Letter from John G. Fee to Cassius Clay (1844)

John G. Fee Writes to Cassius Clay, April 1844: A Context Note

Eleven years before Berea College held its first classes in the old district schoolhouse, John G. Fee began a correspondence with Cassius M. Clay, a prominent Madison County landholder, politician, and antislavery advocate. Clay, the son of a slaveholder, had been converted to the antislavery cause in 1832 when, as a student at Yale University, he was deeply impressed by a sermon given by the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Returning to Kentucky, Clay established an antislavery newspaper, The True American, in 1845.

In this 1844 letter, Fee introduces himself to Clay, and discusses at length his vision for ending the institution of slavery in Kentucky. Fee became Clay's ally for free speech and a potential means of expanding Clay's political influence in the mountains of eastern Kentucky.

Clay published a number of Fee's antislavery articles in The True American. In 1853, he invited Fee to hold a series of religious meetings in the Glade, an area of bottomland located north of the Berea ridge. One year later, thirteen local persons formed a free and nondenominational church and called Fee as their pastor. Clay provided a ten-acre site for a homestead, money toward a house, and additional land for a church and school. Fee, with his wife Matilda and their small children, moved to Madison County in the fall of 1854.

—by Shannon Wilson (May, 2006)

Bracken Co[unty] Ky April 4th 1844

To the Hon[orable] Cassius M. Clay

Sir I am a stranger to you in person but I trust not to some of the emotions which move your philanthropic heart.

I have for many months desired to see you in person & converse with you freely on subjects of national policy & interest especially that of slavery. But the duties devolving upon me at the present time together with the supposed uncertainty of finding you at home has prevented my doing so & subjected me to the more limited medium of pen & paper.

As a native & citizen of Kentucky I feel a tender solicitude for her welfare & watch with anxious care over whatever involves her interest either politically or religiously individually or nationally.

Looking as I do upon American Slavery as involving in all these respects in a very eminent degree the welfare of the state together with the happiness of many other millions of the human family I enquire eagerly from all men what is truth & duty on this subject.

Perhaps by way of further introduction & justice to you I may state that I am a native & resident of Ky—the son of a beloved Father who is unfortunately the owner of slaves—have been raised from my infancy in the midst of slavery. I have seen its evils & felt its curse. Having taken a regular literary & theological course of study I am now in the Presbyterian Church a licensed though unworthy minister of the Gospel of Christ. And as such I desire to take some humble part in whatever the welfare of my country the happiness of the human family & the glory of my God may demand. And as by the interchange of thought truth is more fully developed I desire from you a free expression of your views on this subject & as to what is the duties of American citizens in their respective spheres in life. For whilst it is the duty of everyone to investigate & think for himself yet as a statesman—a man of
research observation & foresight beyond anything which I can claim your suggestions would be received with
great profit & deference.

And to come immediately to the point of my letter.

By what mean or means do you suppose the slavery system in our state will be abolished—I say our state
because some suppose our state will precede the rest of the South. This however may not be your view.

And when I ask by what mean or means I ask whether it will be done by some resolution in national or
governmental affairs—such as rebellion of the slaves aided by England & some from the North—or by an
accumulation of facts proving slave labour to be a wrong pecuniary policy—or 3rdly By force of moral truth—
that it is morally wrong to hold our fellow men beyond a certain period in bondage—or will it be by all of these
combined?

I know the events of the future are veiled to us to some extent yet men of observation experience & foresight
may know with some degree of certainty the means necessary to a given end.

The above questions are necessary in order to prepare the way for another namely—What is the duty of the
Ministry of Kentucky? should they leave slavery entirely as a national affair for statesmen and politicians as
something not within their province? or should they treating it as a sin against God & man make it a religious
question & raise their voice against it?

The answer to these as you perceive will depend upon the way in which we suppose it will be abolished. If it
shall be by Revolution only then their labor & time will be comparatively lost for a faithful minister can do five
times the amount of immediate good in a free state than he can in a large slave holding district where he cannot
have Sabbath Schools—white children being but few—these raised in habits of idleness—the blacks or labouring
class not being permitted to learn—the master accustomed to rule does not like the obedience & humility of the
Gospel. Missionary operations will not be very extensive when men can keep heathen in their employ—prayer
meetings will languish where there are only a few to sustain them—the minister himself when he shall be brought
to that state in which he can look with indifference upon the condition of a part of his fellow men will have lost
that sensitiveness to principle & love for his fellow man which is essential to efficient labour.

Were I persuaded that the labours of the ministry are not necessary to the accomplishment of the
emancipation of the slave or that it will be done by some other means—so much greater are the advantages of
doing good in a free state above those in a slave state that I should not stay here one month.

But if slavery will be abolished partly or chiefly by the force of moral truth then it seems as though it is the
duty of the ministry to stay & apply the truth to the hearts & consciences of men. But Again if it is to be done
chiefly by the accumulation of facts showing it to be wrong policy then this seems to fall more within the
province of the politician & the minister of the gospel hath better go where he can do most in his appropriate
sphere—the conversion of the world.

Permit me to say before I close that many of your fellow citizens who feel an interest in this great subject look
with great solicitude upon your every address or action upon this subject They feel that God in his providence has
raised you up to take a prominent place in the great work of disenthralling your country of its greatest curse—
your fellow man from their greatest calamity. I have recently written to twelve or fifteen of the ministers &
laymen of our state who take antislavery papers enquiring & proposing. They write me in return that they are each
doing what they can in their sphere but "expect Cassius M Clay to do more than a thousand of us" May it be so &
may God bless you preserve your health & life—give you grace still to stand upon the broad platform of truth &
to continue to speak with boldness what you believe to be for the good of your country the welfare of your fellow men & the glory of your God.

May I say your fellow citizens who sympathise with you on this subject & very many who do not admire the freedom & boldness with which you speak your sentiments.

And even those who in word & acts curse & denounce you yet in their souls—they are bound to renounce the man who speaks & acts upon principle. And such is the nature of liberty that every heart must feel its propriety & excellence and so soon as the power of interest & public odium shall be overcome then the cause of liberty will spread with a rapidity unparalleled even by the temperance reformation. And then may the people reward by their kind regards a man who has been in a power in the defense of truth & promotion of their interests. But I have evidence that you ask no other reward than tie consciousness of rectitude of course – the welfare of your country & happiness of your fellow beings.

I have no claims upon you for a reply to these questions I know that the duties of your office requires much of your time & that it cannot be expected that your time should be consumed by writing to everyone who would wish to hold a correspondence on this subject yet an answer to this letter would be to me a source of profit at the present time. And if you shall find it convenient to do so you will much oblige your friend & fellow citizen.

John G. Fee

My post town for the present is Germantown Bracken Co[unty]. I say for the present as I have given up the care of the churches to which I have been preaching they belonging to a different school from that in which I wish to be ordained.

P.S. With Professor McCowan & Pres. Bascomb of your city I have a personal acquaintance having boarded many months with professor McCowan.