



Church of the Brethren Statements on Slavery

Current Statement - July 2008

Annual Conference Resolution Slavery in the 21st Century: A Call to Awareness, Education, and Action.

Whereas, Jesus began his public ministry with words from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19); and

Whereas, the gospel mandates our action on behalf of the oppressed, and whereas throughout its history the Church of the Brethren has spoken out strongly and repeatedly in opposition to slavery and the slave trade, passing antislavery resolutions in 1782, 1797, 1812, 1813, 1837, 1845, 1853, 1854, 1857, 1862, and 1863; and

Whereas, 2008 is the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Church of the

Brethren and a time for us to celebrate and recommit ourselves to our historical understandings of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and

Whereas, slavery is illegal in every nation in the world, but many forms of slavery continue to exist today, such as child labor, sexual slavery, and debt bondage; and currently it is estimated that 27 million people worldwide, adults and children, are victims of human trafficking and enslavement;

Resolved:

We the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren reaffirm our denomination’s historic opposition to slavery. We understand the scriptures to reveal that God abhors slavery and that the gospel of Jesus Christ mandates our unwavering resistance to and action against all forms of slavery.

We confess our complicity in the global network of slavery through consumption of goods and services that have been produced by slave labor.

We commit to educating ourselves and others about modern-day slavery and initiating and supporting antislavery action at home and abroad. This includes measures to prevent enslavement, to end slavery, to care for those who have been victimized by slavery, and to change our personal lifestyle habits that support it.

We invite all Church of the Brethren agencies, educational institutions, districts, congregations, and members to partner in this work.

We seek cooperation with other faith communions and ecumenical partners

including the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, and interfaith organizations.

Historical Statements

Annual Meeting of 1782

It has been unanimously considered that it cannot be permitted in any wise by the church, that a member should or could purchase negroes, or keep them as slaves.

Annual Meeting of 1797

Article 1. It was considered good, and also concluded unanimously, that no brother or sister should have negroes as slaves; and in case a brother or sister had such, he (or she) has to set them free. And in case a person is drawn by the grace of God, who has negroes, and desires to be received into the church, then it is to be laid before him (or her) before being received by baptism into the church, that it is the brotherly and united counsel that brethren and members having negroes for slaves, and thinking that they could not at once emancipate them, may hold them so long as the nearest church may deem that they had earned the money, and then, according to the counsel of the church, to let their slaves go out free, with a good suit of wearing apparel (*frei kleid*) as is given to a white servant. And if they (the slaves) have children, they shall stay with the brother as servants until they are twenty-five years old; he is to have them taught reading and writing, and bring them up in the fear of the Lord, and

The Church of the Brethren Study and Action Guide on Modern-Day Slavery

is posted at www.brethren.org/slavery and includes pieces on:

- Modern-Day Slavery
- Biblical Teachings on Slavery
- Church of the Brethren Statements on Slavery
- Resources for a Worship Focus on Slavery
- Suggestions for Action on Modern-Day Slavery
- Resources on Modern-Day Slavery
- Bulletin Insert

when they enter upon their (26) twenty-sixth year, to let them go out free with a good suit of clothing (*frei kleid*). Further it is considered, if a brother, contrary to this conclusion, would purchase negroes, and would not emancipate them, he would have to be considered as disobedient, and we could have no fellowship with him until he sets them free.

Annual Meeting of 1812

Article 5. Concerning the slave trade and slaveholding;

It was considered that it is a most grievous evil, and should be abolished as soon as possible.

Annual Meeting of 1813

Article 1. With regard to the slave trade and slave holding,

It was unanimously considered that it is wrong, and that it belongs to the iniquities of Babylon, making merchandise of souls of men (Rev. 18:13), and that it is carried on by the spirit of this world, and is contrary to the good and holy Spirit of God, by whom all the faithful souls dedicated to God are ruled and led into all truth, and are to come out, according to the counsel of God, of Babylon, not touching the unclean thing, that they be not partakers of her sins, and receive not of her plagues. Hence it is unanimously and in union considered, that no member, neither brother nor sister, shall purchase or sell negroes, and keep none for slaves; members should also, with all diligence, restrain their children from it as far as it is possible while they are yet out of the church. Further it was concluded, if there

were members having slaves, or persons who wish to be received into the church and have slaves, that they might hold them in a proper way so long as the church near which they live may deem it necessary for the slaves to earn the money they had cost, and then, with the counsel of the church, they are to be set free, with a good suit of clothing; and if there are any who have not bought, but inherited their negroes, they are to be liberated as soon as the church considers it right and proper. And if members have negro children under their care, or even as slaves, they shall bring them up in an orderly manner, teach them also to read, and keep them, if males, to the age of twenty-one years, and if females, to the age of eighteen years, and then, with the counsel of the church, emancipate them, with a good suit of wearing apparel. Further it has been unanimously concluded, that if members having negro slaves, will not set them free, and thus oppose themselves to the order of God and the loving counsel of the old brethren, who are indeed servants and stewards of God, and even the united counsel of the whole yearly meeting, then after sufficient admonition they would have to be held bound (according to the word). We would have to deny such members the breaking of the bread of communion, the holy kiss, and the brotherly counsel, yet according to the word of the apostle Paul, to admonish them as brethren or sisters.

Annual Meeting of 1837

Article 10. How it is considered if a brother buys and keeps slaves, and sells them also for gain?

Considered, that it could in no wise be justified in a brother, according to the gospel.

Annual Meeting of 1845

Article 3. In regard to hiring slaves,

Considered but little better than purchasing and holding slaves, and that it would be best for a follower of Jesus Christ to have nothing at all to do with slavery.

Annual Meeting of 1853

Article 14. How is it considered for a man, who is a brother, to purchase a man or woman that is a slave, upon condition that such slave shall be free, or emancipated, after serving the purchaser a certain number of years, agreed upon by the slave and his purchaser, without consulting the church?

Considered that no brother should do so without the counsel of the church; and we believe the better way would be to have nothing at all to do with slavery in no shape or form whatever.

Annual Meeting of 1854

Article 1. Report of the committee appointed last year on the subject of slavery. The question having been, “How shall any branch of the church proceed, in case an individual wishes to become a member, who is in possession of a slave or slaves, and the law of the State in which they reside is such that they cannot manumit them in safety, without transporting them beyond its limits?”

“Agreeable to the ninth query of Yearly Meeting of 1853, concerning slavery, the committee appointed to report the same have had this subject under serious consideration, in the fear of the Lord, and do report as follows:

First, Under no circumstances can slavery be admitted into the church.

Second, In all cases where a holder of a slave or slaves wishes to become a member in the church, he be required to manumit all his slaves before baptism, upon the following conditions: The males to go out free at the age of twenty-one, and the females at the age of eighteen years. All those over and above these ages, when manumitted, are to be paid by their former owner such a sum, either in money or goods, as may be judged right by the church in which the case may occur, and which is considered as the best judge, being acquainted with all the circumstances—as a compensation for their services over age. This will enable the manumitted to migrate to a land of liberty, and will relieve the conscience of the

liberator from the burden of taking with him to the bar of God the wages of oppression.”

This report was adopted, after a lengthy discussion by the meeting.

Annual Meeting of 1857

Article 6. As the subject of slavery has often been before the Annual Meeting, and as it has always been considered that no brother can, according to the gospel, hold a fellow-creature in bondage (to which we say, Amen), what, then, is to be done with brethren who do not observe the advice given by the Yearly Meeting, in this or in any other respect?

Answer: That such churches or members should be visited, and if not willing to liberate their slaves, they should be dealt with according to the gospel manner of dealing with all gross transgressions.

Annual Meeting of 1862

Article 15. How is it considered, if a minister defends and justifies slavery, even in a public debate?

Answer: It is utterly wrong for any brother to do so, according to Matt. 7:12.

Annual Meeting of 1863

Article 6. What should be done with a brother that would preach that slavery was right according to the Scriptures, and cause discord among the brethren?

Inasmuch as the brethren always believed, and believe yet, that slavery is a great evil, and contrary to the doctrine of Christ, we consider it utterly wrong for a brother to justify slavery, either in

public or in private, and that he should be admonished, and if obstinate, shall be dealt with according to Matt. 18.