in the cause of emancipation, I would not have it thought that I am less capable than others, of calmly and rationally contemplating the movement designed to accomplish that important and much desired end....

Let us now...examine the anti-slavery movement in its branches, for divisions are here, as well as elsewhere. I will not enter into an examination of their causes. God forbid! that I should open here those bitter fountains....

There are four principal divisions.

- 1st. The Garrisonians, or the American Anti-Slavery Society.
- 2d. The Anti-Garrisonians, or the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.
- 3d. The Free Soil Party, or Political Abolitionists.
4. The Liberty Party, or Gerrit Smith School of Abolitionists....

I shall consider, first, the Garrisonian Anti-Slavery Society....the oldest of modern Anti-Slavery Societies....Its peculiar and distinctive feature...of "no union with slaveholders," carried out, dissolves the Union, and leaves the slaves and their masters to fight their own battles, in their own way. This I hold to be an abandonment of the great idea with which that Society started. It started to free the slave. It ends by leaving the slave to free himself. It started with the purpose to imbue the heart of the nation with sentiments favorable to the abolition of slavery, and ends by seeking to free the North from all responsibility for slavery, other than if slavery were in Great Britain, or under some-other nationality. This, I say, is the practical abandonment of the idea, with which that Society started. It has given up the faith, that the slave can be freed short of the overthrow of the Government; and then, as I understand that Society, it leaves the slaves, as it must needs leave them, just where it leaves the slaves of Cuba, or those of Brazil. The nation, as such, is given up as beyond the power of salvation by the foolishness of preaching; and hence, the aim is now to save the North ; so that the American Anti-Slavery Society, which was inaugurated to convert the nation, after ten years' struggle, parts with its faith, and aims now to save the North....

But to the second branch of the anti-slavery movement. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society has not yet departed from the original ground, but stands where the American Anti-Slavery Society stood at the beginning. The energies of this association are mainly directed to the revival of anti-slavery in the Church. It is active in the collection, and in the circulation of facts, exposing the character of slavery, and in noting the evidences of progress in the Church on the subject. It does not aim to abolish the Union, but aims to avail itself of the means afforded by the Union to abolish slavery. The Annual Report of this Society affords the amplest and truest account of the anti-slavery movement, from year to year. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against this Society, as well as against the American Anti-Slavery Society. It has almost dropped the main and most potent weapon with which slavery is to be assailed and overthrown, and that is speech. At this moment, when every nerve should be strained to prevent a re-action, that Society has not a single lecturing agent in the field.

The next recognized anti-slavery body is the Free Soil party, *alias*—the Free Democratic party, *alias*—the Republican party. It aims to limit and denationalize slavery, and to relieve the Federal Government from all

responsibility for slavery. Its motto is, "*Slavery Local—Liberty National.*" The objection to this movement is the same as that against the American Anti-Slavery Society. It leaves the slave in his fetters—in the undisturbed possession of his master, and does not grapple with the question of emancipation in the States.

The fourth division of the anti-slavery movement is, the "*Liberty Party*"—a small body of citizens, chiefly in the State of New York, but having sympathizers all over the North. It is the radical, and to my thinking, the *only* abolition organization in the country, except a few local associations. It makes a clean sweep of slavery everywhere. It denies that slavery is, or *can* be legalized. It denies that the Constitution of the United States is a pro-slavery instrument, and asserts the power and duty of the Federal Government to abolish slavery in every State of the Union. Strictly speaking, I say this is the only party in the country which is an abolition party.... The Liberty Party, by its position and doctrines, and by its antecedents, is pledged to continue the struggle while a bondman in his chains remains to weep. Upon its platform must the great battle of freedom be fought out—if upon any short of the bloody field. It must be under no partial cry of "no union with slaveholders;" nor selfish cry of "no more slavery extension;" but it must be, "no slavery for man under the whole heavens." The slave as a man and a brother, must be the vital and animating thought and impulse of any movement, which is to effect the abolition of slavery in this country. Our anti-slavery organizations must be brought back to this doctrine, or they will be scattered and left to wander, and to die in the wilderness, like God's ancient people, till another generation shall come up, more worthy to go up and possess the land.

One anti-slavery movement nearly died out fifty years ago, and I am not prepared to deny the possibility of a like fate for this one. The elements of discord and deterioration are already in it, and working their legitimate results. And yet I am not gloomy. Present organizations may perish, but the cause will go on. That cause has a life, distinct and independent of the organizations patched up from time to time to carry it forward. Looked at apart from the bones and sinews, and body, it is a thing immortal. It is the very essence of justice, liberty and love. The moral life of human society—it cannot die, while conscience, honor and humanity remain. If but one be filled with it, the cause lives.... If there be but *one* such man in the land, no matter what becomes of abolition societies and parties, there will be an anti-slavery cause, and an anti-slavery movement....

In conclusion, I have taken a sober view of the present anti-slavery movement. I am sober, but not hopeless. There is no denying, for it is everywhere admitted, that the anti-slavery question is the great, moral and social question now before the American people. A state of things has gradually been developed, by which that question has become the first thing in order. It has got to be met. Herein is my hope. The great idea of impartial liberty is now

fairly before the American people. Anti-slavery is no longer a thing to be prevented. The time for prevention is past. This is great gain. When the movement was younger and weaker—when it wrought in a Boston garret to human apprehension, it might have been silently put out of the way. Things are different now. It has grown too large—its friends are too numerous—its facilities too abundant—its ramifications too extended—its power too omnipotent, to be snuffed out by the contingencies of infancy. A thousand strong men might be struck down and its ranks still be invincible. One flash from the heart-supplied intellect of Harriet Beecher Stowe could light a million camp fires in front of the imbattled hosts of slavery, which, not all the waters of the Mississippi, mingled as they are, with blood, could extinguish. The present will be looked to by after coming generations, as the age of anti-slavery literature—when supply on the gallop could not keep pace with the ever growing demand—when a picture of a negro on the cover was a help to the sale of a book—when conservative lyceums and other American literary associations began first to select their orators for distinguished occasions, from the ranks of the previously despised Abolitionist. If the anti-slavery movement shall fail now, it will not be from outward opposition, but from inward decay. Its auxiliaries are everywhere. Scholars, authors, orators, poets, and statesmen, give it their aid. The most brilliant of American poets volunteer in its service....

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not superstitious, but I recognize an arm stronger than any human arm, and an intelligence higher than any human intelligence, guarding and guiding this Anti-Slavery cause, through all the dangers and perils that beset it, and making even auxiliaries of enemies, and confounding all worldly wisdom for its advancement. Let us trust that arm—let us confide in that intelligence—in conducting this movement; and whether it shall be ours to witness the fulfilment of our hopes, the end of American slavery or not, we shall have the tranquil satisfaction of having faithfully adhered to eternal principles of rectitude, and may lay down life in the triumphant faith, that those principles WILL, ULTIMATELY, PREVAIL.

Source: *The Anti-Slavery Movement: A Lecture by Frederick Douglass Before the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society* by Frederick Douglass (Rochester, NY: Lee, Mann, and Co., 1855), pp. 3–4, 28–40, 44.