

# William P. Newman, A Response to the Fugitive Slave Act



**ABOUT THE READING** The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act dismayed abolitionists throughout the United States. Government support of the arrest and return of escaped slaves caused many abolitionists to re-evaluate their opinion of the nation's political principles. In 1850 William P. Newman, a Baptist clergyman and a former slave, wrote to Frederick Douglass—also a former slave—at the abolitionist newspaper the *North Star*. In the excerpt below, Newman criticizes the federal government and abandons his belief in pacifism, or the refusal to accept violence as a solution to problems.

## VOCABULARY

**despicable** monstrous  
**truckling** yielding  
**abominations** hateful things  
**inalienable** permanent  
**avaricious** greedy  
**knave** a dishonest person



*As you read think about how Newman wanted people to react to the new law.*

It seems to me that the world has misunderstood, till the sitting of the last United States Congress, what the real and true mission of that government is. Is it not a mission of bonds and death? Our race has been taught to think that it was to be the example of all coming human governments, it being itself the model of heaven. . . But all must confess, that were all legislative governments to follow the example it has set of late, that earth would be anything else than human. . .

Fillmore's heartless position, indecision of character, and the want of a virtuous soul, have rendered him **despicable** in the eyes of the good, and contemptible in the just opinion of the bad. In seeking to please tyrants, he has lost the favor of all.

**Newman is using sarcasm to say that the U.S. government should support freedom rather than slavery.**

**In passing the Fugitive Slave Act, the U.S. government is setting a bad example for the rest of the world.**

**President Millard Fillmore strongly supported enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act.**

Source: *From the North Star*, 24 October 1850.

And alas, the true church of Christ can no longer pray for the success of his **truckling** administration. It has given their souls to the oppressor, and their bodies to the prison, if they dare do their duty in obedience to Christ. In view of such facts, it is my candid conviction that the record of the infernal regions can exhibit no blacker deeds than the American archives, and the accursed Fugitive Slave Bill. Upright humanity cannot uphold the hand that signed that bill of **abominations**, unless it first does violence to its own nature. . .

I am proud to say that Patrick Henry's motto is mine—"Give me Liberty or give me Death." I am frank to declare that it is my fixed and changeless purpose to kill any so-called man who attempts to enslave me or mine, if possible, though it be Millard Fillmore himself. To do this, in defence of personal liberty, to my mind, would be an act of the highest virtue, and white Americans must be real hypocrites if they say not to it—amen!

Do they not *saint* the spirits of '76 for their noble defence of their **inalienable** rights? Why then [doom] me for doing the same? . . . Who that is oppressed himself, is not ready to do the like deeds for his race to come? . . . I am ready, willing, and should rejoice to die; and I glory in the fact that so many of my brethren in tribulation are of the same mind, and feel determined to be sacrificed rather than be enslaved. . .

And you, my brethren, the objects of hate and the victims of oppression, can you and will you allow yourselves to be made the dupes of despots and the slaves of tyrants, without resisting even to death? I hope not. Disgrace not your nature. [Do not abandon] your God. Allow not posterity to curse thy memory and disown thy name for a base submission to **avaricious knaves**.

Newman believed that killing anyone who tried to enslave him was justified.

He refers to the country's Founding Fathers and the rights they fought for during the Revolutionary War. He demands those same rights for African Americans.

That you may “show yourself a MAN,” is the constant and ardent prayer of Your brother in bonds. . .

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. What does he urge Christians to do? What does he encourage slaves to do?

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2. Why does Newman believe that white Americans are hypocrites—people who pretend to be better than they really are?

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3. Why do you think that Newman mentions Patrick Henry and the “spirit of ’76” in his letter?

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