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Gospel of Liberty:
Antislavery and American Salvation

by

Benjamin Gilbert Wright

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

John B. Boles,
William P. Hobby Professor of History

W. Caleb McDaniel,
Professor History

Jeffrey J. Kripal,
J. Newton Rayzor Chair in
Philosophy and Religious Thought

Rebecca Goetz,
Professor of History,
New York University

Houston, Texas
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ABSTRACT

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Americans understood and sought to solve the problem of slavery in terms strongly colored by understandings of religious conversion. In the early-eighteenth century, Great Awakening revivals fueled a new belief in the transformative nature of religious conversion. By the antebellum era, theological changes – coupled with democratization and sectionalism – prompted greater direct confrontation with social reform. Historians have chronicled the role of religion in motivating antislavery thought, but by privileging political action over religious sentiment, earlier work misses non-political manifestations of early antislavery. If we take religious belief seriously and seek to understand antislavery motivations, the question is not whether reformers were gradualist or immediatist in political action, but whether or not they ascribed to the expectations of conversionist or purificationist causation. While conversionists sought to destroy slavery through the millennial expansion of salvation, other Christians looked within, laboring to purify their own communities through coercive action. Imperatives of conversion drove ministers to consolidate religious authority in new national denominational bodies. Forming these bodies had the unintended side effect of pushing denominationalists toward social reform. This process added organized social reform as an additional religious solution, alongside that of conversionist millennialism, to the era’s social problems. In the early 1830s, the conversionist consensus cracked, and a new coercive, sectionalist antislavery took its
place. Conversionist appeals continued, but the antislavery of men and, increasingly, women challenged the causation of conversion and began to look to political agitation as a means of reform. Each stage of this progression shaped the worlds of American antislavery. By foregrounding conceptions of religious conversion, we can begin to understand the problem of human bondage and its potential solutions as did the men and women whose lives entangled daily with the reality of a slaveholding republic.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction
1 Conversionist Causation and American Antislavery.........................17
2 Purificationist Antislavery and the Era of the American Revolution......53
3 Conversionism and American Denominational Formation....................102
4 Denominationalism and American Reform....................................152
5 Conversion, Redemption, and African Colonization..........................194
6 The Conversionist Consensus Shatters...........................................234
Epilogue.............................................................................................277

Sources Consulted..............................................................................287
Bibliography.......................................................................................304
INTRODUCTION

Never go to the southern states of America! they are polluted with slavery, and slavery is the most demoralizing thing under the sun. It is the parent of oppression, the nurse of sloth and guilty passions. It is the bane of man, the abomination of God. Where slavery reigns the human being is made a beast of burthen, or the slave of lust. The poor half-famished negro, trembles at a tyrant’s nod, and loses every good quality in the servility of a drudge, or the wickedness of a prostitute. O that this scandal of humanity were annihilated! - Joshua Marsden, 1814

Joshua Marsden never penned a petition against slavery, wrote a representative in favor of abolition, nor joined an antislavery society. Despite describing slavery as “the bane of man, and the abomination of God” and earnestly yearning “that this scandal of humanity were annihilated,” this Methodist itinerant did nothing. Yet, he was not alone in his seeming hypocrisy. The list of religious Americans who condemned slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries runs long; however, the expressions of antislavery in the era were nearly always limited to occasional sermons, speeches, or editorials. It would take several decades before more than a few Americans joined antislavery organizations and even longer before genuine political pressure was deployed for the cause of abolition. Why did Americans like Joshua Marsden fail to act on their antislavery convictions?

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Countless Americans in the late eighteenth century sought to wash away the great sins of slavery through concerted campaigns for religious conversion. Other Americans worked to purify their religious communities of slavery’s stain. Differences in understandings of religious conversion informed the antislavery agendas of men and women in the era in ways previously unacknowledged by historians. Beginning with the revivals of the Great Awakening in the early eighteenth century, Americans came to understand religious conversion as an immediately transformative experience with implications for the coming of the millennium. By the antebellum era, theological changes, coupled with democratization and sectionalism, allowed greater direct confrontation with social reform. In narrating the shift from antislavery to abolitionism, historians have emphasized status anxieties, market changes, and, most recently, biracial cooperation. Yet few have heeded Robert Abzug’s caution against “the modern trend toward psychological or materialist reduction” and acknowledged the centrality of genuine religious conviction in the transformation of antislavery. Historians have chronicled the role of religion in motivating antislavery thought, but by privileging political action over religious sentiment, earlier work misses the non-political ways that religion directed the understandings and actions of early antislavery Americans. Americans fretted over the social welfare of the new nation, and they worked to fight slavery through campaigns for conversion. For most antislavery Christians the only sound more harrowing than the moans of a shackled slave were the wails of a damned soul, but the solution for the soul was also understood to be the surest means of unshackling the slave.


Despite the expanding body of recent work on early antislavery, the discussion must still begin with the distinction David Brion Davis drew nearly fifty years ago between gradualist and immediatist antislavery.\(^4\) Richard Newman’s more recent study elaborates on the distinctions between the two movements, echoing Davis’s portrayal of early antislavery as “conservative,” “pragmatic,” and “cautious,” although Newman would also add “elitist.”\(^5\) Christopher Leslie Brown’s *Moral Capital* credits the shifting political context in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain as creating space for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.\(^6\) But Davis, Newman, Brown, and other historians of early antislavery nearly all refer to a small coterie of politically active reformers. My study focuses on the greater population of politically inactive, religious Americans. The antislavery of men and women like Joshua Marsden, Stephen Grellet, Elizabeth Wilkinson, and John Leland was far more common than the antislavery of Anthony Benezet, Granville Sharp, or even Benjamin Rush, yet the activities of the latter are continually evaluated while the former remain nearly invisible in the historiography. By connecting theological trends with social reform, my study shows that the very ideologies that turned so many early antislavery reformers against human bondage in the first place also emphasized the power of religious conversion rather than political action. The distinctions between gradualist and immediatist utilized by nearly all historians of antislavery depend exclusively on assessments of political action. When examining the ideology underpinning the antislavery movement, the Davis distinction breaks down. If we take religious belief seriously, the question is not whether a reformer was gradualist or immediatist in his or her political action, 


but whether or not he or she ascribed to the widely shared expectations of conversionist causation or adopted an alternative antislavery of religious purification.

Conversionism refers to the ideology that looked to the millennial expansion of salvation as the most effective means of combating social injustice. This ideology had its core in evangelicalism, but conversionist expectation spilled out beyond evangelicals and seeped into the wider Protestant world as well. Conversionist causation captured the imagination of the majority of antislavery Americans, but a rival impulse of purification provided an alternate antislavery. Religious bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like all religious bodies, struggled to balance the imperatives of religious conversion with the need to maintain discipline within their communities. The tension between looking without and within, growing or purging, evangelism or discipleship, challenged religious leaders. While conversionists sought to destroy slavery through the millennial expansion of salvation, other Christians looked within, laboring to purify their own communities of the stain of slavery. Purificationists removed slaveholders from churches, or at least attempted to coerce members of their religious community into adopting antislavery principles.

Early Americans understood religious conversion in a great variety of ways, but the similarities between American understandings of Christian conversion proved far more consequential than differences in the development of American antislavery. Popular religious discourse during the era was ubiquitous but often theologically ambiguous. This ambiguity did not signal a lack of conviction, however. People in every era, including our own, carry deeply rooted convictions that contain contradictions. The early republic was no exception. But these contradictions did not necessarily pose a problem. Historians of theology have too long valued
ideological consistency as the measure of theological strength. In the early republic, the theological flexibility of popular evangelicalism proved to be its greatest asset. The explosion of theological systems and ecclesiastical structures during the final decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth enabled the expansion of evangelical religion. An optimistic expectation in the transformative power of conversion united nearly all Americans during the late eighteenth century. These expectations fed millennial energies that allowed evangelicals to expect the disappearance of injustice without turning to the law.

Using this capacious understanding of theology, I draw connections where others have not, unfolding the way that ideologies of conversion created national religious cultures. Tracking the eighteenth century emphasis on conversion not only reconfigures categories of antislavery thought, but it also challenges the broad narrative of religion in the early republic. Nathan Hatch’s *Democratization of American Christianity* remains the most valuable synthesis of religion in the early republic. Even if Hatch misrepresents evangelicalism as anti authoritarianism, as Amanda Porterfield claims in her recent, boldly revisionist work *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation*, we must still reckon

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7 It is difficult to determine why this has been the case. Explanations may partially owe to the tendency of intellectual historians to focus their studies on unfolding logically consistent intellectual systems. The legacy of Perry Miller’s spectacular dissection of Ramist logic in the *New England Mind* has led to equally impressive cartographies of American Calvinism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a synthesis of this work, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Another, more speculative explanation may result from the prevalence the Reformed tradition in both scholarship and among the leading scholars in American religious history. Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Harry S. Stout have cast a long shadow with both their own work and their role as mentors for many leading historians of American religion. A corrective to these tendencies may be coming from an attempt to recover the intellectual power of Pietism in American evangelicalism. See chapters 18-21 in Christian T. Collins Winn et al, eds. *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

with his characterization of the early nineteenth century as a period of religious democratization. According to Hatch, religious energy moved westward, away from traditional sources of religious authority. Old denominational power structures tottered. Upstart revivalists spawned dozens of new sects uniquely designed to meet spiritual needs in a time of unprecedented economic and social change. The market revolution and accelerated migration across the Appalachian Mountains challenged time-honored patterns of social organization. This period of flux brought great opportunity for religious innovators crafting spiritually egalitarian messages. However, despite all of the democratic dispersal correctly chronicled by Hatch, American religion experienced concurrent consolidation in new, national denominational bodies. Frontier itinerants were not the only ones aware of the great changes of the day. Rather than standing idly behind their pulpits, the settled clergy formed new networks designed to Christianize the growing nation. These new networks eventually created the national religious cultures necessary for antebellum reform movements, including antislavery.

Scholarship on religion in the early republic has flourished in the past several decades, but historians have not paid sufficient attention to the national denominational bodies in the era. Synthetic works exploring life in the early republic ignore the national denominational bodies, and religious history syntheses focus exclusively on the sectionalist divisions of the antebellum era. From these works we know much about the way that denominations divided over the question of slavery, but we know remarkably little about how these national bodies came together in the first place. Teleologies of sectionalism obscure the nature of religion in the early republic and fail to demonstrate the means by which denominations spread and tied various churches together. The story of religion in the early republic then is not simply one of diffusion.

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or sectionalism but also one of national development, a process essential for the effective, confrontational antislavery of the antebellum era.

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, religious Americans looked to non-coercive solutions for the world’s problems. Contemporary intellectual trends engendered an optimistic expectation that an imminent, millennial expansion of salvation would wash away the great sins of the age. This expectation discouraged coercive political agitation as a solution to the era’s problems. Reformers expected that a slight push would allow the unfolding of enlightenment or the expansion of holiness – depending upon one’s persuasion – to complete the work of abolition. Given these trends, it is logical that the vast majority of early antislavery activists sought to save souls rather than organize politically.

Conversionism captured the imagination of most reformers in the late eighteenth century, but a rival understanding of causation—what I call purificationism—provided an alternative antislavery discourse. We can find purificationist antislavery in the three most influential manifestations of eighteenth-century antislavery. The Quakers stood as the strongest and most consistent opponents of slavery in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. By the dawn of the American Revolution, the Quakers had experienced shockwaves of their own making for decades. Reformers in the mid to late eighteenth century encouraged Quakers to strengthen their prophetic voice of protest, but others contested these reforming impulses. The community of Friends struggled to maintain unity. My work demonstrates how antislavery became a means by which the Society of Friends held their church together despite intense friction. But the Quaker Reformation of the eighteenth century left the Society of Friends as an increasingly marginal
sect, and the American Revolution further weakened Quaker claims to power. In the aftermath of the Revolution, both religious and secular leaders struggled to reconcile the new language of liberty with the institution of slavery. If purificationist antislavery would capture the national consciousness, it would need a more widely accepted mouthpiece than the marginal Quakers. Quakers recognized this fact and developed alliances with non-Quaker antislavery supporters throughout North America, none more influential than Congregationalist theologian and minister Samuel Hopkins. Hopkins pounced on the critical moment of the American Revolution to solidify opposition to the slave trade in the immediate shadow of powerful and profitable local mercantile interests. But Hopkins, despite his considerable influence, represented a religious tradition that declined in the early years of the new nation. Insurgent evangelicals swept along the frontier and quickly grew into the dominant religious force of the antebellum era, which represents the third case of purificationist antislavery. For a few years, antislavery sentiments spread throughout the surging evangelicals, even in the South. Important institutional declarations against slavery came from both Baptists and Methodists, the two most influential southern evangelical denominations. Baptist minister John Leland and Methodist superintendent Francis Asbury stood at the head of the efforts in their respective denominations and loom large throughout my study. But a close look at Francis Asbury reveals the frailty of late-eighteenth-century purificationist antislavery.

Asbury displayed tremendous skill in building the national Methodist Episcopal Church. Forward thinking and nimble, the Methodist church flourished during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, growing exponentially as American migrants raced westward. Because of this migration, however, the quest for purification was soon eclipsed by the need to tend to these new communities. Late-eighteenth-century anxieties over sin eroded as a more
pressing alarm grew. American clergymen feared that large swathes of the new nation’s population would find themselves beyond the reach of existing churches. The demographic challenges of the post-revolutionary era diminished the call for purification, and a new national emphasis on missionary outreach reinforced the importance of conversionism. Conversionist causation enabled antislavery Americans to rest assured that the quest to bring the gospel to the West would also lead to the destruction of slavery. But before the gospel could reach the West, new denominational structures had to form in order to coordinate the effort. And these new structures would plant the seeds for a new era of antislavery reform.

Americans constructed national religious cultures through denominational bodies. Churches struggled to keep up with the rapid westward migration that followed the American Revolution, but upstart evangelicals like the Baptists and especially the Methodists filled the religious demands of western yeomen. Yet their rise was not uncontested, as Presbyterians and Congregationalists scrambled to appoint missionaries and establish new churches in the West. While the creaky infrastructures of these older churches struggled to adapt to the push westward, the missionary movement provided the rationale for ever-larger denominational networks. Driven originally by the need to coordinate missionary outreach, church leaders formed ever-larger networks until all of the major Protestant churches formed national denominational bodies. By knitting together thousands of churches, north and south, east and west, national denominations tied together the spiritual imaginations of men and women. Simultaneously, however, differences in the hearts and minds of these communities accelerated sectionalist tensions and propelled the construction of the benevolent empire. This process had tremendous impact on American life and American social reform, but much of the drama of the nineteenth century began with the tedious process of institution building. To understand American reform,
we must begin with the institutional history of American religion. Denominations mattered to early Americans, and if we are to understand how Americans understood and sought to combat social injustice, denominational history must matter to us as well.

Ministers knitted denominations together largely as a means of furthering conversionist aims, but the formation of these bodies had the unintended side effect of pushing denominationalists – both in pulpit and pew – toward social reform. After establishing reform networks through conversionist groups like missionary, tract, and Bible societies, reformers eventually turned to combat particular sins like Sabbath breaking, intemperance, and slavery. Inattention to the institutional development of national denominational bodies has led historians to miss how nearly all early American voluntary societies sprang out of national denominational bodies. The competing Christian nationalisms of denominational bodies created the desire and the infrastructure essential for the coercive reform of the benevolent empire. The politicization of denominational action eventually added organized social reform alongside conversionism and purificationism as the religious solutions to the era’s social problems.

Recently, historians of abolitionism have looked beyond the United States to track transatlantic networks of reform. In so doing, however, the focus on commonalities has missed at least one crucial difference between the two nations. For my study, I sought to understand the starkest difference between British and American antislavery: why did British evangelicals turn to political agitation earlier than Americans? While British reformers flooded Parliament with petitions, speeches, and other forms of legislative agitation, white American evangelicals rarely turned to the halls of Congress. Contextualizing religion in Great Britain and the United States reveals that ecclesiastical differences, perhaps even more than political, social, or economic differences, explain the divergent developments of antislavery on both sides of the ocean.
The reality of religious disestablishment and the strain of migration prevented ministers from mustering a unified political assault on slavery. The instability of religious authority in this tumultuous time contrasted sharply with the ecclesiastical context in Great Britain. British reformers successfully harnessed a longstanding national religious culture to tie the abolition of the slave trade to the very core of British religious identity. Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries struggled to find a similar discourse that would work for the diverse new republic, and even if such a discourse could be found, who could claim the authority to wield it? Despite attempts by Americans Presbyterians to stake a claim as the keepers of the national faith, religious life in the United States could not be driven by any one denomination, or even through any single religious discourse. American religious life would be shaped through a great competition of churches, ideas, and movements.¹⁰ American abolitionists could not follow the same path as British activists. Dogged commitments to religious liberty and the sovereignty of conscience worked to stymie coercive denominational attempts at social reform, at least while anxieties over religious conversion continued to haunt Americans.

Despite these setbacks, denominational action pushed religious leaders to take stands on the great issues of the day. Tracking the evolution of Boston-based Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing’s turn to antislavery activism as well as South Carolina Baptist’s Richard Furman’s development of proslavery positions reveals the relationship between denominational leadership and social activism. In the early phases of their careers, Channing and Furman lacked the national religious imagination required to pursue large-scale reform. As a result of their denominational leadership, however, both men enlarged their understanding of ministerial spaces from congregations or regional associations to the republic in its entirety. The spatial expansion

of clerical duty enabled leaders of new national religious cultures to take public positions on the
issue of slavery. But denominational formation also connected coreligionists across sectional
lines, making it increasingly difficult for some northerners to demonize their southern brethren
and vice versa. Denominationalism opened the door to national reform, while discouraging that
reform from taking an aggressive, coercive shape. Historians have written extensively on the
transformation in American life that resulted from advances in transportation and
communication. Indeed, technological advances collapsed space, but long before the railroad or
telegraph knit together the continent, denominational affiliation created connections across many
of the same great distances.

Just like the telegraph, the spatial expansion of clerical duty did not stop at national
boundaries. When American reformers finally created the national infrastructure that could deal
with the problem of slavery, they did so again in a manner that was infused with concerns over
salvation. From the initial inception of the American Colonization Society, the first national
organization that reckoned with the problem of slavery, Americans sought to use the movement
as a tool to inaugurate a global expansion of salvation. In the early nineteenth century, thousands
of black Americans migrated to colonies in West Africa. Many Americans looked to this
movement as the most effective means of solving the problem of slavery, but a closer look at the
movement again reveals the centrality of religious conviction and particularly the centrality of
religious conversion. Historians tend to frame studies of colonization in relation to slavery, most
recently by emphasizing the colonization movement’s antislavery functions.¹¹ Still others stress

the ambitions of African American nationalism. Colonization certainly influenced political
debates over slavery, and the movement accelerated the development of African American
identity, but colonizationists invoked another motivation with far greater frequency and
rhetorical intensity than the explanations emphasized in the existing historiography.

White and black colonizationists drew strength from a millennial faith in the promise of
the sixty-eighth Psalm that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands to God.” Sending well-
trained, African American missionaries across the ocean would kickstart the Psalm’s prophetic
promise. Colonization promised salvation for Africa and moral redemption for the United States.
The impending conversion of Africa would redeem the sins of the slave trade by repaying the
wounded continent with the gift of Christianity. In the minds of early-nineteenth-century white
Christians, colonization would do more than abolition, as the salvation of an entire continent
weighed heavier than the emancipation of several million. Tracing the conversionist ideologies
of early colonizationists reveals the goals and expectations of the men and women who invested
so much capital, human and otherwise, in this ambitious venture. Acknowledging the power of
conversionism also illustrates the ways in which the shockingly popular colonizationist
movement echoed and amplified the strains of racism and imperialism in the early nineteenth
century.

Colonization, despite its popular appeal, could not solve the problem of slavery, and
beginning in the 1830s, a small but loud contingent of radical abolitionists began pressing for

12 James T. Campbell, Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005 (New York: Penguin,
2006); Amos Beyan, African American Settlements in West Africa: John Brown Russworm and the American
Civilizing Efforts (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and James Sidbury, Becoming African in America: Race

13 I refer to my actors as conversionists and their ideology as conversionism largely because all other terms are too
narrow. Dreams of a converted Africa transcended the theological boundaries implied by labels like evangelicalism
or missionary Christianity.
new national antislavery strategies. No longer beholden to conversionist causation, these reformers introduced a new discourse that would ultimately erode the middle ground of conversionist antislavery. Largely due to the challenge of these new abolitionists, the conversionist consensus cracked, and a new coercive, sectionalist antislavery took its place. This is not a story of the cosmos crumbling, but rather a story of how black and white agitators tore it down. The work of David Walker, William Lloyd Garrison, and Nat Turner epitomized the new antislavery discourse. The threat of slave rebellion had long threatened the United States, as the specter of Haiti haunted white Americans, North and South. But the uncompromising vitriol of William Lloyd Garrison, foreboding threats of David Walker, and the realized horrors of Nat Turner’s revolt seemingly shifted nightmares into reality. The conversionist consensus provided a bulwark against the threats of bloodshed and disunion, but conversionism was on shaky ground, falling victim to many of its own successes.

Denominational outreach had succeeded, and fears of an unchristian frontier receded. Yet the sins of slavery remained and in fact only grew despite the spreading of the gospel. Meanwhile, revivalists like Charles Graddison Finney inaugurated changes in the process of religious conversion. As Calvinism declined, theologies of increased human agency meshed with increased commitments to popular democracy. The reform movements that grew out of earlier denominational conversionist projects had politicized northern Christians, and reform leaders redefined conversion as a catalyst to social change rather than as a sufficient cure in itself. Conversionist appeals continued, but the antislavery of men and, increasingly, women challenged the causation of conversion and began to look to political agitation as a means of reform. Moderate antislavery conversionists responded to the new abolitionists with hostility, seeing their agitation as a distraction of the work of salvation. For these men and women,
abolitionists threatened to hinder the work of missions, thereby delaying the expected day of emancipation. But abolitionism had come too far to be stymied by these old arguments, and the new generation of agitators would not be deterred. This left conversionist discourse in the hands of proslavery apologists who contrasted southerners spreading the gospel with abolitionists spreading the seeds of slave rebellion and disunion. These increasing tensions further frayed the bonds of denominational unity. The conversionist consensus would no longer hold, and the nation began to tear itself apart, beginning in its churches.

Religious Americans in the late eighteenth century expected slavery to disappear with the expansion of Christian conversion. A prophetic few adopted an alternative antislavery of purification, but these cries were either muted by the limitations of their source (i.e. the marginal Quakers or declining Calvinists) or they were drowned out by the challenges of the explosion of migration in the aftermath of the American Revolution. The challenges of this migration forced conversionists to focus energies on missionary outreach, resulting in the consolidation of religious authority in new denominational bodies. These new bodies created an opening for reform but restricted it from taking an aggressive, coercive shape. By 1830 it became clear that religious conversion would not solve the problem of slavery, and the old discourse of conversionist antislavery turned into a conservative weapon by proslavery apologists.

Joshua Marsden’s antislavery was not hypocritical nor was it apathetic. Marsden hated slavery and looked with great anticipation for the day when God would fulfill his promise of deliverance for all creation. Marsden staunchly believed that the hours of study, preparation, and active ministry that occupied his time served to accelerate this glorious day. But these hopes and expectations hinged on a converted populace. Achieving this goal required a responsive, active
church. Conversionism provided both an expectation of emancipation, but also a challenge to meet the needs of the age through institutional development, organization, and ultimately social transformation. Each stages of this progression shaped the worlds of American antislavery, and by foregrounding conceptions of religious conversion, we can begin to understand the problem of human bondage and its potential solutions as did the men and women whose lives entangled daily with the reality of a slaveholding republic.
In April 1824 Stephen Grellet rose to speak to a small group of farmers in southern Virginia. The French-accented voice of this Quaker itinerant echoed throughout the small church, confronting those assembled with a gospel message of emotional humility, self-denial, and painstaking piety. Silence was the dominant sound during this Quaker-led meeting, amplifying Grellet’s protestations as his words drilled into the souls of his audience. The message was one of Christian righteousness, but the subtext was lost on no one in the crowd: Stephen Grellet had come to southern Virginia to speak with these slaveholders about the sins of slavery. As he left the meetinghouse, these sins burdened Grellet’s mind with deep distress. He reflected on this Virginia community, lamenting that “the yoke of slavery has become heavy here.” The meeting with slaveholders left Grellet depressed as he considered abolition’s obstacles. A feeling of hopelessness slowly grew within him, but like so many other antislavery evangelicals, Grellet transformed this despondency into hope by focusing his thoughts on the value of ministry and God’s promise of deliverance. His mind cheered as he proclaimed, “Will not the Lord plead with the people for these things? Will He not arise for the cry of the poor and oppressed descendants of Africa?” Grellet’s answer to these questions was, of course, affirmative, and his mind was set at ease with the confidence that his evangelizing was part of the Lord’s plan to purge the nation of the great sin of slavery.¹

Grellet believed in the decisive power of conversion to bring about an end to slavery, yet scholars of early antislavery have underestimated the potency of such conversionist arguments because of the continued shadow cast by David Brion Davis’s distinction between gradualist and immediatist antislavery. Davis described the patterns of early reformers in the late eighteenth century, whom he labels as gradualists, by writing that the “British abolitionists moved with the circumspection of conservative pragmatists, [and] their American counterparts acted with the caution of men surrounded by high explosives.” For Davis, it was only when “uncompromising hostility to the slave trade became a sign of personal virtue and practical Christianity, [that] the rhetoric of statesmen acquired the strident, indignant tone that we associate with later American abolitionists.” Davis is right to draw a distinction between early and late antislavery behavior. Surely the individualist focus of early activists implies a less dramatic and immediate change than that envisioned by the political reformers who yearned for their legislatures to abolish slavery with a single stroke of the pen. However, the “conservative,” “pragmatic,” and “cautious” tactics of early antislavery do not reflect a lessened commitment to antislavery but rather a different understanding of causation. Early antislavery activists were not immediatist in tactics yet they possessed a very serious immediacy in their conviction and in their expectations of slavery’s disappearance.

The old label of gradualism, with its accompanying dismissal as “conservative,” “pragmatic,” and cautious,” needs to be replaced with a sensitive understanding of the religious and philosophical foundation of early reform. A widespread commitment to the sovereignty of individual conscience and the expectation for imminent social transformation characterized early

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antislavery, and three strands of thought combined to celebrate the rights of conscience. The first derived from Scottish moral philosophy and specifically Frances Hutcheson’s view of an inherent moral sense ingrained within all of humanity. The second and oldest of the three is the uniquely Quaker emphasis on what George Fox called the inner light. Fox described his calling to the ministry in 1648 by writing “I was commanded to turn people to that inward light, spirit and grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God; even that divine spirit which would lead them into all truth, and which I infallibly knew would never deceive any.” We see here the essence of Quaker ministry as turning people “to that inward light… which would lead them into all truth.” From Fox onward, active politicking or institution building would never be as popular for Quakers as the direct confrontation of individuals in the hopes of appealing to their inward spirit of grace. The third and most recent strain derived from radical Protestant groups who opposed all commingling of religious authority and magisterial power. These evangelical commitments to the liberty of conscience bore traces of an older European heritage. Forged in the religious wars on the continent and reenergized by the chaos of the Interregnum, radical Protestantism spread across the Atlantic World, and while many of these traditions lost their radical edge, a continued insistence on religious liberty endured. In North America, we see the clearest example of this tradition in the disestablishment campaigns against the Church of England in the South and Congregationalists in New England. All three of these intellectual


strains were wary of external coercion and instead embraced a vision of society where mankind could engage in the unfettered pursuit of internal moral reflection and religious revelation. As a limit on coercive reform, any violation of the rights of conscience – even when in service of the greater good like antislavery – could not be tolerated.

The commitment to the rights of conscience led early reformers to frame the problem of slavery as one of individual moral failure rather than institutional injustice. The solution depended upon personal transformation and not political fiat, but these solutions would yield imminent results. When set in its late-eighteenth-century religious and philosophical context, early antislavery thought does not fit into Davis’s gradualist/immediatist framework. Certainly later abolitionists – particularly those active after 1830 – were less likely to seek accommodation or compromise. It is unfair, however, to make the activities of this later generation the standard by which we evaluate early antislavery agitation.

But questions of tactics or procedure are only part of the story. To truly understand the actions of early antislavery activists, we must uncover a worldview that may seem startlingly foreign to contemporary observers, a worldview that credits religious conversion as the prime mover in world history. Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries looked to religious conversion as the solution to the great ills of the day. This conversionist causation directed antislavery in ways previously unacknowledged by historians. Christopher Leslie Brown’s *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* offers several useful

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7 The history of toleration has recently generated considerable interest from historians. Most works focus on the ideologies outlined above, but for an interpretation that looks to practical causes rather than ideology in the development of American toleration see Chris Beinecke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
historiographical admonitions by criticizing the tendency to view antislavery as the inevitable “working out of cultural trends or as the consequence of a series of intellectual steps that ascended to a breakthrough in moral perception.” Brown is correct that the early, conversion-centered antislavery of the Quakers and their evangelical allies was more than a necessary intellectual hurdle before the serious business of political abolition could be attempted, and thus Quaker-led conversionist antislavery should be considered on its own terms. We have too often judged these early activists against their heirs. Brown’s anti-teleological interpretation of antislavery invites new work on these early reformers. Unlike Brown, however, we must not consider early antislavery to be simply “dormant, inert, and ineffective” because it was “unable to stimulate political action.”

It is the goal of this study to track the ways by which understandings of religious conversion directed the behavior of early antislavery Americans. Doing so collapses the distinctions of gradualist and immediatist antislavery in favor of a new understanding of antislavery: conversionist antislavery that included the men and women who fought against slavery but did not do so through the petition campaigns, pamphlet wars, antislavery societies that historians have traditionally emphasized in studies of the trans-Atlantic antislavery movement.

One of the great lessons in Brown’s *Moral Capital* is the fact that abolitionists were not always abolitionists. Brown is helpful in reminding us that attention must be paid to the moments of contingency that radicalized individual abolitionists. In seeking the reasons why abolitionists adopted certain tactics, we find that reformers attempted to recreate their personal antislavery conversion experiences for others. Reformers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries rarely joined the cause as a result of collective, organized political movements.

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Examining the diaries and letters of antislavery Americans reveals the most common foundations for antislavery convictions to be either individual encounters with slavery or the development of moral convictions fostered through religious networks.

A vibrant historiography has worked through the cultural preconditions that made it more likely for certain individuals to feel the pulse of antislavery. The best account of these interpretations emerges from the Davis-Haskell debate over the role of a capitalist consciousness in inspiring antislavery action.\(^9\) James L. Huston offers an important caution, however, by encouraging historians to remember the history of slavery in histories of abolitionism. Whatever intellectual groundwork took place in the antebellum North or in England, it was ultimately the institution of slavery itself that prompted abolitionism. Abolitionists took to the cause primarily because of encounters, whether literal or imaginary, with the brutality of human bondage. Huston is right to privilege encounters with slavery as the primary cause of antislavery feeling, but it is worth highlighting the role of missionary action as a key means by which reform-inclined northerners encountered southern slavery.\(^10\)

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now apparent that slavery could only be eradicated through coercion applied by the force of law. Indeed, there is not a single instance of slavery’s gradual disappearance in the modern world. The only possible exception is the antebellum North, although recent scholarship on the disappearance of slavery in the North highlights the role of contentious political action.\(^11\) Moral suasion was only useful in that it generated support for


political action. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, however, this realization was not so obvious. In fact, the intellectual trends of the time placed considerable faith in the citizenry to commit itself to the cause of justice without the strong arm of the state. Historians of the American Revolution are familiar with the cautious pragmatism of James Madison, but zealous idealism characterized the default disposition of most religious Americans, particularly those of an evangelical persuasion. Early antislavery existed in a world that venerated the sovereignty of conscience and looked with hopeful expectation to society’s reformation through the progressive but imminent conversion of heart’s and minds. The focus on religious liberty worked to radicalize evangelicals in the political wars over disestablishment, but it also created a discourse that discouraged aggressive, coercive reform.

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, moral optimism engendered by the rejection of Hobbesian pessimism in favor of Hutchesonian moral philosophy fueled a progressive belief in the eventual triumph of virtue. Likewise, an enthusiastic evangelical belief in radical personal transformation generated a cheerful expectation that cultural change would best be wrought through individual conversions. In this milieu, centralized reform appeared less fitting than an international campaign for hearts and minds. A slight push from reformers would allow the unfolding of Enlightenment or the expansion of holiness – depending upon your persuasion – to complete the work of abolition. The nature of early American antislavery agitation comes into clearer focus given this orientation. Under the logic of conversionist

Conversion, tactics that we might dismiss as conservative were for contemporaries the very embodiment of radicalism.

Conversion, of course, meant different things to different people, but the differences carried less weight than the similarities. Tracy Fessenden has described the development of the “nonspecific Protestantism” that enabled reform movements to exert so much pressure in the early republic. John Lardas Modern describes how, “Transcending both doctrinal and denominational differences, a somewhat hazy metaphysics assumed hegemonic status both within Protestant practice and across a number of other sites.” These “nonspecific,” “hazy metaphysics” exerted tremendous influence on early American culture and formed the ideological foundation for conversionist antislavery. What united nearly all evangelicals was the optimistic expectation in the transformative power of conversion. These expectations often fed millennial energies that allowed evangelicals to expect the disappearance of entrenched systems of injustice without having to exert organized, political pressure.

Neither Fessenden nor Modern acknowledges the important role of millennial optimism in forming the hegemonic nonspecific Protestantism of the early republic. Christians have expected the return of Christ since the earliest days of the faith, but Anglo-Atlantic Christians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries directed their efforts towards hastening the arrival of this event with an unusual intensity. Periods of war and power-upheavals had catalyzed millennial religion throughout Anglo-Atlantic history. The upheavals of the English Civil War and the chaos of the Interregnum gave birth to a host of new religious movements, all clamoring

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to make meaning of the great changes of the day.\textsuperscript{13} The American Revolution continued this tradition. Nathan Hatch has argued that Americans adopted a millennial set of expectations that the political upheavals of the era portended more thorough social transformations.\textsuperscript{14} Robert Abzug describes the same explosion of millennial energies in the aftermath of the era but claims that post-Revolutionary partisanship, the horrors of the French Revolution, and the development of so many new religious groups enervated the enthusiasm of the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} Outside of Abzug’s select New England religious virtuosos, however, the millennial spirit endured and grew. Most Americans optimistically believed they were living on the cusp of rapturous social change. Nicholas Guyatt likewise downplays the millennial energies of the early republic by comparing them to the far more explicit millennial preoccupations of seventeenth-century England.\textsuperscript{16} His historical narrative is accurate, but the comparison misses how the strength of early American millennialism flowed not from its systematic orthodoxy but rather from its flexibility. Guyatt usefully distinguishes between apocalyptic and historical providentialism. The former he equates with millennialism and the latter with optimistic nationalism, but historical providentialism also fed a sense of millennial destiny in the early republic. American greatness would hasten the return of Christ, and American greatness depended on the advance of religious conversion.


Conversionism provided the foundation of both antislavery and proslavery ideologies. Samuel Davies, one of the most emphatic supporters of converting slaves in the eighteenth century, offers a case study in the development of both American proslavery and antislavery intellectual systems. Ministering among slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike in Hanover County, Virginia, Davies was among the most influential advocates of conversionist Christianity in the mid-eighteenth century. His emphasis on religious conversion often had racially leveling implications. In explaining how he would minister with non-Christian slave owners, Samuel Davies explained, “I would then deal with you, as with your heathen negroes.” But the push to convert slaves nearly always simultaneously supported the logic of paternalism. When trying to convince Virginians of the “duty of Christians to propagate their religion” to slaves, Davies compared masters to parents and slaves to children. Charles Irons’s outstanding work, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*, unfolds this process with a level of detail and rigor that need not be replicated here.\(^{17}\) But it is worth listening closely to the priorities of men like Samuel Davies, who represented some of the best hopes for eighteenth-century antislavery. Davies asked his readers if they would be “rewarded for our faithfulness; or punished for our negligence as having promoted the happiness or been accessory to the ruin of an immortal soul!” He then doubled down and demanded that his readers “[p]ause and think of these things and they will certainly appear very solemn and weighty.”\(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) Samuel Davies, *Duty of Christians to Propagate their Religion among Heathens, Earnestly Recommended to the Masters of Negro Slaves in Virginia, a Sermon Preached in Hanover, January 9, 1757* (London: 1758), 12, 8.
If we are to understand the attitudes of conversionist Christians, we too must pause and understand the solemnity and weight of these words. Questions of conversion occupied the minds of early Americans in ways that directed their thoughts on slavery. Salvation was a preeminent concern, but the expectation of social change following from conversion directed the ways by which antislavery Americans understood the solution to slavery.

Religious discourse in the late eighteenth century promised an imminent social transformation that would include and end to slavery. According to ministers, missionaries, and audiences at countless camp meetings, Sunday services, or society conventions, the great sins of the age would soon wash away in a flood of holiness. As will be discussed in coming chapters, the missionary societies of the early republic served an essential role as both the creators and transmitters of the new national religious cultures that bound the new nation together. Pressing concerns for the multitudes of unsaved souls consolidated denominations, creating national networks of reform-oriented Americans that would aid in the development of the antislavery movement. During the first several decades of the American experiment, whether in times of denominational formation or collapse, the new nation found a unifying discourse in the belief that religious conversion promised the surest means of social transformation.

John Blair Smith, addressing the inaugural meeting of the Northern Missionary Society in Albany, New York, on January 11, 1797, clearly articulated the expectation for social transformation, proclaiming that the expansion of conversions would ensure that “the order and happiness of the creation be best secured.” Smith’s ministry moved through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and New York as he pastored numerous churches, fostered revivalism, and held the presidency of Hampden-Sydney and Union Colleges in central Virginia and upstate New York respectively. In all of his homes and in all of his vocations, he held a consistent anticipation
of a gospel-driven social transformation. He repeated this sentiment throughout his address to the Northern Missionary Society, calling his audience to aid the society in their efforts “to obtain the increase and stability of the Redeemer’s kingdom.” The end of slavery would be a component of these radical changes, but antislavery, and other matters of social reform must begin with conversion not only because eternal salvation took priority over temporal happiness, but also because the expansion of salvation promised the surest route to the Godly social order.19

These sentiments are largely absent in the existing historiography on antislavery, but these thoughts were not Smith’s alone. In fact, Smith considered them so commonplace as to negate their necessity for publication. When the society pressed Smith to allow his remarks to be published, Smith insisted that a foreword acknowledge its contents were “so familiar and common.” Smith wanted to be known for uttering new and exciting ideas and found it embarrassing to be associated with such oft-repeated beliefs. The foreword again expressed the wish that readers would nonetheless benefit from these “common topics and arguments.”20 Though so prevalent in Smith’s world as to make him wary of overburdening his reader with commonplace assumptions, historians have not recognized the widespread belief of conversion’s potential to enact social change. What was common for Smith in fact is novel for historical scholarship, for his words challenge existing explanations of antislavery thought as imagining a gradual erosion of slavery rather than a millennial disappearance. The focus on political agitation and institutional antislavery that has characterized antislavery studies has missed the “common arguments” that were “so familiar and common” to early Americans. The widely held conviction


that conversion would bring God’s kingdom to earth enabled the men and women who made up an early American antislavery consensus to drift along with the tide of the times without mounting a serious challenge to increasingly entrenched systems of slavery.

The tireless Abiel Holmes of Midway, Georgia, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, offers another clear illustration of early Americans’ perceived connection between conversion and social advancement. Holmes believed and preached that social progress would be impossible without a nation of pious Christians. But the other half of this assumption was the assurance that a nation of pious Christians could not help but ensure national prosperity and virtue. Preaching in Cambridge after the induction of Massachusetts Governor Caleb Strong, Holmes asked, “what citizen, or what Christian, can hear, with indifference, what are the means of insuring the benefit and blessings of a sure and permanent government?”21 The evil of slavery, along with other great political evils, would wash away when the nation’s citizenry turned to Christ. The honored governor stood as an example of a godly magistrate, but Holmes was not content to rely solely on the actions of magistrates. His emphasis on individual citizens submitting to the government of Christ revealed the belief that universal conversion would lead to the bottom up destruction of sin.

Holmes’s questions were not simply rhetorical exercises; they laid the foundation for deeply held providential convictions. Later in the same sermon, Holmes let his tone rise and conjured a glorious millennial image: “Let us behold the welcome day when HOLINESS TO THE LORD shall be deeply inscribed on every bosom and be legible in every action. Then violence shall no more be heard in our land, wasting nor destruction within our borders, but our walls shall be called salvation, and our gates praise.” Slavery involved a state of perpetual war, a

21 Untitled sermon, “June 1, 1800,” Abiel Holmes Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
fact that informed the antislavery of pacifist Quakers as well as the non-Quaker antislavery polemics. The imminent day of holiness would erase human bondage along with all other forms of violence and warfare. Human governments rose and fell, but the kingdom of God was eternal, and the oncoming millennium would stand stronger than the greatest political movement. Holmes took this moment of political celebration, in honor of the election of Governor Strong, to remind his audience of the author of true and lasting change. After recounting the recent deaths of political greats including Massachusetts Governor Increase Sumner and Lieutenant Governor Moses Gill, Holmes warned his audience not to place too much trust in even the most reliable leaders. Even George Washington lay in the grave, and his unquestioned benevolence could only free those slaves under his own personal care. The recent deaths inspired Holmes to remark, “How strikingly do these breaches on our public teach us the instability of human governments.”

This same understanding of causation worked within religious bodies as well. In May 1787 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia met in Second Church, Philadelphia and produced a curious antislavery tract. The first sentence proclaimed, “The Synod of New York and Philadelphia do highly approve of the general principles in favor of universal liberty, that prevail in America, and the interest which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery.” This enthusiastic praise for the progress of abolition was followed not by encouragement for further action, but rather caution. The synod asserted that “men introduced from a servile state, to a participation of all the privileges of civil society, without a proper education, and without previous habits of industry, may be, in many respects dangerous to the community.” While this alarm certainly illustrates how Presbyterians were not exempt from the

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ubiquitous racial anxieties of the era, their concern does not imply a lack of antislavery zeal but rather indicates a deep confidence in the inevitability of mass manumissions. These Presbyterians, like many other Americans in the era, felt assured that slavery was passing away. In the minds of many Americans, the tide of freedom had begun to sweep across the continent, and backwards institutions such as human bondage would soon disappear. The American Revolution marked a shift in the millennial timeline, and an era of holiness was nigh. From their perspective, the Synod did not need to encourage further action since divine action made manifest through economic trends, religious conviction, and political currents promised to continue the work of abolition. The question for these Presbyterians was not whether the United States would abandon slavery but rather what a post-slavery nation would look like. It was here that the Presbyterians sought to act.

Presbyterians implored the faithful to educate their soon-to-be-freed slaves. The members of the Synod “earnestly recommend it to all the members of their communion, to give those persons who are held in servitude such good education as may prepare them for the better enjoyment of freedom.” According to the republican ideology common in the era, freedom required the ownership of property, so Presbyterians implored their members to provide their slaves with “some share of property to begin with, or grant them sufficient time, and sufficient means, of procuring by industry, their own liberty, at a moderate rate; that they may thereby be brought into society and those habits of industry that may render them useful citizens.” Only after these directives did the authors conclude with a call for churchmen “to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and the state of civil society, in the parts where they live, to procure, eventually, the final abolition of slavery in America.”

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These antislavery sentiments came from the Synod of New York and Philadelphia two years prior to the formation of the General Assembly, when concerns over converting America’s unchurched accelerated denominational formation. Tying the national church together would require compromise, particularly on the question of slavery, and northern clergymen must have worried over how their southern brethren would react to veiled antislavery language. Yet in 1793, at the height of Presbyterian attempts to maintain national unity, the General Assembly unanimously approved the earlier resolution and apportioned money to be spent in reprinting and publicizing the declaration. The statement left enough room for slaveholders to offer their support without offering any foreseeable threat to the institution. Paternalist fantasies enabled pious slaveholders to imagine their mastery as a means of preparing slaves for freedom without actually taking steps toward manumission, much less abolition.

Conversionism ironically fueled both proslavery and antislavery thought, and we can find both in this Presbyterian antislavery message. Proslavery Christianity was rooted in conversionism, and the 1793 General Assembly directed the majority of their energies not on purging the denomination of slavery but rather on advancing the mission of conversion. A Christian America could be free of slavery, but only after and because the church had spread its message throughout the new nation. The Assembly resolved that, “they who as patriotic citizens regard the prosperity of their country will be anxious to diffuse the principles of the gospel so favorable to that prosperity, through the numerous, recent, and increasing settlements on our frontiers.” Westward migration required deliberate action. The “numerous, recent, and increasing settlements” in the West required missionaries and new churches. Presbyterianism promised freedom for slaveholders and slaves, but before this freedom could be achieved, the church needed to grow.
We can find an even clearer example of conversionist antislavery in the life and work of Stephen Grellet, the itinerant Quaker evangelist and reformer who opened this chapter. It has long been noted that Quakers were at the vanguard of the early antislavery crusade. However, just as abolitionists were not always abolitionists, many Quakers were not always Quakers. In fact Brown, Davis, and others tend to ignore this point, choosing to see the Society solely as reproducing through family inheritance. In fact, a notable number of the leading Quaker antislavery activists experienced dramatic conversions Quakerism or at least credited conversion moments in their decision to take up the antislavery cause. Anthony Benezet, converted from Huguenotism sometime in his teenage years, and went on to become the most active and influential Quaker activist in the early antislavery crusade. Rebecca Jones, another significant Quaker antislavery leader, converted from Anglicanism in Philadelphia. Even John Woolman, who grew up in a Quaker household, credited a series of dramatic moments that developed his religious sensibility and social compassion. William Savery, who like Woolman was raised in the Society, credited a remarkable encounter with the Lord’s audible voice as drawing him into active fellowship.

Stephen Grellet experienced two dramatic conversions – the first to Quakerism and the second to social activism. Both experiences informed his antislavery thought. The first occurred in Newtown, Long Island, in 1795 where he settled with his brother after a brief stay in New

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24 Benezet claimed to have converted at the age of fourteen in London, although some historians question whether his conversion occurred after his family moved to Pennsylvania. See Maurice Jackson, Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism (Philadelphia, 2009), 6, 258-69 n 38-40.

25 Rebecca Jones, Memorials of Rebecca Jones, William J. Allinson, ed. (Philadelphia, 1846), 4-16.


York City. Despite a harried journey fleeing the violence of the French Revolution, Grellet and his brother retained their aristocratic airs, and prior to his conversion Grellet preferred to associate with those of similar distinction. When the brothers reached Newtown, their options were limited. Among their first friends was Sarah (Franklin) Corsa, the sister and heir of Walter Franklin (a deceased wealthy New York merchant), and her husband Colonel Isaac Corsa. The Corsas’ daughter Mary spoke French, terrifically useful to Grellet as he was still wrestling with the English language. Mary offered Grellet a copy of William Penn’s works, which he endeavored to translate. He found the work tedious and put it aside until one day while walking alone through a field he heard “an awful voice proclaiming the words, ‘Eternity! Eternity! Eternity!’” Grellet fell to the ground and was struck by a terrible fear of the afterlife. This sent him into several days of inactivity, feeling overwhelmed with a sense of his sinfulness. Grellet then revisited Penn’s works and read them through twice. He resolved to attend the next Quaker meeting with his brother, and it was here that his conversion finally occurred.

In the very manner that Grellet described his conversion, we find the roots of his antislavery strategy. Grellet wrote, “I was favored to find in me, what I had so long, and with so many tears, sought for without me.” Grellet indicated that for weeks after his conversion experience, he “had no outward dependence to lean upon. In religious meetings, as well as out of them, my single concern was to feel after the influences of the Holy Spirit in my own heart.”

This emphasis on the internal versus the external source for conversion would inform Grellet’s ministry and social action as he sought to bring converts into a place where they too could experience the same personal, internal regeneration that he had experienced in Newtown.

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29 Ibid., 23.
Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century conversion narratives describe an excruciating process. Stricken by the weight of their sin, the converted searched the scriptures and sought solace in the promises of Christian redemption. Undergoing conversion left early Americans changed in substantial ways. To understand the ideologies of early antislavery thinkers, we must immerse ourselves in the intellectual world that directed their imaginations. Stephen Grellet presents a favorable candidate for such a study as a considerable portion of his personal library has been preserved in the Quaker Collection at Haverford College. In this personal library we find the works of two Quaker heroes that both offer valuable insight into the process of early American religious conversion.\(^{30}\) John Fothergill, a British minister, wrote that on the eve of his conversion, he “was kept for a time thus low and watchful to this heavenly principle of truth, which let me see my sin and the danger of it.” This feeling of lowness prompted cries, “frequent and strong to be purged thoroughly, whatever I had to bear, if the almighty would but enable me.” For Fothergill, the change did not occur overnight. In fact, he wrote, “I wrestled several years.” These years of torture threatened to overwhelm him, and he “was often tempted to conclude I was forsaken of Mercy and that judgment and darkness were to be my portion.”\(^{31}\) Most early American conversions did extend not over several years like Fothergill’s, but the converted nearly always described the process as one of considerable trial and drama, the most radical moment of transformation of their life.

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\(^{30}\) See the Quaker Collection at Haverford College for a considerable portion of Grellet’s personal library.  

\(^{31}\) John Fothergill, *An Account of the Life and Travels, in the Work of the ministry, of John Fothergill: To which are added, divers epistles to friends in Great-Britain and America, on various occasions* (Philadelphia: James Chattlin, 1754), 4.
John Richardson, another Quaker hero who inspired Grellet, had a similarly vexing, if not as long, journey to conversion. Richardson described his transformation from a life of pride and vulgarity within his memoir, a copy of which Grellet kept in his library. Richardson felt the sting of God’s judgment more than any earthly pain, knowing that “His [God’s] heart penetrating, searching Word is sharper than any two-edged sword, that pierceth to the cutting or dividing asunder between flesh and spirit, joints and marrow.” Through his encounter with the piercing truth of Christianity, Richardson claimed that he “came to see and abhor the Evil in myself, when such who had been my companions in vanity reviled me, or came in my way, I was often moved to warn and reprove them.” After his conversion, Richardson instantly “changed my thoughts, words and ways, and there became an aversion in me to vice, sin and vanity, as there had been to the ways of Virtue.” The surest way to combat evil in the world, from the perspective of Richardson and his contemporaries, would be to encourage transformative events like these. Richardson wanted to make clear that the process he experienced in his life took place elsewhere as well, reminding his readers that “thou has known something of the work of Conversion and consider the great difference there is between the bright lives of the virtuous, and the dull and cloudy lives of the vicious, and be sure thou look well which of these thou most resemblest in thine.”

These themes rang throughout the library of Grellet and in sermons across the Protestant world. Benjamin Holme, another Quaker minister whose works filled Grellet’s shelves, encouraged converts who felt the stirrings of Christ in their life to “take heed to that good Spirit

32 John Richardson, *An Account of the Life of that Ancient Servant of Jesus Christ: John Richardson, giving a relation of many of his trials and exercises in his youth, and his services in the work of the ministry, in England, Ireland, America &c.* (Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank, 1785). See, 8-12 for the story of Richardson’s conversion.

33 Ibid., 12-13.

34 Ibid., 68.
of God which convinces you of sin, and inwardly reproves you for it, that there by you may know an overcoming of those things which are evil, for it is certain there is power in the divine Light, to give men a sight and discovery of that which is evil.”35 In this work, entitled “An Epistle to Friends in America,” Holme told American Quakers that conversion was the only way to instill the abhorrence of evil required to confront problems of social injustice. According to the logic of conversionism, the sight and discovery of evil results from divine light; therefore, conversion is required before it is possible to do any good work.

Grellet’s antislavery evolution followed this pattern, for he never experienced a discrete conversion to the antislavery crusade. Instead, he interpreted social reform as the logical extension of his religious ministry. After seeing the brutalities of slavery in Demerara, Grellet “felt convinced that there was no excess of wickedness and malice which a slave holder or driver might not be guilty of.”36 For Grellet, however, earthly slavery was never as dangerous as spiritual bondage, and in remembering his time in Guyana, Grellet summarized his life-long belief in the relationship between spiritual salvation and social reform by writing that “the Lord himself interfered to release me from that land, and to open a way for my emancipation from a bondage, far more dreaded than that of the poor slaves whom I commiserated.”37 Only after Grellet’s spiritual transformation did he feel compelled to redress the injustices of slavery. As such, Grellet assumed that the most effective way to exterminate slavery would be to encourage the conversion of others. In addition to proselytizing, Grellet attacked the great sin of slavery through targeted encounters with individual hearts and minds. Historians have largely ignored


37 Ibid., 16.
Grellet’s antislavery work, yet a close analysis of this Quaker reformer and his contemporaries reveals a worldview characterized by intense optimism in the power of spiritual conversion as the catalyst to widespread social change.\(^{38}\) Grellet’s faith in the reformatory power of the inner light knew no bounds. While ministering in France, he wrote, “Day and night my mind is turned toward Buonaparte. O could I plead with him! Could I bring him to feel and see, as I do, the horror and misery he is accumulating upon man, and the vices and immoralities he causes.”\(^{39}\) Grellet worked hard to arrange an interview with the emperor but failed. Upon his return to the United States, Grellet passed through New York City and heard that Thomas Paine’s “infidel friends” had abandoned the world’s most famous heretic on his deathbed. Grellet visited Paine, making such an impression that the dying man requested the constant attention of Quakers before ultimately converting in his final hours. Tragically, Grellet reports that a band of Paine’s deistical colleagues destroyed all evidence of this deathbed conversion.\(^{40}\)

Grellet’s commitment to the individual reformation of social ills extended even to moments of extreme danger. While he was traveling across the Atlantic, a band of North African pirates seized his ship and were in the process of taking the crew prisoner when an English man-of-war appeared on the horizon, scaring off their would-be captors. Grellet himself was nearly seized and sold into slavery in North Africa, yet he claimed to be calm and attempted to “proclaim to them [his captors] the Gospel message of redeeming love.” Grellet’s implacable confidence in the face of these pirates is more than suspicious, but whether or not he did perform so heroically, the passage illustrates what Grellet believed the proper response should be in such

\(^{38}\) Occasionally Grellet will appear in broader studies of the antislavery crusade as an example of the transnational nature of the movement or to show its conservative limitations. Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Ann Arbor, 1972), 101-102, 240.


a situation. In all things, Grellet believed he should proclaim the Gospel message of redeeming love, a message that he considered to be one of personal, internal regeneration. This regeneration functioned the same way whether the matter was a conversion to Quakerism or antislavery.

When God spared Grellet and his shipmates from capture, he observed how the “the hearts of some of them appear to have been made soft, by our great deliverance from the pirates.” Grellet took advantage of the moment, immediately seizing “private, as well as public, religious opportunities with the crew.” Throughout Grellet’s missionary career, he was always on the lookout to share God’s love with an anxious soul or a heavy heart grappling with the yearnings of the inner light, fully expecting God to use these moments to reform both individual lives and the world as a whole.

The yoke of slavery threatened to bind slaves for life, yet as Grellet emphasized, it also endangered the souls of masters for eternity. During a visit to slaveholders in Natchez, Mississippi, Grellet found that descendants of Quakers who “had or have had a right of membership in our Society” had never once had a Quaker meeting in their community. Among these Mississippians Grellet found “much to be pitied” as they “involved themselves and their children in various difficulties by settling in a slave country; they have also become slaveholders themselves.” Grellet sympathized with these brethren, even claiming, “the yoke of bondage, under which they have placed themselves, is heavier than that of their slaves.” The temporal sufferings endured by slaves were deeply felt by Grellet, yet he feared also for the eternal sufferings of the master class. Grellet was shaken, briefly losing his confidence in the power of moral suasion to end slavery, for these families “know it is wrong, but have not strength to break away from the chains they have made for themselves.” In this passage we hear

41 Ibid., 111-112.
the foundations of Grellet’s world shaking. The basis for Grellet’s life ministry and social activism was rooted in his faith that conviction would result in conversion. If ever Grellet would abandon his faith in individual conversion and look instead to political action, this would be the moment. Yet despite this moment of despair, Grellet still behaved as he had in the past by “endeavor[ing] to have a meeting among them, and to proclaim the offer of salvation through faith in Christ.”

For Grellet to abandon his quest for individual conversions to antislavery in favor of political activism, he would first have to surrender his faith in the reformatory power of the moral sense, rooted in the inner light. Despite the challenges he encountered in Mississippi, his faith endured.

Grellet’s despair turned to joy before he left Natchez when a wealthy colonel owning nearly four hundred slaves requested a meeting. A few years prior, the colonel experienced a radical conversion. After this conversion, the colonel “felt for [his slaves] as brethren, whereas, before, he had only considered them as slaves or chattels.” The laws of Mississippi prevented this man from freeing his slaves, yet he immediately began to treat them as free men, and claimed to be working out a plan to get his slaves to a free state. Grellet could not take credit for the conversion of this wealthy Mississippi planter because the colonel had reformed his life years before Grellet’s arrival; nonetheless, divine conviction and a personal searching of the scriptures had led this planter to abandon slavery. Grellet’s faith in conversion as a means of exterminating slavery was reaffirmed.

On October 15, 1809, Grellet reported that several slaveholders came to his meeting a day’s travel outside of Baltimore. His response was not to address them specifically on the

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matter of slavery but rather “closely to labor, showing them what the Christian character, and the fruits of the Spirit are.” Grellet’s antipathy to slavery came out of his understanding of “the Christian character and the fruits of the Spirit.” It makes sense then, that he would speak of these things in an attempt to persuade slaveholders of the injustice of the practice. Scholars may look at this exchange and see Grellet’s privileging spiritual matters as compromising his commitment to the antislavery cause. Grellet, however, would argue that the two are not incompatible but in fact inseparable. The work of antislavery was best achieved by encouraging men and women to listen to the inner light yearnings of their souls. While preaching to slaveholders in Norfolk, Virginia, Grellet remarked that, “The Lord’s servants can have no other doctrine to preach…. It cannot change. The fast that the Lord hath chosen, is to loose the bands of wickedness; to undo the heavy burdens; to let the oppressed go free; and to break every yoke; as he saith by his prophet Isaiah.” Grellet believed that he was doing the work of Isaiah, and the yokes of slavery would be broken so long as he and others continued to preach that unchanging doctrine.

Grellet and others looked to convert black Americans alongside white Americans, believing that doing so would move the nation closer to the end of slavery. Often ministers followed Samuel Davies in describing the conversion of black Americans as of prior importance to earthly liberation, including Francis Asbury, who asked, “What is the personal liberty of the African which he may abuse, to the salvation of his soul; how may it be compared?” But antislavery ministers often understood conversions, whether white or black, as an essential step in destroying slavery. When Abiel Holmes wrote a worshipful biography of Ezra Stiles, he gushed how Stiles gathered slaves in his office where the learned divine and supposedly illiterate

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44 Ibid., 156.

45 Asbury, Heart, 607-608.
slaves fell on their knees together. Stiles “poured out fervent supplications at the throne of grace, imploring the divine blessing upon them, and commending himself and them to the most high.” In assessing Stiles treatment of slaves, Holmes asks, “what can exhibit a more interesting spectacle, than this Christian pastor, on his knees, surrounded by these Africans, and interceding for them with the God of heaven.”

Holmes’s biography illustrated the expected result of conversionist antislavery. If masters truly converted, the spirit of the Lord would lead them to manumit. Holmes claimed that in 1778, Stiles freed his slave Newport. Newport received his freedom from no proactive effort on his part. Indeed, Holmes makes clear that “[Newport] never asked for his freedom. It was only the master’s conviction of the injustice and barbarity of the slave trade, in which this servant had been imported, in 1757 that determined his conduct.”  

But more important to Stiles, and to Holmes, was that Newport received the light of the gospel. Before he received his freedom, Stiles ensured that Newport “experienced a saving change of heart.” Holmes interrupted the narration of Stiles’s life to editorialize on the importance of Christianizing slaves. Holmes dismissed critiques of slave evangelization that claimed Christianity ruined slaves by asserting that “nothing is more demonstrable, than that the moral and religious precepts of the Gospel, duly regarded, have the most auspicious influence on every class of human beings, and furnish new springs to fidelity in all the relations of life.”

The rhetoric supporting slave conversions likewise blended easily into the developing appeals of proslavery Christianity. John Holt Rice, a Presbyterian minister in Richmond,

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48 Ibid.
Virginia, straddled both worlds, condemning slavery as a gross injustice but providing rhetoric for defenses of human bondage. In a 1827 personal letter to a close friend, William Maxwell, Rice noted that, “I am most fully convinced that slavery is the greatest evil in our country, except whiskey; and it is my most ardent prayer that we may be delivered from it.”49 In that same year, Rice wrote Archibald Alexander at Princeton to help secure the freedom of a local family who had appealed to Rice for assistance. In 1811 a slave in Richmond named Billy Brown obtained his freedom. However, since 1806, all manumitted slaves were required to leave the state within six months. Unwilling to leave the only land he knew and abandon his still enslaved wife, Brown instead took the remarkable risk of finding a white man to claim ownership of him. Fortunately for Brown, this man proved virtuous and allowed Brown to go about his life as if he were a free man. Brown began to work informally at Union Theological Seminary, taking in washing for the students and tending to horses. Over time this arrangement worked out so well that Brown was able to purchase his wife and even set aside a bit of money. For the moment, it appeared that Billy Brown had successfully carved out a life for his family free from the chains of chattel slavery. Brown knew, however, that his wife was in a precarious position, for if he should die, she would be in immediate danger of confiscation by any of his creditors. By 1827 Brown was contemplating a move in pursuit of greater security to another college town such as Princeton or New Haven. In contemplating his move, Brown consulted with the most well connected man possible, the president of Union Theological Seminary, John Holt Rice. Rice’s first idea was for the Brown couple to immigrate to Africa, but Brown assured him he was too old for such an adventure and had no children to support him in his unproductive years. Rice remained skeptical

as to the potential for success in Princeton or New Haven, as “there are in those places more hands than work.” Nonetheless, Rice forwarded his inquiry to his close friend Archibald Alexander, who was then teaching at Princeton. It is here that Billy Brown vanishes from the record, and we are left in suspense as to the fate of his family.

Intimate interactions along these lines shaped Rice’s opposition to slavery, and the minister consistently included the souls of both black and white Virginians in his ministry. Despite his antislavery convictions, Rice’s ministry fueled proslavery discourse. To ensure that he could continue to gain access to slaves, Rice nurtured relationships with slave owners primarily by arguing that slave members of his church exhibited “more industry, fidelity, and submissiveness; less intemperance, dishonesty, lying, and laziness, than are to be found among an equal number of this class in any other part of the country.” Such rhetoric fueled slaveholders’ assumptions that the institution served as a kind of civilizing school for blacks and reinforced their belief that hereditary slavery provided the most humane and benevolent arrangement for black Americans. Church provided another opportunity for slaves to improve themselves. Writing in his monthly magazine, Rice declared that the improvement in behavior among church-going slaves “has been so notorious, that the owners of these slaves have been compelled to acknowledge, that the services of the preachers were more profitable than those of all the overseers ever employed by them.” The contradictions implied in Rice’s writings could only be explained by the logic of conversionist antislavery. In the very same letter written to Archibald Alexander about Billy Brown and his family, Rice celebrated the rise in religious conversions


and proclaimed, “There is a march of opinion on this subject [slavery], which would, if uninterrupted, at no distant date, annihilate this evil in Virginia.” The salvation of slaves was an essential component of conversionist antislavery, but in pursuing this aim, many ministers further fueled the development of proslavery discourse.

Presbyterians designed policies to reach slaves and Indians (groups they nearly always lumped together) from the earliest days of their national missionary endeavor. The General Assembly resolved in 1800 “to attempt, more extensively than heretofore has been done, the Christianizing of the Indians, the instruction of the black people, and the propagations of Christian knowledge.” Converting Indians required they first be instructed in European modes of living. The Presbyterian General Assembly resolved in 1800 to press for “the gospelizing of the Indians on the frontiers of our country—connected with a plan for their civilization, the want of which it is believed has been a great cause of the failure of former attempts to spread Christianity among them.” Distant missionary work focused on white frontier settlers and Indians, while missionary work closer to home dealt with converting slaves. Their second point of emphasis included “the instruction of the negroes, the poor and those who are destitute of the means of grace in various parts of this extensive country.” These Presbyterians drew a straight line between access to the gospel and virtuous living. They described the unchurched by remarking on their “immorality and profaneness, their vices and dissoluteness of manners.” The final two goals of this committee included “purchasing and disposing of bibles and… short essays on the great principles of religion and morality,” as well as improving the education of


54 Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its Organization A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1847), 206.

55 Ibid., 195.
ministers. To reach slaves, the General Assembly commissioned John Chavis, a black minister, as a missionary to the South. Before Chavis’s appointment, few true efforts to reach African Americans took place. In fact, Chavis marked the first real effort on the part of Presbyterians. Chavis was the right man for the job: after fighting in the Revolutionary War, he studied under John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey, graduated from Liberty Hall in Lexington, Virginia, and became the first black American ordained by the Presbyterian Church. Before receiving the call to missionary service, he ministered in Lexington and Hanover presbyteries for a year. From 1801 to 1807 Chavis itinerated throughout Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, preaching before both white and black audiences. While Chavis was commissioned to preach to members of his own race, the biracial nature of early American Christianity ensured that Chavis’s ministry reached both white and black southerners. By 1809 the General Assembly rejoiced that, “through the instrumentality of these missions… the unhappy children of Africa are also greeted with those glad tidings of salvation to which, in a Christian country, they have a peculiar claim.”

That same Assembly commissioned John Holt Rice as “a missionary for three months to the blacks in Charlotte county, Virginia, and parts adjacent.” Rice’s work was valued so highly that he delivered the opening sermon at the next General Assembly, and his appointment was

56 Ibid., 195-196.


59 Ibid., 427.
renewed.\textsuperscript{60} Nearly every annual meeting of the General Assembly included celebrations like this, as in 1810, when the Assembly remarked, “the heart of the savage has been melted by the all-subsuming grace of God.”\textsuperscript{61} In 1811 the Assembly rejoiced at the formation of an African American Presbyterian congregation in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{62} But it is misleading to assume that African Americans required separate evangelists. As early American churches were often biracial, evangelists to white Americans reached black Americans and vice versa. Black Americans also contributed to the missionary efforts of the Baptist General Conference. Luther Rice reported in 1814 that African Americans in Sunbury, Georgia, and Washington D.C. contributed to the emerging international missionary fund. In fact, the donation from the black Americans in Sunbury so impressed Rice that he affixed a note to his report:

\begin{quote}
I am not satisfied with simply mentioning this donation. These blacks were professors of religion. They had voluntarily rowed me several miles in a boat, when, instead of receiving compensation which I offered them for their services, they, understanding something of the nature of my business, gave me their willing contribution. I thought of the widow’s two mites, and the Savior’s approbation.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

Of all of the early northern missionary societies, none focused more intently on reaching black Americans than Samuel Hopkins’s Missionary Society of Rhode Island (MSRI). It is not surprising given Hopkins’s unusual track record as a dogged opponent of slavery in the eighteenth century. The constitution of the MSRI, adopted in 1803, unfairly criticized other missionary societies for ignoring the plight of blacks, claiming “nor by any missionary society in

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 433, 450.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 443.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 482.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 27-31
the country has any attention been paid to the condition of Africans.” The passion of the MSRI for biracial ministry led the officers to mischaracterize efforts made by others, but their zeal is illustrative of the importance they placed on the endeavor. The officers described the goals of their society as “to promote the gospel in any part of the state where there may be opportunity for it and to assist Africans in coming to the knowledge of the truth in any way which may consist with our means and advantages.”

Hopkins died only a few months later, however, and the MSRI failed to take action.

The biracial nature of early American conversionist Christianity inhibited the development of the hardened scientific racism of the later antebellum era, and these more pliant understandings of race further encouraged antislavery sentiments. The letters and diaries of conversionist ministers illustrate the similarities in how ministers understood their ministry to white and black Americans. A close reading of Francis Asbury’s diary reveals the biracial nature of early evangelicalism, as there is no discernable difference between the texts that Asbury chose for white or black audiences. In three sermons delivered to a collection of exclusively black audiences, Asbury preached on Hebrews 10:37, claiming that God would return to deliver the faithful; John 1:17, arguing that grace and truth have replaced the authority of the law; and Romans 1:16, explaining how the power of the Gospel is open to all races.

These emphases on God’s return, the disempowerment of law, and the availability of Gospel power to all races reveal a minister who is not deploying scripture solely as a means of preserving the standing order.

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64 Connecticut Evangelical Magazine, Volume V (April, 1803), 384.

65 The passage from Hebrews was delivered in the midst of a two hour sermon, given outside in the cold to a collection of slaves in Virginia. The other two passages were both delivered in 1794 at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.
In the spring of 1822 John Holt Rice, the learned president of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, rose to speak to a group of restless and rough sailors. His eyes passed back and forth between his notes and the faces of his audience. The faces were lean, grubby, and hardened from years of sea spray and sunlight. A momentary panic surged through Rice as he envisioned a hostile reception to his prepared remarks. Suddenly, Rice’s mind drifted back several years and recalled a sermon he delivered standing beneath the shade of a great tree, exhorting a collection of similarly sooty-faced slaves. Instantly Rice decided to pay no heed to the notes in front of him and instead proceeded to recite selections from the sermons he had delivered years earlier to slaves. Writing several days later about his sermon to the sailors, Rice gloated to his mother, “I saw immediately that I had riveted their attention.”

The connection Rice made between slaves and sailors strongly speaks to his view of race. Rice viewed the black mind as conditioned by experience rather than innate racial difference, and his privileging class distinctions over race led him to imagine that white sailors could be reached the same way as black slaves. According to his diary, his instincts proved correct.

Other evangelicals questioned the dominant view of environmental racism. John Leland, for instance, reflected with considerable detail on the physical characteristics of black Americans. He discounted the commonly held theory that skin color was the result of climate or diet by writing, “No change is yet discernible among the negroes in Virginia, in point of color; but the children of the third and fourth generations retain as much of the jet, as their ancestors did, who were imported from Africa. The difference of climate, therefore, cannot be the cause of the difference of colors; and, as they live upon the same kind of food that the whites do, their diet cannot be the cause of a diversity of color, hair or shape.” Leland’s writings show a fascinated

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obsession with black albinos; he claimed to “have seen a few of them, and heard of others.”  
67 These fair skinned blacks simultaneously challenged and upheld racial distinctions as Leland intently noted that the hair and body shape of black albinos denoted them as clearly African.

John Leland had arrived in Virginia in 1776 and itinerated throughout the central Piedmont, building a strong base in the north-central counties of Orange, Spotsylvania, and Culpepper. After a ministry of fourteen years, he claimed to have “baptized seven hundred persons” and “preached about three thousand sermons.”  
68 In addition to preaching, Leland led the Baptists in the successful fight to disestablish the Episcopal Church and, as compelling recent scholarship has shown, likely proved decisive in persuading residents of Orange and Culpeper counties to support the nomination of James Madison to Virginia’s ratification convention.  
69 During campaigns for disestablishment and constitutional ratification, Leland collaborated with Madison and Thomas Jefferson, earning a reputation as an influential spokesman for the burgeoning Baptists. When Leland arrived in Virginia, Baptists ministers were regularly jailed for preaching without a license. By the time he returned to his native Massachusetts, he had helped to redefine the relationship between religion and politics as well as created a network of Baptist churches that continued to grow into the nineteenth century.

While Leland’s lifelong cause was that of religious liberty, he did care deeply about the plight of slaves. Upon leaving Virginia in 1791, he reproduced and amplified his earlier attacks on slavery, writing that even “in its best appearance, [it] is a violent deprivation of the rights of


nature, inconsistent with republican government, destructive of every humane and benevolent
passion of the soul, and subversive to that liberty absolutely necessary to ennoble the human
mind.”

It was, however, his reputation for leadership rather than his committed ideological
opposition to slavery that earned him the role of draftsman for the 1789 Baptist resolution
against slavery. Leland’s pen, operating under the authority of the Virginia Baptist General
Committee, challenged other religious bodies to “make use of every legal measure to extirpate
this horrid evil from the land.” Moreover, the resolution prayed that “our honorable legislature
may have it in their power to proclaim the great Jubilee, consistent with the principles of good
policy.”

John Leland read scripture intensely and maintained a lifelong aversion to slavery. His
inability to find explicit biblical condemnation of slavery was, however, matched with his
readiness to apply general Christian principles against the system. Leland spoke about slavery as
“a violent deprivation” and as “destructive of every humane and benevolent passion.” He likened
the American blacks to Old Testament Israelites and imagined Moses leading black slaves to
liberty just as he did for the Israelites. Leland continued to use Biblical imagery to imagine a
“halcyon day” when slaves will “march out of bondage.”

Despite Leland’s antislavery
sympathies, he never again pressured a legislature for emancipation. In fact, as the nineteenth
century progressed, Leland’s antipathy for slavery was replaced by an antipathy for New
England abolitionists. Leland held fast to a commitment to conversionist antislavery, trusting in a
millennial emancipatory moment and doubting the political nature of abolitionism. The


increasingly confrontational activism of abolitionists was at best a distraction from the holy work of conversionist antislavery and at worst a dangerous encouragement of violence.

Conversionist antislavery was a dead end, but if we are to understand the ways that men and women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries understood the problem of slavery and its potential solutions, we must account for ideologies of conversionist causation. Despite the inability of conversionism to mount a serious challenge to slavery in the era, conversionism did inaugurate a consolidation of religious authority that ultimately created the infrastructure for the kinds of coercive reform that developed in the antebellum era. The imperatives of conversion in post-Revolutionary America required a new approach to evangelism. The millennium still loomed, but to bring the kingdom of God into reality, Americans would have to create new structures to meet the changing realities of the new nation. In so doing, they transformed both the nation and the fight against slavery.
Many of the nation’s so-called founding fathers invoked the specter of slavery to justify their rebellion, but few called for the liberation of the real slaves in their midst. This fact was not lost on Samuel Johnson, as he asked, “Why is it the drivers of negroes who issue the loudest yelps for liberty?” The works of the founders are well known and often quoted, even displayed at civic shrines for the admiration of tourists. In the iconic year of 1776, Samuel Hopkins, a Congregationalist minister in Newport, Rhode Island, published his own defense of human freedom. But while Thomas Jefferson’s declaration of independence lies behind six inches of glass as a civic shrine read by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year, Hopkins’s essay is unknown to all but the most assiduous students of American history. The American Revolution was a time of tremendous paradox. Men like Thomas Jefferson produced stirring words that have stood as the building blocks of modern liberty while simultaneously owning enslaved persons. Others, like Samuel Hopkins, harnessed the energies of the Revolutionary era, what Bernard Bailyn most memorably termed “the contagion of liberty,” into a movement for the abolition of slavery.¹ As this contagion spread throughout the new nation, old systems of deference and oppression tottered. Yet the most egregious system of oppression remained.

A number of Americans sought to topple this system, and while conversionism captured the imagination of the majority of these antislavery Americans, a rival impulse— that of purification— provided an alternative antislavery model. Religious bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like religious bodies throughout time, struggled to balance the imperatives of religious conversion with the need to maintain discipline within their communities. Religious leaders struggled to manage the tension between looking without and within, growing or purging, evangelism or discipleship. These competing impulses informed different responses to the problem of slavery. While conversionists sought to destroy slavery through the millennial expansion of salvation outside their congregations, other antislavery Christians looked within, laboring to purify their own communities of slavery’s stain. This chapter unfolds the world of early American purificationist antislavery through three case studies. The first case analyzes the most consistent opponents of antislavery in the era, the Quakers. Reformers in the mid to late eighteenth century encouraged Quakers to strengthen their prophetic voice of protest, but others contested these reforming impulses, and the community of Friends struggled to maintain unity. Antislavery became a means by which the Society of Friends held their church together despite intense friction. But the Quaker Reformation of the eighteenth century left the Society of Friends as a marginal, often persecuted sect.

The American Revolution further weakened Quaker claims to power. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, both religious and secular leaders struggled to reconcile the new language of liberty with the institution of slavery. We see this most clearly in the second case, that of Congregationalist theologian and minister Samuel Hopkins, who utilized the rhetoric of revolution to mount an assault on the slave trade, and he did so in the immediate shadow of powerful and profitable local mercantile interests in his home of Newport, Rhode Island.
Through a series of tracts and treatises published in the middle of the eighteenth century Hopkins developed a powerful reputation as a formidable theological thinker. But his commitment to Calvinist theology ultimately muted the effectiveness of his antislavery appeal. The heirs to the Great Awakening slowly moved away from the rigors of Calvinism, and new voices in the South and West proved to better capture the national consciousness in the era. These evangelicals serve as the third case of purificationist antislavery. Southern evangelicals mounted a short-lived challenge to the slave system, as both the Baptists and Methodists issued condemnations of the practice and excluded slaveholders from active religious fellowship. In a tumultuous time of Revolution, religious leaders north and south, from denominations expanding and contracting, processed revolutionary hostility to slavery in terms colored by geographic location and religious values. The revolutionary language of liberty combined with the values of late-eighteenth-century religion to ignite a purificationist purge of slavery in the newly independent United States.

Purification and the Quaker Reformation

Christopher Leslie Brown begins his study of the British antislavery movement by describing a rift between British evangelicals and Quakers. Whereas British evangelicals sought to transform society through both the ballot box and conversion campaigns, Quakers were more introspective and committed to purifying their own fellowship rather than attracting converts. Brown correctly traces this Quaker introspection to what has been referred to as the Quaker Reformation, a watershed development in the history of the movement that transformed the Society of Friends from a small, scattered community that exerted considerable influence in Pennsylvania into a globally informed sectarian counter-cultural movement. The Quaker
Reformation commenced as Friends relinquished their power in the colonial Pennsylvania government in the 1750s and sought instead to focus their attention inward by tightening Quaker disciplinary policies across the Atlantic World. Fearful that too much worldly success might overshadow their spiritual commitments, Pennsylvania Quakers withdrew from prominent positions in civil government, a process accelerated by the Seven Years’ War. Quaker commitments to pacifism had always made it difficult for Friends to hold positions of civil power during periods of war. But this Reformation was not uncontested, and it affected far more Quakers than those holding office. Reformers called all Quakers to renew their commitment to the Holy Experiment, to live lives of quiet contemplation coupled with renewed prophetic activism. Quakers were called to commit to increased discipline with regard to a host of moral issues ranging from honesty to guarded parenthood to material asceticism. A period of communal cleansing reduced the ranks of the Society, allowing many marginal Quakers to drift away to other sects, while simultaneously emboldening those who remained. The smaller, more committed group emerged with a zealous belief in their moral purity, and Quaker identity became increasingly connected to adherence to these reforming principles. This perception of newly enhanced purity gave the Quakers greater confidence in speaking out on a range of moral questions, the most important of which became the crusade to abolish the slave trade and, later, slavery itself. By the end of the eighteenth century, it became nearly impossible to maintain active membership in a Quaker meeting while holding slaves. The purificationist impulse had worked within the Society of Friends, and slavery all but vanished from Quaker communities.
Historians have done well in chronicling the Quaker Reformation, and the work of Jack Marietta stands out among many excellent studies that describe the fraught process of reform. But an underemphasized component of the Quaker Reformation stands as an interesting corollary to Brown’s study of British antislavery. Brown carefully demonstrates the persistent influence of American Quakers in motivating British antislavery, but it was British Quakers who proved to be some of the most important encouragements in the spread of the American Quaker Reformation. Many could be highlighted here, but of particular importance to this story of purificationist antislavery is John Storer, a British Quaker who traveled to North America in 1759 with the goal of encouraging Americans Quakers in their Reformation. Pennsylvania Quaker George Churchman praised the English visitor’s ministry in his journal: “Storer attended our meeting at West Nottingham to much satisfaction. His doctrine clear to the state of things and very close. I have no doubt but his mission to America in the present circumstance of our Society was from divine wisdom, and surely the cause of truth is rather in an advancing state.” Storer also earned the praise of the great Quaker mystic John Woolman when the two worked together to advance the antislavery cause. In early May 1760 the two met in Newport, Rhode Island, the principal port for slave trade activity in eighteenth-century British North America. Woolman felt tortured by the continuation of the slave trade, a feeling amplified by his time spent in Newport. Inspired by this agitation, Woolman hoped to present a self-penned essay against the slave trade to the state legislature. Local Quakers dissuaded him from this plan, pressing him to instead look within and purify the local community by encouraging Friends to emancipate their slaves.

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3 November 22-23, 1759, George Churchman diary, Quaker Collection. Haverford College
Woolman complied but soon grew distressed as several respected Newport Quaker elders refused to free their slaves. Woolman turned to Storer for help, and the two quietly and patiently confronted these elders to press for emancipation. Following the meeting, Woolman rejoiced, confident that “a good exercise was spreading among them,” and that slavery would soon disappear from the community of Friends in Newport.⁴

Many other British travelers mimicked Storer and crossed the Atlantic to embolden American Friends. John Stephenson, another British visitor to North America in 1760, delivered a warning to the members of the Nottingham Meting, just outside of Philadelphia. According to George Churchman, Stephenson spoke in a “lively manner” on the danger that comes both to the individual and to the wider faith community when Quakers have not fully subsumed their selfish inclinations.⁵ Stephenson boldly condemned American Quaker sins throughout his trip, telling the Nottingham meeting that they had “grown bulky and had need of sifting.”⁶ Several decades later, Samuel Spavold left England to travel to the United States. Spavold diagnosed a sickness in the American Quaker community, reporting that “the camp must be cleansed.” Spavold encouraged his American brethren to continue their purification mission but warned them “against driving too fast” for “it would take time.”⁷ As shown by the examples of Storer, Stevenson, and Spavold, British Quaker agitation supported nearly every step of the American Quaker Reformation. With the support of well-respected Friends across the Atlantic, American Quakers began to dream of a better church.

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⁵ November 22, 1760, George Churchman diary, Quaker Collection. Haverford College.
⁶ February 15, 1761, Ibid.
⁷ 1798 nd. John Parrish diary, Quaker Collection. Haverford College.
And dreams played a significant role in Quaker life and culture, as historian Carla Gerona has described. “Quakers used their dreamwork,” Gerona argues, “sometimes loosely and sometime literally, to construct maps of the future,” and one particular vision of respected reformer John Churchman, the father of George Churchman, illustrates the desire for purification and the way in which dreams were used to prompt action.⁸ On November 19, 1760, Churchman experienced a remarkable vision of “a large company of children receiving or coming forward with even steps in a beautiful way, in similar apparel, or all in a clean decent dress of a dove-like color.”⁹ In discussing this vision with his son, Churchman interpreted the dream as “appertaining to the future state of the Church or her redeemed member after a time of purification.” The themes of purification and wholesome children echo throughout much of the Quaker Reformation, and dreams like Churchman’s informed the motivation and the tactics of Quaker antislavery. In particular, the image of children supplied an appropriate rationale for the inclusion of female Quakers in reform movements.¹⁰

The doctrine that fed the Quaker Reformation circulated decades before the movement began in the mid eighteenth century. In 1720 British Quaker Thomas Chalkley offered perhaps the most succinct distillation of the doctrine that later informed the movement: “Christ says, ‘be ye perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect,’ as he is perfect in fullness so we are to be perfect according to the measure of grace received. This faith and belief is much wanting in this unbelieving generation, which is the reason that people remain in their sins, and the peoples

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⁹ November 19, 1760, George Churchman diary.

leaders cause them to err, and their ministers minister in their sin, and minister sin to the people.” On the very next page, Chalkley expects that many will balk, that some teachers might say, “the best saints cannot live without sin, and that people sin in their best duties.” He unflinchingly claims that those who utter these claims “mock the Almighty,” and “they will be much mistaken in the day of the righteous judgment of God.” Chalkley and the reformers who came decades after him expected perfection, required intense discipline, and shared commitment to purifying the community. Chalkley believed that his times were auspicious, that the day he and his follow Quakers shared “is no day for sin.”

Chalkley published his call for purification in 1747, after which Quakers throughout the Atlantic World reprinted the text and employed his message as a powerful argument for reformation.

With the exception of a small number of evangelically minded itinerants like Stephen Grellet, American Quakers did not actively seek converts. American Friends instead relied primarily on generational turnover as the means by which the flock would grow, and this emphasis on nurturing faithful children fueled the emphasis on purification. Influential minister John Fothergill emphasized the seriousness that Quaker youths must exhibit towards their faith, writing, “I fully believe one great hindrance to the growth of our youth in true Godliness is the want of that true spiritual mindedness which ought to be regarded by all, but in an especial manner by the elder and more knowing.”

With childrearing central to the maintenance of American Quakerism, female Friends stepped up to take on greater roles in shaping Quaker antislavery practice. Elizabeth Wilkinson, a

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12 John Fothergill, An account of the life and travels, in the work of the ministry, of John Fothergill: To which are added, divers epistles to friends in Great-Britain and America, on various occasions (Philadelphia: reprinted by James Chattin, 1754), 3.
British Quaker who traveled to northern Virginia in the early 1760s, fretted that slave-ownership prevented parents from raising their children properly. At a meeting held just outside of Petersberg, Wilkinson advised Quakers who delayed in freeing their slaves to at least require “servants and negroes to call their children by the names they had given them and not master and mistress.” Wilkinson and many others feared that children raised around slaves would be filled with pride and other perhaps more dangerous sins. Having saved her harshest language for women, Wilkinson berated the attendees of a women’s meeting in Nantucket, blaming them in part for the “many hurtful things [that] had crept into the society.” Questioning the women’s ability to maintain Quaker identity, she challenged all “to look well to their own families each one, so that a reformation might be begun by the present generation.” Wilkinson directed her ministry primarily at parents, conquering her own “great fear” in order to give “a few words to parents concerning the education of their children in reading the Holy Scriptures.” Wilkinson continued trumpeting this message at a Philadelphia meeting in 1763, joining fellow British itinerant Quaker Hannah Harris. According to George Churchman, the pair “appeared to have excellent services as trumpeters divinely gifted for sounding an alarm, in the borders of Zion and for movingly inviting her sons and daughters to arise, shake off the dust of the Earth, and thus to prepare for beginning to repair the wall broken down, through the backsliding of their predecessors and themselves in the day of ease and outward prosperity.”

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13 January 5 1762, Elizabeth Wilkinson Journal, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.
14 July 27, 1762, Ibid.
15 October 18, 1762, Ibid.
16 February 7, 1763, George Churchman diary.
winnowing continued, and women as well as men sounded the call to protect the next generation of Quakers from the dangers of slave-holding.

Reformers warned that slavery threatened to destroy Quaker children. While ministering to Virginia Quakers in 1788, Job Scott wrote to his wife, “Negro slavery has almost ruined this country, both as to religion and the outward soil of the earth.” The primary problem with slavery, according to Scott’s observations of Alexandria, Virginia, was that “Friends’ children have been brought up in idleness.” Unlike the children of “happy New England” who “have to do for themselves and are not so generally endangered by that idleness,” children in the South were “scarcely called on to do an hour’s business of any kind. From infancy to settlement in families of their own, they have spent much of their time in riding about for pleasure. The consequence has been almost the extinction of society.” Scott and other antislavery Quakers argued that the effects of slavery brought religion into “almost desolate states.” 17 During this same trip, Scott found others who had not suffered the scourge of slavery to such an extent. While still ministering in northern Virginia, Scott rejoiced over “a glorious meeting” held “in Friends’ meeting-house, but mostly among such as were not friends, many of them called Methodists, a people that abound in this land, and some of their hearts have been touched with a live coal from the holy altar.” He found the Methodists to be “unsettled, many having hurried forward into much religious activity,” but he nonetheless rejoiced that “some of them will come to a settlement in the truth.” 18 Scott’s Quaker partisanship kept him suspicious of Methodist enthusiasm, but when compared to the despair at slaveholding Quakers, he seemed to privilege moral purity over doctrinal orthodoxy. When meeting with slaveholding Quakers, Scott seemed


to “suffer almost unto death, and it then seems as if we could scarcely get along much further.”

Among Methodists, however, he rejoiced that “this day, in a special manner, the streams of life flowed plentifully and sweetly to my great satisfaction and comfort and to the refreshment of many minds.”

Quakers, even those Friends who desired to attract converts, privileged purity over evangelism. On a 1754 trip to spread the message of salvation to Virginia frontier settlements, John Fothergill traveled to North America in 1754 with the expectation of growing the Quaker church. He made a trip to frontier settlements in Virginia but failed to spread the message of salvation. His explanation for this failure exemplifies how Quakers often understood purity and conversion to be closely related, if not inextricably bound. Fothergill claimed that though the “meeting house in Surry County was pretty large,” the impiety of this community prevented their further growth, as the “want of living to the Truth, stood in the way of the Gospel Life and hindered its prevalency among the people.”

Living to the Truth required a purified community. According to Fothergill, unless these Virginia Quakers first purified their congregation, growth would remain impossible.

British Quaker Benjamin Holme, though unable to travel to North America, nonetheless concerned himself greatly with the success and holiness of American Quakers. Like others, he emphasized the importance of purity, encouraging an uncompromising discipline among American Friends. Holme framed purification as essential for the Quaker witness, suggesting in his “epistle to Friends in America” that “where any make profession with us are likely to be

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20 *Journal of Job Scott*, 215.
drawn away with loose company, let them be tenderly advised and dealt with, that if possible, they may be preserved from bringing dishonor to the truth.” The stakes were high; if the weaker members of the community were “drawn away with loose company,” then the Quaker witness would suffer and the truth would be dishonored. Holme wanted conversions to grow the community, but he believed that the purity of the community was an essential precondition. Like others, Holme targeted his message to children: “I desire that you, young men and women that are growing up, may be careful to keep yourselves pure and unspotted in all respects, and it may please the Lord to anoint many of you to preach the gospel of life and salvation to many people.” There could be no higher calling than to “preach the gospel of life and salvation,” but to do so, the youth of the church would have to first work to keep themselves “pure and unspotted.”

For some Quakers, adding members to the society was less a reason for celebration and more a cause for alarm. When ministering in New York, Elizabeth Wilkinson chastised Quakers about their recent success in recruiting new members. As she wrote in her journal, “I apprehended it my duty to caution our Society that they were spreading in the Land.” For Wilkinson, the desire to see Quakers fully purified led her to warn against attracting novice converts who might become “stumbling blocks to any inquirers.” The strength of the Quaker witness would come from the community’s unique purity, and nothing, not even generating new converts, should jeopardize that. John Churchman’s commitment to purity pressed him to sacrifice opportunities for evangelization if it meant inconsistency with his moral code. Despite feeling a tremendous calling to minister in Barbados, Churchman refused to travel when he could only find passage on warships. While Churchman was sure that God was moving in the

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23 May 10, 1762, Elizabeth Wilkinson diary.
Caribbean and that he could be a part of a great and holy work, he would not sacrifice his uncompromising commitment to pacifism. Conversions mattered for nearly all of this era’s religious Americans, but for some, holy living mattered even more.

Christopher Brown and others understand early antislavery as a continuation of these reforming impulses, as “the Quaker turn against slavery represented an assertion of collective identity, a refinement of what it meant to be a member of the Society of Friends.” But the practical process of the Quaker Reformation played a role in the tactics employed by Friends. According to Brown, “in its origins and its character the drive for purity directed the Quakers inward, away from the world rather than outward and into public canvassing for abolition and emancipation.” These issues of reformation and purification held great importance for Quakers in the middle decades of the eighteenth century.

However, by the early nineteenth century, the reformers had been triumphant for decades. David Brion Davis acknowledges a shift within Quakerism away from the reforming generation by writing that “the second phase of Quaker revivalism came closer to the evangelicalism of the major Protestant denominations, and coincided with Quaker efforts to enlist outsiders in various benevolent causes.” Davis includes Stephen Grellet in this camp along with Rebecca Jones, William Savery, and Elizabeth Gurney (later Fry). Although he distinguishes this second generation from their elders, Davis does not develop his generational thesis. Instead, he quickly moves on to describing the transnational networks of reform established by the previous generation. Davis’s single undeveloped sentence offers remarkable interpretive utility for

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24 November 26, 1760, George Churchman diary.


historians of Quakerism and slavery. A closer look at reformers like Stephen Grellet reveals that several generations of post-reformation Friends were less sectarian and accordingly more like their fellow evangelical reformers. As a convert and foreign missionary, this ecumenical orientation was all the more pronounced for Grellet.

At the same time that reformers like Grellet looked to extend the Quaker witness beyond the society, others worked to maintain the unity of an increasingly fractured church. Fault lines appeared as the democratic impulses of the American Revolution strained the authority of Quaker leaders. A new generation balked at the authority of older reformers, calling for heightened congregational independence by appealing to traditional Quaker respect for the sovereignty of the inner light. The Meetings for Sufferings in New York and Pennsylvania became the primary battleground as these younger reformers challenged the authority of older, orthodox reformers who sought to maintain the Quaker coalition. While reformers used these Meetings as tools to enforce reformation discipline, they also became an important coordinating space for Quaker antislavery activism, and that was one issue where reformers and their opponents, young and old, largely agreed. In fact, in the midst of rising contentions over the legacy of the reformation, antislavery became an essential point of unity, holding the Society together even as serious divisions sought to wrench it apart for several decades. Quaker antislavery was not merely a means of continuing the Reformation; rather, by the late eighteenth century, it also became a means of ameliorating ongoing reformation tensions.

A 1787 letter from Moses Brown of Rhode Island to the influential Pennsylvania Quaker leader James Pemberton highlights the multiple ways that antislavery functioned in the Society. Brown, lamenting the current state of Quakerism, found that, “Some of us need to be more in the

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Oneness.” The impulse to continue reform strained Quaker unity, pushing some Friends to reject attempts to consolidate authority in the church. But despite these problems, Brown rejoiced that there was at least one issue “where we seem to be happily united; that is the stopping of the African Slave Trade.” Unified in their antislavery stance, Quakers in post-Revolutionary Rhode Island united in an attempt to pressure state lawmakers. When ecclesiastical divisions and theological fissures threatened Quaker unity in the late eighteenth century, the antislavery cause took on an even greater importance, preserving the community of Friends.

The purificationist antislavery of some like John Parrish led to open confrontations with slaveholding Quakers, an intimidating prospect for those Friends who still clung to their slaves. In an undated letter to James Thornton, Parrish informed him that he was traveling to Maryland with a prospect of “taking some meetings on the Western Shore and spending some time at Annapolis with the assembly on account of the oppressed Africans before the Yearly Meeting comes on.” By 1806 Parrish believed that his work had been so successful that he began to turn his antislavery ministry outward, beyond the community of Friends. Parrish directed his Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People to “inhabitants of the land of my nativity,” describing slavery as “a national evil.” This focus on slavery in a wider national context, rather than on a local community level, marked an important shift in Quaker antislavery. Even as Quaker antislavery grew more national, the purifying spirit remained. Parrish and other reformers brought the legacy of the reformation with them.

28 Letter, Moses Brown to John Pemberton, November 13, 1787, Moses Brown Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

29 Letter, no date, John Parrish to James Thornton, John Parrish papers, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

30 John Parrish, Remarks on the slavery of the black people, addressed to the citizens of the United States, particularly to those who are in legislative or executive stations in the general or state governments; and also to such individuals as hold them in bondage (Philadelphia: Kimber, Conrad, & Co., 1806), 3.
The newly formed American republic made a perfect target as Quakers sought to extend the purification campaign outward. To do so, however, required new allies. American Friends found a perfect candidate in perhaps the unlikeliest of all places: Newport, Rhode Island. Much like John Woolman nearly a half century earlier, the prevalence of slavery in Newport thoroughly disgusted John Parrish, who called the cosmopolitan port “a dark place and on the decline at present.” He did find some “valuable friends residing there,” but was most excited to make the acquaintance of “a veritable aged Presbyterian parson.” This famous minister was well known to Parrish and others throughout the Atlantic World for his work as “a warm advocate for the liberation of the black people as well as for stopping the trade.” While their theologies diverged wildly, the two shared a commitment to purge the new republic’s sins, and both appealed to the discourse of purification to do so. Parrish rejoiced after the meeting, which he believed “was to our mutual satisfaction.”

This minister was no Presbyterian, but rather the prominent theologian and antislavery advocate Samuel Hopkins.

The Nationalist Purification of Samuel Hopkins

Samuel Hopkins returned the affection of John Parrish, having glowingly written fifteen years earlier, “The Quakers, who have done more than any others to acquit themselves of the guilt of the slave trade, and have discovered more humanity and regard to the laws of Christ, in [the antislavery struggle], than any other denomination of Christians.” Unlike John Parrish, Samuel Hopkins did not have the denominational support of a deep commitment to antislavery activism. His conversion to antislavery did not come from a position of denominational unity,

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31 1798, no date, Diary of John Parrish.

32 Hopkins, Works, 622.
but rather from a place of denominational rivalry. Hopkins first made a name for himself as a theological troublemaker and continued to ruffle Congregationalist clergymen with his theological creativity and commitment to social justice. From a frontier theologian to the most active antislavery divine in the new nation, Samuel Hopkins developed a new theology of social reform that both reflected and shaped the contested meaning of Thomas Jefferson’s declaration.

Samuel Hopkins came of age as the fires of the Great Awakening swept through New England, energizing both the clergy and the laity in a frenzy of emotional enthusiasm and theological debate. These energies opened several rifts among the Congregationalist clergy as competing camps sought to purify the ministry from theological error. One such rift involved debates over the meaning of the covenant. Calvinists had long battled over the relationship between divine sovereignty and human agency, and the theological energies inaugurated by the revivals pushed the New Light clergy into an increasingly uncompromising interpretation of the covenant as entirely unconditional, independent of all human action. Old Light clergymen, inspired by the spread of Arminianism, sought to preserve a place for human action, interpreting the covenant as a contractual relationship between God and man. While God performed the spiritual work in this contract, human beings were required to fulfill their end of the bargain by preparing themselves for conversion and working out their faith through benevolent living. For the moderate Old Lights, divine action was always the primary cause, but divine action might be prompted by the conditions of human behavior.

As the flames of revival slowly receded in New England, the momentum appeared to shift as anti-Trinitarian tracts attracted the attention and alarm of New Light clergymen during the 1750s. Jonathan Mayhew in Boston and Thomas Emlyn in London and then Dublin both produced anti-Trinitarian works that were widely distributed throughout New England, inspiring
great concern. New Light revivalists were appalled, and even Old Light ministers could not
countenance these doctrines. The Old Light response, however, placed greater emphasis on unity
than on orthodoxy. Ezra Stiles responded with *A Discourse on Christian Union*, urging caution
and quiet personal persuasion rather than public denunciation. In the face of this Old Light
refusal to root out heresy, New Light ministers claimed the mantle of doctrinal leadership for
themselves. New Lights not only attacked the anti-Trinitarian heresy but also targeted Old Light
divines who refused to take an exclusivist position. Jonathan Edwards took the lead in combating
the anti-Trinitarian works, while a younger generation led by Samuel Hopkins and Joseph
Bellamy targeted the spreading sympathy for Arminian theology.

Anti-Trinitarianism was a sensational opponent, but the radical theology never gathered
consequential support among the New England clergy. Arminianism was the true threat as
several prominent clergymen became increasingly comfortable in questioning the traditional
interpretations of Calvinist theology. Charles Dana’s ordination as minister at First Church of
Wallingford, Connecticut, inaugurated the first major battle. Dana refused to offer a confession
of faith or to be examined by a consociation of clergymen. A warning call for the New Lights,
the Dana episode inspired Joseph Bellamy to spearhead a pamphlet campaign warning of
spreading heresy. This controversy paled in comparison to the firestorm caused by Samuel
Webster’s 1757 tract on original sin, wherein he claimed that “the notion of our having sinned in

33 Jonathan Mayhew, *Seven Sermons Upon the Following Subjects*… (Boston: Rodgers and Fowle, 1749); Thomas Emlyn, *An Humble Inquiry in the Scripture-Account of Jesus Christ* (London: 1756). Emlyn’s work was written in 1702 but did not achieve major attention in New England until well after his death in 1741.


Adam, and being on that account only liable to eternal Damnation, is proved unscriptural.”

Rebuttals poured in from the countryside, but the most substantive and radical came from a fresh voice in the eighteenth-century frontier town of Housatonic, Massachusetts, that of Samuel Hopkins.

Hopkins’s first major work, *Sin, thro’ Divine Interposition, an advantage to the Universe*, addressed more than the question of sin, establishing a new and radical position on divine sovereignty. Challenging even many of his fellow New Lights, Hopkins interpreted human sin as divinely ordained. Most consistent Calvinists, as the Congregationalist New Light theologians liked to style themselves, claimed that God *allowed or gave permission* for sin. Hopkins believed that this focus on permission was too passive, implying that another force directed events in addition to the will of God. Hopkins offered his own interpretation of sin, arguing that it is a component of God’s will and a tool that God actively used for the betterment of creation. This focus on God’s sovereignty was best captured by Hopkins’s claim, “God is supreme. He is in the heavens, and hath done whatsoever pleased him.” Hopkins asserted that if sin was not an integral aspect of God’s “goodness, holiness, and his revealed will, then the permission of sin is a dark and unaccountable affair to us indeed, and we cannot be reconciled to it, or justify God.”

Sin was an integral component of God’s plan and not something he simply allowed. Others had written that God was able to manipulate sin into something positive, but Hopkins went further by believing sin to be an integral and inherent component of God’s plan. For example, as Hopkins explained it, “the sin of man is the occasion of these new heavens and new earth; for the glory of

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36 Samuel Webster, *A Winter’ Evening’s Coversation upon the Doctrine of Original Sin...* (Boston: 1759).


Christ and his works could not have been, had not sin took place."\(^3^9\) After his initial foray into the public sphere, Hopkins followed *Sin, thro’ Divine Interposition* with numerous other works, all reinforcing his view of absolute divine sovereignty.\(^4^0\)

His second pamphlet, fueled by contemporary religious upheaval, took on questions of history. With the fears of theological heterodoxy still animating many New Englanders, Hopkins offered assurance that God controlled even the most heretical happenings and that the present controversies would not threaten the millennial workings of providence. Hopkins and nearly all of his readers fervently believed that recent debates engendered by revivals foreshadowed Christ’s immanent return and the transformation of this earthly world. The rising tide of Arminianism threatened this narrative, but Hopkins pushed his disheartened readers to focus on purification rather than despair. Defending his doctrine of divine sovereignty against accusations that it was merely a celebration of sin, Hopkins took up the work of his mentor Jonathan Edwards and directed his attention to the nature of holiness.

Hopkins found that disputes over the nature of holiness motivated the major religious controversies of the 1760s and 1770s. Whereas others defined holiness as “that which is opposite to sin,” Hopkins emphasized the law, claiming, “we must first know what holiness, or which is the same, what divine law is, in order to the knowledge of sin.”\(^4^1\) Sin, for Hopkins, remained a part of God’s divine plan, making it both more and less than the antithesis of holiness. Informing the controversies over holiness were shifting definitions of self-love. Liberal Calvinists drew on recent trends in moral philosophy, using the concept of self-love as inspiration for moral living.


Instead of berating selfishness, these ministers praised an enlightened self-interest that demonstrated how righteousness benefitted both earthly and heavenly pursuits. For consistent Calvinists like Samuel Hopkins, these doctrines raised alarm bells. William Hart, an Old Light from Connecticut who nearly made a career out of antagonizing Hopkins, offered the most potent articulations of the liberal position, particularly in his 1771 assault on Jonathan Edward’s widely read *Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue*.42 While Edwards emphasized benevolence toward “Being in general” as the root of all virtue, Hart labeled Edwards’s conception of “Being in general” as the worship of an ethereal idol. (Hart, like many of his contemporaries, struggled to keep up with Edwards’s creative metaphysical system.) Seeking to replace “Being in general” with an accessible system of ethics, Hart located virtue in the pursuit of practical religion.

Hopkins saw himself as a faithful defender of Edwards’s true theology, but, in reality, he had moved well beyond his mentor. Edwards granted self-love a role in what he termed “secondary virtue,” whereas Hopkins relegated all manifestations of self-love as sinful, embracing instead the ideal of disinterested benevolence.43 Best understood as a rejection of self-love and an embrace of unselfishness, disinterested benevolence was a virtue Hopkins found sorely wanting in the world around him, particularly after his relocation to Newport. This virtue provided an ethic for social reform within the New Divinity, allowing Hopkins to condemn William Hart’s doctrine of enlightened self-interest while still providing his own practical

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religion of virtue. Hopkins put his social ethic to quick use, as only three years after he advanced the value of disinterested benevolence, he began his public assault on the slave trade.

The bulk of Hopkins’s 1776 abolitionist pamphlet drew heavily on the context of the American Revolution. Embracing the spirit of the Revolution, Hopkins interpreted his ministerial position as necessitating the guidance of the recently independent nation’s religious destiny. To direct these states toward their holy fate, he deployed the rhetoric of providential nationalism to purify the republic of sin. Hopkins labeled the Revolution as a providential message that condemned the sin of slavery: “God has raised up men to attempt to deprive us of liberty, and the evil we are threatened with is slavery.”44 “This whole contest,” Hopkins wrote in reference to the Revolution, “was suited to bring and keep in our view, and impress on our minds, a deep and lasting sense of the worth of liberty, and the unrighteousness of taking it from any man, and consequently, of our unrighteousness and cruelty towards the Africans.”45 Hopkins clung strongly to this providential logic after the Revolution, crediting victory to the 1774 temporary ban on the importation of slaves. Hopkins wrote in 1793, “With this resolution we entered the combat, and God appeared to be on our side, and wrought wonders in our favor, disappointed those who rose up against us, and established us a free and independent nation.”46 Yet without further progress in the abolition of slavery, Hopkins warned that divinely ordained penance was inevitable, for slavery was “a national sin, and a sin of the first magnitude—a sin which righteous Heaven has never suffered to pass unpunished in this world.”47 He carried this further

in 1787, asking “is this not Heaven frowning upon us now?” His evidence for God’s displeasure at America was plentiful, including the decline in trade, the vast public debt, the depredations of the Barbary Pirates, and “a spirit of discontent and murmuring, and jealousy of our rulers … and in some places insurrections, and open, violent opposition to government.” The struggles of the new nation, according to Hopkins, were the direct result of divine punishment for the sins of slavery.

Historians, most notably Joseph Conforti, have interpreted Hopkins’s doctrine of disinterested benevolence as a bridge between the consistent Calvinism developed in his 1760s pamphlets and his abolitionist writings of the 1770s. While disinterested benevolence did indeed provide a rationale for reform, this focus obscures two radical departures that Hopkins made in his abolitionist work. Hopkins’s abolitionist writings did not ask his readers to abandon their self-interest. Rather, he threatened that the refusal to abandon the slave trade and the system that it supported would lead to divine punishment. It is self-interest then, more than religious piety, that Hopkins emphasized. Disinterested benevolence had been replaced with the fear of divine judgment as the motivation for social reform. While Hopkins may have taken up the antislavery cause out of his own disinterested benevolence, he did not ask the same for his contemporaries. Instead, he appealed to the patriotism and the desire for self-preservation held by his readers.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the New England clergy fought intensely over the meaning of the covenant. When Old Light, liberal Calvinists sought to accentuate the role of human participation in the covenant, Hopkins and his New Light colleagues brought a barrage of sharp rebukes and asserted the unconditional nature of the covenant. Yes despite his often-uncompromising theological rigor, Hopkins’s antislavery writings appear to emphasize the role

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of human agency. In a number of antislavery writings from 1776, 1787, and 1794, Hopkins attributed God’s blessings and curses directly to human behavior. Gone was the view of sin as a divinely ordained illustration of God’s unlimited sovereignty. Instead of the divine will driving historical events independently of human action, we find a system of causation that hinged on human obedience or disobedience.

The nascent abolitionist movement and the desire to purify the new nation pulled Samuel Hopkins out of his study and into the public square. Scholars have often acknowledged the influence that Hopkins had on the revolutionary antislavery crusade, yet what has escaped the attention of historians is how the revolutionary antislavery crusade influenced Samuel Hopkins. Previous to his foray in public reform, Samuel Hopkins labored as an embattled frontier minister, defending the legacy of revivals from Arminian Congregationalists. By the end of the eighteenth century, Hopkins was a publicly engaged social reformer. Throughout this process, both his emphasis on disinterested benevolence and divine sovereignty were transformed as theological purity gave way to social purity. Hopkins’s desire to purify the new nation of slavery pushed him closer to the practical theology of virtue espoused by his theological enemies. Samuel Hopkins, the formerly abstruse frontier theologian, began a second career as an antislavery pamphleteer, searching both the scriptures and the newspapers for material to direct his campaign to purify the new nation.

The American Revolution not only gave antislavery agitators a language of liberty with which to fill pamphlets and broadsides, but it also provided the military exigencies of the conflict itself, calling into question the practicability of holding hundreds of thousands of slaves in the midst of war. As the Continental Army struggled against the British Regulars, both sides pondered the role of slaves in the conflict. Samuel Hopkins expressed concern in 1776 that
“something should speedily be done with respect to the slaves among us in order to [protect] our safety and to prevent their turning against us in our present struggle.” Several months earlier in November 1775, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, and the royal governor of Virginia, issued what would come to be known as Dunmore’s Proclamation, promising freedom for any slave who would flee to and fight for the royal forces.\textsuperscript{49} Hopkins urged caution to American revolutionaries, warning that a crackdown on slaves “will only be making bad worse, and serve to render our inconsistence, oppression, and cruelty more criminal, perspicuous, and shocking.” The only option Hopkins found acceptable was to “set the blacks at liberty ourselves by some public acts and laws, and give them proper encouragement to labor, or take arms in the defense of the American cause, as they shall choose.” This action would rectify two offenses at once, bringing about “some degree of justice, and defeating our enemies in the scheme that they are prosecuting.”\textsuperscript{50} Hopkins’s appeal to those with political power was unsuccessful, and slaves determined to seize their freedom during the war had no choice but to either escape or enlist under the Union Jack.

With the cessation of hostilities, the new nation began the precarious process of carving out its place in the world. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, Barbary pirates wreaked havoc on merchant vessels throughout the Mediterranean. American ships, no longer protected by the Royal Navy, presented a lucrative and vulnerable target to raiders. Seafaring Rhode Islanders felt the threat of the Barbary States more than most as many were held hostage in Africa. Hopkins brought the attention of his Newport congregation to the irony of white


\textsuperscript{50} Hopkins, “Dialogue,” in \textit{Works}, 584.
American captivity at the hands of Africans, lamenting the “self-contradiction in condemning these Algerines, the inhabitants of Africa,—and at the same time not condemning ourselves, who are infinitely more criminal.” Parroting scripture, Hopkins asked “why do we ‘strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel’? Why should we be so stupid and partial as to turn all our attention to these few sufferers, and wholly overlook the sufferings of so many thousands among us?”

To drive his point further, Hopkins repeatedly asked his hypothetical reader “if you, sir, had as many children in slavery at Algiers as you have African slaves in your house, would you take no pains and devise no method to obtain their liberty.” Moreover, he asked “if their master should refuse to let them go free till there was a general emancipation of the Christian slaves in that country, would you justify him as acting a proper, humane, and benevolent part?”

The irony of black pirates enslaving white Americans was not the first illustration antislavery authors used to show the injustice of coerced labor, since the impressment of sailors before and during the Revolution offered antislavery activists like Hopkins a way of linking revolutionary rhetoric with the continuation of the slave trade. The threat of impressment into the British Navy – wherein American seamen were seized and forced to fight for the crown – plagued seafaring Americans. As a major force in North American navigation, Rhode Islanders were especially aware of this danger. Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence included impressment in the list of grievances justifying revolution, complaining that King George III had “constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their

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Hands.” Hopkins played on this fear by comparing this practice to the slave trade, wondering “was it possible for us not to reflect upon our treatment of the Africans, in transporting so many thousands of them from their native country to a land of slavery, while multitudes, being crowded and shackled in our ships, have died on their passage, without one to help or pity them?”54 More common, however, than pointed comparisons to wartime experience were the frequent extensions of revolutionary rhetoric into assaults on slavery.

Besides the specific allusions to impressment, Barbary pirates, and Dunmore’s Proclamation, Hopkins seized on the irony of American revolutionaries struggling against forms of oppression from the British that American slaves would scoff at as “lighter than a feather compared to their heavy doom.”55 Hopkins interpreted this irony as a divine message in the form of the “severest test.”56 To encourage his chosen people to purge the great sin of slavery from their nation, Hopkins revealed his perceived connection between British despotism and American slavery: “God has raised up men to attempt to deprive us of liberty, and the evil we are threatened with is slavery.”57 According to Hopkins, God used British tyranny in an attempt to demonstrate the error of slavery and restore the faithful back into obedience, a narrative not unlike Hopkins’s earlier writings where God authored misfortune for similar purposes of the greater good.

Fortunately for the pious Christians of North America, the Continental Congress in 1774 resolved that, “We will neither import, nor purchase any slave imported, after the first day of

December next; after which time we will wholly discontinue the slave trade, and will neither be concerned in it ourselves, nor will we hire our vessels, nor sell our commodities or manufactures, to those who are concerned in it.” For this act of good faith toward the ultimate abolition of the institution, Hopkins believed that God had elected “to testify his well-pleasedness with that regard to righteousness and mercy” by “appearing on our side in the remarkable, extraordinary manner” necessary to throw off the chains of the British.\(^{58}\) This portrait of causation, however, was innovative for Hopkins, portraying God’s workings as relatively straightforward in the manner of a contract. Disobedience resulted in the sufferings of British tyranny, whereas obedience exercised through the suspension of the slave trade was blessed with God’s deliverance through the successful campaign for independence. Hopkins altered his view of divine sovereignty in these public writings, encouraging the new nation to take their fate into their own hands by activating God’s blessings through the abolition of slavery. The appeal is not to disinterested benevolence, but rather national interest.

While considerable reservations regarding slavery remained during the Revolution, a stronger consensus galvanized in opposition to the slave trade, as indicated by the aforementioned 1774 act of the Continental Congress. Attempting to push popular opinion further, Hopkins praised the act as “a remarkable instance of our professed regard to justice, and a wise and notable step towards a reformation of this evil.” He was unwilling to stop there, pressing for further steps as “no reason can be given for repressing the slave trade which is not equally a reason for freeing all those who have been reduced to a state of slavery by that trade.”\(^{59}\) On this point, Hopkins enjoyed less support.


When revolutionary energies waned in the early republic, the battle over slavery shifted toward religious publications as antislavery advocates opened a new battlefront over the interpretation of scripture. This battle over hermeneutics intensified throughout the antebellum decades, culminating in schism for nearly every major denomination and, according to Mark Noll, a wholesale theological crisis in the national faith. In the early years of this debate, there were few who could compete with Samuel Hopkins’s intensity of knowledge or depth of conviction. Hopkins’s early contributions to the hermeneutical debates set the agenda for later participants by dwelling at length on the genealogy of Ham, the supposedly cursed son of Noah and ancestor to all Africans. Most impressively, Hopkins was almost alone in his ability to distinguish between the practice of biblical slavery and the nature of the race-based chattel system in the United States.

Proslavery apologists drew on numerous passages of scripture that chronicle slavery without overtly denunciating the practice. In addition to dozens of Old Testament references condoning slavery, proslavery writers relied heavily on the Pauline epistles. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians admonishes “slaves to be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.” Additionally, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul asserts, “Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it.” Perhaps most often, these writers would cite Paul’s letter to Philemon, which accompanied the return of Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus, sent back into bondage by Paul himself.

Those wishing to counter these claims struggled to find equally direct passages. While most antislavery commentators relied on broad appeals to the spirit of Christianity, a few offered

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specific scriptural arguments. Proslavery apologists frequently cited the curse of Ham as justification for the enslavement of the African race. The ninth chapter of Genesis recounts the fate of Ham as he improperly viewed the nakedness of his father Noah. In response, Noah cursed Ham’s son Canaan to be a “servant of servants.” Proslavery advocates interpreted Canaan as the progenitor of the entire African race and condemned all men and women born with a drop of African blood in their veins to be divinely destined as permanent slaves. Samuel Hopkins refuted this reading entirely, claiming that Africans “are not the posterity of Canaan.”

Africans, according to Hopkins, are the son of Ham but not through Canaan. He traces their lineage through other sons of Ham, a family tree that would leave Africans outside of the curse. In a rare antislavery move, Hopkins moved further into the Old Testament to condemn slavery, drawing on several verses from the books of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

Historian Mark Noll finds that in the years preceding the Civil War, an ingrained racial ideology inhibited the Bible-believing public from distinguishing between biblical slavery and that practiced in the United States. Yet Samuel Hopkins made precisely this distinction, claiming that “the passages of Scripture under consideration … will not justify any master holding one servant in bondage against his will, so much as an hour, who has not evidently brought himself into this state by his own crimes, and been adjudged to it, after proper trial, by the civil magistrate.” As for Paul and the Apostles, they simply did not have time to examine every instance of slavery to determine if it followed this appropriate pattern. Hopkins argued that the Apostles’ refusal to condemn every instance of enslavement should not be confused with a

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63 Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis, 45-50.
wholehearted endorsement of any and all slave systems. Instead, biblical slavery would require “every one who embraced Christianity and had slaves” to “undergo a strict examination, and be obliged to dismiss his servants unless he could produce good evidence that they had forfeited their liberty.” According to Hopkins’s reasoning, prisoners of war or others who by their actions had voluntarily forfeited their own freedom were the only acceptable candidates for slavery. Thus all slaves in America were unjustly held, and if scripture was to be honored, slaves must be liberated immediately.

It is tempting to explain Hopkins’s rare ability to imagine a slave system based on non-racialized categories as simply the result of the man’s superior moral character. There is, however, another explanation that reveals the evolving nature of early American conceptions of race. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the late eighteenth century marked the high-water mark of cultural environmentalism, and Hopkins’s perceptions of race were undoubtedly colored by his acceptance of this system. It is likely, then, that Hopkins’s understanding of race as something conditioned and contingent spared him from the intellectual limitations of later thinkers. What accounts for Hopkins’s novelty is not his moral superiority but the benefit of his milieu. For Americans in the early nineteenth century, the poisonous doctrines of inherent racial inferiority and scientific racism had so permeated the popular mind that Hopkins’s conclusions became incomprehensible.

It was one thing to reflect philosophically, or even theologically, about slavery, but reckoning with actual slaveholders was an entirely different matter. It was in this field of personal contact that Hopkins distanced himself from nearly all of his contemporaries. In the late eighteenth century, antislavery sentiments had not hardened into the uncompromising intensity

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of the late antebellum years. Hopkins and his contemporary certainly did not live in the same world as William Lloyd Garrison, who could in 1854 boldly proclaim to an abolitionist crowd in New York, “Let the American Abolitionists be honored in proportion as the slaveholders are execrated.” Over the course of the nineteenth century, moderate voices disappeared from the public debate over slavery, leaving only the hardline partisans of each side. Yet in the late eighteenth century, antislavery ministers were comfortable enumerating the ills of slavery without necessarily condemning the actions of individual slaveholders. The Massachusetts-born John Leland, an itinerant minister for fifteen years in Virginia, agonized over the fragility of marriage for slaves, yet when reflecting on possible solutions, asserted that, “it is not in the power of the masters.” Despite Leland’s strong antislavery credentials – he authored the Virginia Baptist petition in 1790 that encouraged “the honorable legislature of Virginia” to “proclaim the great jubilee” by manumitting Virginia’s slaves – he took pity on slaveholders, telling a crowd of slaves that they “cannot conceive what pain, what distress of soul, your masters endure for your sake.” The most startling example of this ministerial refusal to condemn slaveholders comes from one of the last voices of moderation in the antebellum slave debate. William Ellery Channing can, in a sense, be seen as the heir to Samuel Hopkins. Both exerted great influence over the dominant intellectual and theological discourse of their eras, Hopkins the late eighteenth and Channing the early nineteenth. Having grown up in Newport, where Hopkins ministered, Channing himself credited a childhood encounter with Hopkinsian


theology as motivating his commitment to Unitarianism, finding Calvinism to be irreconcilable with his belief in a benevolent deity. Channing experienced a late conversion to abolitionism, and his early writings articulated the widespread doubt held by early Americans over proposed solutions to the slave problem. Even in his abolitionist declaration, Channing refused to condemn the acts of slaveholders, writing “I propose to show that slavery is a great wrong, but I do not intend to pass sentence on the character of the slaveholder.” He goes on to say, “Sympathy with the slave has often degenerated into injustice towards the master. I wish, then, to be understood, that, in ranking slavery among the greatest wrongs, I speak of the injury endured by the slave, and not of the character of the master.”

Few Americans in the late eighteenth century viewed slavery as a noble institution, yet sympathy for slaves and antipathy for the institution did not usually translate into anger against actual slave-owners. Samuel Hopkins stood as one of the few exceptions.

Hopkins showed very little tolerance for the owners of slaves and expressed his distaste in the sharpest of terms. At his most intense, Hopkins excoriated slaveholders, claiming that they were “unworthy [of] the privileges of freemen” and ought “to be considered as enemies to mankind, and murderers of their brethren for the sake of gold, and real pests and plagues to society.”

Opposition to the slave trade caught on much quicker than opposition to the practice of slavery itself, and some argued that while great guilt was incurred by the traders who stole Africans from their homes, present slave owners were merely suffering from an incorrigible arrangement that left them no option but to try to treat their slaves with compassion. Thomas Jefferson is a notable example here, as his original draft of the Declaration of Independence

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68 William Ellery Channing, _Slavery_ (Boston: James Munro and Co., 1835), 56.

complained that the British saddled the virtuous Americans with the burden of slavery. Hopkins had no tolerance for those who imparted different levels of guilt upon slave traders and slaveholders, proclaiming to slaveholders that their human property “have been stolen and sold, and you have bought them, in your own wrong.” Hopkins’s close reading of scriptural slavery led him to conclude that slavery was only sanctioned for prisoners of war or to the grossly indebted. Because American slaveholders acquired their slaves through neither of these means, the system as practiced in the new nation was an indisputable sin that must be extinguished.

It might be easy to see the strong and uncompromising positions taken by Samuel Hopkins as a result of his comfortable northern pulpit, far removed from the southern centers of the highest slave populations. Newport, however, was the mercantile headquarters of the slave trade, a fact that Hopkins never denied, recognizing that the “trade has been the first and chief spring of all the trade and business by which this town has risen and flourished.” Indeed, he commented, “the inhabitants of Rhode Island, especially those of Newport, have had by far the greater share in this traffic of all these United States. This trade in the human species has been the first wheel of commerce in Newport.” Through his thorough distaste for “the first wheel of commerce,” Hopkins distinguished himself from his cross-town rival, Ezra Stiles. Stiles held the pulpit at the Second Congregationalist Church in Newport, while Hopkins was at the First Congregationalist Church, though (despite these names) there was no doubt that Stiles’s congregation was first in rank. On any given Sunday, the pews of Second Congregational in Newport would swell with citizens of the first rank, while Hopkins preached to a smaller, less distinguished lot.

This disparity would have caused little concern for Hopkins, and in his eyes likely confirmed the superior moral character of his more humble flock. From his early years in the backwoods of Housatonic, Massachusetts, Hopkins developed a deep distrust of the arbiters of wealth and power. His relocation to Newport immersed Hopkins in a highly cosmopolitan commercial center, yet his move only accelerated his public criticisms of material comfort. As mentioned above, it was out of this spirit that Hopkins developed his notion of disinterested benevolence. By 1784 Hopkins had nurtured his congregation in his commitment to disinterested benevolence and the desire to distinguish themselves from the affluent at Second Congregational. In this spirit, the church voted “that the slave trade and the slavery of the Africans, as it has taken place among us, is a gross violation of the righteousness and benevolence which are so much inculcated in the gospel; and therefore we will not tolerate it in this church.”71 This 1784 prohibition of slave ownership among the Congregational fellowship followed the purificationist pattern of Quakers. Hopkins was greatly attracted to the moral purity he found in the Quaker social ethic, and he communicated frequently with the active Quaker abolitionist Moses Brown in Providence. It was within his denomination that Hopkins found much to be reviled. While few Congregationalists in Massachusetts or Rhode Island owned slaves personally, the economy of the region remained largely dependent upon the transatlantic slave trade.

The rivalry between Newport’s First and Second Congregational churches and the pervasive worldliness that swirled outside of Hopkins’s study weighed heavy on Hopkins’s mind and colored his attacks on the slave trade. Yet, it was not only the rich and powerful that Hopkins implicated in the sins of slavery. In fact, Hopkins seemed to believe that the sins of the father

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would visit upon the son. In his close study of scripture, he found and shared three verses that backed up his claim that “a heavy, dreadful woe hangs over the heads of all those whose hands are defiled by the blood of the Africans, especially the inhabitants of that state, and of that town, who have had a distinguished share in this unrighteous, bloody commerce!” 72 Every citizen of Newport – whether the high and haughty of Second Congregational or the pious and penitent of First, the owners of slaves or those committed to their liberation – was exposed to the wrath of God that was sure to fall. This view of divine wrath, situated within a clearly delineated scheme of providential punishment, and his inclusion of both the benevolent and decadent in his scheme of damnation, illustrate Hopkins’s evolving theological views.

The frontier theologian had found a place in Newport through an embrace of moral reform. While his motivations were rooted in his distaste for the self-love of rival members at Second Congregational, his commitment to the success of abolition transformed his theology from a consistent Calvinism focused on disinterested benevolence to a contractual providentialism emphasizing human effort and the self-interest of avoiding divine wrath. Samuel Hopkins was one of the most brilliant and prolific participants in the revolutionary antislavery crusade, yet because of his geographical location and theological persuasion, Hopkins’s voice could carry only so far. By the era of the Revolution, the stronghold of American slavery lay southward beyond the echoes of Hopkins’s protestations, where great religious change dethroned the established church of England and replaced it with surging frontier evangelicalism.

The Evangelical Purificationist Moment

Conversion always held a higher priority than antislavery among southern evangelicals, but for a short, but consequential period, the two ambitions seemed to march hand in hand. Rhys Isaac first described southern evangelicalism as a cultural insurgency, and historians like Donald Matthews and Christine Heyrman have since similarly emphasized the counter-cultural elements of eighteenth-century evangelicalism before chronicling a capitulation to southern power structures. As Heyrman puts it, southern evangelicals dropped their prophetic witness as they adapted to the slaveholding south. More recently, historians have downplayed the counter-cultural tendencies of early southern evangelicalism, most notably in the work of Charles Irons that illustrates how the antislavery convictions of a few Virginia Baptists easily melded into the proslavery defenses of the antebellum era. But for a few years, antislavery sentiments spread throughout the swelling new denominations of southern evangelicalism, as both Baptists and Methodists offered institutional declarations against slavery. With Baptist minister John Leland and Methodist superintendent Francis Asbury at the head of the charge, the two sects that later grew into the most influential churches in the South both employed the discourse of purification to destroy slavery. Certainly, the imperatives of conversion ultimately shaped the social positions

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of both Baptists and Methodists, but for a brief moment both denominations sought to purify themselves and the new American nation of the sin of slavery.

As depicted by Isaac, Irons, and so many other scholars, this story begins in Virginia. Anglicanism, the established church of the Old Dominion, permeated the colonial social fabric, maintaining the dominance of the gentry and their place at the apex of the social structure. Two patterns emerged in Virginia’s religious establishment: first, public financial support for the Established Church, which remained consistent with practices in Britain; and second, an empowered vestry, a significant innovation that further tied the Church to the gentry. Because a bishop was never sent from London to Virginia, the legislature functioned as a sort of proxy, regulating the actions of both clergy and laity. For future dissenters, these close entanglements made Virginia hostile territory. Yet despite the ties binding Anglicanism to the local power structure, evangelical itinerants found Piedmont Virginians to be extremely receptive to their ministry. The presence of Anglican churches mirrored the presence of wealth clustered around the coastal tidewater. Because many Virginians had to travel great distances to the nearest parish, many of the non-elites in the Piedmont found the religious establishment lacking. Into this spiritual vacuum came northern missionaries, the most notable of whom was the Baptist John Leland.

Leland arrived in Virginia in 1775, successfully itinerating throughout several counties in the central Piedmont and building a strong base in the north-central counties of Orange, Spotsylvania, and Culpepper. After a ministry of fourteen years, Leland claimed to have “baptized seven hundred persons” and “preached about three thousand sermons.” In addition to his preaching ministry, Leland labored hard to erase any establishment of religion that he saw as

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75 Leland, 1791, 171 and 173
a perversion of both government and gospel. Leland led the charge in the fight for
disestablishment and, as recent scholarship has shown, likely proved decisive in nominating
James Madison to the Virginia convention to ratify the Constitution. During the two campaigns
of disestablishment and constitutional ratification, Leland collaborated with James Madison and
Thomas Jefferson, raising himself up as an influential spokesman for the burgeoning Baptists.
When he arrived in Virginia in 1775, Baptists ministers were regularly jailed for preaching
without licenses. By the time he returned to his native Massachusetts in 1791, he had helped
redefine the relationship between religion and politics, in the process creating a network of
Baptist churches that continued to grow into the nineteenth century.

While Leland’s lifetime cause was that of religious liberty, he also cared deeply about the
plight of slaves, and for several years he labored to purify both his church and his state of the sin
of slaveholding. John Leland despised slaveholders and believed that exposure to slavery warped
the mind, even his own mind. Upon leaving Virginia, Leland confessed, “I am not as shocked to
see [slaves] naked, gaunt and trembling, as I was when I first came into the state.” In addition
to desensitization, Leland wrote that slavery afflicts masters with “enormous evils” such as
“pride, haughtiness, domination, cruelty, deceit and indolence.” Throwing in a jab against the
effeminacy of southern slaveholders, Leland presaged later arguments made by free labor
advocates by claiming that a “hard hand and a meek heart are preferable to a soft hand [and] a
turbulent, fretted, disappointed heart.” In a Fourth of July oration, Leland went so far as to label


78 Leland, “The Virginia Chronicle,” in Writings, 96.
slave owners “despotic masters,” a label which, in the context of a celebration of liberty from the British, carried considerable weight. For Leland, slavery transformed virtuous men into compassionless despots. Many Christians worried about the righteousness of the republic and blamed slavery for inspiring a great many vices. Daniel Chapman Banks, a native of New Hampshire ministering in Louisville, expressed this viewpoint, writing that, “The effects of slavery are here very manifest as it is in all parts of the State of Kentucky. Idleness and destitution and want of enterprise and improvement are the consequence.”

Upon leaving Virginia in 1791, Leland reproduced and even amplified his earlier attacks on slavery, writing with an uncompromising vitriol that the institution “in its best appearance, is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, inconsistent with republican government, destructive of every humane and benevolent passion of the soul, and subversive to that liberty absolutely necessary to ennable the human mind.”

It was, however, his leadership activities more than his ideological opposition to slavery that secured his election as the draftsman for the 1789 Baptist resolution against slavery. Leland’s pen, operating under the authority of the Virginia Baptist General Committee, challenged other religious bodies, referred to as “our brethren,” to “make use of every legal measure to extirpate this horrid evil from the land.” Moreover, the resolution prayed that “our honorable legislature may have it in their power to proclaim the great Jubilee, consistent with the principles of good policy.” When the “honorable legislature” of Virginia failed to “proclaim the great Jubilee,” Baptists turned to conversionism as the sole solution to the problem of slavery.

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79 January 30, 1816, Daniel Chapman Banks Diary, Filson Library.

80 Leland, Writings, 171-175.

81 Leland, Writings, 51.
Yet even after the overwhelming majority of Baptist associations abandoned opposition to slavery, the purificationist strain endured. The targets shifted, however, from removing slaveholders to identifying and ousting rabble-rousing antislavery ministers from fellowship. David Barrow, perhaps the most consistently antislavery white Baptist minister of his age, became one such target. Born in Brunswick County, Virginia, Barrow began his career, at the age of eighteen, itinerating between congregations in Virginia and North Carolina. Soon thereafter he earned a reputation as a courageous minister who openly confronted persecution through occasional dramatic displays. During a 1778 church service, held at the invitation of a gentleman in the Virginia tidewater, a gang of twenty men seized Barrow and Edward Mintz, a fellow traveling minister, and after beating them for nearly a half mile, forcibly dunked the two—mocking the Baptist practice of immersion.82 The arrival of disestablishment put an end to persecutions along these lines, but Barrow found other issues with which to rankle those around him. In 1797 Barrow moved west to Kentucky and immediately gained a reputation as an uncompromising opponent of slavery.

Other Baptists did not share his convictions and attempted to purge him from the ministry. In 1805 the Elkhorn Association of Baptists in central Kentucky resolved “it improper for Ministers, Churches or Associations, to meddle with emancipation from slavery, or any other political subject; and as such we advise ministers and churches to have nothing to do therewith in their religious capacities.”83 Barrow also came under attack from the Bracken Association for “preaching emancipation,” but since Barrow was not under the authority of this group, leaders from Bracken had to bring charges before the October 7 meeting of the North District

82 Carter Tarrant, *History of the Baptist Ministers and Churches in Kentucky &c., Friends to Humanity* (Frankfurt, K.Y.: 1808), 21

83 Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, met at Bryan's, August 10, 1805, 3-4.
After hearing the charges from Bracken as well as Barrow’s testimony, the North District concluded “Brother David Barrow gave cause of hurt to the Bracken Association, by meddling with emancipation, and that his explanations and apologies are satisfactory.” The Association then issued a circular letter to all of the local churches that, among other things, included a condemnation of antislavery ministry. The letter read, “Some are so far deluded that their printing, preaching and private conversation, go to encourage disobedience in servants, and a revolution in our Civil Government, contrary to the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The authors then appealed to the discourse of conversionism, writing to local churches, “we beseech you to flee from these evils; contend earnestly for the power of the gospel, and for the effect and evidences of union with Christ.”

Barrow was unmoved, even as the next year began with renewed chastisement. “Brother Barrow manifesting no disposition to alter his mode of preaching as to the aforesaid doctrine, they proceeded to expel him from his seat in this association.” A committee was appointed to determine whether he would be allowed to minister at his current church. The annual circular letter took a gloomier tone, opening with the lament of “evil speaking and the leaven of malice instead of brotherly kindness and charity, and like the trembling armed enemies of ancient Israel before Jonathan and his Armor-bearer, we are melting away, and go on beating down one another.” Barrow was vilified in both the annual association meeting and in the networks of correspondence that held together the Baptist churches in northern Kentucky. When his congregation rallied to his side in 1807, the Association reversed itself, restored Barrow, and

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84 Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists held at Bethel Meeting House, in the county of Montgomery, state of Kentucky, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth days of October, 1805.

85 Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists, 1806, 3-4.
avoided even disguised references to Barrow’s ordeal in the annual circular letter.\textsuperscript{86} The following year, however, Barrow’s church at Mount Sterling removed itself from the North District Association, and Barrow avoided further conflict with proslavery Baptist denominational authorities.\textsuperscript{87}

The same year that Barrow removed his church from the Northern District, he also published his antislavery thoughts in one of the more remarkable evangelical antislavery statements of the era. Had he not removed himself from the ministerial association already, these incendiary remarks would surely have resulted in his permanent expulsion. Barrow structured his argument based on “Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy and Scripture,” mentioning “the Holy Scriptures last, not out of disrespect to those sacred writings, but rather because vouchers drawn from hence, are proper to substantiate and cap the whole.”\textsuperscript{88} The highly detailed discussions of dozens of scripture passages both explained his antislavery convictions and in an appendix addressed one by one the proslavery hermeneutic that was spreading throughout the South. The substance of these scriptural arguments was less important than the his tone and underlying understanding of causation. Barrow worked hard to avoid offending slaveholders in his document, adopting an uncompromising but civil tone. He dreamed of unity, and in a previous publication he attacked “unhappy divisions, animosities, janglings, groundless criticisms, heart-burnings, evil-speaking,” while praying for the expected day when “all party names may be lost in oblivion, and that an indissoluble union may take place among all true Christians, upon the

\textsuperscript{86} Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists, 1807.

\textsuperscript{87} Minutes of the North-District Association of Baptists, 1808.

\textsuperscript{88} David Barrow, \textit{Involuntary, unmerited, perpetual, absolute, hereditary slavery, examined [microform] on the principles of nature, reason, justice, policy, and scripture} (Lexington: 1808), 7.
old apostolic plan.” In short, he expected “Heaven-borne truth” to prevail. Barrow believed that the body of Christ would put aside a disgraceful past and unite in eternal holiness. This was his work, and under these expectations he attacked the sin of slavery.

The majority of the document takes for granted that slavery was a sin, focusing on how the church should respond to problems of sin. But before he could treat the problem of sin, Barrow first had to reckon with the deeply held Baptist commitment to religious liberty. First forged during the religious wars of the Protestant Reformation, amplified during the English Civil War, and then reenergized during the disestablishment campaign in Virginia, Baptists privileged religious liberty as a core theological tenet. John Leland, one of the heroes of the Virginia campaign and later populist Baptist political philosopher, provided Barrow with a starting point. Leland’s *Blow at the Root*, a widely circulated fast day sermon first delivered in Cheshire, Massachusetts, in 1801, claimed, “freedom does not authorize one man to destroy the freedom of another, but that freedom is to be governed by the laws of good order, and that all beside is licentiousness, and tends to bondage.” Barrow invoked Leland but actually made a further move, writing, “all political evils are moral evils; but all moral evils are not political evils. No evil simply moral, is punishable by a political tribunal; yet every political evil comes within the jurisprudence of the Almighty, because it is morally wrong.” The question, then, was whether slavery was a political or a moral evil. To answer this, Barrow brought the discussion back to the Baptist commitment to religious liberty.

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89 For context on this letter from Barrow as well as a full text reproduction, see Carlos R. Allen Jr., “David Barrow’s Circular Letter of 1798,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 20 No. 3 (Jul. 1963): 440-51, quote at 449.


The Virginia disestablishment campaign marked the clearest action of Baptist political mobilization in the era. In pursuing the commitment to religious liberty, Baptists were more than willing to use coercive political authority, and waves of petitions flooded the state legislature explaining this belief. In making his antislavery statement, Barrow asks, “Can a person enjoy the rights of conscience, who is in a state of absolute slavery?” The obvious negative was all he needed to know that slavery must be opposed. But even for those who refused to see slavery as a political sin, Barrow criticized the “very strange notion entertained by some, that SIN because it may be authorized by civil government, must not be meddled with by the ministers of the gospel and churches of Christ.” Whatever the government may do, the churches owed allegiance to a higher authority, and accordingly the sin of slavery could not be tolerated. In pursuing this agenda, Barrow did not rest in the hope of conversion but rather called for political action: “our constitution, so far as it allows of the emancipation of slaves, ought immediately to be revised, and the laws founded thereon repealed.” Barrow’s work, so strong in its opposition to slavery, failed to enact considerable change. Another new force in southern evangelicalism would arise, spread like wildfire, and soon offer another assault against slavery.

No one saw more of early America than Francis Asbury. The first bishop of American Methodism left his native England for the colonies in 1771, remaining in the post-Revolution United States even after the majority of British Methodists had left. Asbury tirelessly traveled the new nation, covering an average of 6,000 miles a year as he grew his denomination from a small contingent of Anglican evangelicals to the most numerous religious group in antebellum

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92 Ibid., 26.
93 Ibid., 23.
94 Ibid., 41.
America, a group that would come to exert an almost hegemonic influence on the American South. There are few corners of early America that did not witness the road-weary minister passing through to exhort and organize the growing flock. Asbury’s diary demonstrates a keen eye and soft heart as he could not help but notice and frequently agonize over the plight of blacks both slave and free. From 1771 until his death in 1816, Asbury led the Methodist charge against slavery, before retreating to into uneasy accommodation in the face of massive resistance.95

In 1785 Francis Asbury faced the full passion of the slave debate during the first annual conference of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Waking early to a North Carolina spring sunrise, Asbury was in high spirits, but as the events of the day progressed, his heart sank. The harmonious proceedings of the conference stalled as a contingent of angry southerners protested the prohibition of slave owners from Methodist fellowship. As Asbury's colleague Dr. Thomas Coke rose to defend the church’s position, a colonel began cursing and issued threats. The crowd dispersed to allow time for tempers to cool, but the next day began with an equal amount of vitriol as the irascible, future schismatic James O'Kelly angrily denounced slavery and its supporters. O'Kelly's tirade whipped the crowd into a violent frenzy. Asbury gratefully reported that despite the intensity, "we, however, came off with whole bones."96 But while Asbury's bones remained intact, unity in American Methodism was strained. Reflecting upon slavery philosophically and reckoning with actual slaveholders were two very different things, and the manner that Asbury handled the latter often contradicted how he thought about slavery in the abstract.


Francis Asbury’s views on slavery may have remained consistent throughout his life, but his strong stand against slaveholding proved untenable given his commitment to conversionism. A notable psychological turning point occurred in January 1798 when he lamented, “Oh! To be dependent on slave-holders is in part to be a slave, and I was free born. I am brought to conclude that slavery will exist in Virginia perhaps for ages; there is not a sufficient sense of religion nor liberty to destroy it; Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, in the highest flights of rapturous piety still maintain and defend it.”\(^{97}\) Never before did Asbury articulate such despair, and from this point forward he did not relate any serious confrontations with slaveholders. In fact, only two months later, he shifted his focus away from discouraging slaveholding among church members and instead simply tried to keep preachers from owning slaves.\(^{98}\) Asbury backtracked further in 1808, when he appeared resigned to slaveholding clergymen and championed a regulation that simply ensured “that no member of society, or preacher, should sell or buy a slave unjustly, inhumanly, or covetously.”\(^{99}\)

The stakes were high for the Methodists. The last decade of the eighteenth century brought remarkable growth to the movement, and Asbury pressed both settled ministers and itinerants to continue ministering to slaves. This pursuit was always dependent upon the whims of masters, and Methodists worked hard to maintain access to slaves. In 1801 Asbury felt downtrodden at the arrogance of South Carolina planters, writing, “The rich among the people never thought us worthy to preach to them.” Methodists had earned a reputation as hostile to slavery, and many South Carolina planters threatened to deny their slaves the opportunity to


\(^{98}\) *Ibid.*, 156.

attend Methodist meetings. This proved to be the ultimate weapon of the planter class in nullifying the southern evangelical antislavery witness. In 1809, Asbury again appeared frustrated that so many “masters are afraid of the influence of our principles” and wondered “[w]ould not an amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans than any attempt at their emancipation?”101 Asbury witnessed the begrudging discontent that slave owners exhibited when allowing slaves to attend Methodist meetings, and anguished over the fact that Methodists offered the only opportunity for some slaves to hear the gospel. When faced with the reality that antislavery action would close off Methodist access to slave populations, Asbury abandoned the bold stance offered in the Revolution’s aftermath and settled into a process of accommodation and, later, assimilation to southern demands for a proslavery Christianity. Asbury was dealt a difficult hand. Methodism faced a seemingly impossible situation to either abandon the principled stand against slavery and surrender their dreams of a purified American republic or to surrender the great commission to preach the gospel to both masters and slaves. The logic of conversionism enabled Asbury and others to reconcile the two. Ministers would drop the purificationist purge of slaveholders and instead rely on the transformative power of conversion.

Francis Asbury displayed tremendous skill in building the national Methodist church. Independence brought a new era of westward migration and Methodists developed an unparalleled ability to coordinate outreach among far-flung frontier settlements. The church grew exponentially but not without cost. Methodists could not afford to both work to purify existing

100 Ibid., 281.

101 Ibid., 591.
communities while also aggressively seeking to develop in the West. What good would it be to create a small godly community while the new nation was allowed to sink into the gross errors of infidelity and licentiousness? The ancient tension between evangelism and discipleship inherent in all Christian traditions challenged Methodist leaders, and the powerful nationalism of the Revolution led Methodists and others to work earnestly in ensuring the new nation would fulfill its duty as the Lord’s republic of righteousness. But the logic of conversionism enabled antislavery Christians to bridge the gap. If only they could complete the holy work of bringing the gospel deep into the heart of the continent, then surely the Lord’s deliverance would come for both master and slave. As the salvation of the frontier took greater precedence over the purification of the church, the logic of conversionist antislavery took on an even greater importance.

Compelled by the imperatives of conversion and the challenges of migration, an era of denominational formation commenced. New networks stretched across vast spaces, uniting the new republic, North and South, East and West. At the same time economic trends eroded slavery in the North while solidifying the institution in the South. Denominational networks strengthened, but the national context changed along with it. As reformers attempted to bend the new national denominational structures toward the antislavery cause, they faced a new paradigm of sectionalist tension. This tension strained and eventually snapped the conversionist consensus, leading to the renewed purificationist push of the post 1830s era. But from the vantage point of the late eighteenth century, there was little evidence of this fate: Slavery was in decline, liberty was on the rise, and the gospel of Christ would soon stretch deep into the continent.
Chapter 3

CONVERSIONISM AND AMERICAN DENOMINATIONAL FORMATION

On December 18, 1777, David Avery preached in his hometown of Greenwich, Connecticut, promising that the newly independent United States would become “Immanuel’s land, a Mountain of holiness, a habituation of Righteousness! The Lord’s spiritual empire of love, joy, and peace will flourish gloriously in this western world!”

This sermon, and thousands of other sermons of the era, proclaimed the United States as God’s chosen nation, millennially destined to inaugurate international redemption. But these lofty hopes confronted the reality of a nation increasingly outside the reach of churches. Independence brought an explosion of westward migration, and churches struggled to meet the needs of these migrants. If the United States would become “the Lord’s spiritual empire,” the nation needed the church, and the church needed greater coordination. The problem of unchurched borderlands alarmed the new nation’s clergy and pressed them into action, sparking a new era of denominational organization.

Nathan Hatch’s field-defining *The Democratization of American Christianity* claims that “American Protestantism has been skewed away from central ecclesiastical institutions.” Historians have largely followed Hatch in emphasizing the diversity and diffusion of religion in the early republic, paying little attention to the efforts of many American Christians to consolidate religious authority. Hatch and others have convincingly demonstrated how religious

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1 David Avery, *The Lord is to be Praised for the Triumphs of His Power* (Norwich, Conn.: Green, 1778), pp. 45-46.

2 Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: 1989). Amanda Porterfield has offered the most recent and compelling critique, claiming that Hatch misrepresents evangelicalism as antiauthoritarianism. Porterfield convincingly chronicles the anxieties felt by evangelicals in the era and the ways
energy followed the patterns of American migration, pushing westward in the decades after the Revolution. Old systems of authority struggled to react to the new landscape as theological diversity created space for new, spiritually egalitarian messages that fused with a national commitment to democratic ideals. Similarly, rapid changes in commercial relations created new opportunities and anxieties, spawning new sects with new messages of spiritual fulfillment. But this was not the only great change underway. Change stirred among the settled clergy as well. To meet the challenges of migration, religious leaders forged new, ever-larger networks to spread the gospel deep into the West. These networks grew into the national denominational bodies that would later lay the foundation for a benevolent empire of social reform.

Despite the prominence of religion in recent scholarship on the early republic, denominational institutions receive scant attention. Synthetic accounts of the early republic largely ignore denominational formation. In What Hath God Wrought, Daniel Walker Howe completely ignores national denominational bodies. In describing Baptists in the early republic, Howe does not mention the Baptist General Convention and instead emphasizes the sect’s alleged lack of organization and the anti-reform convictions of the Campbellites and Primitive or “hard shell” Baptists. These impulses within the Baptist tradition deserve mention, but so too do those of the greatly influential Baptists leaders who labored for consolidation. Religious history surveys do not do much better. The two best syntheses of American religious history, including Religion in American Life by Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, and Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt’s The Religious History of America, mention the schisms over slavery but do

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not account for the process of Baptist or Presbyterian denominational formation. Mark Noll’s *America’s God* follows the machinations of the Presbyterian General Assembly but pays less attention to the Baptist General Convention. He grants that Baptists and Methodists, despite antiformalist origins, “actually met the formalist challenge of training recruits to construct a national religious culture,” but Noll does not illustrate how this construction of a national religious culture occurred, opting instead to emphasize the intellectual currents that bound early American evangelicals together. Ideas matter but so too do institutions, and the institutions of early American denominations played a key role in developing early American culture.

Denominational histories—most written decades or even a century ago—remain our best resources on this process, yet these works lack the analytical depth we need to understand how denominational formation influenced the religious life of the new nation. Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier’s *The Presbyterians* is among the finest analytical accounts of denominational formation. But Balmer and Fitzmier fall into the trap of emphasizing sectional tensions of the early republic and eliding the process of national consolidation. From the work of scholars such as C. C. Goen, Richard Carwardine, and Eugene Genovese, we know much regarding how

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denominations split but little about how they came to exist as national bodies. Teleologies of sectionalism obscure the nature of religion in the early republic and fail to demonstrate the means by which denominations spread and tied various churches together. The story of religion in the early republic then is not simply one of diffusion or sectionalism but also one of national development.

American Christianity moved through three phases in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Anxieties over religious authority suffused the decades prior and immediately following the American Revolution. Internal conflicts between New Light disciples of the Great Awakening and their Old Light rivals receded as the threat of Anglican authority culminated in the fear of a bishop in North America. The American Revolution smashed the threat of Anglican hegemony, and by the end of the 1780s, the newly formed Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States suffered the twin blows of severed ties with England and disestablishment in the former stronghold of Virginia. In every state, the Episcopal Church was on its heels. Independence shifted American Christianity away from a defensive quest for religious autonomy and out into an effort to evangelize the new nation. The migration explosion following the Revolution proved a heavy challenge to Congregationalist and Presbyterian churchmen. Upstart evangelicals like the Baptists and especially the Methodists filled the religious demands of western yeoman, but their rise was not uncontested. Presbyterians and Congregationalists scrambled to appoint missionaries and establish new churches. While the creaky infrastructures of these older churches struggled to adapt to the push westward, the...

missionary movement provided the rationale for ever-larger denominational networks. As the missionary push of the early nineteenth century matured, a host of theological and social forces moved American Christianity into a third era. The success of western missionaries assuaged the anxieties of clergymen who had earlier feared a rise in irreligion. The energy of the Second Great Awakening ensured that the United States would remain a nation of Christians, but many ministers began to fear that the new nation lacked true Christian piety. The imperatives of conversion then shifted into a quest for purification. The institutional infrastructure for social reform had already emerged as denominations consolidated and conversionist societies formed. The networks of tract and Bible societies melded easily into the societies waging the Sabbatarian crusade, the temperance movement, and, ultimately, politically active abolition. Reform societies will be discussed in the next chapter, but before we can understand their origins, we must first explore the development of American religious nationalisms and the national denominations that gave them birth.

This chapter does not discuss Methodist or Episcopal churches but rather focuses on Presbyterians and Baptists. The emphasis on the former follows from the fact that Presbyterians along with closely related Congregationalists, exerted a vastly disproportionate influence on American reform movements. Baptists are treated because of their famously hesitant attitude toward ecclesiastical hierarchy. Despite this recalcitrant tradition, Baptists formed an impressively national denominational structure, which from 1814 to 1832 was unparalleled in its geographically diverse representation. Both of these churches illustrate the development of national American religious cultures and provide a useful backdrop to see how denominational formation set the foundation for the benevolent empire. The drive for conversion ignited the development of national denominational institutions, and the consolidation of these national
churches led to reform culture in two ways. One, it gave leaders practice in forming societies, and two, it expanded the worldview of its members. Large-scale missionary work and later reform, only possible through the bureaucracy of denominations, gave American Christians a means of understanding distant space. Denominations gave Americans a means by which they could shape their new nation and the world. Baptists in Vermont became aware and could become a part of reaching Cherokees in Georgia or orphans in Burma. The experience of impacting distant Christians nationalized and globalized the American religious consciousness. This nationalization was essential for the success of large-scale reform movements. Missionary networks, designed to further the goals of national conversion, catalyzed denominational consolidation. To understand how and why Americans fought the sins of slavery, we must begin with the story of national denominational formation, a story that begins with missionary efforts and ends with a turn to reform.

Missions and the Origins of American Denominations

Presbyterians created one of the largest North American-led missionary endeavors in the colonial period. Just one year after its elevation from a presbytery to a synod in 1717, the Synod of Philadelphia sent a letter to the Committee of Dissenting Ministers in London, reporting their commitment to “unite their endeavors annually at Philadelphia, for spreading and propagating the gospel of Christ in these dark parts of the world.”8 From this beginning, the coordination of missions drove the process of denominational consolidation for a century. The Synod of Philadelphia rejoiced that churches had already taken root in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Virginia, however, remained unreached. This problem would last

8 Records of the Presbyterian Church in America (Philadelphia: 1841), p. 54.
only a few years. In 1722 American Presbyterians commissioned their first three missionaries to cross the Potomac and minister in Virginia. Jonathan Dickinson joined Hugh Conn, John Orme, and William Stewart, and the four itinerated along the frontier, enjoying their greatest successes among the Scotch-Irish immigrants in the Shenandoah Valley. However, internal bickering between New Side revivalists and Old Side traditionalists hindered the Presbyterian missionary quest. When tensions flared in 1741, Old Siders nearly halted their missions work, waiting until 1748 to send another missionary. Until reunion in 1748, the Old Side did not successfully plant a single church in Virginia. The New Side New York Synod took to missions with greater early enthusiasm. With the guidance of the New York Synod, the New Side New Brunswick Presbytery sent William Robinson to Virginia in 1743. Robinson organized a well-regulated Presbyterian Church in Virginia, and in 1747 the New York Synod ordained Samuel Davies who settled in Hanover County Virginia. Davies enjoyed a long, storied ministry in the Old Dominion before ending his life as president of the College of New Jersey.

Philadelphia also proved a powerful base for colonial Baptist expansion. The Philadelphia Baptist Association formed in 1707, when representatives from congregations in the Delaware River Valley gathered annually for fellowship and preaching. The Association did not hold any real authority until 1749, when the Association earned the right to expel individuals or even entire congregations from the fellowship. It is not a coincidence that 1749 also marked the beginning of missions work in the Philadelphia Association. Denominational authority and organized missions twinned closely throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1749 Oliver Hart traveled to Charleston, South Carolina. He formed the Charleston Baptist Association and remained in the city for thirty years. The new Charleston association was

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9 A. D. Gilette, ed. Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from AD 1707 to AD 1807, Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), p. 63
ordaining its own missionaries by 1755. Leadership from Oliver Hart and later Richard Furman allowed the Charleston association to become a major source of Baptist denominational strength. By 1754 missionaries from Philadelphia established churches in Virginia, one at Ketoecon Creek and other west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Opeckon. Virginia proved fertile ground for Baptists’, and from this early foothold, dozens of congregations formed prior to the Revolution.

The most explosive Baptist expansion in Virginia did not stem from Philadelphia but rather from Separate Baptists in New England. Led by Shubal Stearns, this missionary effort had far-reaching consequences for religion and social life in Virginia. Shubal Stearns was born in Massachusetts and converted to the Baptist faith at the old age of fifty-five. Three years after his conversion, Stearns embarked on a missionary effort to the South and West. His first stop was Opequan in Berkeley County, Virginia, a church that had been planted by missionaries sent from the Philadelphia Association. Here Stearns exhorted the members of the small church, who were unaccustomed to his fiery enthusiasm. The conflict between the New Light Separate missionaries and the conservative, Old Light Regular Baptist provided an incentive for Stearns to move on. Letters describing the desperate need for ministers in North Carolina also drew Stearns away from Virginia. Stearns followed these letters, and on November 22, 1755 he founded and assumed the pastorate of Sandy Creek Baptist Church in Guilford County, North Carolina.

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11 Semple, *Baptists in Virginia*, 12-13. Semple describes how the church in Opequan maintained an affiliation to the Philadelphia Baptist Association to whom they complained about the excessive zeal of the New Lights in 1755. The terms New Light and Old Light are used to describe the adherents and opponents of the Great Awakening respectively.

The arrival of Stearns and the subsequent success of his colleagues were not celebrated by his Regular Baptist brethren. The struggles of Daniel Marshall are illustrative of the jealousies between the Separate and Regular Baptists. At Opequan, Stearns reunited with his brother-in-law Daniel Marshall, also a New England Baptist missionary. Marshall had been ordained in Virginia as a missionary, but not as a pastor, a process that required the presence and blessing of two pastors. Finding a pastor to join Stearns in ordaining Marshall proved difficult. When the Sandy Creek church swelled from sixteen members to over six hundred, it became imperative that Marshall receive ordination to meet the demand of the growing flock. Regular Baptists, also called Old Lights, disapproved of the New Light Separate Baptists who challenged the standing order by encouraging female participation and displaying enthusiasm in worship services. Regular Baptist ministers refused to participate in the ordination of Marshall. Eventually, an appeal was made to Henry Ledbetter, brother-in-law to Marshall who endured a long journey to complete the affair. Following his ordination, Marshall itinerated throughout southern Virginia, spreading the successes earned in North Carolina with its neighbor to the north. In August of 1760, the first Separate Baptist church in Virginia was formed under the pastorate of Dutton Lane, a Marshall convert.

The Philadelphia Association of Baptists also trained their eyes north. Congregational churches disenfranchised with the New England standing order proved ripe pickings for Baptists. Philadelphia missionaries planted churches in Duchess County New York, in 1757 and New York City in 1762. The Philadelphia Association also sent James Manning to Rhode Island in

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13 Semple, Baptists in Virginia, 16.

14 Semple, Baptists in Virginia, 7

15 See A. D. Gilette, ed. Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from AD 1707 to AD 1807, Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851). Also, Robert B.
1764. Manning became the president of Rhode Island College and pastored a church in Warren, Rhode Island. By 1767 Warren had organized ten other New England Baptist Churches into the Warren Association, the most powerful Baptist association in New England. The Warren Association directed campaigns against religious persecution, organized missionaries to the northern and western borders of New England, and continued to reach out to Congregationalist churches that had grown tired of Congregational ecclesiastical authority. In 1766 the Philadelphia Association committed to missions on a permanent basis, establishing a long-term fund for local missions.

During the colonial period, New England Congregationalists organized missions to Indians but devoted far less attention to European settlers beyond their church boundaries. The General Association of Connecticut expressed an early concern in 1774 over “ye settlements now forming in the wilderness of the westward and northwestward of us who are mostly destitute of a preached Gospel.” In response to this problem, the association determined that “an attempt should be made to send missionaries among them.” Fundraising began but a lack of enthusiasm and the tumult of the Revolution delayed the association from taking action for well over a decade. Massachusetts Congregationalists took even less interest in extending the church beyond its current borders. In the 1770s the Eastern Association of Ministers, a small group of clergymen along the border of New Hampshire and Maine, outfitted one missionary. Daniel Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: 1810). Wood Furman, *A History of Charleston Association of Baptist Churches in the State of South Carolina, with an Appendix Containing the Principle Circular to the Churches* (Charleston, S.C.: J. Hoff, 1811).


Little made a few trips to the eastern settlements in Maine in the 1770s, but all efforts ceased during the Revolution.

Colonial American Baptists never experienced the support of a religious establishment, and Presbyterians flourished most in areas without the aid of public support, including Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Congregationalists enjoyed a very different relationship with civil authority, and these relationships shaped American Congregational ecclesiology. Congregationalists inherited an ecclesiology from their Puritan ancestors that was shaped by attempts to mitigate the consequences of original sin. The total depravity of mankind required magisterial power to protect society from humanity’s destructive impulses. Government was a gift from God, and the identity and role of the New England church could not be extracted from the identity and role of New England governance. Problems of religious authority in new and distant settlements therefore were often understood and treated as problems of the reach of government. This worldview shaped New England settlement patterns and attempts to curtail migration patterns. Congregationalists did not turn to domestic missions as a true priority until the American Revolution unleashed the migration explosion that closed the eighteenth century. The relationship between the denomination and public authority shaped not only New England Congregationalism: it also catalyzed the most dramatic instance of ecumenical cooperation in the eighteenth century.

**Anti-Anglicanism and Revolutionary American Denominationalism**

American clergymen valued transatlantic connections within their respective denominations greater than interdenominational relationships in North America. Ecumenical efforts of any kind were exceedingly rare, but the old fault lines of early modern British
Protestantism led to the first major ecumenical effort of the colonial period. In the late eighteenth century, the threat of Anglican authority motivated dissenting Protestants to expand their ecclesiastical structures. Antipathy toward the Church of England formed a key component of the new nationalism of the American Revolution. The Revolutionary years birthed numerous new communication networks tying the colonies together as never before. Denominational connections sprung up parallel to committees of correspondence and provide a useful window into the formation of the earliest American nationalism. In the northeast, Presbyterians in Philadelphia and New York reached out to Congregationalists in Connecticut to resist the imposition of an Anglican bishop, and in Virginia, the always-fractious Baptists managed to hold together a coalition of both Regulars and Separates in their successful attempt to disestablish the Episcopal Church. The fear of consolidated British religious authority inspired the consolidation of American religious authority. To defend themselves against a bureaucracy, clergymen in the Northeast and in Virginia attempted to create their own.

The effort began in 1766 as delegates from the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia reached out to Congregationalists in Connecticut “to obtain some correspondence between this Synod and the Consociated churches of our brethren.” The Presbyterians prepared to send a few ministers to meet with representatives from the Connecticut association anytime, anywhere they would agree. The Presbyterians described their purpose as two-fold. They wished “to defend the common cause of religion against the attacks of its various enemies” and to “bless

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the benighted heathen on our borders with the glorious light of the Gospel.”\textsuperscript{19} Even when alarmed by the threat of aggressive Anglicanism, these Presbyterians presented their request for cooperation as a missionary exigency. The rhetoric of coordinated missions continued, but no action was taken. Coordinated missions would have to wait. The only real result of this inter-denominational dialog concerned the second goal, that of defending religious liberty. Both Connecticut Congregationalists and Middle Colony Presbyterians dreaded the prospect of an Anglican bishop on the continent and banded together in taking proactive steps to prevent such an appointment. Beginning in 1766 and lasting until armed conflict broke out in 1775, this convention met once a year, oscillating annually between Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and various locations in Connecticut.

The first meeting occurred in Elizabethtown on November 5, 1766. Several Connecticut associations sent a representative, and messengers carried the minutes to three others who could not. The only major action suggested at this meeting involved opening a dialogue with coreligionists in London for the purpose of identifying the severity of the threat. The minutes sent to the register of the New Haven East Association included the suggested letter that concerned parties could send across the Atlantic. This letter began with the acknowledgement that “sundry petitions have been sent home by some of the Episcopal clergy in these colonies in order to obtain the appointment of a Bishop here.” American clergymen kept a close eye on their Anglican peers and feared how a bishop might curtail their liberties: “this affair we must confess gives us much anxiety.” Prior to adjourning, the convention agreed to extend their network beyond Connecticut Congregationalists and Middle Colony Presbyterians in order to include the Dutch Reformed Churches in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The convention

\textsuperscript{19} Minutes of the Convention of Delegates from the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and from the Associations of Connecticut, held annually from 1766 to 1775 inclusive. (Philadelphia: Hartford: E. Gleason, 1843) 5-6.
occurred in New Haven, Connecticut, one year later and included a few representatives from Boston. These Bostonians brought a letter from the Convention of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts informing those assembled in New Haven that the Massachusetts convention heeded their advice in contacting their associates in England. The Massachusetts Congregationalists wrote to the Committee of Deputation of Dissenters in England thanking the British body “for the concern they have expressed for our religious liberties, and to desire that they would give us their assistance, and use their influence for the preservation of the same, and in particular that a Bishop may not be sent among us.”

The following year, the Presbyterians followed the lead of Massachusetts Congregationalists and drafted a letter to the same London-based committee. In 1769, back in New Haven, the convention established a communication plan to further their reach. The Connecticut association would maintain contact with ministerial associations in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. New Yorkers managed correspondence with those in Rhode Island and South Carolina. New Jersey continued the dialogue with Scotland, and Pennsylvania with England and Ireland. In 1770 a committee formed to catalogue all of the religious persecutions endured in North America. As American Anglicans appealed to England for a bishop, North American dissenters prepared to fight back with a unified resolve and a list of Anglican depredations.

In 1771 a letter finally arrived from England. Dr. Francis Alison of Pennsylvania presented a letter at an annual meeting in Norwalk, Connecticut, from Thomas Cotton, the Secretary of the Committee of Dissenters in London. Cotton swore that he had no knowledge of any “special exertions newly launched to send a bishop to North America” but promised to

20 Ibid., 13, 18.
At this meeting, the representatives swore to continue assembling their index of religious persecutions, and the next year they paired this project with an attempt to gather copies of the many laws protecting religious freedom in all of the North American colonies including Nova Scotia. Another letter was sent to the Committee of Dissenters in England promising to send an accurate count of Episcopalian versus dissenters in all of the colonies. Two Presbyterians, Dr. Francis Alison of Philadelphia and Dr. John Rodgers of New York, were selected as the facilitators of these transatlantic communications. Alison was born in Ireland, educated at Glasgow, and remained well connected with Presbyterians in Britain. Alison knew all too well the perils of religious collaboration as he fired the first shot in the Presbyterian Old Side-New Side schism. He later took a leading role in healing this rift by delivering a sermon entitled “Peace and Union” at the first convention after the two sides rejoined. Dr. John Rodgers of New York took the opposite side during the schism. This Boston-born New Side minister remained a major denominational leader in New York until his death in 1811. Despite these old tensions, the perceived new threats of an Anglican bishop pressed these men into active cooperation.

By 1773 the convention felt confident enough in their census to present findings to the London Committee of Dissenters. They reported that in the southern colonies, where the Church of England enjoyed a strong establishment, dissenting Protestants nonetheless held a majority or at least comprised a “large and growing population.” One-fifth of the residents of New York and Connecticut colonies owed allegiance to the Church of England. In “the provinces of New Jersey and Pennsylvania their proportionable numbers are less and in the Massachusetts government, Rhode Island and province of New Hampshire they are much less still.”

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21 Ibid., 30.
chaired this session of the convention and signed the letter. In the remaining two years before war prevented further action, the committee worked their contacts to gain information on places as far as West Florida and Georgia. At the final meeting, held September 6, 1775, the convention widened their research still further, requesting not only a catalogue of persecutions and a collection of laws but also full histories of “the rise, progress, and present state of the several religious sects in the different provinces and colonies.” The convention never reached their goals, and the war prevented another interdenominational endeavor for several decades, but a precedent had been set. These clergymen developed connections with ministers from distant churches and began to see themselves as the leaders of a national church.

Animosity between Anglicans and dissenting Protestants was not confined to New England. Tensions between Baptists and Anglicans in Virginia have garnered considerable historiographical attention. Most historians have followed Rhys Isaac in presenting late-eighteenth-century Baptists as a counter-cultural monolith, obscuring the divisions between Baptists during the era. Despite exceptions to this trend by Jewel Spangler and Charles Irons, the institutional relationships of early Baptists deserve greater attention. As discussed above, rifts between enthusiastic supporters of revival, New Lights, and those suspicious of it, Old Lights, endured in Virginia long after the fires of the Great Awakening first ignited New England

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22 Ibid., 42, 47.


in the 1730s. Old Light Regular Baptists broke from the Philadelphia Association in 1765 and formed their own Virginia-based denominational body, called the Ketocton Association. In 1771 Separate Baptists, as the New Lights came to be called, followed a similar pattern, splitting away from the North Carolina Sandy Creek Association to create the General Association of Separate Baptists in Virginia. Even these divided groups proved tenuous, however, as the General Association of Separate Baptists was wracked by various theological disputes. Dissention plagued Baptists in Virginia. Change came following the American Revolution and the opportunity of disestablishment. To wage this campaign, Baptists in Virginia forged the General Committee of Baptist Associations, the first statewide denominational body. The General Committee was shockingly successful at holding together its volatile coalition by raising the specter of religious tyranny as a rallying cry for Baptist unity.26

The Virginia General Committee formed in October 1784, largely as a reaction against the effort to wage a tax to provide public support for religion. The General Assembly of Virginia struggled throughout 1784 to create a policy that would replace the Anglican establishment of the colonial regime. Throughout the Revolution, adherents to the Church of England found themselves in the difficult position of defending the state church of an enemy nation. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of ardent patriots feared the unregulated masses at least as much as a tyrannous monarch. For many, the aftermath of the Revolution seemed like the worst of times to reduce the influence of the established church, charged with maintaining social order. As destabilizing revolutionary fervor swept through Virginia, many feared that their fledgling society was in jeopardy. With the radical rhetoric of independence seeping down into all layers of society, what was keeping the lower order from rejecting deference for their superiors? In

Virginia, the answer had been the Church.\textsuperscript{27} It was widely understood that revolutionary Virginia suffered from a dangerous decline in virtue. Many Virginians believed that only a strong established church could maintain order during these precarious times.

A middle ground appeared in 1784 that could stand between a continuation of colonial patterns and complete disestablishment. During a Saturday session of the House of Delegates, a petition emerged from “sundry inhabitants of the county of Warwick” that introduced a new phrase into the debate. To remedy “the present neglected state of religion and morality,” the petitioners proposed “a general assessment.”\textsuperscript{28} The general assessment would continue the public funding of religion but distribute funds to all Protestant denominations rather than simply the Episcopalians who had benefited from the colonial establishment. Neither establishment nor the complete abandonment of public financing, a general assessment promised to preserve the morality and order of Virginia without privileging one sect over another. The plan proved wildly popular, much to the chagrin of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the Baptists. Less than two weeks later, the House’s committee for religion concluded that the petition “is reasonable” and should be considered by the whole House of Delegates.\textsuperscript{29} What was reasonable for many Virginians was considered outrageous to Baptists.

Baptist theology had been forged in the fire of European religious violence, and American believers held onto the tradition’s deep suspicion of any public support for Christianity. Given these convictions, the proposed compromise of the general assessment horrified both Regular and Separate Baptists. In order to combat a general assessment, the


\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Journal of the House of Delegates (JHD)} (May 15, 1784), p. 8.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{JHD} (May 27, 1784), p. 23.
Baptists would need to muster a unified voice and draw on as many allies as they could. The General Committee of Baptist Associations formed on October 9, 1784, to address “all the political grievances of the whole Baptist Society in Virginia.”³⁰ The Baptists were gearing up for a political fight, and they wanted to ensure that all political communication would flow through one organized body. Through an impressive petition campaign, and the legislative wizardry of James Madison, the push for a general assessment was defeated, and Thomas Jefferson’s Statute for Religious Freedom passed instead in 1786. The General Committee continued for several years, but despite strong leadership, the absence of an external threat left little motivation for Virginia Baptists to maintain their denominational structure. In 1799 the General Committee dissolved. Fear of ecclesiastical tyranny worked well to form denominational structures, but such threats were only temporary. It would take elaborate missionary endeavors to push churches to create lasting denominational structures.

**Conversionist Imperatives and Denominational Formation**

Severing ties with England provided many opportunities for American denominational formation, but missionary imperatives, fueled by nationalism, proved to be the strongest stimulus. The American missionary movement gained a tremendous boost from the outburst of nationalism following the American Revolution. Congregationalists made but few attempts to reach the unchurched prior to the Revolution, focusing instead on missions to Indians. The migration following the Revolution shifted Congregationalist missionary energies away from Indians and toward the Anglo-Americans pressing westward. Congregationalist missions received a boost from the nationalism of the Revolution, as New Englanders were no longer

content to allow their missions work to fall under the direction of the Scottish Society for the 
Propagation of Christian Knowledge. Instead, they formed their own North American missionary 
society, the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and others in North America 
(SPGNA). The Massachusetts General Court issued a charter in 1787, and the SPGNA began its 
work. In 1790, fundraising troubles inspired Peter Thatcher, the pastor of Brattle Street Church 
in Boston, to write a celebratory history of the young society in order to procure funds from the 
General Court. His mission succeeded, and the society was given a yearly budget of one hundred 
and fifty pounds, renewable for three years. State support continued for over a decade. Thatcher 
deamphasized Indian missions in his history, claiming “the principle efforts of the Society have 
been directed to our countrymen and friends in the three eastern counties of this 
commonwealth.”²³¹ Fear over the class tensions epitomized by Shays Rebellion three years prior 
likely motivated the General Court to send the calming influence of state-sanctioned religion to 
these distant settlements.

Connecticut took a few more years to form a formal missionary society, but missionary 
activity had begun earlier. Beginning in at least the early 1780s, the General Association of 
Connecticut collected money for missions work. In 1786 Isaac Lewis received four pounds ten 
shillings and six pence in return for five Sabbaths spent in the new, underserved settlements that 
had sprung up as a result of the rapid migration of the 1780s. The next year, the New Haven 
West Association commissioned a missionary to Vermont. The statewide General Association 
was so impressed by the initiative of this local association that it encouraged others to follow 
suit. But the General Association did more than simply outsource missions to local associations;

²³¹ The three eastern counties refer to Maine. Peter Thatcher, A Brief Account of the Present State of the Society for 
Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America (Boston: The Society for Propagating the 
Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America, 1790), p. 1. See also Charles L. Chaney, The Birth of 
instead, it formed a committee to direct future missions work. This committee included many of the most distinguished Connecticut clergymen, including Timothy Dwight, Joseph Huntington, Cotton Smith, and Jonathan Edwards Jr. By 1798 the General Association formalized these activities as the Missionary Society of Connecticut.32

Congregationalists in Connecticut formed a committee for missions in 1787, but after ten years, members called for more. Connecticut needed a state missionary society, but the General Association of Connecticut, the closest thing that these fiercely independent Congregationalists had to a governing ecclesiastical body, understood itself as fulfilling that role. The state settled on a curious solution that ultimately expanded the authority of the state denominational body. The Missionary Society of Connecticut (MSC) formed in 1798 as an extension of the General Association. The constitution of the new society stated, “The General Association of the State of Connecticut shall be the Missionary Society.” All members of the General Association automatically received membership in the missionary society. The new society would “Christianize the heathen in North America” and “support and promote Christian Knowledge in the new settlements within the United States.”33 The second goal garnered far more attention and success.34

Presbyterian attempts to form a national denominational body began as early as 1774, but considerable opposition mounted among those fearful of how a powerful centralized church might enforce theological conformity. Jacob Green, pastor in Hanover, New Jersey, led the charge against consolidation. Still fuming over the fiery battles against revivalism, Green fought


the construction of a stronger national assembly.\textsuperscript{35} A small faction of Presbyterians, mostly from New England, split off from the synod and formed their own presbytery. This defection was short lived, however, as the schismatics either died off or reentered the main body. The realities of war proved a far more challenging threat to the synod than this rare outburst of ideological opposition. Attendance at synod meetings dwindled far below an acceptable quorum.\textsuperscript{36}

Poor attendance caused the synod assembly of 1785 to chastise several presbyteries for failing to send sufficient representatives to the annual meeting of the synod.\textsuperscript{37} More importantly, however, this synod also called for a reorganization of the body along the lines of the Church of Scotland. This proposal called for the formation of three synods and an annual General Assembly. Despite the importance of this proposal and the intensity of the scolding over the poor representation, only thirty-eight ministers attended the synod of 1786. In 1786 the synod formed a committee to craft a new plan of ecclesiastical organization. The committee cycled through multiple drafts from 1786 to 1788, but the only major change concerned the relationship of Presbyterians to other denominations. Ecumenical language regarding “the unity of the catholic church” was replaced with less ecumenical language assuring that “it is necessary to make effectual provision that all who are teachers be sound in the faith.”\textsuperscript{38} Concerns over an overly powerful centralized authority endured, and the committee made clear that ultimate authority rested in local presbyteries rather than in the national body.

\textsuperscript{35} E. H. Gillett, \textit{History of the Presbyterian Church in America, Volume I} (Philadelphia: 1864), 207-212. See also, Trinterud, \textit{Forming of an American Tradition}, 280-281

\textsuperscript{36} Trinterud, \textit{Forming of an American Tradition}, 281.


\textsuperscript{38} Trintirud, \textit{Forming of an American Tradition}, 297-298.
As the nation cautiously submitted itself to the authority of the newly formed Constitution, Presbyterians formed their national ecclesiastical government tenuously, ever jealous of their local privileges. Anticlerical strains of New Side revivalists worked to minimize ministerial qualification requirements and to reserve ordination powers in presbyteries rather than the General Assembly. Leonard J. Trinterud’s remarkably detailed history of early Presbyterianism finely distinguishes between Scottish and American Presbyterian ecclesiology. While Americans still looked to Scotland for inspiration, the clergymen of the new republic modified Scottish practices in nearly every respect in order to enhance the power of local congregations and presbyteries over the national body. Not unlike the rest of the new nation, Presbyterian nationalism hinged on the preservation of local authority. Despite these concerns, Presbyterians had constructed a national denominational body and eagerly anticipated their role in guiding the spiritual destiny of the United States.

The first meeting began May 21, 1789, in Second Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia. Reverend James Sproat opened his church to the thirty-four commissioners, twenty-three ministers, and eleven ruling elders that made up the assembly. John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, opened the meeting with a sermon and set the theme for the assembly. Witherspoon focused the sermon around 1 Corinthians 3:6. The apostle Paul wrote, “I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” The text of Witherspoon’s actual sermon has never been found, but we can surmise from the scriptural reference that the assembly opened with a reflection on evangelism. Just as Paul wrote of his efforts in spreading the fledgling Christian church, so too these American Presbyterians labored to sow the seeds of a national faith. To assert their national orientation, the assembly drafted a letter to the great

symbol of the new nation, George Washington. In their encomium to the new president, the Presbyterians sought to claim Washington as a crypto-Presbyterian and make their claim as keepers of the national faith. To the local presbyteries, the General Assembly encouraged their annual participation in the larger body by warning them that “without a common intelligence, and concert in our measures, our respectability will be diminished and our efforts for the public good, and for the promotion of religion will be weakened by becoming divided.”

The United States needed Presbyterians, but for the church to be at its best, national denominational unity had to become a priority.

Northern churchmen dominated the proceedings, but Moses Hoge of Virginia made his presence felt. Hoge hailed from the Virginia backcountry of the Shenandoah Valley, amid numerous other Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. He came to Philadelphia from his pulpit in Shepherdstown, Virginia, a small community on the south side of the Potomac in present-day West Virginia. Hoge was a veteran of the religious liberty battles in 1780s Virginia where backcountry Presbyterians joined with Baptists and enlightenment-influenced elites to disestablish the Episcopal Church and replace the establishment with Thomas Jefferson’s famed statute for religious freedom. Men like Hoge, Francis Alison, and John Rodgers—the heroes of the battle against Anglicanism during the years just prior to the Revolution—remained in positions of authority. But with the threat of coercive Anglicanism erased by the revolution, Presbyterians shifted their attention toward missionary endeavors.

The five-day assembly centered primarily on establishing the infrastructure for missionary work. A year prior to the general assembly, the national body divided into four synods: New York and New Jersey, Philadelphia, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The assembly

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focused less on ecclesiastical structure or doctrinal orthodoxy and instead focused their efforts on establishing a plan for evangelizing the nation. At this General Assembly in 1789, twenty-seven years before the formation of the American Bible Society, Presbyterians prepared a printing of Bibles to support their new missionary ambitions.\footnote{John DeWitt, \textit{The First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America} (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1887), p. 28-29.} Committed to establishing the best missionary strategy, Presbyterians formed a board for home missionary endeavors chaired by Francis Alison and Samuel Stanhope Smith, Princeton professor of classics and son-in-law to John Witherspoon. The committee resolved that each of the four synods would recruit a pair of missionaries to work in their region. These missionaries would be given the specific charge of “organizing churches, administering ordinances, ordaining elders, collecting information respecting the religious state of those parts and proposing the best means of establishing a gospel ministry among the people.”\footnote{Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1789, p. 8.} The committee instructed local presbyteries to see that every Presbyterian congregation in the nation took at least one collection to defray the cost of these missionaries. Isaac Snowden, the treasurer of the General Assembly, collected all funds and distributed them to the selected missionaries. Inspired by Witherspoon’s sermon, the delegates returned home prepared to plant and water the gospel in anticipation that God would give the increase. They began recruiting young men willing to work with the hordes of migrants flocking west across the Allegheny Mountains.

The Synod of New York and New Jersey rose to the occasion, appointing Joshua Hart and Nathan Ker for a mission to the frontier settlements on the western branch of the Susquehanna in western Pennsylvania and New York. These two men, both Princeton graduates, were not novices in the ministry; Ker had been ordained in 1764 and Hart in 1772.
General Assembly met in 1791, Ker and Hart attended and shared their success. The missionaries split their time between frontier settlers and Native Americans, including members of the Oneida, Onandagos, and Cayuga nations. While they reportedly reached many Indians, they focused most of their attention on white settlers. Of these Americans, the missionaries reported, “the numbers are very considerable and in most there appeared a great attention to the preaching of the gospel. Your missionaries were treated with much respect, and in many places they were requested in the most affectionate manner to offer the thanks of the people to the General Assembly for their pious attention in sending missionaries.”

This request was answered as the General Assembly sent two other missionaries to the same region the next year, this time with the considerably younger James Boyd and Aaron Condict undertaking the itineration. The need to outfit missionaries drove Presbyterians together in an unprecedented expression of national unity. Other denominations attempted to follow, occasionally with mixed results.

The Dutch Reformed Church struggled to manage internal tensions and conflict with the church in Holland but shared the Presbyterians’ preoccupation with unchurched western settlers. Their concern was warranted: the General Synod of 1784 reported that of the nearly one hundred congregations, only fifty-three had a regular minister. “Many of the vacant congregations are large and able, and that in them all there is an ardent desire for the Word of the living God.” Even worse, “the lack of ministers is rather increasing than otherwise.” The church regretted having few candidates approaching licensure and feared for the future of the nation. Even the properly staffed churches “daily find their danger and affliction increased, partly by the lack of licentiates, and partly by the flood of error, infidelity, and all kinds of irreligion, which are everywhere bursting upon our land.” The situation was grave. These were dangerous times, and

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43 Ibid., p. 17.
the church needed to act if they would reverse these alarming trends. Great promise existed, however, for “the new settlements which are now occurring in the respective States of this land, and will daily increase, present the most favorable opportunities for the extension of our churches and the diffusion of the pure doctrines of grace.” These favorable opportunities only required “missionaries, with sufficient means for their support.”

After several years considering different plans, the General Synod decided to instruct each congregation to take a special offering for the purpose of outfitting missionaries. Nine years after the alarming report, Andrew Gray traveled from Poughkeepsie to the Susquehanna where he enjoyed considerable success, bolstering an ailing congregation and organizing a new one as well. Every year thereafter, the General Synod continued to outfit missionaries “for the purpose of extending the interest of our Dutch Church in the back country.” In the first decade of the nineteenth century, John M. Mason, a New York City Reformed minister and founding member of the New York Missionary Society, tackled the ministerial shortage by forming a seminary. On an 1802 fundraising trip to London, Mason encouraged Britons, “Let us not overlook as an unimportant matter, the very existence of that missionary spirit that which has already awakened Christians.” After listing a long catalog of anticipated struggles, Mason rested in a millennial faith that “the missionary cause must ultimately succeed. It is the cause of God, and shall prevail.”

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For Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the Dutch Reformed, active missionary work required denominational unity. The Dutch Reformed Church is a case in point. Between 1798 and 1812, the Committee on Missions of the General Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church sought to send missionaries to Upper Canada and Kentucky but lacked the strength to do it on their own. Instead, the General Synod delegated the problems to local bodies. The Classis of Albany was charged with reaching Canadians, and the Particular Synod of New York was told to organize a mission to Kentucky. Neither fulfilled their mission as internal tensions prevented action. In 1806 the General Synod, agitated by Robert McDowell’s warning that Baptists and Congregationalists were making great advances at the expense of Reformed Dutch prospects, finally took action and sent three missionaries to Upper Canada for eight weeks. The General Synod also appointed a Standing Committee on Missions, but the committee rarely took action. Between 1807 and 1812, the committee appointed only four missionaries. The strict prerequisites for ordination in the Dutch Reformed Church required a major effort to recruit and commission qualified missionaries, but the denomination never gathered sufficient strength for such an endeavor. As a result, Dutch Reformed missions languished.

Successful missions in the first decades of the early republic required either a strong, centralized denomination or few ministerial qualifications. The Dutch Reformed had neither, Presbyterians had the former, and Baptists had the latter. Baptists benefitted greatly from post-revolutionary migration patterns. Relying less heavily on educated ministers, Baptist itinerants swept along the frontier, rapidly forming congregations. By 1787 Baptists in Philadelphia rejoiced that “the purity of the doctrines and ordinances of the gospel of Christ are prevailing more and more.” Reports from Virginia, South Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, New England, and

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western Pennsylvania shared the many gains of the Baptist faith. The Philadelphia Baptist Association gloated “in the prosperity of Zion throughout this continent.” The missionary work sparked by the Philadelphia association had taken on a life of its own as dozens of other associations took up the cause and organized their own missionary endeavors. New England Baptists enjoyed most of their growth at the expense of Congregationalists, picking off disenfranchised members or sometimes even entire congregations of the Standing Order. But as in the South, New England Baptists grew especially rapidly among western settlements. The Warren Association commissioned Job Seamans and Biel Ledoyt as missionaries to the Connecticut River Valley in New Hampshire and Vermont in 1779. The two men planted numerous churches and organized the Shaftesbury Association in 1781. Other Baptist missionaries traveled throughout New Hampshire and Maine. Baptists advances in Maine stymied the missionary ambitions of Congregationalists, as Daniel Little and other missionaries from the Congregationalist-led SPGNA found many potential converts already claiming adherence to Baptist principles.49

The 1787 Baptist revival in Virginia neither resulted from nor contributed to the formation of missionary societies. Virginia Baptists united in the religious liberty crusade, but then immediately reverted to the fiercely independent congregational model and took to planting new churches without any institutional prompting or organization. Despite the lack of coordination, Baptists enjoyed remarkable success west of the Appalachian Mountains. South Carolina retained its institutional cohesion as the Charleston Association continued to send missionaries into Georgia. The Charleston Association’s missions work led to the formation of

48 Gilette, Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, p. 228.

49 See, for example, the letter from Daniel Little to Peter Thatcher in Thatcher, A Brief Account, p. 2.
the Georgia Baptist Association in 1784 that in turn commissioned its own missionaries. Baptists in the South responded to the post-Revolutionary period by strengthening local or state-wide denominational ties, but it would take another outburst of postwar nationalism to catalyze national Baptist denominational formation. Baptist ecclesiology was built on a suspicion of hierarchy, and accordingly they remained more hesitant than Congregationalists or Presbyterians to establish stronger governing bodies.

The relationship between Connecticut Congregationalists and Presbyterians in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania developed during the 1760s and 1770s as the two groups worked together in protesting the possible placement of an Anglican bishop in North America. Attempts to restore these bonds of fellowship blossomed in the 1790s as committees for correspondence maintained dialog and arranged certifications for ministers traveling between the two groups. With the threat of an Anglican bishop removed, the Presbyterian General Assembly lacked an immediate imperative for resuming dialog with New England Congregationalists but nonetheless “did resolve that the ministers of the congregational churches in New England be invited to renew their annual convention with the clergy of the Presbyterian church.” In explaining the purpose of this overture, the General Assembly simply remarked on the “mutual pleasure and advantage produced and received by their former intercourse” and that the two denominations “so nearly agreed in doctrine and forms of worship.” The next year a committee was formed to meet with delegates from the Congregational Association in New Haven. By 1796 Presbyterians had met with Congregationalists, and the two denominations agreed to partner on missions. Both churches launched their own attempts to reach frontier settlements, but in 1801 the General Association of Connecticut requested a meeting with representatives from the Presbyterian

General Assembly to “promote union among the inhabitants of the new settlements and the missionaries to those settlements.” The Connecticut Missionary Society further instructed “their missionaries to avoid everything that may interrupt peace in the new settlements among those that are attached to the Presbyterian and congregational forms of governments.” One year after this Plan of Union between Middle Colony Presbyterian and Connecticut Congregationalists, the General Association of Connecticut made similar overtures to Congregationalists in Vermont.

**Limits to Denominational Unity**

While the Presbyterian General Assembly attempted to direct mission activities through national meetings, southerners generally took matters into their own hands. The Virginia Synod appointed four ministers and four elders to serve as a board of missions in 1790. Nash LeGrand accepted the first commission in 1790. That same year, Cary Allen, William Hill, and Robert Marshall joined the cause. The Synod of the Carolinas appointed four missionaries in 1792 and maintained a rotation of four missionaries, preaching four months at a time along the border of Tennessee and Georgia. Internal tensions hindered southern Presbyterian development, however, as debates over the Watts hymnal and doctrinal divisions occupied the attentions of southern leaders and prevented further missionary action. Difficulties in travel and a general southern intransigence prevented the General Assembly, always meeting in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, from exerting as much control in the region as its leaders would like. Instead, the

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52 Ibid. p. 237.
General Assembly directed missions activities in the North and Northwest, while individual southern synods handled the Southwest.

Presbyterians had national reach. With churches in New England, Georgia, and everywhere in between, the General Assembly attempted to direct a national church. But the denomination offered considerable autonomy to the southern synods. When referring to sending missionaries, the General Assembly in 1800 resolved that “all the clergy of our denomination within our bounds, do aid the exertions of those who shall go on this business.” But the assembly followed this up by creating an exception for two southern synods: “these orders however, be not considered as extending to the Synod of the Carolinas, nor to the committee of the Synod of Virginia west of the Alleghany mountains.” These southerners were instructed, however, to “bring those objects distinctly before the judicatures and individual ministers under their care, and take such measures to advance the purposes specified as to themselves shall appear best.” Southerners were allowed to direct their own missionary activities, but the need for an explicit exception indicates that the General Assembly still understood the southern synods as “within our bounds.”53 In many ways, the southern synods led the way in organizing missionary activity. While the General Assembly floundered in organizing a mission to Indians, the Synod of Virginia west of the mountains sent missionaries to Indians near Lake Erie.

National Presbyterian denominational consolidation stalled. Geography proved a powerful barrier, as few southerners made the long voyage from South Carolina or Georgia to the General Assembly, usually held in Philadelphia or New York. Presbyteries submitted money to the Commissioner’s fund that was used, in part, to offset travel expenses. These payments were commitments to denominational unity, and when in 1812, the funds came up short, the

53 Ibid., p. 206.
General Assembly issued a rebuke, calling these donations essential to the preservation of denominational unity. The same geographic challenges were not enough to keep southern Baptist clergymen from traveling to their national denomination body meeting in Philadelphia in 1814, however, so distance is not a sufficient explanation for the limits of Presbyterian unity. Southern Presbyterians simply refused to surrender control of their missions work to the national body. Southerners had enjoyed great success without the cooperation, much less the coordination of their northern brethren, so a truly national Presbyterian church never formed. When sectional tensions over slavery emerged later, the national Presbyterian body lacked the cohesion or authority to adjudicate the problem. Despite the greater successes among southern Presbyterians, national denominational authority remained in the North. As national denominational action increasingly coincided with northern benevolent reform, southern Presbyterians felt increasingly ostracized by the denomination.

Congregationalists never had to contend with the vast geographical challenges of Presbyterians or Baptists, yet unity remained elusive in New England as well. The Connecticut Missionary Society became simply a synonym for the General Association of the Connecticut, and accordingly the missionary impulse fueled the consolidation of denominational authority and the power of the denomination fueled missionary outreach. This was not the case for all Congregationalists, however. The situation in Massachusetts was more complex and indicative of the fractious nature of Bay State ecclesiology. The Massachusetts Missionary Society grew out of disgruntled Hopkinsians. Other Hopkinsians formed the second missionary society in

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54 Ibid., p. 507-508.

55 Congregationalism split into at least three factions during the late nineteenth century. Liberal, proto-Unitarians rejected traditional Calvinism, but even the Calvinists could not maintain unity. Hopkinsians, the followers of Samuel Hopkins’s New Divinity, took a stronger stance on divine sovereignty than most orthodox Calvinists. For
New England. The Congregational Missionary Society of Berkshire and Columbia formed in 1798 under the leadership of Stephen West, a close associate of Samuel Hopkins. This society functioned as a ministerial association but grew rapidly, sending missionaries to New York, Vermont, Ohio, and western Pennsylvania. Ministers west of Boston formed the Evangelical Missionary Society of Massachusetts (EMSM) in 1807. Under the leadership of Joseph Sumner, the first moderator for the Society, the EMSM directed their efforts toward “extending the means of Christian knowledge among the destitute or poorly provided in the infant settlements of our own country.” The EMSM remained free from doctrinal controversy or the partisan spirit only temporarily. Both liberal and orthodox ministers labored for the Society until Unitarians took over the organization in 1817. Other states followed the example of Connecticut in maintaining statewide missionary societies. The New Hampshire Missionary Society and the General Association of New Hampshire held their meetings simultaneously, essentially merging the two organizations. Vermont followed suit as the Vermont Convention of Congregational and Presbyterian Ministers and Churches transformed itself into the Vermont Missionary Society in 1807. Baptists remained fragmented longer than Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or the Dutch Reformed, but when they did come together, the Baptist General Convention became the strongest national denominational body in the early republic.

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Baptist Formation

It was once again a conflict with Great Britain that encouraged national denominational formation. Baptists formed their national body as a result of the War of 1812 and a series of unexpected conversions. Surprisingly, rising interest in international missionary endeavors spurred national Baptist consolidation. To engage globally, American Baptists had to begin acting nationally. Since the late eighteenth century, American Baptists looked with tremendous admiration on the efforts of William Carey and the London-based Baptist Missionary Society. Carey’s Baptist mission to India captured the attention of American Christians of all denominations, but American Baptists found the work of their British brethren particularly encouraging. Baptists responded by forming missionary societies in New York and Massachusetts. William Staughton proved an important link between the London-based Baptist Missionary Society and supportive Americans. Born in Coventry, England, Staughton migrated to South Carolina in 1793. After preaching for several years in South Carolina, he made his way to New Jersey before settling in Philadelphia. He remained a leader in the Philadelphia Baptist community and participated actively in the General Convention. Staughton had been a champion of missions since at least 1792 when he attended the founding meeting of Mathew Carey’s Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). His 1811 publication, The Baptist Mission in India, raised funds for the BMS. Despite the tremendous enthusiasm for Carey’s efforts in India, all of the early American Baptist societies targeted domestic missions. In order to spread the gospel internationally, Americans had no choice but send money to support their British brethren. As

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60 The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society enjoyed tremendous success, for example. By 1825, the MBMS had spent over $12,750.00 to support forty missionaries who administered 2,300 Sunday services. See William H. Brackney, “Yankee Benevolence in Yorker Lands: Origins of the Baptist Home Missions Movement,” Foundations, 24:4 (October 1981), pp. 293-301.
tensions between the United States and Great Britain accelerated, culminating in the War of 1812, Americans grew increasingly desirous for their own foreign missionary apparatus. Congregationalists in New England made the first move, creating the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), but a series of unexpected defections from the ABCFM provided the spark American Baptists needed to undertake a missionary enterprise of their own.

Ann Hasseltine, Adoniram Judson, and Luther Rice traveled to India through the support of the ABCFM. Upon arriving in India, the three renounced their former Congregationalist identities and joined the Baptist faith, accepting baptism at William Carey’s Lal Bazaar Chapel. This defection left the three missionaries without means of supporting themselves, so Judson and Hasseltine, now married, traveled to Burma, while Luther Rice returned to the United States to fundraise. It would be difficult to overstate Luther Rice’s importance in uniting American Baptists. Itinerating tirelessly, Rice traversed the nation, organizing societies in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, and countless smaller settlements in between. By the end of 1813, there were seventeen missionary societies, the majority of which formed in response to Rice’s labors.

In countless sermons, Rice called for a stronger national missionary society capable of supporting his former colleagues and commissioning reinforcements. This was not the first attempt to organize Baptists in America. In 1776 the Warren Association, comprising dozens of churches in New England, asked “all the societies of our denomination in the American colonies” to create “a general meeting of delegates from our societies in each colony… to consult upon the best means and methods for obtaining and establishing full and equal religious
In 1799 the Philadelphia Association, the most active Baptist association in commissioning missionaries, sent a circular to other associations proposing “a general conference, composed of one or more members from each Association, to be held every one, two, or three years.” After receiving a few favorable replies, the association resolved to “invite the general Committee of Virginia and different Associations on the continent to unite with us in laying a plan for forming a missionary society.” All of these actions came to nothing, however, as friendly correspondence was not enough to convince the fiercely independent Baptists to risk establishing a national body, no matter how weak.

Ten years later things had changed, particularly in the South. Earlier efforts at unification or at least large-scale coordination began in the North, but Rice found the greatest enthusiasm for unity in the South. Richard Furman, influential minister at First Baptist Charleston, and his protégé William Bullein Johnson, then of First Baptist in Savannah, both voiced their support. Inspired by Rice’s efforts, Johnson circulated a letter on behalf of the Savannah Baptist Society for Foreign Missions that wished that “delegates from [all of the Baptist missionary societies in America] convene in some central situation in the United States.” This meeting would allow “the energies of the whole Baptist denomination, throughout America” to combine “in one sacred effort for sending the world of life to idolatrous lands.” Johnson thought in huge terms, dreaming of “100,000 to 200,000 souls all rising in obedience to their Lord, and meeting by delegation in one august assembly.” This language was curious, for there was not really a

61 This letter was signed by Isaac Backus, Nathan Plimpton, and Asaph Flether. See Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), p. 229-230.


“Baptist denomination,” only Baptist churches, with a few ministerial associations. A convention would have to do more than draw together the denomination; it would have to create one. With that challenge, Baptist ministers from around the nation gathered in Philadelphia’s First Baptist Church in 1814.

The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in United States of America, for Foreign Missions met for seven days in May 1814. What began as an effort to coordinate missions grew into the construction of a national denominational body. Even the title of the convention shifted from 1814 to 1817. The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in United States of America, for Foreign Missions was simplified to the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States. 64 This name change does not indicate a change in the primary purpose of the convention, but it does illustrate how the missions impulse fueled a consolidation of religious authority in the early republic. The constitution listed the purpose of the convention as “organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole Denomination in one sacred effort, for sending the glad tidings of Salvation to the heathen.” International missions required a national church. The call to evangelize trumped anxieties regarding ecclesiastical power. The rise in American nationalism resulting from the War of 1812 buoyed Baptist dreams of a powerful American church, spreading “pure Gospel-light” around the world. 65

Richard Furman delivered the opening sermon, which unfolded the promise of Matthew 28:20 that Christ would be with the faithful “even to the end of the world.” For those gathered in


65 Proceedings, 1814, p. 3.
Philadelphia, Burma, the site of the fledgling American Baptist mission, surely felt like the end of the world. But the content of the sermon had very little to do with the importance, function, or method of missions work. Instead, Furman delivered a careful doctrine-heavy explanation of individual conversion. Furman affirmed his Calvinism with a rigorous defense of divine sovereignty, suggesting a theological framework for the new denomination. This sermon went beyond the rhetoric of typical missionary sermons. Instead, Furman laid out a doctrinal vision for the new national Baptist church. But in the final passages, Furman returned to the missionary theme, encouraging those gathered “to look forward with pleasing anticipation to those blessed days which prophecy has made known, when the triumphs of the cross shall extend to the remotest parts of the habitable globe” and society will be transformed until “benevolence, harmony, and love prevail.” He repeated the millennial rhetoric, promising “great events with respect to the Kingdom of Christ appear to be drawing near.”

The General Convention met every three years and came to be called the Triennial Convention. In the intervening years, a board of twenty-one commissioners directed the missions work for the denomination. Thirty-six clergymen attended the conference with nearly half hailing from Pennsylvania or New Jersey. Despite the preponderance of ministers from the Middle Colonies, the body included representatives from Massachusetts and Rhode Island, as well as representatives from every southern state along the eastern seaboard, from Delaware to Georgia. Richard Furman of South Carolina served as president, but Thomas Baldwin of Massachusetts and William Staughton of Pennsylvania also made valuable contributions. When it came time to elect the missions board, Luther Rice solicited nominations, and the convention ensured geographical diversity by selecting at least one member from every state delegation for

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the board. Jeremiah Vanderman from Kentucky was added, despite his absence from the convention, bringing the number of represented states to thirteen. The board met a day after the closing of the convention. Efforts to maintain national representation continued, but the challenges of geography proved considerable. Richard Furman was again selected as president but “declined the office on account of his great distance from the seat of the board.” Judge Matthias B. Talmadge, also from South Carolina, turned down his appointment as treasurer. As a result, the board’s officers remained exclusively northern. Bostonian Thomas Baldwin took the position as president. All four of the vice presidents and secretaries hailed from Pennsylvania, and a New Yorker replaced Talmadge as secretary.\(^6^7\) Despite the northern domination of the offices, southerners contributed considerably at this first board meeting. Talmadge and W. B. Johnson of Georgia, along with Lucius Bolles of Massachusetts, prepared the board’s bylaws. Luther Rice became the board’s missionary “to continue, his itinerant services in these United States, for a reasonable time, with a view to excite the public mind more generally, to engage in Missionary exertions, and to assist in originating Societies or Institutions for carrying the missionary design into execution.” The recently married Adoniram Judson and Ann (Hasseltine) Judson received appointments as foreign missionaries and were paid $1,000. Luther Rice was also to be remunerated an undisclosed sum for expenses incurred during his fundraising travels.\(^6^8\)

In an appendix to the published minutes, Luther Rice gave an outline of the global opportunities for missions, highlighting Southeast Asia, Madagascar, and Brazil. Drawing on his brief time in India, he celebrated British success but encouraged Americans to look elsewhere. Rice also included a list of donations he collected in the southern and middle states, illustrating

\(^{6^7}\) *Ibid.*, p. 6-7, 12. Henry Holcombe of Georgia was first vice president, Rogers second. William Staughton became corresponding secretary and William White the recording secretary. The treasurer was New Yorker John Caldwell.

the South’s disproportionately enthusiastic response to national unity and foreign missions. Six missionary societies and three ministerial associations contributed, with the majority of funds coming from the Richard Furman’s Charleston Baptist Association (CBA) and W. B. Johnson’s Savannah Baptist Society (SBS).

On the first day of the convention, “Drs. Furman, Baldwin, and Staughton (of South Carolina, Massachusetts, and Philadelphia, respectively) were requested to prepare an address on the subject of foreign missions and the general interests of the Baptist denomination” to be sent “throughout the Union.” The majority of the address explained the progress of international missions, and an appendix even included characters in Sanskrit and Burmese along with the scriptural text of Matthew 2:2, “We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.” But at its conclusion, the address veered from the topic of missions, offering a justification for denominational consolidation, or as they phrased it, “delightful union.” While “independence of the churches, we trust will ever, among us, be steadfastly maintained,” these Baptist leaders asked “why prevent us from uniting in one common effort for the glory of the Son of God?” In describing the national convention, they exulted, “It was as if the first interviews of heaven had been anticipated.” Clergymen from New England shared desks with ministers from South Carolina. Heaven contained souls from every tribe and tongue, and the convention included ministers from every state in the Union. Constructing a national church required an expanded understanding of clerical duty and ministerial space. No longer content to focus solely on their church or their community, these ministers redefined their flock as the nation, a transformation essential for the development of antebellum social reform.

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69 Ibid., p. 7.
The convention succeeded in plotting a course for American Baptist missionary work, but then the delegates turned their attention to education. The convention asserted, “Within the last fifty years, by the diffusion of knowledge and attention to liberal science, the state of society has considerably elevated. It is certainly desirable the information of the minister in the sanctuary should increase in equal proportion.” From their pulpits in Charleston, Boston, and Philadelphia, these reverend doctors catered to increasingly educated and cosmopolitan congregations. Backcountry, illiterate itinerants would not suffice for this new national denomination. These ministers called for improvements through “education societies, and if possible, by a general theological seminary.”

The next convention began with great rejoicing. All of the members of the first meeting survived the three intervening years. Donations far surpassed expectations. What began as a convention to coordinate international missions had turned into a national denominational body. Progress continued in Southeast Asia, but the convention rejoiced that Providence “is opening other spheres on our own continent.” The concluding calls of the 1814 convention for improved ministerial education and domestic missions found a ready audience. James A. Randaldson accepted a commission to New Orleans. The emphasis on education marked something of an innovation among Baptists, but the convention asserted in 1817 that “difficulties on this subject, felt by some pious brethren, are, like vapors of the morning, vanishing.” The Board for Foreign Missions proposed to the General Convention that “the powers of this Convention be extended so as to embrace home missions and plans for the encouragement of education.” This proposal

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70 Ibid., 41-42.


72 Ibid., 130.
was answered with a series of amendments that empowered the board “to appropriate a portion of the funds to domestic missions” and to “institute a Classical and Theological Seminary.”  

Nothing combined the goals of education and home missions more than the commissioning of John Mason Peck and James E. Welch. Less than two weeks after the 1817 convention, Peck and Welch traveled west to establish a mission in the Mississippi Valley, a trip several years in the making. Since at least 1813, Peck had obsessed over the non-Christian Indians residing in the Mississippi Valley. In 1815 he took action, writing to Luther Rice regarding this conviction. Rice was sitting with James E. Welch when he received the letter. Welch had earlier reported a similar desire, and Rice connected the two. But Rice also informed Peck that an ideal missionary to the west should “possess an acquaintance with the Latin and Greek, if not the Hebrew; and indeed it would be desirable that the missionary should be a graduate of some college.” While formal college training could be dispensable, Rice reported, “A thorough acquaintance with grammar, rhetoric, geography, and history, are of great importance.” Rice wished to see a school planted in St. Louis and hoped Peck and Welch might be up for the job. Peck was willing, but he lacked the education Rice desired. Welch had even less education and described his ministerial training by writing, “I had no instructor and but few books to aid me. I had been literally born in a cane-brake, brought up on a farm, and had never studied geography, history, or even grammar.” To remedy his deficiencies, Peck wrote to William Staughton of Philadelphia requesting “some assistance in board and tuition” from the

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73 Ibid., 131-132.


Philadelphia Education Society to allow him to spend a few months improving his education.  

Peck got more than he bargained for, as the board of missions established a theological institute in Philadelphia, with Staughton as principal. John Mason Peck and James E. Welch comprised the first class, and the two trained for over a year in preparation for a mission to the Mississippi Valley.

Peck and Welch planted numerous churches in the Mississippi Valley but centered their efforts in St. Louis. The two found ready allies in the African American community, and First Baptist of St. Louis had its roots in the biracial cooperation of Peck and John Berry Meachum, a former slave turned successful carpenter. In 1825 the black Baptists of St. Louis formed their own church, the first independent African American church west of the Mississippi. Peck ordained Meachum, who began a long and successful career as a minister and educator. Collaboration between Peck and Meachum continued for several decades as they worked together, in violation of Missouri state law, to educate black Americans in St. Louis. Despite the success of Peck and Welch, the General Convention did not continue supporting the Western Mission. By 1820 the General Convention began to direct their energies elsewhere.

The 1820 convention appeared to continue the work of earlier meetings as the emphasis on home missions and ministerial education continued. The tone in discussing education changed, however. The confidence in the 1817 report that opposition to ministerial education were “like vapors of the morning, vanishing” was gone. In its stead, the convention produced a

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76 Letter, John Mason Peck to William Staughton, January 5, 1816 in Peck, Forty Years of Pioneer Life, p. 48-49.


cautious defense of education, acknowledging several times how learning “has been often abused to the vilest of purposes.” This address was written by the Virginian, Robert Baylor Semple, elected president of the 1820 General Convention. Semple and his allies were clearly wrestling with the primitivist inclinations within the denomination, but the educated men of the General Convention pushed back, claiming that “miracles have ceased” and some practices of the primitive church no longer apply. No longer should the church attempt “casting out demons, healing the sick, treading on serpents, and drinking deadly poison.” According to the General Convention, education could be dangerous and had sadly been used in the past more for pomp and personal glory than for the extension of the gospel. The threat of Unitarianism was real for these ministers. Only knowledge of Greek and Hebrew could safeguard the scriptures from liberal hermeneutics. Semple bemoaned that, “The battlements of Zion are assailed; war is come to our gates; and some of the mighty are fallen.” Baptist leaders felt compelled to resist the Unitarian threat with an army of educated clergymen. The theological institute in Philadelphia (headed by William Staughton) that trained Peck and Welch was a start, but the Baptists dreamed of something bigger. Largely under the leadership of Luther Rice, the board created a seminary based in Washington, D.C.

The Board recognized the value of a periodical to publicize their works. The American Baptist Magazine, based in Boston had performed the service well, but because of its location, circulation was difficult. Having one single, nationally distributed publication was the ideal, but practical concerns that the communications of the board “if introduced into the American Baptist Magazine, must swell it to an impracticable mass.” Given concerns over the cost of printing and of distribution, the board rested in the assurance that “in a country as ours, two, and even more of
such publications, could not be regarded as an excess.” As a result, the board began printing a second publication in 1818, *The Latter Day Luminary*, based in Philadelphia. The *Columbian Star* emerged in 1822 with the goal of focusing on the functions of the new Columbian College and in offering circulation to the South.

The new emphasis on education included attempts to “civilize” Indians. In 1817 the board commissioned Isaac McCoy to work with Indians in Michigan and Indiana and Humphrey Posey to western North Carolina to work with the Cherokee. Over the next few years, over a half dozen new missionaries spread out across the eastern half of North America in attempt to reach Native Americans. In 1819, with direction from the board, Baptists in Kentucky commissioned John Ficklin to open a school for Indians that at various times was called the Choctaw Academy or Johnson’s Academy. The increased emphasis on Indian missions inclined the board to transfer John Mason Peck from St. Louis to McCoy’s settlement in Illinois or Posey’s in North Carolina. The General Convention agreed with the board in concluding that, “From the numerous emigrations of ministers to our western settlements, the period has arrived when it is no longer necessary to support our brethren as missionaries of these places.” Peck chaired the committee of the General Convention that authorized these board decisions, but no one was more aversely affected than he. Peck and his family had made the Mississippi Valley their home, and he enjoyed a successful ministry to both the white and black residents of St. Louis. Some historians have claimed that the 1820 General Convention marked a decline in Baptist support for domestic missions. This is erroneous, however. The shift away from St. Louis


was more than compensated for in the increased attention to Indians. The General Convention proclaimed that a “cry, mournful and nearly despairing, except where missionary stations have begun to send forth songs of salvation, issues from every point along the wide range of our western forests.” In their final sentence, the Committee on Domestic Missions concluded with praising “efforts on a larger scale than any that have yet been attempted among us for evangelizing the wretched and injured aborigines.”81 The anxiety over post-Revolutionary migration had been assuaged. The Baptists succeeded in providing churches for westward migrants and now turned their attention to Indians.

The millennial confidence of earlier conventions declined in 1823. The Board began their address with the warning that “in some sections of our country, the missionary spirit has languished.” The problem, however, was not really a lack of enthusiasm. They assured their readers that “the deficiency has resulted from the absence of exterior excitement; from the want of more comprehensive ideas as to the fields and advantages of missionary efforts.”82 The problem, as they understood it, was a lack of clear communication, not of passionate piety. The remainder of the report endeavored to rectify this shortcoming by extolling the progress in Burma, as well as gains made among the Pottawatomie, Ottawa, Choctaw, Cherokee, and Oneida. Despite the shift toward foreign and Indian missions in 1820, the 1823 Convention still assembled a committee on domestic missions, indicating that this was still a priority. Given the increased migration of ministers west, this committee determined that the General Convention could best use their resources in Indian or foreign missions while leaving domestic missions to state conventions or missionary societies. Strategies may have changed, but the Baptist

expectation of a church with national reach continued. The nationalism of the 1823 General Convention appeared to reach fever pitch, as the delegates invited themselves to the White House where President Monroe received them. Robert Baylor Semple, president of the 1823 General Convention, delivered an address extolling the United States as an unparalleled land of religious purity and blessed freedom. The Baptist commitment to religious liberty infused the address, as Semple informed Monroe, “You are waited upon, sir, by a denomination of Christians to whom rational freedom is dear as the ‘current of the soul,’ whose ecclesiastical government is interwoven with its dictates, and whose ardent desires and endeavors embrace the victories of patriotism and piety, from the Potomac to the ends of the Earth.” Monroe offered a brief address in reply, thanking the Baptists for their solicitation and particularly rejoicing in the establishment of the College.

In 1832 Baptist denominational consolidation suffered an irreversible blow. The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, responding to the work of missionary Jonathan Going, called for the formation of a domestic missionary society in the United States. The organizational meeting for this society coincided with the triennial meeting of the General Convention. Two plans emerged, the first proposing a new home missions society. The second plan was more ambitious, permanently defining the General Convention as a national denominational body with a board for foreign missions and another for home missions. The second plan was defeated, and the American Baptist Home Mission Society formed. Baptists changed their General Convention from a national denominational body to its original stated

83 “Substance of the Proceedings,” The Latter Day Luminary, Vol 4, No. 6 (June 1, 1823), p. 172.

purpose, that of a foreign missionary society. However, for nearly twenty years, the Baptist held together a strong national body that tied together men and women across vast distances. The experience of denominational unity in the early republic set the groundwork for the benevolent empire.

Concerns over migration, religious authority, and souls in need of conversion preoccupied Christians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But the ways in which these problems were addressed ultimately shaped the many reform movements that culminated in aggressive abolitionism. In understanding this process, historians of the early republic must resist the urge to look forward to the roots of sectionalism and instead understand early American denominations as attempts to create national religious cultures. Doing so will transform our understanding of religion in the era by balancing an emphasis on democratic diffusion with an awareness of the concurrent consolidation of religious authority. Understanding denominational formation promises further insight as we can see how these national bodies fostered the Christian nationalism that became such a core component of antebellum American identity. Large-scale social reform required a foundation of nationalism. National denominations connected Americans across vast distances, but as tensions developed over slavery, denominational bonds strained. Many Americans first felt the national tremors over slavery through their denominational bodies, and tensions within denominations served as an important accelerator for these sectionalist tensions. But before these tensions approached a breaking point, national denominations enabled ministers to turn their attention to the national cause of social reform. The construction of the benevolent empire required the national foundation of denominational

identification, and indeed it was upon the bedrock of national denominations that reformers constructed the early pillars of national reform
Conversionist impulses preoccupied the minds of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century clergy. The political upheavals of the American Revolution and millennial expectations of worldwide conversions fostered an assurance of impending social change. Ministers knitted their denominations together largely as a means of furthering these conversionist aims. Anxieties over religious conversion led Americans to consolidate religious authority into denominational bodies. The formation of these bodies had the unintended side effect of pushing denominationalists—both leaders and many of their followers—toward social reform. Beginning with the formation of missionary, tract, and Bible societies, reform expanded to promote the establishment of educational institutions before shifting toward political agitation during the Sabbatarian and temperance movements. This process added organized social reform to conversionist millennialism as religious solutions to the ills of the age.

Denominations became a major means for fostering nationalism and by so doing both stimulated and enervated reform. It tied Americans together in national religious communities, building connections across vast tracts of space. As northerners abolished the institution and erased the history of slavery in the region, historian Joanne Pope Melish has shown, abolitionism required a national awareness.\(^1\) Many antislavery New Englanders were content to rest in an apathetic sense of self-superiority, and while abolitionism grew from a foundation of these self-

righteous emotions, the movement to rid the nation of the sin of slavery demanded not just thought but action. Denominational relationships forged in the preceding decades had established valuable connections for Americans, north and south as well as east and west. These connections made it impossible for northern ministers to ignore slavery while simultaneously imploring southerners to defend the institution that had become exclusively theirs. Though it was not an immediate shift, changes made at the denominational-level moved Americans away from an overriding preoccupation with religious conversion, thereby enabling the construction of the benevolent empire and the rise of antebellum social reform. This chapter tracks the ways in which denominational institutions, formed by the imperatives of conversion, shifted American religious priorities away from conversion and toward social reform.

The study of antebellum reform has been dominated by the social control thesis, the claim that social reform was a tool developed and employed by elites to reinforce their own status. Clifford S. Griffin first advanced the idea in 1957, and historians have been grappling with the argument for decades. Social historians built on the interpretation, explaining reform as a means of inculcating and spreading middle-class values on a growing population of immigrant laborers. Dissenting voices emerged early, but it took until the 1980s and 1990s before historians moved beyond preoccupations with social control in narrating early reform. The best current work on reform acknowledges the increased pressure that religious leaders were able to place on Catholic immigrants but moves beyond narrow Marxian dismissals of genuine religious

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2 Clifford S. Griffin, “Religious Benevolence as Social Control, 1815-1860,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 44, no. 3 (December, 1957): 423-44.

3 Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revival in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York: Macmillan, 1978) was the most impressive of a host of contemporary works emphasizing social control.

conviction. Religious leaders directed social reform as an attempt to purge the nation of destructive social sins, and in so doing elevated their social position and created a discourse of cultural power, privileging their values over those of others. For example, in evaluating temperance literature, it is difficult to separate genuine anxieties over the effects of alcohol from nativist attacks on the Irish. But the task of separating these motivations from one another is a fool’s errand. The question of whether social reform represented genuine religious sentiment or simply the means of oppressing the laboring classes is misguided. The answer is obviously both, and contemporary studies should not only acknowledge this but unfold the ways in which anxieties over power informed religious understandings and vice versa.

Most recently, historians of reform have looked beyond the United States to track transatlantic networks of reform. In so doing, however, the focus on commonalities has missed the crucial differences between the two nations that caused American reform to look so different from related movements in Britain. In attempting to answer, “Why, in the late 1780s, did certain evangelicals within the Church of England assume a leadership role in developing campaigns to abolish the British slave trade,” Christopher Leslie Brown resolved, “The Evangelicals… did not set out to become abolitionists… What mattered to them was the promotion of Evangelical religion.” In this, the development of British and American abolitionism mirrors one another. However, evangelicals in Great Britain adopted very different tactics from those of their American brethren. While men like William Wilberforce politicked tirelessly in Parliament, white American evangelicals rarely turned to the national legislature. To understand the difference, we must contextualize antislavery within American evangelicalism. Ecclesiastical

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differences between Great Britain and the United States, perhaps even more than political differences, explain the divergent developments of antislavery on both sides of the ocean.

The absence of a state church inhibited American evangelicals from directing political reform movements, particularly in the first decades after the Revolution when challenges of geography coupled with disestablishment to destabilize the religious environment in the new nation. Presbyterians understood themselves as keepers of the national faith, but the explosive growth of Baptists and Methodists increasingly threatened Presbyterian authority. In one last desperate attempt to assert their authority over the nation, the Presbyterian General Assembly issued a petition to Congress protesting the Post Office policy of delivering mails on the Sabbath. When the petition failed, even the Presbyterians accepted the fact that religious life in the United States would not be driven by any one denomination, but rather through the competition of churches.6 The American religious marketplace would dictate the moral politics of the nation, not the dictates of any one church.

The infrastructure for American social reform began with missionary societies and other groups specifically charged with generating additional conversions. These societies both resulted from and fueled the consolidation of religious authority in denominational bodies, who in time shifted their emphasis from missionary endeavors to the formation of educational bodies. Domestic missionary efforts in the late eighteenth century were wildly successful. Denominational action assuaged the fears of an unchurched nation that plagued Christians in the immediate post Revolutionary era. The success of missionary societies and conversionist action did not ease American anxieties over the righteousness of the nation, however, as fears of an unchristian frontier were replaced by anxieties over the unrighteousness of a backsliding

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Christian republic. Attempts to curb the sins of Sabbath-breaking, alcoholism, and eventually slavery drew on denominational foundations established in the early republic. But before tracking the religious reform movements of the era, it is worth considering the exception that proves the rule. Female reform societies of the early nineteenth century followed a very different pattern than those of their male counterparts in fostering ecumenical action. Identifying the institutional frameworks of these organizations reveals the structure and limitations of early American reform.

**Women, Denomination, and Social Reform**

*The Christian Register*, a short-lived publication in Kentucky, proclaimed in 1822 that “Until within a few years, females confined their efforts in aid of religion to the circle of their own families and neighborhoods.” However, the article continued, “recently they have entered a wider field, and given their efforts a more extended scope. We find them forming associations in aid of missionary efforts, for the diffusion of Bibles and tracts, for the support of schools, and in fine, for the instruction of ignorance and the alleviation of woe.” The editor was correct in crediting the work of women in these various Christian reform movements but erred in calling this a recent trend. Since the earliest days of the republic, women played prominent roles in nearly every major reform movement of the era. American female activism, like that of their male counterparts, began with the pursuit of religious conversions before spreading out to other benevolent causes. Nancy Cranch, John Adams’s niece, exemplified the desire and limitations of female reform when she described her membership in the Ladies Missionary Society of

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7 “Female Piety,” *Christian Register* (August 1822), p. 144. The Kentucky-based *Christian Register* should not be confused with the far more popular Boston-based Unitarian publication of the same name.
Washington D.C. by exclaiming “Tho’ I cannot become a preacher of the gospel in public—why may I not at least endeavor to increase the knowledge of God and religion in my little circle?”

Women’s activism fueled missionary expansion, but their efforts often remain submerged under institutions dominated by men. One of the most successful early women’s groups spawned from the labor of Mehitable Simpkins, who called women to donate a single penny per week for the cause of missions. The tremendous outpouring from women all over New England filled the coffers of the Massachusetts Missionary Society, where Mehitable’s husband John served as treasurer. The modest donations enabled women to participate directly, and the single cent harmonized well with the parable of the widow’s mite, the Bible story of an impoverished widow who gave two mites to the temple, all she had in the world, earning the praise of Christ. Mehitable played on this parable in her 1802 broadside, writing, “While the hearts of the wealthy have been opened cheerfully to defray the expenses attending the exertions of enlarged plans of Christian Philanthropy in the dissemination of divine truth, the female disciples of the Lord encouraged by their masters gracious acceptance of the widow’s mite have associated to aid in accomplishing the benevolent object.” In the parable, the donation of a wealthy man is ignored, while the modest donation of an impoverished woman is lauded. Participation in the Cent Society promised a similar spiritual reward for pious women and also provided an outlet for women eager to transform the new nation with the message of the gospel. Cent Societies, also called Mite Societies, sprang up throughout the republic as women took an active role in fundraising for the missionary cause. In 1809 the Connecticut Bible Society requested support

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9 Cent Society Address, 1802, Broadside, Massachusetts Historical Society.
from “young ladies desirous of contributing a mite towards promoting the important object for which the Connecticut Bible Society was instituted.” Members needed to pay only one cent per week, the same fee as the original in Massachusetts. Women appeared eager to help; the Connecticut Bible Society advertisement concluded by listing the current membership already well established at 152.10

Just two years prior to Mehitable Simpkins’s work, another woman in Boston, Mary Webb, formed the first woman’s missionary society. Webb and fourteen other Congregationalist and Baptist women met on October 9, 1800, and formed the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes (BFSMP). Webb’s group, like Mehitable Simpkins’s organization, donated the fundraising proceeds to the Massachusetts Missionary Society.11 Inspired by women like Webb and Simpkins, dozens of new women’s missionary organizations formed, and in 1812 the BFSMP initiated correspondence from other female organizations. By 1818 ninety-seven other women’s missionary organizations coordinated their activities with the BFSMP.12 This frenzy resulted in a token number of women being admitted to the ranks of the Massachusetts Missionary Society. In 1803 three women joined the MMS, and a fourth joined the following year.13


11 After two years, the BFSMP began distributing their donations equally among the MMS and the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society. A Brief Account of the Origin and Progress of the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes, with Extracts from the Reports of that Society, in May, 1817 and 1818 (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1818), p. 3. See also, Massachusetts Missionary Magazine, Vol. 2, 5 (1804), pp. 279-381.


Female religious societies began as subsidiaries or supports for groups already created by men, but eventually, women moved out from underneath men’s organizations and took action directly. Bostonian women first successfully organized their own organizations, with the women of Philadelphia taking action shortly thereafter. Men in Philadelphia had formed the first Bible Society in December 1808, and women in the city began their work soon after, establishing themselves autonomously in the spring of 1814 as the Female Bible Society of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{14} The 1811 Presbyterian General Assembly singled out the contribution of women in “aiding, by their voluntary contributions,” a series of benevolent organizations. “Benevolence is always attractive,” they concluded, “but when dressed in a female form possesses peculiar charms.”\textsuperscript{15} Episcopal bishop William White preached to the society assuring its members that “If there should press on the minds of any of you, the apprehension of exceeding the bounds which the modestly of your sex prescribe, it does not appear to me that there is the least ground for such reproach.”\textsuperscript{16} The women of Philadelphia sent letters to prominent Boston women publicizing their efforts. By the fall of 1814 the Female Auxiliary Bible Society of Boston and Vicinity formed.\textsuperscript{17} Two years later, the women of New York established their own auxiliary Bible society.\textsuperscript{18}

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\textsuperscript{14} The actual first female Bible society formed in Geneva, New York, just ten miles west of Seneca Falls, but the Philadelphia Society became the first consequential foothold for female Bible Societies in North America. C.S. Dudley, \textit{An Analysis of the System of the Bible Society throughout its Various Parts including a Sketch of the Origins and Results of Auxiliary and Branch Societies and Bible Associations} (London: R. Watts, 1821), p. 363-364.

\textsuperscript{15} Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its Organization A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive, Presbyterian Historical Society (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1847), 483.

\textsuperscript{16} Dudley, \textit{An Analysis of the System of the Bible Society}, p. 351-352.

\textsuperscript{17} Constitution of the Female Bible Society of Boston and Vicinity with the Annual Report (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1816).

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The Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes began supporting their own missionaries to “the poor and vice-ridden” in 1816. Rev. James Davis and Rev. Dudley Rosseter began working in the employ of the BFSMP, and a year later, the society celebrated “the establishment of religious meetings, and a school in a neighborhood of colored people.” This ministry to Boston’s African American population particularly excited the society. The 1818 report reminded readers how “this unfortunate people were introduced into our country by the cruel hand of avarice and barbarity” and accordingly “have a right to demand our charity.”\(^\text{19}\) In another venture valued among New England women, the Boston Female Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews raised enough money to support a missionary overseas.\(^\text{20}\) Also in Boston, women formed the Boston Fragment Society in 1812 “to assist in clothing the destitute, more especially destitute children, and to loan bedding and infants’ garments to such mothers as are unable to procure things necessary for their comfort during their confinement.”\(^\text{21}\) Numerous other women’s organizations similarly worked to aid impoverished women. The Female Association of Philadelphia for the Relief of Women and Children of Reduced Circumstances dated back to 1800.\(^\text{22}\)

Female and male missionary societies differed in their level of denominational affiliation. We see this most clearly in fractious New England. While many male missionary societies merged with denominational structures, including those in Connecticut, Vermont, and New

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\(^{19}\) Brief Account of the Boston Female Society, 6.

\(^{20}\) Beaver, American Protestant Women in World Mission, 28.

\(^{21}\) The Boston Fragment Society took their name from John 6:12. After miraculously feeding 5,000 Christ instructed his disciples to “gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost.” The Act of Incorporation and Constitution of the Fragment Society with the Subscribers’ Names Instituted October 1812, Incorporated December 1816 (Boston: Munro and Francis, 1817), 6.

\(^{22}\) Constitution of the Female Association of Philadelphia for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803).
Hampshire, female societies not only remained independent of denominational control but also avoided the theological schisms that plagued many male organizations. There is no indication of the ubiquitous wrangling between orthodox and liberal Congregationalists so prevalent in male associations in any of the Massachusetts female societies. In fact, Mary Webb’s path-breaking Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes held together a coalition of Baptist and Congregational women. Early in its organizational fundraising, the BFSMP donated all of its proceeds to the Congregationalist-dominated Massachusetts Missionary Society. Even after Baptist men formed the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, the BFSMP held together despite the considerable number of Baptist members. Instead of dividing, the women of the BFSMP agreed to split their funds evenly between Congregationalist and Baptist groups. For these women, the bonds of gender and the commitment to missionary activity proved stronger than the tensions of theological or denominational rivalry.

Missionary Societies and the Structure of Reform

Male organizations, including missionary, tract, Bible, and temperance societies often worked to cultivate ecumenical memberships, but an overwhelming majority of these organizations had sprung out of denominational bodies. The Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (MSPCK), one of the earliest American missionary societies, formed in 1803 to supplement the missionary work of the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and others in North America (SPGNA). The MSPCK fretted over the plight of

23 In 1829, the membership of the BFSMP had grown entirely Baptist, prompting the founders to rename the society the Boston Baptist Female Society for Missionary Purposes. There is no indication that this change resulted from tensions but rather simply from natural turnover as orthodox Congregationalists defected to Baptist churches as a result of the triumph of liberal Congregationalism. See Constitution of the Boston Baptist Female Society for Missionary Purposes (Boston: True and Greene, 1830).
the un-churched along the frontier, but back at home they waged partisan wars against liberal Congregationalists and Baptists. The first words of their constitution lamented “not only the increase of irreligion and infidelity among the inhabitants of our native land in general, but also the decay of evangelical piety among professors of Christianity.”

This last clause revealed their animosity towards liberal Congregationalists and transformed the MSPCK into a surrogate orthodox Congregationalist denominational body. While not all missionary societies evinced this highly partisan character, the majority of early-nineteenth-century missionary societies formed as extensions of clerical associations.

Reform bodies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fell into one of two organizational categories; both were deeply enmeshed in denominational structures. Associations were almost always extensions of denominational bodies, but historians have missed how the second structure, societies, also grew out of denominational contexts. An overwhelming number of voluntary societies owed their roots to denominational action. Missionary work began in associations but followed the example of England and shifted primarily to societies in the late eighteenth century. American missionary societies differed from English organizations in that they maintained greater congregational independence. Americans remained resistant to denominational consolidation but drew together in pursuit of conversions through both denominational associations and missionary societies. The first American missionary society formed in direct response to actions across the Atlantic. The London Missionary Society (LMS), formed in 1795 by evangelical Anglicans, inspired Americans to form their own societies. The LMS emphasized an ecumenical orientation. The society’s bylaws espoused “the union of Christians of various denominations” and explained its conviction “not to send Presbyterianism,

24 Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, An Account of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Andover, Flagg and Gould, 1815), p. 3.
Independency, Episcopacy… but the glorious gospel of the blessed God.”

When news of the LMS reached New York City, local ministers “became impressed with the duty of making a similar attempt in America.”

The New York Missionary Society (NYMS) held its first meeting on November 1, 1796, in the Middle Dutch Church. Alexander McWhorter, Presbyterian minister in Newark, gave the opening sermon and characterized the mission of the society as “sending God’s salvation to our desolate frontiers, and the gloomy regions of paganism.”

The NYMS, following in the footsteps of the LMS, maintained an impressively ecumenical leadership. John Rodgers, the influential Presbyterian, served as president while John H. Livingston, a leader in the Dutch Reformed Church, was vice president. Secretary John M. Mason was from the Associate Reformed Church. Of the nine other officers, four were Dutch Reformed, three Presbyterian, one Associate Reformed, and another Baptist. This diverse roster set the NYMS apart as a singular example of the possibilities of American ecumenism, but the society struggled to turn ecumenical enthusiasm into results. The society’s primary endeavor included the establishment of a missionary settlement in the Chickasaw territory of western Georgia, but the mission struggled and was abandoned after five years.

The NYMS had greater success in co-sponsoring the missionary outreach of Elkanah Holmes among the Iroquois, but

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Holmes’s primary sponsorship came from the more partisan New York Baptist Missionary Society.29

Philadelphia Baptists experimented briefly with ecumenical missions, trying to form an interdenominational Philadelphia Missionary Society in 1798. Presbyterians failed to join, however, so by 1803 the Philadelphia Baptist Association formed a missions society solely supported by their association.30 In Massachusetts, doctrinal divisions between liberals, old Calvinists, and Hopkinsians limited the possibility for organization. The SPGNA continued its work, but Hopkinsians formed a society of their own in 1799, called the Massachusetts Missionary Society (MMS). Samuel Austin and Nathaniel Emmons led the way. Emmons delivered the opening address, feeling like his fellow members “impelled by a deep commiseration for the unhappy state of thousands, who are perishing through lack of those precious means of salvation which we enjoy.” The MMS acknowledged inspiration from “the imitable examples of many others, both in our own country and in Europe, who have nobly stepped forward in the cause of Zion.” Like so many other societies, the MMS gave the twin goals of reaching “the poor heathens and those in remote parts of our country in which the inhabitants do not enjoy the benefit of a Christian ministry and Christian ordinances.”31 The society attempted to deemphasize “party objects” and “refuse[d] to suffer any political interest.” Emmons gave his circular letter for the society an appropriately ecumenical title, calling “all who are desirous of the spread of the gospel” to support the work of the Society. But despite this ecumenical message, Emmons included a few sentiments that likely pushed away potential


30 Gillette, Minutes of the Baptist General Association, 350, 370, 381.

liberal ministers. Emmons began his own partisan rhetoric by claiming, “those who cordially subscribe to the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, and candidly admit the leading doctrines which they contain, as all Christians must be supposed to do.” The “leading doctrines” that he chose to emphasize included the claim that “the whole human race is in a state of apostasy from God… and exposed to the eternal punishments.” He ended however, with a millennial promise that the “glory of God which is so largely predicted in the scriptures, that the world shall shortly be filled will essentially consist in the universal and legitimate influence of this Gospel.” When the world is under the sway of the true gospel, the great sins of the age will fade away, for “the virtue and happiness of mankind are really always in proportion to the influence which the Gospel has upon them.”\(^{32}\) The MMS successfully partnered with the Northern Missionary Society in reaching Indians and sent its own missionaries to frontier communities throughout New England, New York, and even into Canada. Fault lines emerged, however, primarily around the issues of infant baptism and Unitarianism. American Christians could work across these barriers in Indian missions or Bible and tract societies, but when it came to planting churches, theological divisions proved too powerful to overcome.

A few Baptists joined the MMS, but in 1802 they formed their own society. The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society (MBMS) held no formal affiliation with the Warren Association, the association of New England Baptists. The society allowed non-Baptists to advance as far as the level of trusteeship, so long as at least eight of the twelve trustees remained Baptists.\(^{33}\) The MBMS tried to attract non-Baptist members and listed their purpose as “to promote the knowledge of evangelical truth,” but the membership roles included few if any non-

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Baptists. At their very first meeting on March 26, 1802, the MBMS commissioned missionaries to western New England, New York, and Upper Canada. The society focused its efforts on white Americans, but due to the indefatigable efforts of Elkanah Holmes the society partnered with the New York Baptist Missionary Society to support his work among the Iroquois.  

Historian Charles Chaney describes the MBMS as “the most extensive and effective missionary society that Baptists formed for churching the wilderness.” He finds far greater success among the MBMS than similar organizations in Philadelphia or Charleston. Baptists in the northeast responded to the problem of migration with societies, while their brethren in the South directed missions from within local or state associations. We have already seen how southern missionary movements led to denominational consolidation. North and South, missionary efforts both benefited from and further fueled the consolidation of denominational authority, but they rarely challenged the conversionist consensus that shaped how early Americans understood reform. This transformation required a move away from missions toward education and other non-conversion related religious activities. Tract societies stood at the crossroads between these two paths.

**Tract, Bible, and Temperancy Societies**

The New England Tract Society formed in 1814, partially fueled by the nationalism of the War of 1812. The Society recognized the leadership of Great Britain in establishing tract societies to combat infidel philosophers like Voltaire, but the United States needed its own leadership. After losing the Hollis chair of theology at Harvard to liberals in 1805, orthodox

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34 Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine Volume 1, p. 5-8, 11-12, 93, 159, 191, 220.

Congregationalists retrenched by actively forming new societies that appealed to the former conversionist consensus. The New England Tract Society (NETS) struck an ecumenical tone with its commitment to produce tracts “calculated to receive the approbation of serious Christians of all denominations,” but these Calvinist Congregationalists generally believed that only theologically similar members of their own denomination deserved to be considered “serious.” Conservative Congregationalist ministers affiliated with Andover seminary devised the NETS, and until Justin Edwards took the reigns from the orthodox war-horse Jedediah Morse, the society distributed tracts predominately to their co-denominationalists.36 Tract Societies in New York were even more denominationally fractured. The Protestant Episcopal Tract Society formed in 1810 and distributed a handful of tracts to Episcopal churches in the region. All the key founders of the New York Religious Tract Society were strict Calvinists of either the Associate Reformed tradition or the Dutch Reformed Church.37 The New York Methodist Tract Society joined the market in 1817.38 Eventually, the New York Religious Tract Society attracted other members and inched toward ecumenism, but in the early days, members from the Reformed tradition dominated.

The example of Great Britain, once again, inspired national American religious reform when the first American Bible Society attempted to mirror the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). The BFBS launched in 1804, impressing Americans who supported the society and formed their own local auxiliaries. The Philadelphia Bible Society materialized first in 1808, but state societies followed the very next year in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and New

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Jersey. These various state bodies managed to distribute thousands of Bibles, but coordination was difficult. Samuel J. Mills, the influential educator and missionary, moved between New England and the Mid-Atlantic, struggling to coordinate activities with the various state societies. Furthermore, tensions with Great Britain strained relationships between the BFBS and American evangelicals. In an 1811 letter to John Brodhead Romeyn, future officer of the American Bible Society, George Burden, an influential British minister and active agent for the BFBS, provoked his American friend with frequent jabs at American piety. Burden rejoiced, “It is the privilege of British Christians to take an active part in various schemes for the general Good. God has given them greater ability for this purpose than almost any other nation.” After eventually acknowledging American missionary efforts, he chastised United States foreign policy and added, “God grant that War may not paralyze your hands.” Of course he had no concern that war would slow the efforts of the BFBS or any other British missionary society. In one final dig, Burden commented on the death of the famous advocate of American independence, Thomas Paine, and asked if Paine’s later religious writings had led Americans to reverse their earlier veneration of the man. Insufferable condescension such as this certainly irked Americans, but if they were to break free from dependence on the BFBS, Americans would have to create their own national society capable of coordinating the distribution of Bibles. The first public call came from the Presbyterian General Assembly, who at its annual meeting in May 1814 called for the formation of “a general Bible Society.” When the denominational body stalled, Elias Boudinot, who was in attendance, took matters into his own hands. Four months after the General Assembly adjourned, Boudinot sent a proclamation to Bible societies throughout the nation to meet the following May in New York City to create “a well organized constituted Body, to be

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called “The General Association of the Bible Societies in the United States.” Presbyterians in the Mid-Atlantic dominated the meeting, but Jedidiah Morse of Charlestown, Massachusetts, made his presence felt.

Studies of temperance have dwelt extensively on the social, economic, and political motivations of reform, often considering religious motivations as epiphenomenal. Other historians who do take religion seriously unfortunately overemphasize the functions of revivalism, obscuring the ways in which the development of temperance was intimately bound up in denominational structures. Accounts of the temperance movement often begin by discussing Benjamin Rush’s pamphlet, “An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind,” but historians usually elide the connections between Rush’s research and Presbyterian denominational action. In 1811 Rush donated 1,000 copies of this influential pamphlet to the Presbyterian General Assembly. The national Presbyterian body accepted this gift with gratitude, for that same year the General Assembly reported that they “have heard of the sin of drunkness prevailing—prevailing to a great degree—prevailing even amongst some of the visible members of the household of faith.”

40 An Answer to the Objections of the Managers of the Philadelphia Bible Society, Against a Meeting of Delegates from the Bible Societies in the Union to Agree on Some Plan to Disseminate the Bible in Parts without the United States (Burlington, N.J.: David Allinson, 1815), p. 3.


43 Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly, I, p. 467, 485.
General Assembly declared “Profane swearing, drunkenness, and Sabbath-breaking” to be “sins of our land.” To combat the supposedly increasing sin of drinking, the assembly “recommended to all the ministers of the Presbyterian church in the United States to deliver public discourses, as often as circumstances may render it expedient, on the sin and mischiefs of intemperate drinking.”

The campaign for temperance progressed through different stages. The spirit of religious purification influenced the first phase, employing politics of exclusion to separate the faithful from the intemperate. The second wave employed the politics of reform, attempting to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol. The transition from temperance (exclusion) to prohibition (reform) mirrors the shift from antislavery to abolitionism; moreover, denominational bodies directed each shift. In June 1811 the General Association of Massachusetts appointed a committee of four ministers and four laymen to cooperate with the committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church and the General Association of Connecticut in devising measures for the promotion of temperance. Two years later this very same committee organized the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance. The three key founders of the Massachusetts Society – Justin Edwards, Lyman Beecher, and Leonard Woods – would become the most influential proponents of temperance organization, and all three committed to the cause under the direction of denominational bodies.

**Education and the Transformation of American Reform**

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The political action of the temperance movement required a move away from the preoccupations over conversion, and denominational educational efforts provided such a shift. Two fears preoccupied American Christian nationalists in the years following the Revolution. Migration patterns pushed thousands of Americans westward beyond the reach of settled ministers. Clergyman responded by forming ever-larger denominational structures to coordinate missionaries and send settled ministers to the frontier. Another concern prompted a different course of action. Recent historiography has revisited the claims of Martin Marty, demonstrating how fears of deist infidelity fueled the development of American Christianity. Many Americans fretted over the rise of deism, particularly after the violence of the French Revolution.46 Thomas Jefferson’s famous prediction in 1822 that “there is not a young man now living in the US who will not die an Unitarian” is understandably mocked as wildly incorrect.47 And by 1822 American evangelicalism had already taken hold with a strength it would never relinquish, but in earlier decades, Jefferson’s prediction would fit well with anxieties shared by many evangelical ministers. Timothy Dwight, while president of Yale, tackled the “Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy” in a sermon to degree candidates in 1797. One year later the sermon was printed and distributed throughout the republic.48 Dwight revisited the topic in 1801, alarmed that whereas “in earlier periods of the controversy there were, however, more frequent efforts at argumentation on the part of Infidels.” But lamentably, “for the last twenty or thirty years they


seem to have despaired of success in this field and have betaken themselves to that of action and influence.” This change in tactics had brought the forces of infidelity “success totally unprecedented.” Deists have submerged their reason in favor of an indulgence in luxury, and this devotion to luxury threatened to cease the spread of the gospel. Dwight fretted, “To a mind, to a nation, dissolved in sloth, enervated by pleasure, and fascinated with splendor, the Gospel is preached and heaven presented in vain.”

William Staughton, writing on behalf of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in response to requests from local ministers, felt prompted to address the presence of infidelity by the “pious hints suggested in your letters.” He, along with his other Baptist correspondents, have “observe[d] crowds of unreflecting youths, pressing on to ruin, fascinated with systems which, though genial with depravity, are at an infinite remove from holiness and truth.” Contrasting American Christianity with European infidelity became an effective tool for the new republic working to develop a national identity. Staughton accused Europeans of “for ages [having] been deluged in superstition.”

Europe held a curious position in the mind of religious Americans. It was both a hotbed of gross infidelity and an inspiration for missionary ingenuity.

Alexander McLeod understood the rise of infidelity as a need for greater denominational coordination. For McLeod, denominations were needed not only to fuel missionary movements, but also to ensure the education of the clergy. The church needed well-educated ministers to stand toe to toe with deist intellectuals. Such a commitment to education would not come easy or cheap. McLeod warned that if the church did not support a well-educated ministry, “the philosophy of the world would soon overwhelm with superior talents and acquisitions the


professed disciples of our Lord.”\textsuperscript{51} Three years earlier, in a letter to John Brodhead Romeyn, a Presbyterian minister and future officer of the American Bible Society, McLeod considered the bloodshed of the French Revolution to be “a heavy blow given of God to the Kingdom of the Beast.” Infidelity was a dangerous foe, but the violence in France exposed the danger of idolatrous doctrine. The moment was auspicious but the church needed to act, “The public mind is eager for religion. They have felt the evils of Infidelity. They know the falsity of Popery. Whither shall they turn?”\textsuperscript{52}

These anxieties died down during the second decade of the nineteenth century. At the 1810 meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly, those attending rejoiced that “in some places where infidelity appeared to have built her strong holds, the doctrine of Christ crucified has triumphed.” For example, the Assembly reported, “The impious heresy of Socinianism, which reduces to the level of a mere man our blessed Lord and Savior, has been also, in some instances, considerably diminished.”\textsuperscript{53} A year later the Assembly reported, “There are few apostasies; none of great moment.” Apostasy was receding and the Assembly rejoiced, “There appears to be an increasing attention in most places to the doctrines of the gospel. People begin to be generally convinced that it is important for them to have correct principles in order that they may lead correct lives.” Later at that same gathering, these Presbyterian leaders found that “infidelity appears to be declining, and that there are few errors prevalent” and again that


\textsuperscript{52} Letter, Alexander McLeod to John Brodhead Romeyn, February 17, 1803. John Brodhead Romeyn Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly}, I, p. 443.
“Infidelity is not so audacious, nor immorality so prevalent as formerly.”

The decline of Presbyterian anxieties over infidelity coincided with the construction of Presbyterian institutions of higher learning. Plans regarding the creation of Princeton Seminary dominated the General Assemblies of 1810-1812.

In the Baptist context, historians have charted the 1820 General Convention as a turning point from denominational consolidation to denominational diffusion. But through the emphasis on education, the 1820 convention brought far more continuity than change. The committee on finance gushed over the establishment of what would become Columbian College in Washington. One of the goals of the seminary was listed as “to secure the future harmony of our brethren in different sections, by which the bands of union will be strengthened.”

The nationalism continued as the committee determined the location for the school. Just as the federal government selected Washington as its capital, so too would the Baptists “for considerations of a like nature” place their cornerstone institution in the latitudinal center of the new nation. At this convention the committee on education became even more active, not only in promoting the establishment of the college, but also in creating increasingly organized ecclesiastical structures. Richard Furman, writing for the committee on education, encouraged the convention to consider “a plan of concert… in uniting their efforts in a regular manner for forming associated bodies, and auxiliary societies.”

The same issue of the Latter Day Luminary that carried news of the

54 Ibid., 482-484.


convention also carried a “General Education Plan” to be used by enterprising individuals wishing to form subsidiary groups. It is interesting that the Board suggested associations or state conventions instead of societies. The promotion of education was pursued within denominational structures rather than as ecumenical societies. For the next General Convention, the delegates followed the path of their college and met in Washington rather than Philadelphia.

The push for education has been narrated as a process of social mobility, a desire to shift the denomination from that of backwoods illiterate itinerants to urbane educated elites. The Baptists themselves justified the shift in emphasis as a necessity for missions. When discussing Columbian College in 1823, Luther Rice claimed that the college was “subservient to the cause of missions. One material defect in the missionary operations of the Baptists of this country has arisen from the want of suitable missionaries.” He boasted that the students already attracted to the infant institution gave “reasons to hope that this deficiency will, at no distant period, be amply supplied.” While the motivations for educational institutions drew from the discourse of conversion, the turn to education altered the orientation of American evangelicals.

The turn to education was motivated by the imperatives of conversion, but once venerated, education nourished a different set of assumptions and understandings of causation. The importance of education in redressing social ills is a long-held tenant of liberal thought. The spread of educational institutions in the early republic was articulated as a means of social reform. The heavy emphasis on seminaries, theological schools, or other religious institutions illustrated the prominent place of religious thought in expectations for social improvement. Initially created to train missionaries who would generate religious conversions, educational

58 “Proceedings, 1820” in Latter Day Luminary, 151.

institutions ended up transforming understandings of conversion, and this transformation influenced antislavery. The emphasis on education moved conversion from a discreet emotional experience to a process of spiritual development. For many, this transformation recast slavery as a greater danger to missions of conversion. As James Patterson claimed in an ecumenical religious address entitled on *The Effects of the Hebrew Slavery as Connected with the Slavery in this Country*, “Slavery as a system knows nothing of religious education. Her voice is this, ‘Who is the Lord that we should serve him?’ Nay, it not only disgraces and depresses the mind but restrains the expression of the faculties, and stifles almost every effort of genius.”

Patterson’s understanding of Christianity as dependent upon free intellectual development led him to conclude that, “with the increasing growth of Christianity among us, it is impossible that slavery can exist. Christianity and slavery cannot be identified. For truly if we measure slavery by the enormity of its crimes and sufferings, it is the greatest practical evil that ever afflicted the human race.” For others, like Richard Furman, for example, education would reveal the scriptural righteousness of slavery and embolden educated ministers to defend the institution against abolitionist fanatics. For both Patterson and Furman, education was the responsibility of the denomination, and its importance altered understandings of conversion from an immediate, millennially transformative agent of change to the beginning of a life-long pursuit of godliness. It was this shift that enabled reformers to move beyond the imperatives of conversion and directly confront the sins of the republic, including and especially slavery.

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Sabbatarianism and the Crossroads of Denominational Reform

The emphasis on education laid the ideological groundwork for confrontational, politically active reform, but the means by which that reform would be pursued remained an open question. The Sabbatarian movement reveals a turning point that shaped the tactics employed by reformers for decades. The first Sabbatarian crusade depended upon the imperatives of conversion: potential converts had to be in church on Sunday if they were to hear the gospel. The perceived decline in piety lamented in American jeremiads depended upon anxieties over a backsliding populace and a pernicious immoral market crowding out the concerns of Christianity. The market revolution brought its own anxieties and the opening of post offices on Sundays proved a flashpoint for conflict. Historians have obsessed over the relationship between Sabbatarianism and political culture, following Bertram Wyatt-Brown in understanding Sabbatarianism as a “Prelude to Abolitionism” in the way it led to political confrontation and accelerated the second party system.62 Richard S. John went further in taking seriously the religious motivations of the movement, but previous accounts have missed the way in which Sabbatarianism marked a crossroads in the reform culture of the Presbyterian Church, and accordingly a crossroads in the history of religiously inspired American social reform.63

The issue first came to a head in 1809 when Hugh Wylie, the postmaster and active Presbyterian in Washington, Pennsylvania, opened his local post office on Sunday.64 Church leaders in Washington referred the matter to the Ohio and then Pittsburgh Synods to determine whether Wylie should be excluded from membership. During the 1809 annual meeting, the

64 Postmaster General Gideon Granger had instructed all postmasters to sort mails on Sunday, but Wylie’s decision to open the Post Office was his own.
Pittsburgh Synod deliberated over the matter, concluding that “Mr. Wylie’s officiating as Postmaster on the Sabbath day, in existing circumstances, is a sufficient reason to exclude him from the special privileges of the church.”\(^{65}\) Wylie appealed the decision to the General Assembly, but the 1810 meeting upheld the ruling of the Pittsburg synod.\(^{66}\) When a number of local Presbyterians in Washington, Pennsylvania, submitted an 1812 petition asking the General Assembly to reverse its decision, they were denied, and Wylie remained excluded from fellowship.\(^{67}\)

The case became more than a matter of church discipline, however, when on April 30, 1810, the United States Congress passed “An Act regulating the Post-office Establishment.” Section Nine of the law required “that every postmaster shall keep an office in which one or more persons shall attend on every day on which a mail, or bag, or other packet or parcel of letters shall arrive by land or water.”\(^{68}\) Five months after the passage of the law, the Synod of Pittsburgh held their annual conference. The synod approved a petition to the United States Congress, calling the law “glaring violations of the laws of God, and therefore an infringement on the rules of conscience.” Furthermore, they mustered their best jeremiad to warn congress that a national policy desecrating the Sabbath gives “reason to fear it may provoke God to inflict upon us, grievous judgments and calamities.”\(^{69}\) The Pittsburgh synod was not the only petition, but it was the most radical. Other protests came from Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

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\(^{66}\) *Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly*, I, p. 456.


\(^{69}\) *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh*, p. 74.
The Presbyterian protest did not go unnoticed, and in 1811, Postmaster General Gideon Granger attempted to compromise by opening post offices for only one hour after the conclusion of weekly worship. Granger’s new policy only fueled the uproar, as the controversy extended beyond western Pennsylvania. In 1811 the Presbyterian Synod of New York and New Jersey felt that the desecration of the Sabbath had reached disastrous levels. The Synod believed “it to be their duty to do whatever may be in their power to check this growing iniquity.” The Synod appointed committees from each state in the synod to examine Sabbath laws and then to “apply to the Legislatures to make any alterations which may be thought advisable.” The General Assembly was under great pressure to address the issue. The 1811 General Assembly lamented “the prevalence of Sabbath-breaking” but did not take action directly. Instead the delegates rested in the hope “that associations for the suppression of vice and the promotion of morals, will be generally established, so as to arrest the wicked, and support faithful magistrates in enforcing the laws.” The success of the Synod of Pittsburgh in handling the problem proved that this was a matter that could be handled locally.

One year later, the arrival of open war with Britain changed the mood of both the nation and the General Assembly. In July the General Assembly declared a national fast day to ensure divine aid in the War effort. This fast day inspired a national reflection on the godliness of the United States and provided a window for Sabbatarians to again agitate against the policies of the federal government. Congregations across the United States experienced the fast day as a


72 *Minutes of the Presbyterian General Assembly*, 1, 485.
rallying cry against the desecration of the Sabbath. With this momentum, the 1812 General Assembly petitioned congress to cease opening and carrying the mail on Sundays. The Assembly echoed the Pittsburgh synod in employing the language of the jeremiad, blaming the outbreak of war on American impiety.73

The failure of the 1812 petition marked a turning point in the tactics of the General Assembly and American denominational activism as a whole. The General Assembly issued the 1812 petition in its own name, but found that it held little sway in the halls of government. In 1814 the delegates tried a new tactic, this time drafting 2,000 petitions from each of the towns represented by the General Assembly. Instead of receiving one petition from the representatives of America’s Presbyterians, Congress would now hear directly from the people at the local church-level. Where centralized attempts at reform had failed, the General Assembly hoped perhaps a groundswell of public opinion could succeed. For this public relations campaign, the General Assembly delegates solicited the support of their Reformed brethren in New England, earning the allegiance of the general associations of Connecticut and Massachusetts. By January 1816 over one hundred petitions had reached the floors of Congress, and a new mode of grassroots national denominational political protest was born.74 The English model of early-nineteenth-century antislavery would not work in the American context. Reformers could not wield a national church, nor invoke its authority in direction policy. Social reform would result from the chorus and cacophony of American democracy.

Case Studies in Denominationalism and Slavery

73 Ibid., I, 513-514.

The myriad reasons for why slavery captured the attention of reformers will be discussed later, but it is worth illustrating here how two of the least cohesive denominations in the early nineteenth century provide surprisingly compelling illustrations of how denominational leadership encouraged ministers to engage in antislavery reform. Richard Furman, the influential Baptist leader from South Carolina, and William Ellery Channing, sage of American Unitarianism, both drew inspiration from their experiences as denominational leaders in outlining public positions on slavery. From different regions and traditions, these men made two very different arguments even as they used similar invocations to public advocacy. Furman’s 1822 address, “Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States,” is among the earliest full-throated articulations of aggressive proslavery. In the age of David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison, William Ellery Channing’s lengthy 1835 treatise simply titled “Slavery” appeared conservative and even unoriginal, but Channing’s essay created important space for antislavery Americans uncomfortable with the radicalism of Walker or Garrison.

Denominational leadership frequently pressed clergymen to take positions on the issue of slavery, whether in support or in opposition. Denominational leadership spurred action, but the shape of that change was owed to numerous other factors, not the least of which was geography. For William Ellery Channing, his role as a Unitarian leader in Massachusetts moved him to make a public pronouncement against slavery, while denominational leadership in South Carolina pressed Richard Furman into increasingly vocal proslavery positions. In many ways, Richard Furman was an unlikely candidate for the proslavery pulpit. Though Furman owned slaves and was even willing to sell them with little regard to family ties as a means of covering debts, he simultaneously characterized slavery in the early nineteenth century as “undoubtedly an evil”
and lamented its growth. Furman’s journey from a somewhat reluctant slave-owner to a full-throated proponent of human bondage mirrored his rise as a major Baptist leader.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Richard Furman was an essential advocate for national Baptist denominational formation and the president of the first two meetings of the General Convention. He also worked to organize at the city, district, and state level. An emphasis on social reform infused all of his denominational activities. As early as 1792 he pressured the Charleston Baptist Association (CBA) to set aside funds for the education of ministers. A year later, he succeeded in convincing William Staughton to leave England for the United States. With encouragement from Furman, Staughton began a ministerial education program that eventually grew into Columbian College, thereby fulfilling Furman’s dream of seeing a national Baptist college. Furman was self-taught but championed educational opportunities for others. His 1817 presidential address at the General Conference emphasized the importance of education.

In 1802 he began promoting missionary societies through the CBA and partnered with Luther Rice in establishing the national framework to support the American Baptist mission in Burma.

Furman began agitating for a statewide Baptist association for South Carolina as early as 1808. When the society finally formed in 1821, Furman was the obvious choice for the inaugural president. This first meeting had only nine attendees, but many more joined as sectionalism intensified and tensions within the national body drove a wedge between northern and southern Baptists. It was at this inaugural meeting that Furman made his first public pronouncement on slavery. Furman staked out the proslavery position using rhetoric that anchored southern thought

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for decades to come. His first utterances acknowledged a particular additional motivation for the formation of the South Carolina association, thanking God for the “protection afforded [South Carolinians] from the horrors of an intended Insurrection.” Just five months earlier, Furman’s neighbor, Denmark Vesey, and thirty-four other black men were convicted and hanged for attempted insurrection in what would have been the largest slave revolt in American history.

Historians have increasingly acknowledged the integral role of African Americans in catalyzing antislavery, but it should also be noted that the action of black Americans unintentionally worked to radicalize southerners into ever more aggressive proslavery positions. Rebellions and conspiracies like that supposedly led by Vesey challenged the paternalist status quo and prompted discussions of slavery. As a result of the seriousness of the conspiracy, his role as a denominational leader required that Furman respond with a definitively proslavery statement, pushing him further away from his previous position as a moderate nationalist and establishing his reputation as a proslavery sectionalist. Furman took the opportunity to assert “the lawfulness of holding slaves, considering it in a moral and religious view.” He couched the need for his address as a defense against abolitionists who were working “indirectly, to deprive the slaves of religious privileges, by awakening in the minds of their masters a fear, that acquaintance with the Scriptures, and the enjoyment of these privileges would naturally produce the aforementioned effects.” After outlining the Biblical sanction for slavery, Furman concluded his address with his solution to prevent future rebellions. With great pride he noted “there were very few of those who were, as members attached to regular churches, (even within

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78 Furman lived just a few blocks from Denmark Vesey’s home. Rogers, Richard Furman, 223.

the sphere of its operations) who appear to have taken a part in the wicked plot.” Members of the African Church, however, he demonized as potential rebels. To prevent rebellion, Furman called for masters to send their slaves to Baptists churches. Christianity not only sanctioned slavery; it ensured that the system functioned properly. At the very next annual meeting, the South Carolina Baptist Convention reprinted the speech and circulated it throughout the state. The convention also requested that it be published in the *Southern Intelligencer* and the *Columbian Star*. The later publication’s national reach would ensure that Furman’s words reached northern audiences.

Furman was not alone. Others, like Frederick Dalcho, emerged as prominent pro-slavery voices by using their positions as denominational leaders in the South. Dalcho’s story begins outside the church, when in 1801 he pushed to bring the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite, a Masonic organization, to the American South. Beginning in early 1820s, Dalcho resigned this masonic leadership post and took a more active role in the Episcopal Church. This transition, coupled with the actions of Vesey, led him to make a public pronouncement on slavery. Writing as “a South Carolinian,” Dalcho cited Furman’s earlier work as an authoritative account on the origin of slavery, but differed from Furman in describing the present practice of American slavery as “not in accordance with all our feelings. We deprecate the evil which attends it.” But to absolve slaveholders from guilt, Dalcho claimed, “It has descended to us; we have not produced it. We would most willingly apply the remedy, if we knew what it was.”

The primary argument of the piece claimed that the only injustice brought about by American slavery was the

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80 Ibid., p. 16-17.

81 Frederick Dalcho, *Practical considerations founded on the scriptures: relative to the slave population of South-Carolina* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1823), 6.
failure to “giv[e] religious instruction to our Negroes.”

But this burden must fall on southerners, not invasive northern missionaries. For only southerners can be trusted with exercising “the measure of prudence, which is necessary to improve their moral and spiritual condition, without deranging the existing order of society.” Moving beyond the environmental racism of the time, Dalcho proclaimed that American slaves were “Ignorant and indolent by nature, improvident and depraved by habit, and destitute of the moral principle.” Conversion would not change this, but it would save their souls. And more, it might save American lives. In his last major point, Dalcho asserted his denominational and sectional allegiance in a comment on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. The solution to the problem of slavery lay in Christian conversion, but as Dalcho believed, only the Episcopal Church brought true conversion. As he told his audience, “None of the Negroes belonging to the Protestant Episcopal Church were concerned in the late conspiracy.”

His Episcopalian denominational leadership and the threat posed by men involved in the Vesey conspiracy inspired Dalcho to take action on the problem of slavery. At the same time, his denominational allegiance also framed the way in which he understood the problem. Too many wild evangelicals had filled “improvident and depraved” black Americans with the dangerous intoxication of religious enthusiasm. The Episcopal Church alone could bring true conversion and social stability, the only guarantee for safety in the black majority Palmetto state. Denominational leadership required an active voice on the great issues of the day, and after the Missouri Crisis, slavery increasingly became that great issue.

\(^{82}\) *Ibid.*, 3.


\(^{84}\) *Ibid.*, 33.
Denominational leadership pressed southerners like Furman and Dalcho into proslavery pronouncements but often had the opposite effect for ministers in the North.

There are hundreds of northern ministers whose denominational responsibilities pushed them to take public positions on slavery. William Ellery Channing, minister of Federal Street Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, may seem an odd choice for a case study on denominational leadership. Early Unitarians lacked the institutional structures or national reach of other, more evangelical denominations, but the limited, informal leadership network of Unitarians followed patterns of larger, more cohesive denominations.

Confrontational sectionalism became an essential ingredient in the active abolition of the antebellum period. Denominational action pulled ministers out of local communities and into engagement with others. For some, this became a unifying experience of respectful sharing. For others, however, it reinforced suspicions of local superiority and fostered antipathy. As the nineteenth century progressed and the connecting fibers of the new nation pulled taut over the issue of slavery, interactions between northerners and southerners took on heightened importance. For many, a few key instances of personal contact forever shaped their understanding of their far-off fellow countrymen.

William Ellery Channing had such a series of experiences when tutoring in Virginia for a year and a half. While in Richmond, Channing yearned for a religious correspondent with whom he could reflect on devotions and work through intellectual problems. By the fall of 1799, Channing frustratingly wrote Joseph McKean in Boston that he could not find a single Virginian “to whom I could express my sentiments on religious subjects or to whose bosom I could confide those feelings which the study of the scriptures inspired in my own.”

did not endear him to the Old Dominion and left him suspicious of Virginia’s churches. He dismissed the outrage over the Alien and Sedition Acts as disingenuous and found it ironic that “the Democratic Negro drivers of Virginia,” as he called them, would have the gall to complain about an abridgment of their freedom.⁸⁶ Many decades later, after the threat of the Nullification Crisis receded, Channing nonetheless claimed that northerners and southerners “differ too much on social conditions, feeling, modes of industry, and perhaps interests, to hold together strongly.” Angrily writing to Lucy Aikin in England, he complained, “Our southern brothers, far from feeling the dishonorableness of their vocation as task masters to slaves, hold us at the north in a degree of contempt.”⁸⁷

For others, intersectional denominational connections hindered the development of sectional animosities. John Holt Rice, the president of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and editor of the Virginia Literary and Evangelical Magazine, maintained an active correspondence with Archibald Alexander, the famed Princeton theologian. Alexander came to understand the problem of slavery and the potential of antislavery partly through his correspondence with Rice. Rice hated slavery but abhorred all ecclesiastical attempts to fight the institution. In a letter to Alexander, the Virginian claimed “I have long had it as an object dearest to my heart, to get Virginia free from slavery,” but he was convinced that “the direct exertions of the church hinder the work.”⁸⁸

John Holt Rice was not responsible for Archibald Alexander’s ambivalent stance towards slavery. Regardless of what his southern friend wrote him, Alexander would not have transformed into a virulent abolitionist, but his understanding of the institution

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⁸⁶ Letter from William Ellery Channing to William Smith Shaw, November 28, 1789. Reel 1. WEC Papers. MHS.

⁸⁷ Letter from William Ellery Channing (New York) to Lucy Aikin, May 30, 1833, Reel 2, WEC Papers, MHS.

and the prospects for its amelioration were informed by his relationship with men like Rice. These denominational connections made it difficult for many Christians to participate in the increasingly tense sectional discourse, a discourse that would come to undergird the Garrisonian abolitionist movement.

Denominational connections led religious leaders to expand their understanding of ministerial space as their attention widened from congregations to communities of states, regions, and the nation. Cambridge, Massachusetts, simultaneously possessed an unusual cosmopolitanism and a crushing insularity. This intensely literate religious community wracked itself over painstakingly nuanced theological squabbles and deeply provincial personal rivalries. A Cambridge minister could spend a lifetime of intense theological debate and professional intrigue without ever taking more than an afternoon’s journey. William Ellery Channing engaged deeply with the particular religious world of Cambridge and connected broadly with a network of sympathetic believers. His emergence as a denominational leader pulled him across the Charles River and even out of New England. This expanded worldview ultimately advanced his antislavery work.

Our understanding of William Ellery Channing is distorted by a tendency to emphasize the relationship between his Unitarianism and nascent transcendentalism. Conrad Wright pushes against this tendency by challenging our understanding of the mercurial divine as a romantic philosopher, arguing that “The Channing We Don’t Know” is Channing as an evangelical, a Christian, and a man of affairs. To this valuable contribution, we must add Channing the denominationalist. Although rigidly independent in his thinking, Channing cared deeply about the Unitarian movement and worked intently to further its cause. In April 1819 Channing

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delivered his famed address “On Unitarian Christianity,” the closest thing that antebellum American Unitarians would have to a founding text. It is worth noting that he delivered this sermon in Baltimore, far away from the Unitarian hearth of Cambridge. At the ordination of Jared Sparks, Channing veered from the usual explication of the duties of ministry, choosing instead to define Unitarian belief. There is no indication in his private writings that Channing expected his address to turn into the sensation it became, but the popularity of the address transformed Channing from a respected Cambridge minister into a nationally recognized denominational leader.

As he prepared the document, Channing troubled over distant explosions of violence. In a letter fragment, probably written to Noah Worcester, Channing reflected on the threats of privateering in the Atlantic and Andrew Jackson’s extra-legal campaign against Seminoles. Against both he proposed sending memorials to Congress. The preoccupation with distant political concerns was unusual for Channing at this stage in his career. It may very well be that his reflection on the nature of Christianity and the place of Unitarianism in the world led him to widen his field of vision beyond the Boston community, and even beyond the developing network of Unitarian churches stretching south to Baltimore from the stronghold in Cambridge.

Following his sermon, Channing showed a greater interest in fostering Unitarianism, both at home in Cambridge and in increasingly distant communities as well. In 1821 Channing founded the Berry Street Conference, which in 1825 would transform into the American Unitarian Association. By the 1820s Channing was driven less by the need to gain converts to Unitarianism and began to concern himself more with the internal purity of the movement. While

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91 Letter from William Ellery Channing, February 22, 1819, Reel One, WEC Papers, MHS.
preaching to Unitarians in New York City, a community in which he took particular interest, Channing wrote to Catherine Maria Sedwick, the pious novelist with whom he maintained an active and mutually respectful correspondence. Channing reflected on the growth of Unitarianism with concern: “The numerical increase of my party is of very little object with me. Had I power, I would rather thin its ranks by dismissing not a few who call themselves Unitarians and have nothing but the name.”\(^{92}\) This quest for moral purity ultimately informed his denunciation of slavery a decade and a half later.

By 1835 Channing felt that Unitarianism was strong enough to begin the process of social transformation. In earlier years, the fledgling movement had to defend itself against orthodoxy, but by 1835 Channing looked beyond Boston and saw Unitarian churches growing in New York and Baltimore. He developed correspondences with men in England, France, and Scotland and believed that the moment had come for Unitarians to purify the world they had begun to convert.

Joseph Tuckerman, Channing’s roommate at Harvard, left a lasting impression on his close friend. The two maintained an active friendship and lively correspondence, particularly as Tuckerman’s health began to fade in the late 1820s and early 1830s. His dear friend’s tireless work with the poor in and around Boston shaped Channing’s view of benevolence. By facilitating Tuckerman’s ministry, Channing outsourced some of his reform energies. When his friend’s health began to falter, however, Channing could no longer vicariously claim the labor of his friend. In a July 1833 letter to the committee of the American Unitarian Association concerning Tuckerman’s reduced duties, Channing declared that “the signs of the times point to a great approaching modification of society… the chief end of the social state is the elevation of all its members as intelligent and moral beings.” He went on to say that “The present selfish, dis-

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\(^{92}\) Letter from William Ellery Channing to Catharine Maria Sedgwick, May 20, 1821. WEC Papers, MHS.
social system must give way to Christianity” and that “the time is coming when religious bodies will be estimated by the good they do, when creeds are to be less and less the test of the Christian.”

Channing’s extended networks of correspondence pushed him to more direct action on the issue of slavery. He wrote to his colleague Ezra Stiles Gannett that letters with friends in England had been “making me more ashamed of our country and more alive to its deep guilt, than I have ever been before.” Gannett and Channing exchanged numerous other letters in the fall of 1833 concerning slavery, and it was clear that Channing was growing increasingly agitated. While Channing had mentioned slavery briefly in earlier publications, his 1835 essay was his first direct discussion of the institution and the means for its removal. What makes Channing’s antislavery appeal so compelling is not its bold attack on the institution, for it was neither bold nor militant, but rather the way in which Channing’s position as a Unitarian leader inspired him to make this consequential public pronouncement.

Despite these antislavery commitments, Channing never involved himself in abolitionist organizations, preferring to work through denominational and intellectual channels. Many contemporary abolitionists criticized Channing’s social reform as woefully moderate, and Channing, in turn, distrusted abolitionist groups, which he viewed as intemperate bands of intellectual dependents. He praised individual action but looked down upon those who searched beyond their own conscience for answers, writing, “The enthusiasm of the Individual in a good

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93 Letter from William Ellery Channing to the committee of the American Unitarian Association concerning the Ministry-at-Large of the Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, July 11, 1833. Reel Two, WEC Papers, MHS.

94 Letter from William Ellery Channing to Ezra Stiles Gannett, August 6, 1833. Reel Two, WEC Papers, MHS.

95 Earlier discussions of slavery are found in Channing’s extended review of the character of John Milton, originally published by the Christian Examiner in 1826 and briefly in published sermons at the commencement of the War of 1812. Both can be found in William Ellery Channing, Discourses, Reviews, and Miscellanies (Boston: 1830), pp. 51-52, 586.
cause is a mighty power. The forced, artificially excited enthusiasm of a multitude, kept together by an organization which makes them the instruments of a few leading minds, works superficially, and often injuriously.  

In the first few decades of the nation’s history, American reformers lacked the national religious imagination required to pursue national reform. By the 1830s, however, leading clergymen enlarged their understanding of ministerial spaces from congregations or regional associations to the new republic in its entirety. Denominations became the mechanisms for clergymen to direct the destiny of the republic. The spatial expansion of clerical duty enabled the leaders of these new national religious cultures to plot the purge of the great sins of the republic. But denominational formation also connected coreligionists across sectional lines. These often intensely personal connections discouraged denominationalists from engaging in the increasingly vitriolic sectionalist discourse. For northerners, denominational connections created a window in the world of the South and made it more difficult to ignore the reality of slavery, but these same connections also restrained antislavery northerners from condemning the men and women with whom they collaborated in the missions of their churches.

Historians have lauded the antebellum revolutions in transportation and communication. Indeed, technological advances collapsed space, but long before the railroad or telegraph knit together the continent, denominational affiliation created connections across great distances. Americans created and deployed religious discourse to discover themselves and to pursue spiritual errands—errands that always involved ambitions both personal and political. As the nation began to recognize itself as a unified body, the sins of the day took on a greater threat.

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90 Channing, Slavery, 159.
From their foundations in denominational bodies, national reform societies began to combat the great sin of slavery. But the obsession over religions conversion again exerted itself in the process, as the first national movement designed to alleviate the problem of slavery owed its origins to dreams of an American-led global expansion of salvation.
On February 13, 1820, several dozen white and black bodies huddled around a flickering flame. Samuel Bacon’s voice filled the crowded cabin of the *Elizabeth* with tales of Christian missionaries, past and present. Eighty-six American emigrants rocked with the swells of the Atlantic as they drifted farther from their families in America and closer to their new home in Africa. Daniel Coker, born a slave, now a free man of color, a husband, a father, and a missionary, reflected on the evening devotional. Bacon’s words left him “refreshed much,” and Coker reported that all on board “felt encouraged in our work, in the conversion of the heathen.” Coker and eighty-five other emigrants risked everything they had in traveling to Africa, and they did so for many reasons, but it was this goal, “the conversion of the heathen,” that excited him more than anything.¹

Historians have focused studies of colonization on its relation to slavery, most recently emphasizing the movement’s antislavery functions. By making it easier for benevolent masters to manumit their slaves, colonization seemed to offer a gradual solution to the problem of slavery. Other historians see the movement as a desire to strengthen slavery by removing free people of color, a group that threatened the control of the master class. Still others stress the

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ambitions of African American nationalism. Nicholas Guyatt compares African colonization with Indian Removal and emphasizes racial anxieties in motivating both movements. Eric Burrin’s impressive and lively history of the American Colonization Society, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*, explores the relationship between the American Colonization Society and antislavery, claiming with its very first sentence that the Society “hoped to rid the United States of both slavery and black people.” Beverly C. Tomek’s outstandingly detailed account of colonization in Pennsylvania unfolds the important differences between competing antislavery movements. Douglas R. Egerton presents a more ambivalent relationship between slavery and the movement. Other historians, including James T. Campbell, Amos Bevan, and especially James Sidbury, have explored colonization’s influence on developing African American identity. P. J. Staudenraus’s wide-ranging 1961 study of the movement gives the most attention to religious impulses but ultimately bends his interpretation toward political questions surrounding the endurance of slavery in the United States. Colonization certainly influenced slavery debates, and the movement accelerated the development of African identity, but

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colonizationists – white and black – invoked another motivation with far greater frequency and intensity than the explanations emphasized in the historiography.

White and black colonizationists drew strength from a millennial faith in the promise of the sixty-eighth Psalm that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands to God.” Colonization promised salvation for Africa and moral redemption for the United States. The impending conversion of Africa would redeem the sins of the slave trade by repaying the wounded continent with the gift of Christianity. In the minds of early-nineteenth-century white Christians, colonization would do more than abolition, as the salvation of an entire continent weighed heavier than the emancipation of several million. Tracing the conversionist ideologies of early colonizationists reveals the goals and expectations of the men and women who invested so much capital, human and otherwise, in this ambitious venture. Acknowledging the power of conversionism also illustrates the ways in which the incomparably popular colonizationist movement echoed and amplified the strains of racism and imperialism in the early nineteenth century.

British colonization began in 1787 when a small group of impoverished black Londoners relocated to Sierra Leone. Shortly thereafter, the Sierra Leone Company formed for the purpose of resettling 1,196 African American refugees who had escaped from slavery during the Revolutionary War. Americans had discussed the prospects of colonization since at least Samuel Hopkins and Ezra Stiles attempted to organize a mission in 1774. Thomas Jefferson evaluated the question in his 1783 Notes on the State of Virginia, but no serious attempt emerged until Paul Cuffee and thirty-eight African Americans sailed for Sierra Leone in late 1815. Cuffee, a deeply

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8 I refer to my actors as conversionists and their ideology as conversionism largely because all other terms are too narrow. Dreams of a converted Africa transcended the theological boundaries implied by labels like evangelicalism or missionary Christianity.
pious Quaker, paid for the expedition himself. Cuffee passed away before he could organize another expedition, but by that time, white Americans had taken up the cause and the American effort began in earnest. The American Colonization Society (ACS) held its first meeting in Washington D.C.’s Davis Hotel on December 21, 1816, and incorporated shortly thereafter. Immediate efforts to secure funding from the national government finally came to fruition in 1819. One year later, Daniel Coker and eighty-five other black Americans joined three white ACS agents in boarding the *Elizabeth*. Unable to procure land on the mainland, these first emigrants settled on the uninhabited Sherbro Island, just south of the British settlement of Freetown, Sierra Leone. A year later, in late 1821, Lieutenant Robert Stockton of the U.S. Navy forcefully acquired land for the ACS on Cape Mesurado, just over 100 miles south of the British colony. Over the next decade more than 2,500 American settlers arrived in what would be called Liberia. Colonists suffered terribly from disease and hostile relationships with natives as the venture proved shockingly costly in both dollars and lives.

This study does not chronicle the establishment or struggle of these African colonies but rather restricts itself to questions of motivation. The on-the-ground reality involved tremendous suffering and all the violence of conquest and colonialism, but the motivations for these actions repeatedly circled back to religious conversion. Colonization held together men and women, north and south, black and white, in an unprecedentedly widespread effort. A stunning roster of influential Americans voiced their support. Bushrod Washington, Supreme Court Justice and nephew of the venerated first president, served as the society’s first president. Major contributions were made by figures including Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House, William Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury, and the legendary Senator Daniel Webster, then a representative in Congress. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find another contemporary
group that could claim so wide a mandate as the American Colonization Society, at least among whites. The only societies that perhaps could have rivaled the ACS include other conversionist groups like the American Tract Society of the American Bible Society. Cutting across the major political and geographic divisions of white society in the early republic, the ACS coalition was wide and unwieldy but tremendously influential. The ability to transcend these divisions resulted from the ACS’s use of the great unifying force of the era: conversionist Christianity. Free blacks in the North remained skeptical of colonization but largely shared the conversionist worldview of their white coreligionists.

Black American theologies of the era prove more elusive than that of their white coreligionists. While consistently employing a prophetic, liberationist critique against slavery, black Christians nonetheless shared important theological similarities with whites. Both shared an evangelical soteriology, the theology of salvation, and believed that without a transformative Christian conversion, sinful souls were bound for eternal damnation. Both also shared a millennial imagination. The millennium envisioned by African Americans often proved more capacious than that by whites, including racial equality and powerful black nationalism, but both whites and blacks privileged Africa in their providential expectations. Evangelical Christianity provided a powerful biracial discourse that colonizationists wielded to surprising success.

Colonizationist pamphlets extolled the many expected blessings of the movement, including the removal of free black communities, the development of an American empire, the enervation of American slavery, the destruction of the Atlantic slave trade, and limitless economic growth resulting from new markets and trading networks. But another motivation was mentioned more often and with greater rhetorical intensity. Throughout the antebellum era, colonizationists almost constantly reprinted Robert Finley’s 1816 tract, *Thoughts on the*
Colonization of Free Blacks.9 The brief eight-page essay laid out a rhetorical pattern shared by nearly all colonizationists’ tracts. After promising that colonization would offer an assault on illegal slave trading, a decline in domestic slavery, the edification of free people of color, decreased risk of slave revolt, and the advancement of American commerce, the most intense emotional rhetoric comes in the final paragraphs with the promise of African conversion and American moral redemption. In the final paragraph, he proclaims that “Nor shall Africa be forgotten. Her bosom begins to warm with hope and her heart to beat with expectation and desire.” He later continues by rejoicing that through colonization the United States will surpass other nations, “exceed[ing] them in the great cause of humanity which has begun its never-ending course.”10 This “great cause of humanity” is the cause of religious conversion that promised to hasten the millennium so craved by American Christians. A review of the annual reports of the ACS reveals the generation of propagandists who copied Finley’s style, overwhelming readers with a lengthy catalog of the seemingly innumerable benefits of colonization before concluding with an emotionally heightened plea to save African souls and absolve American sins.

Conversionism united white Americans with a widespread intensity rivaled only by pervasive anxieties over free people of color. George Tucker composed his very early colonizationist tract shortly after Gabriel Prosser’s conspiracy in Richmond, Virginia. Prosser, along with white co-conspirators, planned to kidnap Governor James Monroe and hold him

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9 Robert Finley, Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks (Washington D.C.: 1816). While some historians question Finley’s status as the father of colonization, the literature produced by the Society consistently credited the Presbyterian educator and divine as its founder. Whatever his role in the organizational establishment, the ubiquity of his tract and his reputation as the movement’s founder illustrates his symbolic importance and requires scholarly attention. For accounts downplaying Finley’s role see Douglas Egerton, “Its Origin is Not a Little Curious,” and also Joseph S. Moore, “Covenanters and Antislavery in the Atlantic World,” Slavery And Abolition (forthcoming).

10 Finley, Thoughts, 8.
hostage in return for Virginia’s abolition.\footnote{Douglas Egerton, \textit{Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802} (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and James Sidbury, \textit{Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).} Tucker and others interpreted this threat as a sign of the danger of the free black population in the Old Dominion and pointed to religion as the connection between potentially violent African Americans and poor whites. Tucker lamented, “Fanaticism is spreading fast among the negroes of this country, and may form in time the connecting link between the black religionists and the white.”\footnote{George Tucker, \textit{Letter to a member of the General Assembly of Virginia, on the subject of the late conspiracy of the slaves: with a proposal for their colonization} (Baltimore: 1801), 12.} His solution was to purchase land from the Spanish on the North American continent on which to colonize free blacks. Thomas Branagan, a former slave trader turned antislavery writer, created an elaborate metaphor describing the problem of slavery in the United States and the role colonization could play in its amelioration. Branagan wrote that slavery was “a large tree planted in the South, whose spreading branches extends to the North; the poisonous fruit of that tree when ripe fall upon these states.” This poisonous fruit was the former slaves who became free people of color. His solution was to “lop off the branches that drop their untimely fruit in our states, and transport them in a land more congenial to themselves, where they may grow and flourish without annoying any person, and become in process of time in Africa, a flourishing tree which may be beneficial to the union in a commercial and agricultural point of view.”\footnote{Thomas Branagan, \textit{Serious remonstrances: addressed to the citizens of the northern states, and their representatives, being an appeal to their natural feelings and common sense, consisting of speculations and animadversions on the recent revival of the slave trade in the American republic} (Philadelphia: 1805), 92–93.}

For Americans who yearned to remove free people of color, colonization provided an attractive solution. Robert Finley shared these anxieties. In fact he began his colonizationist tract
with the very question, “what shall we do with the free people of color?” Finley fretted more over the religious health of the nation than over the threat of slave revolt. He felt that free people of color damaged the virtue of white Christians because religion required industry, and the presence of blacks gave whites a feeling of entitlement and a dangerous enjoyment of luxury. But “the gradual withdrawing of the blacks would insensibly and from an easy necessity induce habits of industry and along with it a love of order and religion” for both African American emigrants and the white Americans who remained behind. Sending African American missionaries across the ocean would not only hasten the conversion of Africa but facilitate the conversion of the white Americans who had yet to join the church. Colonization would yield conversion abroad and conversion at home – potent promises for the many Americans eager to seek and save the lost.

Africa was not the only site considered for colonization. Finley contemplated a colony west of the Mississippi and even concluded that “Africa would be a much more arduous undertaking.” But he was not looking for expediency. He was after souls. Other possible locations were similarly vetoed for their lack of missionary potential. Prince Saunders, a New England black educator, pressed the case for Haiti, claiming that Christians had a duty to help the infant republic. Saunders himself arrived in Haiti in 1815 and worked as an agent for the

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14 Finley, Thoughts, 1.

15 Skeptics may claim that it would be easier for the New Jersey-based Finley to privilege African conversion over the prevention of slave revolts, a danger that certainly disproportionately affected southerners. But there is no indication that Finley’s brief career as the President of the University of Georgia changed any of his views.

16 Ibid., 5.

17 Ibid., 2.
administration of Henri Christophe.\footnote{18} Christophe’s political rival, President Jean Pierre Boyer, encouraged American migration, sending a representative named Citizen Granville to the United States.\footnote{19} Richard Allen, the widely respected founder of African American Methodism, greeted Granville and aided the Haitian agent in finding emigrants. Loring Daniel Dewey, an agent for the ACS in New York, had grown frustrated in attempting to attract migrants to West Africa and instead arranged a migration to Haiti. The ACS fired Dewey, but Dewey persisted, corresponding directly with President Boyer. Eventually over two hundred black Americans relocated to Haiti, but the plan never generated nearly as much enthusiasm or economic activity as African colonization.

Boosters billed the two migrations differently. Haiti was sold as a refuge, Africa as a mission field. President Boyer wrote of Haiti as “a sure asylum to unfortunate men.”\footnote{20} Boyer believed that African Americans, “debased by ignorance and exasperated by misfortune, have become turbulent and dangerous.” While white colonizationists often held the same opinion of American blacks, ACS materials rarely invoked this discourse, opting instead to focus on the positive potential of colonization for both Africa and the United States. Both before and after the founding of the ACS, Americans looked to migration as a means of liberation, but white colonizationists could not divorce African American migration from the mission of Christianization. James S. Green weighed the possibility of facilitating Haitian migration in his address at the 1824 inaugural meeting of the New Jersey State Colonization Society. According

\footnotetext{18}{Saunders, \textit{A Memoir Presented to the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race} (Philadelphia: 1818).}

\footnotetext{19}{Society for Promoting the Emigration of Free Persons of Color to Haiti, \textit{Information for the free people of color, who are inclined to emigrate to Haiti} (New York, 1824).}

\footnotetext{20}{Letter, Jean Pierre Boyer to Loring Daniel Dewey, April 30, 1824 in Loring Daniel Dewey, \textit{Correspondence Relative to the Emigration to Haiti, of the Free People of Color, in the United States} (New York: 1824), 11.}
to the rules established by President Boyer, immigrants to Haiti enjoyed religious liberty but were restricted from proselytizing. How could any true Christian hold his tongue and allow his neighbor to drift through life on their way to an eternity of torment? According to Green, Christians who care about their neighbors would not be able to “never say or do anything to save them from ‘the wrath to come!’ It is impossible.” By prohibiting conversionist activity, Haiti nullified its candidacy as a major site for colonization. Theodore Frelinghuysen, speaking before the same society six months later, similarly appreciated the offer from Haiti but told his fellow colonizationists that “the trespass was committed against the continent—and to the continent, let retribution be made.” Speaking for the United States, he claimed that “we have injured, and we must make reparation.” Frelinghuysen framed the need for redemption as a millennial imperative, for what would happen “when America beholds, flaming from the eternal throne, ‘The blood of injured Africa calls for judgment.’ What must be our plea?” He concluded that the United States would be found “guilty before God.” The injury of the slave trade required reparation, and colonization promised not only eternal life for Africans but also absolution for America’s sinful slave trading. Africa needed conversion; America needed redemption.

American and British Christians shared a religious imagination of Africa as blessed with a rich and often mythic Christian past. This imagination often transcended time and space, holding places of prominence for white Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on both sides of the Atlantic. Benjamin Rush took for granted that his readers would be well aware

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of African Christianity, asking “Who has not heard of the Christian Church in Africa?” Ezra Stiles poured over the travel accounts of James Bruce looking for remnants of ancient Christianity. Stiles even wrote Bruce, correcting of the Scottish explorer’s claims regarding the travels of the early apostles and asking if “there may not be found some relics of oppressed Africans of St. Matthew, in lower Ethiopia?” Granville Sharp’s antislavery pamphlet *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God* included an extensive history of Christianity in Africa, drawn mostly from William Cave’s *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Historia Literaria*, a widely reprinted literary history of early church writers. Sharp followed the interests of his grandfather in studying the major African church councils in Carthage and even provided a numerical count of 310 bishops in the West African City of Baga by 394 CE. Since the glory of the early African church, the continent had “lamentably, fallen back into gross ignorance,” yet Sharp and so many others determined “to restore the heathens to their lost privileges.” Restoring the heathen would return Africa to her glorious past, a challenge that required immediate action.

Africa was both the location of a proud Christian past and an anticipated glorious Christian future, but in the minds of American and British Christians, it was also an unrivaled challenge for missionaries eager to win the world for Christ. Colonizationists drew on the deeply racist understandings of Africa held by Anglo-Christians for centuries. In an 1820 funeral sermon honoring two fallen ACS agents, William Augustus Muhlenberg called Africa “the

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strong hold of Satan,” a land “enveloped in a moral night of tenfold darkness.”

This imagery of Satan’s strongholds and tenfold darkness, ultimately bent to imperialist ends, originated in the earnest missionary pleas of conversionist Christians fretting over the souls of unreach
Africans. It would be a mistake to overemphasize the imperial ambitions of early American colonizationists, but the seeds of what would bear troubling fruit sprouted in even the earliest colonizationist rhetoric. Historians have recently focused attention on the relationship between religious conversion, antislavery enforcement, and the development of western imperialism. The best of these studies resist the tendency to caricature missionary zeal and anti-slave trade enforcement as nothing more than justifications for empire, instead illustrating how the two motivations fused over the course of the nineteenth century.

Conversionist rhetoric enabled colonizationists to subsume much of the discourse of early antislavery activists under their banner, including the writings of many of the most committed antislavery agitators. When Anthony Benezet reflected on the evangelical opportunities of the continent, he could not help but mourn a missed opportunity. Europeans long had favorable chances for bringing the gospel to Africa. Benezet lamented how Christendom failed to deploy her maritime prowess in the cause of Christ and instead enriched herself through war and plunder. Hope remained for the continent of Africa, but slavery posed a great obstacle to missionary ambitions. Benezet and others feared how “the slave trade must necessarily raise in the minds of the thoughtful and well-disposed negroes the utmost scorn and detestation of the


Christian name."²⁹ Benezet cited Peter Kolb, who wrote that “numbers of these people have given it as reason for their not harkening to Christianity."³⁰ The greatly influential early-eighteenth-century Anglican divine William Law shared Benezet’s concern for the salvation of Africans, warning that the slave trade nullified the Christian witness.³¹ Kolb, Benezet, Law, and numerous others feared that the slave trade had damaged the cause of conversion by linking Christ with slavery in the minds of Africans. For many reformers, slavery was seen as a tremendous obstacle to missionary activity, and the colonization movement managed to harness antislavery sentiments in a project ultimately ambivalent on abolition. By emphasizing religious conversion over either antislavery or proslavery, colonizationists held together a fractious coalition. For even many of the most zealous antislavery activists, the only sounds more sorrowful than the moans of a shackled slave were the wails of a damned soul.³²

Conversionists had to present Africans as desperately needing the light of the gospel yet not so horribly depraved as to be unreachable. A gathering of abolitionists in 1818 opposed colonization partially because the “bold and martial race, entirely addicted to war, many of them a large size, strong and well proportioned” that occupied the African coastline, was ill-suited for


³¹ William Law, An extract from a treatise on the spirit of prayer, or The soul rising out of the vanity of time into the riches of eternity. With some thoughts on war: Remarks on the nature and bad effects of the use of spirituous liquors. And considerations on slavery (Philadelphia: 1780).

³² Charles Irons has worked to complicate our understanding of proslavery and antislavery Christianity by showing how in the eighteenth and even early nineteenth centuries, both sides shared the discourse of conversionist Christianity. It would take several decades after the founding of the ACS before the ideologies of abolitionist and proslavery Christianity hardened into the irreconcilable conflict that Mark Noll calls America’s theological crisis. See Charles Irons, The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) and Mark Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
In combating these claims, colonizationists relied on environmental racism, condemning the licentiousness of Africans while also offering a promise of improvement, an improvement best achieved through religious conversion. Colonization advanced the belief that African Americans, if they were removed from the exploitative relationships of American society, could elevate themselves to at least near equality with whites. This logic undercut the arguments of inherent African inferiority but also reinforced the widespread belief that a stable, biracial America could never exist. Benjamin Rush repeated racist tropes by claiming that Africans were known for “idleness, treachery, theft and the like,” but he found these vices to be “the genuine offspring of slavery and serve as an argument to prove that they were not intended for it.” Polygamy, however, he found to be an inevitable vice among Africans, given “the heat of the climate, the early maturity and speedy decay of the women, [and] the peculiar fertility of the soil.” Other sins, such as an absence of friendship and gratitude, were the temporary result of their lack of Christian civilization. Despite these temporary problems, Rush did not doubt the capacity of Africans for religious improvement and used Anthony Benezet’s citations of distinguished European thinkers, including Michael Adanson and William Bosman, who similarly asserted the intelligence of Africans.

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33 American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Condition of the African Race, Minutes of the proceedings of a special meeting of the Fifteenth American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race assembled at Philadelphia, on the tenth day of December, 1818, and continued by adjournments until the fifteenth of the same month, inclusive (Philadelphia: 1818), 52.

34 Guyatt, “The Outskirts of Our Happiness.”

35 Rush, An Address, 2, 27.

36 For more on Anthony Benezet and his use of European thought see Maurice Jackson, Let This Voice Be Heard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
After researching African colonial history and observing African culture firsthand, Carl Bernard Wadström, a Swedish geographer in the service of the Sierra Leone Company, declared Africans to be “already predisposed by their natural dispositions and principles to receive Christianity.” Catholic missionary success in Congo, Angola, and several other Portuguese African possessions illustrated just how fertile the African prospects could be if the gospel was sown with care. The African American poet Phillis Wheatley likewise understood Africa as ready for harvest and praised the early colonizationist scheme of Samuel Hopkins and Ezra Stiles. In a 1774 letter to Hopkins, Wheatley assured him that Africans would zealously turn to Christianity, and she rejoiced that she could see “the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of my benighted country.” Wheatley declared that African “minds are unprejudiced against the truth,” and accordingly believed Hopkins’s missionaries would enjoy great success. Minds unprejudiced against truth and natural dispositions predisposed to receive Christianity portended a thorough triumph for suitable missionaries willing to voyage across the Atlantic.

A half-century after Wheatley reflected on Africa’s missionary potential, racist understandings of the continent as a religious blank slate persisted among British and American Christians. Ralph Randolph Gurley, addressing a Fourth of July crowd in 1825, described Africa as a land without any “formidable systems of superstition consecrated by age and authority.” He dismissed indigenous beliefs as “shadowy conceptions [that] cannot fortify their minds against the arguments and appeals of the word of God.” Nowhere in the world was a missionary field “more easy for cultivation, or rich in promise.” He claimed that African chiefs had found Christians morally and intellectually superior and accordingly would aggressively work to help


missionaries convert their people.\textsuperscript{39} The vapidity of Africans and their alleged eagerness for Christian instruction promised great success for a concerted conversionist enterprise. Evangelical Christianity and racist assurances of Anglo-American supremacy combined to create expectations of a smooth and speedy African conversion.

Reports of conversionist advances in Africa and elsewhere assured colonizationists of missionary success. Four years prior to his election as Bishop of London, Beilby Porteus preached before the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. For him and many others “a real, and general conversion of the negroes is no romantic project, but a thing perfectly practicable.”\textsuperscript{40} He praised Moravian missionary successes in the Caribbean and expected them to be replicated in Africa. Robert Finley looked to the missionaries in New Holland (Australia) and others in Africa who had “already been so successful in teaching the Cassre, the Hottentot, the Boshemen, the means of present happiness and the way of eternal life.”\textsuperscript{41} Christians anticipated the advance of the gospel with eager zeal and sought to join the glorious cause as it swept the globe. The international march of conversions foretold a transformative, historic advance in the history of the church. The millennium loomed.

In 1817 the ACS proclaimed that “there exists an unusual sensibility and desire to aid the cause of humanity and religion. The tone of public feeling is elevated.”\textsuperscript{42} The local branch of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in Columbia contemplated the character of their age as “marked as it is with a concurrence (unexamined in history) of events of striking import in the physical,  

\textsuperscript{39} Ralph Randolph Gurley, \textit{A Discourse, Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1825} (Washington: 1825), 18.

\textsuperscript{40} Beilby Porteus reprinted in \textit{Substance of the report of the court of directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the general court, held at London on Wednesday the 19th of October, 1791} (London: 1791), 29–30.

\textsuperscript{41} Finley, \textit{Thoughts}, 3–4.

political, and religious worlds” and “exertions that are making in different sections of the globe for the melioration of the condition of man.” These great advances occurred because of “the footsteps of deity in the mighty revolution,” but were only precursors to something far greater. A rise in conversions was on the horizon and “the time is nevertheless approaching when through the blessings of Providence upon human exertions, justice and mercy shall become respected in the earth and this much injured and long degraded race be raised to their proper grade in the scale of being.”

Robert Finley was thrilled to be living in a period when “the voice of justice and humanity begins to be listened to with attention.” He rejoiced that, “the time at last is come when not a few are imbibing the spirit of Him who came from Heaven ‘to seek and save the lost.’” Americans understood the missionizing spirit to be strongest in the new republic but spreading rapidly across the globe. “Europe begins slowly but sensibly to reform her governments. The gloomy and dread superstitions of Asia begin to totter before the Gospel of Christ. Nor shall Africa be forgotten.” In 1774 Phillis Wheatley rejoiced “that which the divine royal Psalmist says by inspiration is now on the point of being accomplished, namely, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” This last clause, drawn from Psalm 68:31, became a rallying cry, and nearly every colonizationist tract repeated the verse. William Augustus Muhlenberg in 1820 was no exception but grew even more strident, thundering, “The heathen are

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43 American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Condition of the African Race, Minutes of the proceedings of a special meeting of the fifteenth American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race: assembled at Philadelphia, on the tenth day of December, 1818, and continued by adjournments until the fifteenth of the same month, inclusive (Philadelphia: 1818), 21.

44 Finley, Thoughts, 3.


46 Wheatley, Collected Works, 178.
demanding the gospel. On us hang the fulfillment of the promises. The time is come. The church is on her march to victory." 47

As Americans looked to the millennium, their eyes turned to Africa. The conversion of Africa had become an essential requirement for the fulfillment of millennial prophecy. For most Americans, and nearly all colonizationists, millennialism had little to do with precise understandings of eschatological theology but rather manifested itself as a component of the versatile, nonspecific Protestantism that dominated the early republic. Millennialism became a venue for imperial ambitions, fantasies of racial homogeneity, and the enduring optimism of messianic American nationalism. While a few painstakingly searched the scriptures for a prophetic checklist, the vast majority of Americans drifted along with hearts and eyes directed heavenward in assurance of impending radical improvement. Colonizationists harnessed millennial faith as a unifying force and read current events as signs of the times portending African conversion.

Early reports of British activity in Sierra Leone offered encouragement and illustrated the potential power of nonwhite missionaries. The story of one African Prince circulated on both sides of the Atlantic as evidence of African religious potential. King Naimbanna, an African chief who ceded land for the Sierra Leone settlement in 1787, sent his son John to England where he experienced a dramatic religious conversion. 48 John drew the attention of England’s elite and became a celebrity among evangelicals opposed to the slave trade. The prince evinced all the characteristics of pious Christianity. After his conversion, he stopped dressing in the ostentatious manner of African royalty and refused to drink more than one glass of wine per


48 Naimbana also sent another son to North Africa to study under Islamic tutors and another to France to learn under Catholics.
After several years in England, Naimbanna returned to Africa. His departure inspired Hannah More to wistfully reflect that “such instances of fine affections—such generous sentiments—such aptitude to receive religious truth—and have every reason to believe, that instances of this kind are to be found, more or less, in all parts of this unhappy country.”

Through the work of the Sierra Leone Company and the influence of the Christian prince’s return, Britons expected to convert the continent. The vessel that carried the Christian African prince back to his homeland took the name of *Naimbanna* in honor of its prized passenger. Tragically, John Naimbanna grew ill as he drew nearer to Africa and died almost immediately after reaching shore, unable to fulfill his missionary dreams. Information on John Naimbanna stems exclusively from the 1791 annual report of the Sierra Leone Company. Zachary Macaulay, an influential booster for the Company, popularized the tale in his 1796 publication *The African Prince*. American printings of the story likely began in 1799 when Thomas Dobson of Philadelphia printed a summary of several reports from the Sierra Leone Company or then again in 1800 with British playwright, philanthropist, and moral reformer Hannah More’s *The Black Prince*. All of these writings reveal far less about the actual thoughts of Naimbanna and more about the preoccupations of the English and American men and women who used his tale as evidence of conversionist potential.

White missionaries signed up for the cause, but many Christians came to believe that only African Americans could truly bring the gospel to Africa. James S. Green agreed. He feared

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49 *Substance of the report of the court of directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the general court, held at London on Wednesday the 19th of October, 1791* (London: 1791), 15–20.


that “it seems almost impossible without a miracle, which we have no reason to expect, that it ever should be Christianized except by Africans.” The climate and the customs of the natives would prohibit successful white missionary efforts, but “native missionaries, moreover, when well qualified, are, on various accounts, more acceptable to their brethren than strangers, and can address them with more advantage from a knowledge of their customs and their feelings.” Fears of tropical climates and racist anxieties of supposed African barbarism joined with a practical awareness that many Africans understandably equated white skin with fears of slave trading, fears that would certainly impinge on missionary activities. As Anthony Benezet mourned in his antislavery tract, Christians spoiled their opportunity to evangelize the continent. Henry Clay feared the same but believed that Americans could yet still make a difference in claiming that “the African Colonists, whom we send to convert the heathen… will be received as long lost brethren.” Imagining the encounter between an African and an African American missionary left white American colonizationists swelling with paternalist pride.

The ACS program involved much more than rounding up free people of color and deporting them across the ocean. Finley wanted only those migrants to go who would be well prepared, those who upon arrival would “be the great instruments of spreading peace and happiness.” He dreamed of assembling an army of “thousands and tens of thousands” to make the voyage. Surely “in a land of civil liberty and religious knowledge” there would be no trouble finding such an army. Colonization promised to transform American people of color as well as their African brethren. Training African American missionaries would turn a class of loathed,

52 Green, Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Princeton, 33.


54 Finley, Thoughts, 8.
feared, or pitied Americans into pious servants of Christ. In the minds of white colonizationists, degenerate slaves and dangerous free people of color would become disciplined missionaries. In 1817 Edward Griffin, preaching on behalf of the African School, a Presbyterian training ground for African American missionaries, proclaimed that “it can no longer be made a question whether the elevation of the African race is a part of the new order of things. The providence of God has declared it.”\(^{55}\) The Christian College at Clapham, the African Seminary in Philadelphia and the African School in New York all promised to furnish well-educated, passionate missionaries. Through the benevolence of American colonizationists, African Americans would take their place as trusted servants of God, and Africans would be brought into the kingdom of Christ. The concerns of Christian nationalism, both regarding competition with Europe and the fears of rising American sectarianism, further fueled the movement.

American Christians paid close attention to British colonization, but an American colony, Finley assured, would have a far easier time than a British colony. British action proved the viability of colonization, but according to the spiritual father of American colonization, “toward this land of liberty [Africa] turns her eyes.” Edward Dorr Griffin also implored Americans to “no longer look to Europe for the redemption of Africans: the work is laid on ourselves by the plain direction of heaven.”\(^{56}\) Robert Finley never doubted that Africa would return to Christian glory.\(^{57}\) The settlers at Sierra Leone were refugees battered about the Atlantic World. American colonists “could carry with them property, the useful arts of life, and above all, the knowledge of the

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\(^{56}\) Griffin, *Plea for Africa*, p. 31.

\(^{57}\) Finley, *Thoughts*, 8.
benign religion of Christ.” The British proved it could be done, but Americans would do it right. Elias B. Caldwell, Finley’s brother-in-law and clerk of the United States Supreme Court, understood the millennial promise of colonization as a unifying program that would unite an increasingly fractured American Christianity. While Caldwell acknowledged a growing difference of opinion among American believers, he stood confident in the knowledge that all Americans shared “the belief that the scriptures predict a time, when the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be spread over every part of the world.” An increasing number of Americans came to believe “this glorious and happy day is near at hand,” and by emphasizing this shared belief, American Christians could overcome their increasingly contentious economic, social, and theological divisions. Caldwell pointed to “great movements and mighty efforts in the moral and religious world” as evidence of an approaching international wave of conversions that would transcend geographic and denominational lines. Colonization offered a message of unity that not only cut across political and sectional divides but also transcended denominational and theological barriers. Christians of nearly every theological and denominational persuasion, shared the dream of a converted Africa. Calvinists and Arminians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians all labored together. The promise of global conversion appealed to a wide array of Americans, and through the promise of the sixty-eighth Psalm, Africa took center stage in the great millennial drama about to unfold.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century a clear majority of Americans believed the Atlantic slave trade was evil, and although it had been abolished, a moral scar endured. Finley believed that the United States had committed a grave sin, but colonization offered “the

58 Ibid., 3–4.

atoning sacrifice.” The slave trade robbed Africa of millions of children, encouraged violence between African nations, and hindered the progress of missionaries by linking Christianity to slavery. Finley wrote, “if wrong has been done to Africa in forcing away her weeping children, the wrong can be best redressed by that power which did the injury.” By bringing the gospel to Africa, the United States would earn the praise and honor of all of Europe and “exceed them in the great cause of humanity, which has begun its never ending course.” William Augustus Muhlenberg praised American attempts to weaken the Atlantic slave trade but regretted that the nation still owed a debt to the sons and daughters of those taken into captivity. In an 1820 sermon he proclaimed that if by the labors of the American Colonizationist Society, “we can transmit to Africa the blessings of our arts, our civilization and our religion, perhaps we may extinguish a part of the great moral debt.” Colonizationists repeated the theme of debt. Edward Dorr Griffin claimed that Americans “owe a greater atonement than any other nation to bleeding Africa.” This debt mocked American claims to greatness. For Americans to regain their moral capital, they must repay Africa.

The impending wave of conversions had begun. God was calling the United States to lead the charge. By doing so, Americans would erase the sins of their slave-trading past and establish themselves as the preeminent moral authority among the nations of the world. James Patterson, in a July 4 sermon in 1825 told his ecumenical audience “we cannot conceive how this country would make a reparation to Africa for the wrongs done her.” But Patterson and others wanted to more than make reparation. They wanted to assert American righteousness. Patterson asked

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60 Finley, *Thoughts*, 6-8.


“Would this government give a Christian education to her slaves, which she is bound to do, and then return them to their native country, what greater favor under heaven could they possibly confer on Africa?” What greater favor could there be than providing “60,000,000 of souls, sunk in the most cruel heathenism, with the most efficient missionaries.”

The successful conversion of Africa would recast the tragedy of the slave trade as a divine step in the workings of Providence. In a curious late-eighteenth-century tract, James Beattie lampooned the work of proslavery writer Richard Nisbet, mocking the claim that the slave trade “has been the principal means of heaping wealth and honors on Europeans and Americans and rescuing many millions of wretched Africans as brands from the fire.” By the early nineteenth century, however, proslavery Americans made these same points without a tinge of irony. As the nineteenth century progressed, the conflict between proslavery and antislavery thought accelerated. Both sides drew arguments from an earlier conversionist consensus. The proslavery assurance that the slave trade bore a positive good in saving African heathens from a life of barbarism and an eternity of torment received a major boost from colonizationists, many of whom carried committed antislavery convictions. By tracing the anticipated millennial revival back to the slave trade, antislavery colonizationists loaded one of the most potent weapons in the proslavery arsenal, a weapon that would be wielded repeatedly in the pamphlet wars of the mid-nineteenth century.

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Absalom Jones, the first African American Episcopal bishop, made this very point. In an 1808 sermon he asked, “Why the impartial Father of the human race should have permitted the transportation of so many millions of our fellow creatures to this country, to endure all the miseries of slavery.” His answer was that God allowed this great evil to happen in order to raise up a generation of African American missionaries. He mused, “Perhaps his design was, that a knowledge of the gospel might be acquired by some of their descendants, in order that they might become qualified to be the messengers of it, to the land of their fathers.”

65 Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, in its account of the very first ACS meeting, remarked how colonization might “become in the hands of Divine Providence, the instrument of introducing amongst savage brethren, the blessings of civilization.”

66 James Green wrote in 1824 that the fault for the great injustice of the slave trade fell exclusively on Christian nations. But he took comfort from the belief that “when Christians shall repent of their crime, and seek to repair the injury they have inflicted by restoring to Africa her enslaved children, these freemen and Christians will be the instruments in the hands of God, to civilize, and Christianize.” Even the horrors of the slave trade “shall eventually be made productive of the richest blessings, which the inhabitants of that quarter of the globe have ever received from the Father of Mercies.” Green searched the scriptures and human history to find “the usual order of the divine dispensations” and determined that God always worked in ways contrary to the nefarious intentions of mankind.

65 Absalom Jones, A thanksgiving sermon, preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas's, or the African Episcopal, Church, Philadelphia: on account of the abolition of the African slave trade, on that day, by the Congress of the United States (Philadelphia: 1808), 18.

66 Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, December 20, 1816. Julie Winch remarks how through Poulson’s, Philadelphia’s large free people of color population would have heard of the meeting only five days after it occurred. Julie Winch, A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten (New York: Oxford, 2002), 189.
Since “from the sure word of prophecy, we know that ‘Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God,’” it was clear that “Africa shall yet be Christianized.”

The rhetoric of national redemption emerged in surprising places. In its immediate attempt to secure funding from Congress, the ACS proclaimed in a memorial, “it may be reserved for our government… to become the honorable instrument, under Divine Providence, of conferring, a still higher blessing upon the large and interesting portion of mankind.” The United States was still struggling to establish a national identity by distinguishing herself from Great Britain, and members of the ACS believed that by bringing the gospel to Africa, Americans would earn a “glory with which the most splendid achievements of human force or power must sink in the competition and appear insignificant and vulgar in the comparison.” The House of Representatives responded with a report read before the whole body on February 11, 1817. Even the national legislature recognized the continent as “a wide field for the improvements in civilization, morals, and religion” and expected Christianity “in process of time, to spread over that great continent.”

The initial proposal suggested following the mission of Paul Cuffee in sending black Americans to the British colony of Sierra Leone. But the possibility of sending a great mass of colonists to a British territory caused pause. Congress did not want Britain to accumulate all of the expected glories from the colony, nor were they comfortable with the prospect of Americans becoming permanent subjects of British tyranny. These concerns delayed Congressional action, but only temporarily. The removal of the threatening free black population

67 Green, Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Princeton, 32–33.


and home and the expected boon to American commerce certainly enticed legislators, but the 
Congressional report focused on the “humane and enlightened” policy of African conversion and 
the ensuing moral redemption of the United States. In 1823 Samuel Miller, preaching on behalf 
of the African School in New Jersey, declared that by training African American missionaries 
“we may thus most effectually repair the multiplied wrongs we have done to Africa.” But this 
mission would ultimately depend on the willingness of the pious African American colonists 
expected to inaugurate the continental revival.

African Americans largely shared the conversionist mission, but an overwhelming 
majority of free people of color had no desire to emigrate. Panic swept through free black 
communities as terrifying rumors spread of forced removal and deportation. Free people of color 
found themselves in a difficult situation. Many yearned for the conversion of Africa but like 
white Christians most believed it a task best suited for someone else. The widespread African 
American opposition to colonization did not equate to a lack of support for the conversionist 
mission. Free people of color understandably mistrusted the curious coalition of abolitionists and 
slaveholders and feared the ways in which the ACS might be used to further erode their already 
tenuous freedoms.

In response to the panic in Philadelphia, over 3,000 African Americans gathered at Mother 
Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church to draft a response. Ministers Richard Allen, 
Absalom Jones, and James Forten took the lead, along with Russell Parrott who had earlier 
published an oration celebrating the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. Parrott

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concluded this earlier address with a millennial cry for Africa, rejoicing that, “Religion has unfolded [Africa’s] sacred page; and while she holds the heavenly volume to the eye, by her enlivening presence she dispels the clouds of paganism and error, which had so long overshadowed her.” Parrott’s very last line proclaimed that recent African conversions illustrate that religion “with her divine associates, Knowledge and Liberty, shall pervade and humanize the whole habitable portion of the world!”

Absalom Jones, the abolitionist minister of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, frequently shared his commitment to African conversion, including in an 1808 sermon where he mustered nearly every millennial trope possible in proclaiming,

May Ethiopia soon stretch out her hands unto thee, and lay hold of the gracious promise of thy everlasting covenant. Destroy, we beseech thee, all the false religions which now prevail among them; and grant, that they may soon cast their idols, to the moles and the bats of the wilderness. O, hasten that glorious time, when the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea; when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them; and, when, instead of the thorn, shall come up the fir tree, and, instead of the brier, shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Jones connected the conversion of Africa to the imminent millennium and the peaceful paradise that would come along with it. The case with Richard Allen is more complicated. The founder of African American Methodism became a supporter of Haitian emigration and even advocated for a colony to be placed in Canada. But in the early years, Allen was a major booster for

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African colonization, holding meetings in his home and laboring to support Paul Cuffee’s early attempts to settle African Americans in Sierra Leone.73

Despite the support of these influential leaders, the 3,000 black Philadelphians responded to colonization with overwhelming opposition. White ACS leaders clearly had a difficult task in earning the trust of potential emigrants. The language of conversionism proved to be the most effective means of forging and maintaining connections across the racial divide. But many African Americans who shared conversionist goals nonetheless opposed colonization. James Forten and Russell Parrott issued a statement on behalf of the 3,000 African Americans who met at Mother Bethel. In evaluating this statement, historians emphasize the African American sense of ownership of the nation where they lived. Julie Winch, in her excellent biography of James Forten, for example, provides the following quote from the document, “whereas our ancestors (not of choice) were the first successful cultivators of America, we… feel ourselves entitled to participate in the blessings of her luxuriant soil, which their blood and sweat manured.”74

Another portion of the same message, however, reveals another reason for opposition that has not received scholarly attention. The authors proclaimed their support for the conversionist mission and shared the ACS’s optimism regarding the religious fate of Africa. They feared, however, that an insufficient number of well-educated free people of color would voluntarily emigrate. The intense resistance of the Mother Bethel crowd illustrated the hesitance of settled free blacks to emigrate. They remarked that if the new colony was populated solely by uneducated former slaves, “the light of Christianity, which now dawns among that section of


our species, [would] be shut out by the clouds of ignorance, and their day of life be closed without the illuminations of the gospel."\textsuperscript{75} Philadelphia’s community of free people of color framed their opposition around the importance of African conversion but distrusted the ACS to provide the training necessary to fulfill the glorious mission. Black Philadelphians either shared the conversionist, millennial convictions of the ACS or at least recognized the potency of the discourse, and they framed their opposition accordingly.

Phillis Wheatley similarly worried about the prospect of sending unqualified missionaries. Writing to John Thornton fifty years earlier, she weighed the possibility of traveling to Africa as a missionary herself. Wheatley yearned for the conversion of Africa and enthusiastically supported missionary efforts to the continent, but she declined the invitation to participate. This early mission never got off the ground, but Wheatley’s excuse for standing on the sidelines indicates her support for the project. She wrote that she did not speak the language so she would only be a drain on the African American missionaries who were slated to lead the expedition. She nonetheless gave her support to the mission and prayed for its success.\textsuperscript{76}

Baptists provided the strongest base of African American support for colonization, as Lott Carey and Collin Teague dreamed of “spreading through the land of Ham, the knowledge of the Redeemer.” These two African American ministers successfully transmitted their dream to the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia, and ultimately persuaded the white leaders of the Baptist General Convention to support the movement.\textsuperscript{77} The two sailed for Africa in 1821,


\textsuperscript{76} Letter, Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, October 20, 1774 in The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley, 184.

and in 1822, Carey established Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia. Men and women like Daniel Coker, Lott Carey, and Collin Teague, who shared the conversionist mission and were willing to risk their lives in its pursuit, represented a very small minority. But colonization always held greater currency in white populations who could piously praise the conversionist mission without having to offer more than a monthly contribution to the cause.

The ACS fretted over the lack of African American support but ultimately ignored the overwhelming opposition of the free black community. In fact, the ACS claimed the mantle of Paul Cuffee, the famous African American colonizationist, and used his image in their advertising campaign. Before the ACS had formed, Cuffee and thirty-eight other black Africans arrived in Sierra Leone in February 1816. This mission proved terribly expensive, and Cuffee passed away before he could lead another group of emigrants. Before his passing, however, Cuffee grew more ambivalent about African colonization and suspicious of the ACS. Despite his conflicted relationship with the ACS, the Society used him as a symbol. In 1818 Robert Finley published an imaginary dialogue between the ghosts of Cuffee, William Penn, and Absalom Jones. In the dialogue, Finley had Cuffee begin by praising the benevolence of the movement, assuring that the plan was “calculated to restore the race of Africa all the losses they have sustained, heal their wounds and make reparation for their injuries, reinstate them in the honors of their nature, retrieve their sullied glory, and convert their greatest curse into the most signal blessing to themselves and to the world.” Cuffee promised that colonization would bring Christianity to Africa and would purge the national guilt of the United States. Jones stood in as a representative of African American hesitancy to colonization. Cuffee and Jones turned to Penn

to adjudicate their disagreement, and after discussing the issue with the ghost of George Washington and other “illustrious shades of Paradise,” Penn sided with Cuffee in support of colonization. After a long discussion of other prospects for emancipation, Cuffee and Penn made their final arguments in attempts to sway Jones, leaning heavily on the rhetoric of African conversion and American redemption. Penn emphasized the prospect of American redemption by proclaiming, “How rich will be the return, and how noble the reparation, which America will make to Africa, for all the injuries she has done her!” By transmitting the gifts of the gospel to Africa, “that which was the greatest curse of mankind is unexpectedly, under the direction of Heaven, transmuted in to their most signal blessing!” Cuffee was less concerned with America’s fate and was more moved by the prospect of African conversion. Finley imagined Cuffee weeping over the prospect of the ACS “erecting the structure of pure religion upon the ruins of the gloomy doctrines and idolatrous rites of paganism.” Cuffee’s ghost parroted the imperial and anti-Islamic rhetoric that folded into the colonizationist movement by envisioning that “the Crescent is again made to bow to the Cross, and Christian nations, nations friendly to civilized man, take possession of those capitals now occupied by pirates and robbers.”

Before these twin arguments, Jones buckled and retracted his opposition.

Christianity proved the most potent force in forging biracial ties in the early republic, and both African Americans and many slaveholders shared the conversionist obsession. The ACS chapter in Loudoun, Virginia, exhibited a great interest in both the conversion of Africa and the resulting redemption of America. A well-placed colony would spread the gospel across the continent, restoring Africa to her lost greatness. The United States would benefit as well, of course. These northern Virginians quaked at the thought of a slave revolt and feared the “greater

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79 Finley, “Dialogues,” 274–75.
evils [that] have been apprehended, from the existence of such a population amongst us.” But emphasis placed on the increased safety of draining off a dangerous population was dwarfed by the rhetoric placed on national moral redemption. By fulfilling the colonizationist mission, the Loudoun chapter rejoiced that “our national character will cease to wear its most marring blemish.”

Conversionist goals not only motivated colonizationists, but they also directed the creation and governance of the colony. Robert Goodloe Harper considered the missionary purpose of the colony when he offered advice on establishing a settlement. He emphasized the importance of maintaining goodwill with natives. Friendly relations would offer practical benefits, but most importantly they would enable the colonists “to communicate to them the knowledge and habits of civilized life.” He suggested that the colony find a location near the Niger River as it would most effectively offer “the extension of civilization.” For Harper, the extension of civilization was intimately bound up with the extension of Christianity, because one was impossible without the other. Other colonizationists had divergent opinions regarding the relationship between these two ideas; as some believed that civilization must precede conversion, and others took the opposite stand.

Theological questions surrounding the nature of conversion threatened colonizationists’ unity. Evangelicals who saw conversion as a discreet, emotional experience privileged its occurrence over the process of civilization, while Episcopalians and other more liturgically inclined missionaries believed that civilization must come prior. William Augustus Muhlenberg,

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80 Address of the Colonization Society of Loudoun, Virginia (Annapolis, MD: 1819), 4–5.

a self-described Catholic evangelical Episcopalian, bridged the gap between the liturgical conversionists who emphasized a slow moral development and evangelicals who called for a radical immediate conversion experience.\textsuperscript{82} While eulogizing two ACS agents who died in Sierra Leone, Muhlenberg claimed that “to induce the untutored mind to submit to the labor of acquiring [civilization], some great motive is necessary.” For Muhlenberg, religious conversion would catalyze civilization.\textsuperscript{83} G. A. Robertson, a British explorer writing a study of Africa for Britain’s Board of Trade and Plantations, took the opposite view and accordingly criticized the optimistic reports of African conversions. Robertson shared the goal of converting Africa but attacked British missionaries for failing to generate genuine conversions. Whereas missionaries aimed for mass conversions, Robertson espoused a slower process that would privilege cultural development as its own goal. Unchecked enthusiasm on the part of Protestant evangelists would only send undisciplined Africans into the arms of Catholic missionaries. Robertson dreamed of a Christian Africa, but he hated the “attempt to convert them to Christianity before they have acquired a knowledge of the most useful arts and conveniences of life.”\textsuperscript{84}

Most Americans or Britons did not parse the difference between Christianity and civilization. James S. Green said it the most clearly by writing, “Civilization and Christianity will go together, and mutually assist each other. They are indeed all but inseparable.”\textsuperscript{85} Conflicts over the meaning of conversion endured, but the ACS subsumed the debate under a banner of generic Protestantism. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, conversion became


\textsuperscript{83} Muhlenberg, \textit{A sermon in memory of the Rev. Samuel Bacon, and John P. Bankson}, 6.

\textsuperscript{84} G. A. Robertson, \textit{Notes on Africa} (London: 1819), 431.

\textsuperscript{85} Green, \textit{Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Princeton}, 33.
increasingly linked to education. Conversionist leaders formed schools to facilitate conversion both at home and abroad. Muhlenberg connected schooling to the missions of conversion and civilization, writing, “Christian missionaries are the most successful civilizers. The very methods by which they teach religion necessarily conduce to the habits of society. The natives are assembled for worship, their children are formed into schools, and they are instructed in the arts of domestic economy as Christian virtues.”

Schools for free people of color were seen as models for future African academies. Finley predicted that “there might soon be fixed a seat of liberal learning in Africa from which the rays of knowledge might dart across those benighted regions.”

Early reports from Africa encouraged Americans that the continental conversion was already underway. Ephraim Bacon sailed from Norfolk on the brig Nautilus in January 1821. On their very first evening in Sierra Leone, the ACS agents attended a worship service, followed by another service less than twelve hours later. The colonists stared intently at their Bibles, closely following the sermon. “Such cheering fruits” told Bacon that “surely Christians ought to feel themselves encouraged in the support of missions.” He emphasized the order and cleanliness of the parishioners, a striking instance of “a Christian congregation in a heathen land.” On a single Sunday, he recorded services attended at six and ten in the morning and then two more at three and six in the evening. At the primary service in the morning, he recorded four hundred Christians receiving communion. Encouragement came from black colonists as well. Samuel Wilson wrote from Sierra Leone in 1818 to free people of color in America, “your fathers were

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87 Finley, *Thoughts*, 8.

carried into that land to increase strangers treasures, but God has turned it all to good, that you may bring the gospel into your country.\footnote{Letter, Samuel Wilson, May 18, 1818. \textit{The Second Annual Report of the American Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color} (Washington D.C.: 1819), 150.} A joint letter crafted three days later by eleven residents of Sierra Leone echoed this idea, claiming that “all that has befallen us is of God for our good, that we may bring the gospel into our country.”\footnote{This letter was signed by John Kizzell, William Martin, George Davis, George Lewis, R. Robertson, Samuel Wilson, Peter Mitchell, Perry Locke, Thomas Williams, John Kizell Jr., and Pompey Rutledge and dated May 19, 1819. \textit{Ibid.}, 152.}

By 1825 a few things had changed. Optimism for a world breaking free from generations of tyranny slowed, and confidence in the missionary abilities of free people of color waned. Additional reports from Africa offered models of conversionist success but also a more realistic portrait of the challenges that lay ahead. James S. Green had anticipated in 1824 that African conversion would take as long as one hundred years, but was still convinced that “A century hence civilization may exist and Christian churches may be planted in every part of the African continent.”\footnote{Green, \textit{Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Princeton}, 33.}

Ralph Randolph Gurley, the two-time chaplain for the House of Representatives, editor for \textit{The African Repository and Colonial Journal}, and an active officer for the ACS, addressed the Society in 1825 and delivered a far drearier portrait of the world, asking, “is not the iron rod of despotism stretched out over a hundred nations? Bleed not a hundred nations under superstition’s scourge?” The faith in imminent global transformation that rang throughout the early nineteenth century gave way to a more somber interpretation of world events. Similarly, earlier encomiums to African American piety disappeared, as many Americans grew increasingly intolerant of the expanding population of free people of color. Gurley criticized the Christianity of northern blacks by writing that “even religion their sole benefactress seldom rouses them for
their insensibility to her motives and rescues them from their captivity to the lowest indulgencies of sense. Her light shines around, but penetrates not the darkness of their minds.” Despite the negative portrait of black spirituality, Gurley on the very same page asserted that the Society would send free blacks “to the soil of their ancestors and assist them there in founding the institutions of freedom, civilization, and Christianity.”

Gurley believed that the free black population had tremendous potential, but for now he saw them as only a degraded, licentious nuisance.

The dream of African conversion endured, and Gurley’s rhetoric matched the soaring heights of earlier colonizationists. In his 1824 Fourth of July oration, Gurley told the audience “Africa appeals to us this day!” Still deploying the language of national guilt, he claimed that Africa “stretches out her hands, and implores us in the name of justice as well as of mercy and religion to remember the unparalleled wrongs which, for centuries, she has endured from Christian nations.” Burned villages, stolen children, and lost property “bear testimony to the validity of her claims,” and America stood in need of redemption. By bringing the gospel to Africa, the current generation would surpass even the honored revolutionaries who earned national independence. Through their mission to Africa, Americans would “erect to our national honor a monument more durable than granite, inscribed to charity, the queen of the virtues.”

It was one thing to harbor these dreams in 1819, before the American settlements had struggled to gain traction, but by 1825 it was quite another to pursue the conversion of Africans with the same enthusiasm. In that year, the Petersburg auxiliary society in Virginia composed a circular letter to local ministers with some of the most elevated conversionist rhetoric in all of

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93 Ibid., 17–18.
colonizationist literature. In telling their own history, the society claims they were “instituted, principally through the instrumentality of a devoted soldier of the cross,” and that the prayers of pious Christians “have never yet ceased to ascend on its behalf.” It had been nearly a decade since the movement began, but now the prayers of faithful Americans were joined with “the humble but ardent Amen” of the infant churches in Liberia, churches that were already saving souls in Africa and honoring the United States for her benevolence. To these local ministers to whom the circular was addressed, the authors asked, “will you not be on the Lord’s side?”

Virginians had a choice. They could either join the patriotic Christian mission of saving Africa and redeeming their nation or they could stand with Satan, allow Africans to perish for eternity, leave America sullied by the sins of the slave trade, and expose their neighbors to the horror of slave revolt.

Ezra Stiles Gannett wrote to his mentor William Ellery Channing in 1833 explaining his support for the ACS, a position that had grown unpopular in Boston as Garrisonian abolitionists picked up the mantel of David Walker in opposing the movement. Gannett wrote, “The effect of the Colonization Society in diminishing or alleviating slavery in this country, I have not believed would be great. I have advocated it solely on the ground of its effects in Africa, where if the colony be properly increased, it will be the instrument of extinction to the slave trade and of regeneration to the continent.”

Eight years later, William Hemphill, a Presbyterian minister in Abbeville District, South Carolina, extolled African colonization as “the greatest means of

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94 Broadside, 17 June 1825, Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

extending the church of Christ over the benighted regions of enslaved and enslaving Africa.”

Despite these remarks, the conversionist consensus began to erode as sectional tensions heightened. Colonizationists continued to frame their mission as an agent of Christianization, but it became increasingly difficult to maintain the millennial faith of African conversion as Liberia struggled to remain viable. The cold reality of Liberian struggles extinguished the fiery confidence earlier held by so many. Furthermore, national tensions over slavery weakened the reach of the ACS, transforming the society from a national force for unity to a refuge for moderates uncomfortable with the growing militancy of pro and antislavery factions. Conversionism could not longer hold together its national coalition and colonization suffered accordingly.

As Daniel Coker sailed across the Atlantic in 1820, he called to the heavens, “Oh! my soul, what is God about to do for Africa? Surely something great.” Only a few days before arriving, he rejoiced, “has not the day of African’s salvation already began to dawn? I imagine I behold the uplifted hands of thousands, in prayer, that it may shine more and more to the perfect day.” Historians have understandably assessed colonizationist movements in relation to slavery. The debate will continue as to how the movement weakened and strengthened the institution, but colonization, apart from how it influenced slavery or African identity, is worthy of attention. Daniel Coker, Samuel Bacon, and hundreds of others dreamed of restoring Africa to the church and expunging the national sins of the slave trade. Ethiopia would stretch forth her hands to God, and as she did, millions of saved Africans would look with gratitude on the United States for transforming the horrors of the slave trade into a blessed agent of evangelism. Africa would be

96 William Hemphill, “Address on Colonization,” (July 1, 1840), Hemphill Family Papers, David M. Rothstein Rare book and Manuscript Library. Duke University.
saved. America would be redeemed. Religious conviction cannot be understood solely as a ruse for political ambitions, but it is ultimately irrelevant whether the conversionist emphasis flowed from genuine sentiment or a pragmatic attempt to hold together a fractious coalition. Either way, conversionism united colonizationists in a way nothing else could.
The congregants dutifully slid into the pews of the hot and stuffy First Church of Enfield, Connecticut on a July evening. As the sun slowly set, yellow light pierced through the narrow windows filling the chapel with an eerie glow. By 1741 New England was several years into “a great and general awakening,” yet this congregation had remained stubbornly resistant to earlier attempts at revival that now appeared hopeless. As the service began, the congregation chattered among themselves, paying little attention to the proceedings. However, as the small man at the pulpit quietly and deliberately read aloud his prepared sermon, the tenor in the room shifted from lighthearted sociability to grave unease. Pauses in the sermon were no longer greeted with causal whispers but heavy silence. Slowly, gasps and muffled cries filled the warm air. These sounds increased until mournful moans and piercing screams forced the minister to close the service without finishing the sermon. Revival had reached Enfield, and Jonathan Edwards had just given one of the most famous sermons in American history.

Ninety years later, the offspring of the New Englanders who experienced this “great and general awakening” had made their way west over the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains into the upper portions of New York State, populating the new cities that sprang up after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. In a winter evening in 1830, recently repentant souls and several fence-sitters crowded into the Brick Church in Rochester. At the very beginning of the service, Charles Grandison Finney – a tall, thin man with sharp, fiery eyes – welcomed
congregants who felt troubled, convicted, or otherwise in need of special prayer to a bench at the front of the church. To these unsettled souls he aimed the loudest, most intense and pointed appeals of his sermon. With the eyes of the congregation on their backs, the eyes of the revivalist boring into their own, and the eyes of God penetrating their very souls, those seated upon this anxious bench eagerly obeyed the call to publically confess their sins, accept the grace of God, and live a life free of the sinful excesses so common in this economically booming corner of the republic.

These two moments of revival embody the sea change in religious attitudes that occurred during the ninety years that separated them. The key passage in Jonathan Edwards’s sermon terrified his listeners, insisting, "There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God."¹ Finney, on the other hand, focused his sermons on the key moment when he called those on the front seat to “come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord’s side.”² The years between the two revivals experienced a shift in popular theological understanding of human agency. Where the congregants in 1740s New England could only hope for God to spare them from their deserved punishment, those in 1830s New York were told that they could made a conscious choice to renounce their sin and accept the gift of salvation. An emphasis on religious conversion united the two eras, but the public ethos had changed. The old Calvinist model of human incapacity had been replaced by an increasingly democratic model of individual action. Concurrently, a new coercive politics of reform emerged.


to harness and direct these democratic, individualistic currents in a manner suitable for a republic of righteousness.

These theological changes had significant consequences for the antislavery movement, ultimately altering the tenor of both sides of the slavery debate. The theological shift away from Calvinism marks the first moment of antislavery slippage, effectively muting the coercive jeremiad-based conversionist antislavery of Samuel Hopkins. Conversionists suffered from their own success. Missionary efforts successfully brought the gospel to the frontier and the church cemented itself at the core of American life and identity. But as fears of an unchristian frontier subsided, concerns over the righteousness of the republic emerged to take their place. Former conversionists began to construct institutions capable of nurturing the Christian republic into righteous maturity, while new abolitionist voices demanded change. Conservative antislavery voices and proslavery apologists both marshaled the old conversionist consensus against the new abolitionists, but the center would no longer hold. Northerners developed new theologies to work around the emphasis on conversion, but ultimately the uncompromising insistence of radical abolitionists shattered the conversionist consensus, setting the stage for decades of tense sectionalist animosity.

**Theological Change and the Transformation of Antislavery**

The strongest and widest reaching non-Quaker antislavery appeal in late eighteenth century America came from Samuel Hopkins. According to Hopkins, the sin of slavery violated the covenant between God and the new nation. But Hopkins’s world was passing away. In the decades during and immediately after the Revolution, Congregationalists and Presbyterians united to meet the needs of western migration. Despite these efforts, newer evangelical
denominations dominated the religious landscape west of the Appalachian Mountains while simultaneously making incursions into old Calvinist strongholds. Even members of the standing order veered from Hopkins’s model of the scholar minister, instead adopting a confrontational commitment to social reform and activism.\(^3\) Hopkins’s model of activism as well as his rhetorical strategies for antislavery agitation proved terribly out of date by the early nineteenth century. Clerical sages would not direct the reform movements of the new republic, nor would the logic of Calvinism guide its ideologies.

While many abolitionist Christians continued to place tremendous emphasis on conversion, theological changes, particularly the increasing turn away from Calvinism, shifted the agency of salvation away from an inscrutable deity in favor of individual repentant sinners. These trends similarly enervated the millennial confidence in conversion as an antislavery strategy. One need look no further than the most successful revivalist of the 1820s and 1830s to see how the routinization of revivalism encouraged a new antislavery discourse. Charles Grandison Finney replaced the formerly mysterious saving act of God with a predictable, almost mechanical process infused with human agency. In his aptly titled “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” Finney presented a staunchly Arminian account of salvation.\(^4\) Just as sinners were bound to change their own hearts, so too ministers were bound to change their world through an efficient, rational course of action, certain to yield predictable results. Finney claimed that spiritually attuned ministers could create revivals “with the same expectation as the farmer has of a crop when he sows his grain.” Imagined as a sort of manual for those sowing the

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\(^3\) For a discussion of the changes in Presbyterian understandings of the ministry see James W. Fraser, “Abolitionism, Activism, and New Models for Ministry,” *American Presbyterians*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Summer 1988), 89-103.

gospel, Finney’s *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, first published in 1835, was intended as a guide for the harvest of souls.\(^5\) The volume was widely successful, selling over 12,000 copies in the first three months.\(^6\) The shift away from Calvinism had great consequence for Finney’s understanding of moral reform.

James Moorehead characterized Finney’s conversionist ambitions as entirely in line with his expectations for political reform, writing, “So deep was Finney’s commitment to the ideal of community based upon efficiency, function, and free choice that one might say without exaggeration that he refashioned the universe into a cosmic voluntary society.” It is no surprise that, in the words of Moorehead again, abolitionists, “many of whom were converted in Finney’s revivals… employed methods of mass persuasion patterned on those of the itinerant evangelist.”\(^7\) Finney held onto a millennial expectation, claiming that the millennium could be inaugurated in less than ten years, but his understanding of causation differed from earlier conversionist millennialism. His was an imminent millennium to be inaugurated by a new generation of Christians achieving “higher and higher attainments” in bringing the Kingdom of God into reality.\(^8\) Rather than expecting religious conversions to inevitably yield to the disappearance of sins like slavery, Finney encouraged his converts to work out their salvation in the great reform movements of the day.\(^9\)

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Finney’s ecumenism similarly fostered the kind of interdenominational cooperation necessary for the benevolent empire. Unlike the missions projects sponsored by denominational bodies, Finney cared little where the participants of his revivals went to church and even wrote that when settled pastors “begin to make efforts to get the converts to join their church, you see the last of the revival.”

Finney’s revivals often functioned more like interdenominational reform meetings than conventional denominational church services. In fact, Finney cared little for the concerns of church governance that occupied the minds of denominational leaders. In his *Systematic Theology*, Finney reflected heavily on theological questions of divine sovereignty, but he did not devote any energy to a critical reflection on ecclesiology. Finney understood the church as having the identical function of reform organizations, and in fact he claimed that the purpose of the church was “to reform individuals, communities, and government.” In his 23rd Letter on Revival, Finney wrote, “It is melancholy and amazing to see to what an extent the church treats the different branches of reform either with indifference, or with direct opposition.” He went on, lamenting, “There is not, I venture to say upon the whole earth an inconsistency more monstrous, more God-dishonoring, and I must say more manifestly insane than the attitude which many of the churches take in respect to nearly every branch of reform which is needed among mankind.”

Individual American churches could not rest complacently in attempts to generate converts. True Christians must actively seek both conversion and active political reform.

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Finney stood at a radical end of a continuum of Congregationalist and Presbyterian revivalists both for this Arminian theology and for his commitment to social reform. Finney frequently clashed with Lyman Beecher, a far more moderate revivalist and reformer. Beecher even threatened Finney when the wildly successful revivalist planned to bring his new methods to Connecticut. Beecher wrote to Finney and warned him, “you mean to come into Connecticut and carry a streak of fire to Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I’ll meet you at the State line, and call out all the artillerymen and fight every inch of the way to Boston and then I’ll fight you there.”¹³ The seriousness with which Beecher treated the threat of Finney—a no-holds-barred attack on the standing clergy only serves to illustrate the power of the controversial revivalist. Finney’s Arminian theology and anticlerical irreverence threatened nearly everything that Beecher stood for, and the two would battle one another for decades.

Finney irritated many members of the more established Presbyterian order. He often went so far as to mock the more studious members of the clergy, writing in his memoirs that when senior ministers pressured Finney to attend Princeton for seminary he “plainly told them that I would not put myself under such an influence as they had been under; that I was confident they had been wrongly educated, and they were not ministers that met my ideal of what a minister of Christ should be.”¹⁴ A few pages later, he repeated his disappointment with the clergy, “I am persuaded that, with all their training, and discipline, and education, there is a lack in practical views of the best way of presenting the Gospel to men, and in adapting means to secure the end; and especially in their want of the power of the Holy Ghost.” This populist strain of


anticlericalism harmonized with other evangelicals and further isolated him from the abolitionist tradition of theologian-ministers like Samuel Hopkins.

The new evangelical churches initially placed less emphasis on learned theologies, opting instead for an aggressive and pragmatic crusade to generate conversions. The Baptist John Leland had earlier expressed his distaste about the finer points of theology by writing, “When I hear metaphysical reasoning on abstruse questions, I feel more like calling for my night-cap than anything else.” While eighteenth-century clergymen battled incessantly over the precise degree of divine sovereignty, Leland expressed uncertainty and ambivalence “as to [w]hether all events are predetermined, or a part or all of them are contingent.” Throughout Leland’s life, he looked to providence for guidance and believed that God did “bring light out of darkness, good out of evil, order out of confusion.” At the same time, he never once indicated that misfortune was a divine punishment for sin. Francis Asbury and an overwhelming majority of American Methodists similarly turned away from the logic of the jeremiad. Asbury wrote, “The Lord will certainly hear the cries of the oppressed, naked, starving creatures. O, my God, think on this land. Let not disaster come upon America.” Asbury shared Hopkins’s hatred for slavery, but they differed in their understanding of divine causation. Hopkins expected God to issue a grave national punishment in retribution for the national sins of the slave trade. If Asbury had believed as Hopkins did, that God would punish the social sins of the republic, then his request that God would “think on this land” would only invite wrath. Instead, Asbury believed that God actively

16 Leland, “Extract from Address at Bennington, August 16, 1839,” in Writings, 697.
17 Leland, “The Virginia Chronicle,” in Writings, 98.
intervened in human affairs, but divine actions did not follow the contractual logic of the Puritan jeremiad.

The democratic impulses ignited during the Revolution accelerated through the ensuing years before reaching their antebellum apex during the age of Jackson. American religion changed accordingly, and the arguments advanced by Samuel Hopkins were dependent upon assumptions that the new nation had left behind. Antislavery would need a new discourse if it were to harness evangelical energies in the war against human bondage, a language that appealed less to national unity and more to sectionalist strife. As the explosive growth of cotton cultivation captured the economies and ideologies of the South, northern antislavery advocates turned away from conversionist antislavery and instead labored to purify their churches and their nation from slavery’s stain.

The Triumph and Disappointment of Conversionism

The eighteenth century ended with an outpouring of millennial hope in the conversion of the nation. Missionary societies sprouted wildly and hundreds of churches formed throughout the nation as missionaries and itinerants scrambled across the mountains pursuing the ever-westward press of settlers. But by 1820 missionaries had largely caught up with the patterns of migration. The fear of an unchurched nation abated, but a new nightmare arose to take its place: the fear of spreading sin. Ministers had met the challenge of evangelization, but had they failed to inculcate righteousness? We can see the shift in priorities through the ministry of John Brodhead Romeyn, an influential Presbyterian and leading member of the American Bible Society. Romeyn delivered two relatively similar sermons to two similar audiences in 1808 and 1819, but the intervening decades changed the tone considerably. In 1808, before the committee of missions
for the Presbyterian General Assembly, Romeyn opened with an uplifting discussion of Isaiah’s vision of “apostles, evangelists, prophets and teachers, going forth in the strength of the Lord to proclaim the glad tidings of great joy.” He continued with a retelling of falling idols and “nations subdued to the faith, and the banner of the cross waving throughout the world.” Several times during the sermon’s opening, he invoked a “wilderness blossomed as the rose” or “the wilderness an Eden.”

Eleven years later, in a sermon benefitting the New York Marine Missionary Society, Romeyn rebuked his audience, lamenting that “in the bosom of the visible Church so large a proportion should be found forgetting their obligations to God.”

Conversionism had taken root, but the faithful had forgotten their obligations to God, and the seeds of righteousness failed to sprout.

The Baptist General Convention similarly shifted track after decades of organized evangelism. In 1820 the domestic missions board redirected its most successful evangelist in the West, moving John Mason Peck from the settlement in St. Louis to a mission among Native Americans. The wider body agreed with the missions board, resolving that “from the numerous emigrations of ministers to our western settlements, the period has arrived when it is no longer necessary to support our brethren as missionaries of these places.”

As a result, the missions board shifted its energies overseas and to Native Americans, but the denomination also increased efforts to purify the Christian republic they had helped build. The success of conversionist institution-building had laid the groundwork for a Christian republic, but the question then


20 John Brodhead Romeyn, A Sermon delivered in the Middle Dutch Church, on the evening of the Lord’s Day, Mach 21, 1819, for the benefit of the New York Marine Missionary Society (New York: J. Seymour, 1819) 4-5.

became what would the republic look like. Baptist fears of an unchurched nation receded, but the threat of liberal Christianity grew, and Baptists turned their attention back East to vanquish infidelity at home. Their weapon would be education and a new generation of seminary-schooled theologian ministers enlisted as soldiers. “The battlements of Zion are assailed,” Robert Baylor Semple proclaimed in 1820. “[W]ar is come to our gates; and some of the mighty are fallen.” The Baptists responded with the creation of Columbian College in D.C., and from the nation’s capital ministers spread throughout the nation to purge the United States of her sins.

Even in the millennial dream of colonization, the shift to education enervated conversionism. In 1828 J. M. Wainwright, rector at Grace Church of New York City, pointed to “three agents which will soon be entwined with issues of all human affairs, and are the very hinges upon which the moral world will speedily turn.” The transformation of the world no longer resulted simply from an expansion of religious conversion but rather from the development of “Inductive Philosophy, Printing and Universal Education.” Colonizationists still expected American efforts in Africa to redeem the sins of the slave trade, but rhetoric surrounding education began to eclipse the earlier focus on religious conversion.

The turn to abolitionism began with rewriting the past. Joanne Pope Melish has impressively shown how New Englanders rewrote their own history, absolving their ancestors of the sin of slavery. Perhaps nothing presents as compelling an illustration of this process than Giles Kellogg’s 1829 antislavery address at Williams College. Kellogg argued that slavery was foisted on an unwilling populace. “Poplar opinion, so far as it could be expressed, was decidedly against it. The colonists regarded it unjust… Consequently it never existed in this part of the

22 Ibid., p. 107.

country a great extent.” Not only did slavery barely exist in Massachusetts, but the colonists “frequently passed resolutions against it.” Unfortunately tyrannical British rule nullified these attempts at abolition. Despite British opposition, “the efforts of the friends of abolition were ceaseless.” Kellogg extends this imaginary abolitionism even to Virginia, claiming that “no less than twenty-three attempts are recorded in the legislative proceedings of Virginia, to effect abolition during her colonial vassalage, despite numerous petitions to parliament and the king.” But the unfeeling king and the ruthless British would not relent, continuing to burden North America with the weight of slavery.\textsuperscript{24} This forgetting was useful, however, in advancing abolitionism. Rather than reckoning with their own slaveholding past, historical amnesia in the North emboldened men and women to adopt increasingly uncompromising positions against slavery. Sectionalist tension over slavery replaced the national conversionist consensus and a new abolitionism began to take root.

\textbf{The New Abolitionism}

Thundering voices unsettled the conversionist malaise with an abrasive call to end slavery. William Lloyd Garrison burst onto the antislavery scene with a new message and changed mood from that of his conversionist predecessors. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the impact of William Lloyd Garrison’s rhetoric. The very first issue of \textit{The Liberator} set a clear tone attacking the heart of conversionist moderation. Rather than appealing to national religious commitments, Garrison offered outright threats, writing, “Let southern oppressors tremble—let their secret abettors tremble—let their northern apologists tremble—let all the enemies of the

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{24} Giles B. Kellogg, \textit{An Oration delivered July 4, 1829, before the Antislavery Society of Williams College} (Williamstown: Ridley Bannister, 1829), 6-7.
persecuted blacks tremble.”\textsuperscript{25} Garrison knew exactly what he was doing. While admitting “that many object to the severity of my language,” Garrison asked “is there not cause for severity?”

For those like Garrison who did not ascribe to conversionist causation, the truth became clear—change would require confrontation, and moderation would no longer be acceptable. Garrison clearly explained, “On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hand of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; —but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.” Garrison’s millennialism was one of wrath and judgment. In the only invocation of Christ’s return, Garrison credits, “The apathy of the people” as “enough to… hasten the resurrection of the dead.” The end of days may be approaching, but it comes with fire and punishment as a result of the enduring sin of slavery. Garrison’s threats were understood as a call to war, and his attempt to polarize his audience had its intended effect. The language of pamphleteers like Garrison and David Walker triggered the deepest anxieties of the slaveholding south. The work of another abolitionist during the same year that Garrison first published \textit{The Liberator} further heightened these anxieties. Southerners combined the words of Garrison with the news of the day and recoiled at the realization that war had come to southern Virginia.

In earliest hours of August 22, 1831, seven men sat around a small fire in the woods of Southampton County, Virginia. After six months of planning, Nat Turner and his six compatriots reviewed their plans. Turner’s steely gaze met nervous glances squarely, and the band drew on their leader’s seemingly supernatural resolve. At two in the morning, the seven men left the

woods with their knives, hatchets, axes, and clubs. Creeping into the home of Turner’s owner, Joshua Travis, the group of slaves murdered the white man and his family. Traveling house to house, the band of seven grew to more than forty, most on horseback. They eventually killed over fifty white men, women, and children. Within forty-eight hours the local militia, three artillery companies, and supporting sailors from the USS Natchez and USS Warren quelled the rebellion by killing over one hundred black Americans, many more than were involved. Turner eluded capture for several weeks but was eventually found, tried, and hanged.

Scholars have commented extensively how Nat Turner’s rebellion spread panic throughout the South. Yet even in Boston, the horror and terror of the rebellion inspired a backlash against the rising confrontational abolitionists. The most respected clergyman in Boston, William Ellery Channing, wrote, “Massacre has resounded through the land.”

Although Channing had long felt that “there is no subject, now agitated by the community, which can compare in philosophical dignity with slavery,” the aftermath of Turner’s rebellion moved him to write that “[t]here was never such an obligation to discuss slavery as at this moment, when recent events have done much to unsettle and obscure men’s minds in regard to it.”

What followed was surprisingly not an explanation of how the evils of slavery inevitably yield such events but rather a pointed rebuke of the activities of abolitionists.

Channing was concerned that abolitionist rhetoric could be used “to instigate the slave to insurrection,” which he described as “a crime for which no rebuke and no punishment can be too severe.” Channing went further in claiming that it would be “[b]etter were it for us to bare our

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27 *Ibid.*, 8, 4
own breast to the knife of the slave, than to arm him with it against his master.”\textsuperscript{28} Always careful and quick to hedge his arguments, Channing asserted that the “charge of corrupt design, so vehemently brought against the Abolitionists, is groundless.” Channing was not absolving the abolitionists completely, however, as he affirmed that “charge of fanaticism I have no desire to repel.” Abolitionists were not intentional instigators of rebellion, but they were dangerous fanatics whose irresponsible writings contributed to the catastrophe in Southampton County, Virginia.\textsuperscript{29}

Channing regarded certain abolitionist tactics as especially offensive, particularly “send[ing] forth their orators, some of them transported with fiery zeal, to sound the alarm against slavery through the land, to gather young and old, pupils from schools, females hardly arrived at years of discretion, the ignorant, the excitable, the impetuous, and to organize these into associations for the battle against oppression.” Even worse, these apostles of disruption “preached their doctrine to the colored people, and collected these into their societies. To this mixed and excitable multitude, appeals were made in the piercing tones of passion; and slave-holders were held up as monsters of cruelty and crime.” In these activities, Channing charged abolitionists with “increasing, in a degree, the perils of the Slave-holding States.”\textsuperscript{30}

Channing accompanied this explicit condemnation of abolitionists’ attempts to incite slave revolt or violence with a heightened, yet restricted call for action. An issue of this great importance and emotional intensity could not be left to the mob but must be addressed exclusively in polite and educated circles. For Channing, the imperative for action on the part of

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 5-6

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 152

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 155-56
northerners increased “because we have bound ourselves to resist his own efforts for his emancipation.” However, it was not by “direct action on the mind of the slave that we can do him good.” Channing restricted the activities of antislavery to whites, condemning the action of slave rebels.\(^{31}\) In fact, northerners should be out in front in the effort “to discountenance a system of agitation on the subject of slavery, to frown on passionate appeals to the ignorant, and on indiscriminate and inflammatory vituperation of the slave-holder.”\(^{32}\) Antislavery action must be kept off the streets and confined to sanctuaries and parlors.

Other conversionists similarly attacked the new militant tone of Garrisonians and other abolitionists, including John Leland, the influential Baptist leader. Although he began and ended his life in Massachusetts, John Leland’s most consequential work occurred in Virginia, where he itinerated from 1776 to 1791. No other southern state during this era evinced a greater desire to escape the trappings of slavery.\(^{33}\) John Leland offers a prescient window into the evangelical mind as he took an active role in the Revolutionary era opposition to slavery in Virginia—penning the 1789 Baptist resolution condemning the practice—before returning to Massachusetts in time for the rise of militant abolitionism. As Massachusetts abolitionism intensified, Leland’s opposition to slavery continued to soften. Little of his Revolutionary optimism or antislavery zeal remained at his death in 1841.

The juxtaposition of Revolutionary Virginia and antebellum Massachusetts demonstrates the decline of national conversionism. Leland, a decided conversionist, used his experience in Virginia to bolster his authority, challenging abolitionists “to serve an apprenticeship of seven

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 6

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 170

years in a slave holding state to qualify their minds to view the question in all its bearings.”

Richmond minister George A. Baxter echoed the claim that abolitionists knew nothing of life in the South, claiming that slavery “is a subject which people at a distance cannot understand, and with which they cannot interfere without injury to society, and to the slaves themselves.” As northern abolitionists stepped up their uncompromising rhetoric, Leland and other northern members of the conversionist antislavery consensus increasingly removed themselves from the antislavery debate.

While Leland could simply remove himself from the conversation, southern conversionists could not escape the challenge of abolitionist discourse. Abolitionists made it increasingly difficult for southerners to maintain a moderate antislavery stance. Abolitionists within the Presbyterian Church increasingly threatened the ministry of conversionist southerners like John Holt Rice in Richmond. Writing to his close friend Archibald Alexander, the head of Princeton Theological Seminary who shared his conservative views on slavery, Rice shared his apprehension that the Ohio Synod of the Presbyterian Church was leading Presbyterianism down an abolitionist road he dared not follow. His alarm was compounded by the election of John Quincy Adams, causing him to predict “a violent collision between the north and the south; that the subject of slavery would be brought into party politics and religion; and that Presbyterians were to be greatly embarrassed by it.” Rice felt that if the Presbyterian Church followed the abolitionist leanings of the Ohio Synod, “they may just as well bid us abandon the Southern country.” Ignoring the spiritual needs of half of the country was absolutely out of the question.

34 Leland, Writings, 698

35 George A. Baxter, An Essay on the Abolition of Slavery (Richmond, 1836), 5.

for southern conversionists. Rice’s framed his staunch opposition to the abolitionist faction within American Presbyterianism by highlighting his commitment to conversion. Rice remained committed to saving souls both white and black, and he feared that the exhortations of Presbyterian abolitionists would lead slaveholders to shun the Presbyterian Church. By stymying the expansion of conversions with inflammatory rhetoric, Rice feared that abolitionists were not only endangering souls but also hindering the expansion of holiness that he believed would eventually prove the most powerful weapon in the antislavery agenda.

Of course, it was one thing to preach to local black Americans or even work independently on their behalf; it was quite another to agitate collectively for abolition. The distinction between individual and communal action proved consequential for many conversionists. Early America was at once distrustful and yet enthralled by voluntary organizations. Fraternal organizations leapfrogged across the new nation, gaining members almost as fast as suspicion. Early Americans possessed strong loyalties to their immediate community but an aversion to wider social commitments. John Holt Rice doubted the efficacy of voluntary organizations in ending slavery, writing “it is my full belief that the deliverance is not to be accomplished by the combination of benevolent societies.”

Eight years later William Ellery Channing echoed Rice’s suspicion of voluntary societies. Channing praised individual action but looked down upon those who searched beyond their own conscience for answers: “The enthusiasm of the Individual in a good cause is a mighty power. The forced, artificially excited enthusiasm of a multitude, kept together by an organization which makes them the instruments of a few leading minds, works superficially, and often injuriously.”

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38 Channing, Slavery, 159.
Channing viewed benevolent societies as a collection of intellectual dependents, Rice saw them as simply ineffective.

Rice’s antipathy to voluntary organizations was both ideological and practical. He criticized the members as “too little accustomed to calculate consequences. They go directly at their measure, and have no means of accomplishing it but the producing, by means of speeches and addresses, a strong excitement.” Despite this, he was at least intrigued by the work of the American Colonization Society, claiming that “the existence of a prosperous colony on the western coast, will of itself do more for the cause of emancipation, that all that any, or all of us, now can effect by speaking of these things.” Colonization, for all of its faults, represented for Rice the surest hope for the elimination of slavery as it promised to remove the haunting specters of miscegenation and racial violence, but it was the conversionist mission of the colonizationist enterprise that distinguished the ACS from the other reform organizations of the era.

John Holt Rice was less interested in the scriptural debates over slavery than many of his peers were, but the Virginia Presbyterian did use the Bible to explain why he remained on the sidelines in the political battles. In an 1827 letter to his friend and fellow minister William Maxwell, Rice affirmed slavery’s immorality before launching into a critique of the societies that organized to do something about it. Rice viewed these efforts as ineffectual and, even worse, dangerous to religion. When reading scripture, he found “nothing in the New Testament which obliges [ministers] to take hold of this subject directly.” Moreover, he articulated the position of most southern evangelicals by writing that “it never has fared well with either church or state, when the church meddled with temporal affairs.” Rice held this belief not only because he feared what political action would do to the church, but also because he feared what the church would

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do to “temporal affairs.” He wrote that religious feeling was “unmanageable,” and if it was activated in opposition to slavery, a Pandora’s Box would open and transform political affairs in a manner so radical that he “could not pretend to conjecture.” Rice was hopeful to see moral improvement in society but felt that this was best accomplished when the church confined itself to the narrow mission of “endeavoring to make as many good christians as possible” and “minding our own business” in all other matters. Rice presaged the “spirituality of the church” doctrine that was later enhanced by southern Presbyterians following the 1837 schism. In addition to the scriptural injunction that Rice felt to abstain from secular affairs, he added a practical belief in the inefficacy of church activism. Examining the Presbyterian churches in Virginia, Rice estimated that three-fourths of the congregations were made up of women and minors and the remaining fourth were individuals without money or influence. Rice concluded that if the church would just get out of the way and let the spirit of Christianity continue to work its way through the people of Virginia, slavery would accordingly decline. Rice represented a dying ideology and a clear bridge between the world of the southern antislavery conversionist and the core component of the proslavery Christianity that would come to dominate southern evangelicalism.

**Proslavery and the Conversionist Trap**

During the 1830s American abolitionism transformed and the conversionist consensus would no longer hold. As more antislavery activists turned against the once pervasive idea of conversion’s millennial consequences, conversionism became the refuge of proslavery

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apologists. The politicization of the slavery debate had important consequences for southern religion. Where in earlier decades, conversion promised to solve the problem of slavery, now southerners found themselves on the defensive against the new language of abolitionism. The emphasis on conversion enabled southerners to argue for the non-political spirituality of the church while also serving as a bulwark for the preservation of spirituality. Conversionism became the core of the proslavery defense.

The Presbytery of Lexington called George A. Baxter to deliver the installation sermon honoring the appointment of Thomas Caldwell as minister over the churches of Lebanon and Windy Cove, Virginia. Baxter took the opportunity to consider the question of slavery and relied on the logic of conversionism, telling his audience of Virginia Presbyterians, “The achievements of heroes or politicians; the liberty or slavery; the rise or the fall of empires, are little matters compared with the conversion of sinners, or the evangelizing of the heathen.”

Baxter revisited the same topic eleven years later in *An Essay on the Abolition of Slavery*, seeking to build a wide base of support for his anti-abolitionism by appealing to both northern and southern conversionists. Baxter presciently described the national reaction to abolitionists highlighting both northern and southern opposition to these new antislavery voices. While “northern people opposed the abolition doctrines as unreasonable in themselves, and as calculated to sever the union,” southerners felt the threat more immediately and “considered them as a weapon aimed at the very vitals of society, as a spark thrown into a magazine whose explosion would bring instantaneous destruction on everything around it.”

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abolitionists remained an isolated, widely detested minority throughout the antebellum era. Abolitionists found that they could achieve their greatest successes not through creating a majority movement but rather by tirelessly challenging the status quo. Comfortable consensus is always the greatest enemy of change, and post-1830 abolitionists succeeded in mounting a consistently unavoidable challenge to the problem of slavery.

Abolitionism became unavoidable largely as a result of the fear of slave insurrection. Indeed Baxter placed considerable emphasis on the fear “that the evil should break forth at midnight, with an indiscriminate slaughter of all the whites of every description.” This fear owed to two sources. One is the consistent agitation of abolitionists, but the other comes from the very real history of slave resistance in the Americas. The specter of Haiti haunted the South for decades, and the far more recent horror of Nat Turner’s rebellion kept southerners on edge. Baxter manipulated this context into an attack on abolitionists, claiming, “As the white people have generally the advantage in numbers and incomparably the advantage in arms and military skill… there is reason to apprehend that an exasperated multitude would commence a promiscuous slaughter of the slaves.” Abolitionists’ supposed concern for the slave were, for Baxter, belied by the reality that their agitation led only to rebellion and slaughter. Baxter then contrasted the destructive behavior of abolitionists with the paternalist care of slaveowners and the compassionate ministry of the southern clergy, both of whom sought only peace and salvation for white and black alike.

Baxter drew upon the history of late-eighteenth-century manumissions while gesturing towards abstract arguments about the development of civilization to prove that slaves are unprepared for freedom. Only Christianity, Baxter claimed, can prepare these people for true

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44 Ibid., 3.
freedom. In his words, “When society is brought to a high state of civilization, such as has been attained by only a few of the European nations, slavery disappears of course, and for this reason, free labor is better than slave labor.” Baxter strongly preferred free labor to slavery and dreamed of the day when the United States was ready to abandon slavery. But, according to Baxter, the slaveholding American republic could only be transformed through the advancement of Christianity, not through the political troublemaking of abolitionists. The “high state of civilization,” Baxter maintained, “is never attained without the aid of Christianity.” Baxter sought to encourage the philanthropic spirit behind abolitionism, while redirecting its radicalism towards the effective means of social transformation; in other words, towards Christian conversions. Baxter clarified that his protestations were against radical abolitionism not against the anti-slavery movement as a whole, assuring readers that “These observations are not intended to check the benevolence which would relieve the miseries of the slave, but to turn it into the proper channel.” According to Baxter, “the sufferings of mankind proceed from one uniform source; and that is, the depravity or moral corruption of our nature.” The solution to this depravity was not emancipation or coercion of the law as abolitionists sought. The law might serve to obscure corruption, but why cover up a problem when you can solve it? The great sins of the day, Baxter proclaimed, “can be removed by the influence of revealed religion.”

This would all sound familiar to anyone engaged in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century antislavery. Up to this moment in his Essay on the Abolition of Slavery, Baxter relied on the rhetoric of traditional, consensus, conversionist antislavery. But this was 1836, and the older consensus no longer held. Conversionists, reacting to the radicalism of northern abolitionists, receded further into the arms of pro-slavery apologists. The remainder of Baxter’s essay departed

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from the traditional conversionist narrative, reframing slavery from a temporary illustration of human sin to a benevolent institution of Christian love. Baxter, representing many southern conversionists, went so far as to claim that, “Slave and civil government, taken in the abstract, must go together.” After enumerating the many scripture passages that authorize slavery, Baxter made clear his belief that slavery will eventually vanish from the United States only through the “the benign principles of Christianity, brought fully to bear in a scriptural manner on both master and servant, [that] will effect the object.” Baxter even pointed to the British West Indies as an example of how the expansion of Christianity made it clear that the gospel “will banish slavery from the face of the whole earth.” Abolitionism was not the answer, however. “This glorious effect will, I believe, be produced by the gospel in its own way; not by moving the question of abolition, and filling our domestic relations with strife.”46 Once again, the logic of conversionism allowed moderates and proslavery apologists to paint abolitionism as not only a dangerous distraction but also as an inhibitor to God’s plan for liberation.

Baxter went even further, subverting the antislavery hermeneutics of the great abolitionist theologian Francis Wayland. Wayland’s antislavery argument elevated the principles of the gospel above the precise language of scripture and crafted a historical argument for what he understood to be the cautious antislavery of the gospel writers, claiming that “if [the gospel] had proclaimed the unlawfulness of slavery, and taught slaves to resist the oppression of their masters, it would instantly have arrayed the two parties in deadly hostility… and the very nature of Christian religion would have been forgotten amidst the agitations of universal bloodshed.”47 Baxter joyously seized this argument as a weapon against abolition, promising that Christianity

46 Ibid, 10, 17.

would eventually provide freedom for slaves whereas abolitionist agitation would only lead to bloodshed and upheaval. Baxter asked his readers, “why do not the abolitionists follow what one of their ablest writers supposes to have been the plan of inspired teachers… lest they should array masters and servants in deadly hostility and prevent all the good effects of the gospel?” Baxter declared to “all religious teachers in a slaveholding country” that they “must avoid proclaiming ‘the unlawfulness of slavery’ or they will defeat all the benefits of religious instruction.” The great danger of abolitionism, then, was not only the danger of violence but also the subversion of the gospel’s emancipatory power.

On a more practical level, conversionist pro-slavery advocates argued, abolitionists created fears among slaveholders that ultimately led to decreased opportunities for slaves’ salvation. When abolitionists used Christianity as a weapon against slavery, slaveholders may decide that religion was too dangerous and accordingly prevent slaves from receiving religious instruction. “It is on this account,” Baxter lamented, “that I deplore the circulation of abolition doctrines more than any other; they present the strongest barrier against the diffusion of that Christian influence, which is the only remedy for the evils of a slave-holding country.” The ideology of conversionism led even a man who recognized the evils of slavery to attack abolitionists as opponents of human freedom. Because of this fear, Baxter hurriedly offered assurances to slaveholders that gospel religion is of no immediate threat to their control and in fact sanctions their authority as masters.

Baxter’s defense of slavery served also as a call to action. “I earnestly wish the southern churches to awake to their duty,” Baxter pleaded, “and especially to the duty of giving religious

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instruction to the colored people. We know not what revolutions may be at the door, but there is one anchor of hope.” The rise in sectionalist conflict had sounded an alarm throughout the South. Baxter and other conversionists sought to manipulate southerners’ fear into a call to evangelize. Baxter warned “if the southern churches should neglect the important duty of Christianizing the slave population, it is easy to see how that despised people may be made the instruments of our chastisement.” Conversely, Baxter also warned abolitionists that if “the process [of slave conversion] be retarded by abolition sentiments, the authors of those sentiments will participate largely in the guilt.”

This rhetoric shifted the fate of the slaves’ souls from slaveholders to abolitionists. Any misguided attempts at philanthropy would only produce ruin for the union, damnation for the slave, and hindrance of the national providential destiny that promised to bring the United States to new heights of glory.

Baxter and others illustrate how conversionism had become the discourse for slavery moderates and proslavery apologists. But as proslavery thought developed, conversionism increasingly became more than a defensive justification for slavery; it also became a weapon to preemptively attack the alleged idolatry of abolitionism. We see this most clearly in the Methodist mission to the slaves. The earliest Methodist missionaries in North America had targeted slaves for conversion, but the nineteenth century brought a more deliberate organization to the effort. But despite the efforts of Francis Asbury, and other leaders, Methodist missionary outreach to black southerners remained a spotty affair, particularly in the Deep South. As abolitionist attacks on slavery accelerated, both southern churchmen and elite planters recognized the power of conversion as a potential proslavery weapon.

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50 Ibid., 23.
Historian Donald Mathews illustrates how Methodist ministers adapted their ministry to meet the needs of slaveholders, presenting slave conversion as a means of maintaining plantation discipline. And indeed, in South Carolina, the non-Methodist slaveholding elite prompted the renewed commitment to evangelizing slaves. It was the South Carolina slaveocracy, rather than the clergy, that led this most consequential antebellum conversionist effort. More than a few evangelical slaveowners worried over the souls of their slaves. Paternalist fantasies pressed others to ensure that their slaves heard a version of the gospel particularly suited to their station. If abolitionists would distort the message of Christianity into antislavery propaganda, then slaveholders would take the initiative to combat these lies by ensuring that their slaves had a strong foundation in the true gospel.

Toward that end, the wealthy and politically well connected Charles Cotesworth Pinckney traveled to the home of William Capers in 1829. Capers was among the most respected southern Methodists, a leader in the denomination, editor of the *Weslayan Journal*, and delegate to the international gathering of Methodist ministers in England. When Capers returned to South Carolina after this international meeting, Pinckney paid him a visit to ask Capers to serve as a missionary on his expansive plantation. Pinckney believed that Christianity served as an essential tool in managing slaves, proclaiming to the Agricultural Society of South Carolina that same year, “Nothing is better calculated to render man satisfied with his destiny in this world than a conviction that its hardships and trials are as transitory as its honors and enjoyments.” But Pinckney also drew on the rhetoric of conversion to offer the strongest defense against “Abolitionists and others, who are striving, against experience, to keep up that farce of Philanthropy.” Pinckney deployed conversionism against the “lubrations of these visionaries,”

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telling his fellow Charleston planters that converting slaves “would give us the advantage in argument over our Northern Brethren.”

Several other slaveholders followed Pinckney, and an Episcopalian congregation even offered to finance the work of a missionary from the South Carolina Methodist missionary conference. Capers declined to accept the role himself but having long worked to convert enslaved South Carolinians, he delighted in the opportunity presented by these requests. Capers arranged to have other missionaries sent. From these humble origins came the largest organized attempt to Christianize slaves in American history. Over three hundred missionaries would labor until the Civil War, growing the body of southern black Methodists from 65,000 in 1835 to 217,000 in 1860.

The missions to the slaves bent the conversionist discourse directly toward the proslavery agenda. In recounting the exchange between Capers and Pinckney, Bishop William May Wightman, the biographer of the former, wrote, “Much has been said or shrieked by traders in philanthropy concerning the ‘chattel’ into which the negro has been transformed by Southern legislation.” Wightman and others were well aware of abolitionist attacks but sought to use the missions to slaves as tool to deflect these charges. “[P]ublic opinion,” Wightman continued, “freely concedes that moral capabilities and an immortal destiny righteously demand moral cultivation, religious opportunities—in a word, the gospel, which is the chartered right of the poor, and the precious boon of the ‘bond’ as well as the free.”


Slavery, then, provided the surest means of enhancing the expansion of the gospel, whereas strident abolitionists cared nothing for the salvation of the enslaved. Much of this rhetoric came from Capers himself. As editor of the Southern Christian Advocate, Capers engaged in a long-distance dispute with abolitionist Methodists publishing in the North. Zion’s Herald, published in Boston, was one such interlocutor. The editors of Zion’s Herald frequently mentioned Capers and published much of his correspondence concerning the coordination of missionary affairs. One notable mention concerned Dr. Capers’s defense against attempts to ban black Methodists from sitting on the first floor of churches. While systems of racial segregation had been in existence for decades, exceptions had been made for the “accommodation of the old and infirm black members.” A group of white churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina found the status quo unacceptable and decreed that they “could not consent that their wives and daughters should sit on the same floor as colored people!” When Dr. Capers battled back, assuring the white churchgoers these black Methodists were “respectable men and though they were of another color, they were their brethren.” The conflict eventually led to a schism, with the aggrieved white parishioners forming their own church that upheld uncompromising segregation. The antislavery readers of Zion’s Herald no doubt rejoiced at this instance of biracial Christianity standing fast in the face of the slaveocracy.

But the contributors and editor of Zion’s Herald were growing restless of simply reprinting missionary reports, even those that highlighted the racial inclusiveness of southern

54 William May Wightman, Life of William Capers: One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church South (Nashville, Tenn.: J.B. McFerrin, 1858), 293-294.

55 See the 1837 and 1838 editions of Zion’s Herald.

56 “From our Southern Correspondent,” Zion’s Herald, Vol. 6 No. 10 (Mar 11, 1835), 38.
evangelicalism—after all, it was a rare abolitionist that dreamed of a biracial America.\textsuperscript{57} These Boston-based Methodists wrote less about the coordination of missionary activity and instead increasingly turned to discussions of slavery, temperance, and other social reform issues. In 1837 Capers’s relationship to Zion’s Herald faltered when he founded the Southern Christian Advocate. This Charleston-based periodical would serve as a sort of rival to Zion’s Herald, and little time elapsed before the two publications grew antagonistic toward one another, presaging the 1844 division of the national Methodist Church.

Debates over slavery motivated the creation of the new southern publication. In a July 1837 notice by Zion’s Herald, Capers justified the new paper by referencing “the peculiar political aspect of the times” owing to “the feeling, which is known to pervade all classes of men on the subject of our domestic institutions.”\textsuperscript{58} Just three months later, the abolitionist convictions of Zion’s Herald proved inescapable. The September 20, 1837, edition included an abolitionist poem by Thomas Campbell. The Scotsman’s poem mocked the United States, “where boasted freedom waves her Fustian flag in mockery over slaves!”\textsuperscript{59} A few pages after reports of conversions at camp meetings in northern states, as well as the prospects of conversion in Chile and France, the same issue called for immediate emancipation. Mocking southern claims that “they must be prepared for freedom,” Zion’s Herald asserted that “the surest way to prepare a man for slavery is to make him a slave, so the surest and best way to prepare a man for freedom is to make him free.” The most important and substantial part of the article, however, attacks the logic of conversionist antislavery, claiming that converting slaves increases the power of masters

\textsuperscript{57} For accounts of those rare Americans, see John Stauffer, Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

\textsuperscript{58} William Capers, “Southern Christian Advocate,” Zion’s Herald, Vol. 8 No. 28 (Jul 12, 1837), 110.

\textsuperscript{59} Thomas Campbell, “Slavery,” Zion’s Herald, Vol. 8 No. 38 (Sept 20, 1837), 1.
by “mak[ing] them more obedient and content to be slaves.” No longer was conversion understood as a tool for liberation. According to these Massachusetts Methodists, conversion, while of course necessary, was a woefully insufficient response to the problem of slavery. The tone grew stronger throughout the volume as an anonymous article titled “Methodist Abolitionism” attacked southerners as deserving of “censure and reproach,” asserting that “I never did believe, and never shall, that the love of God can be in the heart of that man who claims, holds, and treats his fellow-men as property; nor would I give to that man any mark or token of Christian fellowship whatever.”

Many Methodist leaders worked to restrain these heated pronouncements. Bishop Elijah Heddings issued a pronouncement in 1837 responding to increased abolitionist appeals from Methodists. Heddings echoed an antislavery position but provided room for proslavery apologists. A committee working with Heddings at the Genesee Conference on Slavery, held in Upstate New York, resolved that the issue of slavery was “subordinate and not paramount, to the high and awful ends of that ministry to which we are voluntarily and solemnly devoted.” The imperatives of conversion, even for those who opposed slavery, were now a weapon used to oppose the expansion of abolitionism.

Despite the efforts of some church administrators to quell these hostilities, the end of 1837 left northern and southern Methodist periodicals at war with one another. In the November 1 issue, the Zion’s Herald reprinted an attack from the Southern Christian Advocate that accused the northern periodical of hypocrisy for simultaneously attacking the southern church and

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60 “They Must Be Prepared for Freedom,” Zion’s Herald, Vol. 8 No. 38 (Sept 20, 1837), 150.

61 “Methodist Abolitionism,” Zion’s Herald, Vol. 8 No. 38 (Sept 20, 1837), 152.

rejoicing in the region’s revivals. For William Capers, the South’s ability to generate conversions both protected her from abolitionists’ attacks and proved the righteousness of her institutions, including slavery. The trump card in the debate proved to be the high ground of millennial conversionism. As Capers wrote to the editors of *Zion’s Herald*, “We adopt the language of the Herald, and say, (or rather he adopts our sentiments and puts them into words when he says,) ‘O for the coming days when the salvation of the soul, and the advancement of the glory of God shall be the absorbing topic of thought, conversation and action among men!’” For Capers, the abolitionist meddling of the northern Methodist organ was nothing but a distraction from the church’s true mission. For their part, the northern editors included personal attacks on their former partner, questioning their former belief “that Dr. Capers was not only a Christian but a gentleman—a man no less distinguished for his urbanity than for his piety.” In February of the next year, another abolitionist writer attacked Capers and all southerners, claiming that “the complicated sin of slavery fixes their character beyond dispute.”

But the conversion of slaves took on an even greater importance in the sectional conflict within the Methodist church. Southern Methodists drew on the conversionist consensus to defend their peculiar institution. As abolitionism gained traction within northern Methodist circles, conversionism transformed from a passive antislavery expectation into an active proslavery weapon. Many proslavery apologists produced detailed explications of scripture, demonstrating Biblical sanction for slavery, but scriptural arguments never held the power of appeals to the old conversionist consensus.

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64 “Southern Religion—Dr. Capers,” *Zion’s Herald*, Vol. 9 No. 7 (Feb 14, 1838), 1.
Conversion and Liberal Theology

The populist strain in the new frontier evangelicalism succeeded in challenging the authority of the old standing order, but by the second decade of the nineteenth century the leaders of new Baptist and Methodist denominations began a long and consequential process of institutional development. Richard Furman embodies this transformation. Furman began his ministry at the age of sixteen without any formal education. By the early nineteenth century, as the Baptists had expanded throughout his native South Carolina, Furman became one of the primary advocates for denominational development and the formation of educational institutions.

The fear of enlightenment rationalism and its Unitarian hybrid threatened evangelicals, and populist denunciations of infidelity grew simultaneously with attempts to harness the power of education in evangelical churches. In the South, this trend had the ironic effect of pushing evangelicals closer to the Calvinism of the eighteenth century. Educational institutions in the North experienced their own shockwaves as theologians began reckoning with the Continental thought of Immanuel Kant, as filtered through Samuel Coleridge and other British interlocutors. The development of increasingly critical hermeneutics pushed the burgeoning Unitarian church into an ever more liberal theology. The result became apparent in the sectionalist theological battles of the antebellum era.

The institutionalization of religion and its effects on understandings of conversion and its effects on abolitionism reached their most liberal manifestation in the development of Unitarianism and Universalism in New England. The theological innovations of both movements had considerable influence on the development of new, non-conversionist antislavery. Mark Noll has demonstrated the theological crisis that emerged as a result of conflicting hermeneutics regarding the Bible and slavery, and Molly Oshatz has shown the ways that abolitionists
introduced the idea of social sins, unwittingly leading to the development of liberal Protestantism. But the challenge of proslavery conversionism led to changes for abolitionist Christians that were at least as consequential as those generated by hermeneutical arguments or the redefinition of sin.

Universalists in North America had roots that stretched back at least into the seventeenth century. In Pennsylvania, German Baptists known as Dunkers held that all would be saved. Even earlier, New Englanders influenced by the tumult of the English Civil War began to seek theologies of universal salvation. Samuel Gorton in Rhode Island and John Rogers in Connecticut both believed that the resurrection of Christ saved all of God’s creation. In 1793 John Murray formed the First Universalist Church in Boston, but it would take several decades before Universalism garnered serious attention in the United States. It was the ideas and organization of Hosea Ballou that solidified the position of Universalism in the theological life of the early republic.

For Universalists and for the more influential Unitarians, religious conversion was less a matter of instant salvation than a process of self-improvement. William Ellery Channing’s 1835 essay on slavery depends heavily on his Unitarian convictions. In many ways, the crux of his

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68 Beginning with *The Treatise on Atonement* (Boston: 1805) and culminating with *An Examination of the Doctrine of Future Retribution* (Boston: 1834), Hosea Ballou developed a widely read argument for the lack of eternal punishment.
argument stems from Channing’s belief that slavery stifles the divine human potential of all God’s creation, both slave and slaveholder. And Channing would fret over both, emphasizing the intellectual consequences of subordination over the reality of violence. This emphasis on the intellectual consequences of slavery had several consequences including an avoidance of the intense violence engendered by the reality of slavery. When compared to other abolitionist writings of the era, Channing’s appears disconnected. In an attempt to avoid rousing the passions of his reader, Channing’s adopted a cool, even distant tone. By downplaying violence, Channing managed to produce a damning indictment of the institution of slavery as degrading to both master and slave. However, the concern for the slaveholder occasionally threatened to drown out his empathy for the slave and even prevented him from understanding the true intellectual consequences of American racism.

From his Massachusetts perch, William Ellery Channing was naively magnanimous in disbelieving reports of vicious slaveholders’ cruelty, yet he could not help but wonder how slavery “nourishes the passion for power and its kindred vices” and “unsettle[s] the ideas of Right in the slave-holder, to impair his convictions of Justice and Benevolence.”69 He internalized the role of the slaveholder and encouraged others to do so. Willing to accept his own personal failings and finding the same in all others, Channing concluded that “absolute power always corrupts human nature more or less.”70 According to Channing, slavery traumatized not only slaves but owners as well, inhibiting both from developing their holy intellect.

This emphasis on personal spiritual development led Channing to connect slavery with “abuses on which the spirit of our religion frowns as sternly as on any which can be named.”


While the Gospel did not include a pointed denunciation of the institution of slavery, Channing believed that the Gospel undercut the very ground on which slavery could exist. “[S]ublime truths in regard to God’s paternal character and administration, and broad and generous principles of action” brought about a new cosmology that was “breaking every chain, by a gradual, inward, irresistible influence, and of asserting the essential equality and unalienable rights of the whole human race.”71 To whatever discrete examples pro-slavery advocates offered of scripture supporting slavery, Channing and other liberal antislavery thinkers asked, “is slavery not condemned by stronger implication, in the many passages which make the new religion to consist in serving one another, and in doing to others what we would that they should do to ourselves?”72

Channing’s convictions regarding universal human potential led him to understand racial differences as the result of experience and not inherent incapacity. The hindrances to personal development that faced black Americans formed a national crisis for Channing. He wrote that “the great argument against seizing and using a man as property” is that every man is “a Rational, Moral, Immortal Being” who was “created to unfold godlike faculties, and to govern himself by a Divine Law written on his heart, and republished in God’s Word.” “No matter how ignorant he may be,” Channing continued, “[t]he capacity of Improvement allies him to the more instructed of his race, and places within his reach the knowledge and happiness of higher worlds. Every human being has in him the germ of the greatest idea in the universe, the idea of God.”73 This shackling of divine human potential was slavery’s most egregious abuse. After laying out

71 Ibid., 51-52.
72 Ibid., 120.
these principles, Channing then provided a series of examples of how poor northerners triumphed over humble circumstances to achieve greatness.

Despite these convictions, William Ellery Channing struggled to overcome the racialized thinking of his age, coming close to reasoning that Africans and African American were inherently different from whites. Channing explained that “[o]f all races of men, the African is the mildest and most susceptible of attachment. He loves where the European would hate. He watches the life of a master, whom the North-American Indian, in like circumstances, would stab to the heart. The African is affectionate.” This claim sounded dangerously close to the argument that blacks were natural servants, but Channing pulled back from this conclusion by describing this trait as a scar from generations of suffering.74 Not only did Channing refute the belief in racial difference as a justification for enslavement, he claimed that no one else really believed it either. He asked his reader to imagine waking up one day and finding themselves enslaved for life. Channing assumed that every one of his readers would imagine this to be unjust for a number of reasons, none of which would relate to the color of their skin. “This deep assurance,” Channing argued, “that we cannot be rightfully made another’s property, does not rest on the hue of our skins, or the place of our birth, or our strength, or wealth.”75 The fundamental reason why anyone would find their enslavement unjust is their belief that liberty has been divinely ordained as a right for all of mankind. Channing likewise believed that, while blacks were not “bound to live and toil for an owner,” “the public order and peace, require them, during the present incapacity, to be restrained.” For Channing, this present incapacity is “their own innocence.” It would be a mistake to exaggerate the racial progressiveness of men like Channing, however. The

74 Ibid., 111, 109.
75 Ibid., 16.
emphasis on intellectual attainments as a measure of spiritual worth enabled some liberal Protestants to retain deeply problematic expectations for abolitionism. Channing loathed slavery but similarly feared the prospect of black freedom. According to Channing, to offer an oppressed slave complete freedom would be “cruelty, not kindness,” because “he is unprepared to understand or enjoy” the blessings of liberty. Not all modifications of the conversionist consensus moved Americans closer to abolition, much less equality.

The declining emphasis on religious conversion as the solution to the sins of the age was not restricted to those holding a liberal theology. Even in the sermons of Leonard Woods, the diehard Calvinist who battled liberals from his professorship at Andover Seminary, we find a shift away from conversion. Woods delivered the sermon at the installation of Nathaniel Hewitt as pastor of Second Congregational Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. While ordination sermons in the previous decades nearly all centered on the importance of generating conversions, Wood instead explored the “importance of a minister’s reputation.” In evaluating that reputation, Wood singled out the qualities of “intelligence, piety, [and] faithfulness.” Where earlier ordinations would have emphasized the divine calling and sacred duty of ministry, Wood delivered a relatively straightforward explanation of the imperatives of righteous living. By the 1830s millennial visions of social transformation had evolved into practical guidelines for middle-class respectability.

Conversionism and Northern Anti-Abolitionism

76 Ibid., 132-33.
Anti-abolitionism was not confined to the South. Abolitionists remained a loathed minority for the entirety of the nineteenth century even in places like Boston or New York.

Northern ministers who sought to combat abolitionism similarly relied upon conversionism. In an 1833 sermon in Vermont, Rev. Joseph Tracy proclaimed that distorted understandings of human equality had been the cause of terrible suffering. He began by attacking the radicals of the French Revolution before moving on to the advocates of wealth redistribution in the United States and the abolition of marriage. These terrifying bogeyman served as a prelude to the real danger in New England: abolitionists.

Tracy built on the discussion of family dynamics to create a metaphor comparing slaves to children. Both are entitled to their liberty only when they reach an age they can use it appropriately. According to Tracy, slaves needed an education before they could earn their freedom. An education for Tracy, however, did not involve academic development but rather Christian nurture.

Tracy spent the majority of his document laying out a lengthy list of Christian lessons that must be passed along to slaves, highlighting “the Christian duty of governing the passions.”

Tracy rejoiced that the conversion of the slaves was already well underway, citing an account of a slaveholding missionary who devoted his life to converting slaves in Georgia. The history of the early church proved to Tracy that the expansion of conversion would eliminate slavery in the United States. Indeed American conversionist efforts would “have the same effect, which it had when Paul preached it and men embraced it at Athens and at Rome.” If Americans would harness the same gospel as the apostle Paul, simply put, “it will abolish slavery.”

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78 Joseph Tracy, *A Sermon Before the Vermont Colonization Society, at Montpelier, October 17, 1833* (Windsor Ver.: Chronicle Press, 1833), 16.

79 Tracy, *Sermon*, 17.
One year later, Simon Clough of Fall River, Massachusetts, echoed Tracy’s logic but heightened the stakes, proclaiming in his very subtitle that “clergymen engaged in the dissemination of [abolitionist] principles should be dismissed from their congregations.”

Clough made this address in response to the formation of the American Antislavery Society and opened his document by reprinting the AAS Declaration of Sentiments. Based on the demands for immediate abolition included therein, “no minister of the Gospel,” Clough affirmed, “can consistently become a member of that Society or advocate its measures.”

He began his attack with an anthropological division of humanity into five stages of development, demonstrating that slavery under a civilized people is preferable to a life of unbridled barbarism. After a long analysis of scripture, Clough concluded with a description of how Christian slaves and Christian masters should come together through the power of the gospel, promising that “If these relative duties between the slave and his master were duly observed, the horrors of slavery would forever cease.”

Clough contrasted this dream with the inevitable result of abolitionism, namely “the horrors of civil war—our wives and children will be massacred—our fields will be covered with the slain—and the fairest portions of our country will be drenched in the blood of our fellow citizens.”

Few antislavery moderates went as far as Clough did. A more common response is epitomized in the creation of the American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race (AURICR). In 1835 a number of prominent religious leaders in and around Boston joined

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80 Simon Clough, *A Candid Appeal to the Citizens of the United States, Proving that the Doctrines Advanced and the Measures Pursued by the Abolitionists, Relative to the Subject of Emancipation, are inconsistent with the teachings and directions of the Bible, and that those clergymen engaged in the dissemination of these principles, should be immediately dismissed by their respective congregations as false teachers* (New York: A. K. Bertron, 1834).

81 Clough, *Candid Appeal*, 5

82 Clough, *Candid Appeal*, 36-38.
together to create a middle ground between proslavery apologists and uncompromising abolitionists. The first paragraph of the Union’s *Exposition of the Plan and Objects* includes a dramatic conversionist plea, identifying their purpose as “that great design in which all truly Christian enterprises unite and center.” That is, of course, “establishing everywhere, and in every heart, the kingdom which is righteousness and peace and joy, and in which there is neither Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ the common savior and Lord, the great restorer from moral corruption, the great deliverer from the oppression of malignant powers and from the darkness and bitterness of human woe.”

The cornerstone of offering aid to slaves included the promise of “bringing Christianity into free and effectual contact with that great portion of our population, which, now, these influences do not affect at all, or at the best, touch only inadequately and at a disadvantage.” For these men, abolition was a shared goal; indeed, they decreed that “we seek the abolition of this slavery.” However, unlike William Lloyd Garrison, the American Antislavery Society, or other abolitionist groups, the AURICR proclaimed that, “We seek it, not indeed as the ends of our association, but as a means to our end, or rather as the removal of an obstacle which cannot be surmounted.” To make their attack on slavery, the AURICR privileged the establishment of God’s Kingdom on Earth as the ultimate end, a goal dependent upon both abolition and national conversion. Embodying an antislavery middle ground, the AURICR claimed their mandate from the reality that “There are churches, there are ministers of the gospel, there are benevolent, active and influential individuals, who, it is believed are ready and solicitous to combine their exertions for the welfare of the colored

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84 *Exposition of the Object and Plans of the American Union for Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race*, 2-3.
people." The Christianization of the United States had created a critical mass prepared to complete the holy work of abolition. To abolitionists who claimed that the promotion of Christianity "made Christianity serve as the guardian angel of slavery," the union emphasized "the elastic spirit of Christian enterprise, which seeks the conversion of every creature." The emphasis on conversion, or the "elastic spirit" promised the surest route for a national consensus. The expansion of conversion, according to these men, was already succeeding in its work of liberation for, "in the districts where these efforts are begun, the slave is beginning to be regarded not merely as a chattel, but as a man, and that slavery is there about to arrive [at] … peaceful abolition."\(^85\) Joseph Tracy, the moderate clergymen who delivered the cautious attack on abolitionists in Vermont, rejoiced at the formation of the AURICR. Tracy argued that the work of John Young, a Presbyterian missionary to slaves in Kentucky, demonstrated that the national conversionist antislavery movement was destined to succeed. Speaking confidently about Young, Tracy declared that "those who are with us— in Kentucky especially—are already engaged in efficient, direct labors for the termination of slavery, in the shortest possible time, and the best possible way."\(^86\)

But these plans came to naught. The AURICR failed to gain support from southerners, and less than a year after its formation the society disbanded. In a defeated tone, Reverend Nehemiah Adams spoke at the final meeting, telling his audience that "[God] is calling to us in these times of trouble; Come my people, enter thou into thy closet, and shut the doors about thee, hide thyself for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast." This battle was clearly over, and the forces of slavery had won. Adams cautioned fellow New Englanders, "Let us not throw

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 8-10.

ourselves upon the tempest from a mistaken bravery, or from such a sense of obligation and responsibility in regard to public events as will jeopardize our own private spiritual peace.”

Adams and the AURICR had retreated from public reform and instead clung to the safety of spiritual peace. The world was burning with a great tempest, and godly Americans now had no recourse but to shelter themselves in their own private spiritual peace. No clearer death knell for conversionist antislavery could have sounded, and the antislavery ground in New England would be ceded to the new, confrontational abolitionists epitomized by Garrison and his American Antislavery Society.

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EPILOGUE

The quest for conversions and even the political agitation of abolitionists failed to end slavery in the United States. It took the horrors of civil war and the deaths of 750,000 Americans to do that. Emancipation created an unprecedented social, political, and economic transformation as the end of the Civil War brought the greatest governmental redistribution of wealth in world history and contributed to a wider trend of mass liberation throughout the western hemisphere. By 1888 slavery had been outlawed by all of the major colonial powers. But emancipation and the Thirteenth Amendment did not end slavery. Not in the western hemisphere, not in the world. Slavery persists with estimates ranging from eleven to thirty million held in bondage today. Antislavery has not disappeared either, and evangelical Christianity continues to exert a curious influence on abolitionist movements around the globe. Competing understandings of religious conversion and purification remain central to these contemporary attempts to end a centuries old problem.

The politics of historical memory in American evangelicalism are often unpredictable. Contemporary evangelicals claim a host of late-eighteenth-and-early-nineteenth-century heroes, but no one from the era has proven more popular in the past several years than William Wilberforce. Amazing Grace, the 2006 major motion picture chronicling Wilberforce’s efforts to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire, energized a host of evangelicals, and the film’s
producers recognized the profitability of the religious market. However, the relationship between *Amazing Grace* and American churches went beyond the commercial manipulation of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* or the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise. The homepage of the film’s website promises a free copy of the film as well as a host of promotional materials for pastors willing to host a public screening in their church. The website houses additional resources including flyers, bulletin advertisements, posters, web banners, a study guide for homeschooled children, a 1779 hymnbook, a broken link to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and more. *Amazing Grace* was more than a movie; it was a call to arms.

Evangelicals across the nation heeded the call. Bob Beltz, one of the producers of the film, and Walter Kallestad, pastor of an Arizona megachurch, co-wrote and self-published a book that sought to capitalize on the film’s momentum. With endorsements from televangelist Robert A. Schuller, former Wal-Mart Chief Operating Officer Don Soderquist, and Phoenix Suns owner Jerry Colangelo, and donors including Soderquist, Chick-Fil-A, and the International Bible Society, Beltz and Kallestad’s *World Changers: Live to Serve* promised to “find parallels between [William Wilberforce] and the potential world-changers in our modern society today.”

Kallestad and Beltz produced a self-help book in the tradition of Steven Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by identifying seven character traits shared by Wilberforce, Jesus Christ, and contemporary world changers: pardon, purpose, passion, power, partners, prayer, and persistence. The life and activism of Wilberforce is posited as a continuation of Jesus’s teachings, with the authors exclaiming, “It’s amazing how well the Sermon on the Mount lines up with the life of William Wilberforce.” The authors quickly shift from the Sermon on the Mount to the Great Commission, Christ’s commandment to his followers to “Go and make

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1 Bob Beltz and Walt Kallestad, *World Changers: Live to Serve* (2007). The quote comes from the handsome cover, featuring images from the film.
disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” This scripture passage has served as the foundation of countless missionary expeditions and proved a common text at hundreds of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century American ordination sermons. But Kallestad and Beltz adjust the emphasis. While acknowledging that scripture calls for missions work around the globe, the authors also identify “an implied encouragement that applies to every one of us.” Namely, they argue, the encouragement that every one of us can become a world changer. The precise meaning of this phrase remains vague within the text. Contrasted with those “paying closer attention to their favorite sports team, or the latest blockbuster movie, or an internet chat room,” world changers realize their full potential. William Wilberforce and Jesus Christ combine to offer a message of self-actualization—the famed abolitionist and the Son of God offer easy seven steps to a new you.

The narrative begins with William Wilberforce’s “Great Change” from a card-playing, frivolous pleasure seeker to a follower of Christ. In order to realize this potential, however, Wilberforce had to experience the full pardon of God, described here as “a way of looking past our moral failures, our innate, human flaws, and moving on with our lives with vigor and direction.” Wilberforce had to focus not on his past wickedness but instead on his present and future battle for righteousness. Using Wilberforce’s conversion experience as a kind of model, the authors present their own “Great Changes.” Bob Beltz’s epiphany came on a football field when “holy hell broke loose around me.” After watching a church football game descend into a violent fistfight, Beltz took up a challenge from a friend to read the gospel of John. Walt

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Kallestad experienced conversion early in life, but recommitted himself to Christ after experiencing a miraculous healing from chronic heart disease.³

While conversion plays a key role in the narrative, the greater emphasis is instead placed on individual self-improvement. Changing the world requires religious conversion, but the book is not a call to missionary work; it is a challenge to become your best self. The text continually returns to a focus on individual spiritual development. Even when explicitly discussing the experience of changing the world, the authors emphasize the internal sense of fulfillment that readers can experience: “when we act out of a God-given Passion, we can feel God’s pleasure. And it is good.”⁴

A book using the life of William Wilberforce as an encouragement to change the world presents an optimal opportunity to connect historical and modern slavery, but nowhere in the text do the authors suggest that slavery might still require our attention. In particular, the authors completely ignore the prevalence of sex trafficking in the experience of one particular world changer, Kelly Greene Tietsort. As young woman, Tietsort visited Reynosa, Mexico, on a short-term missionary trip and developed a ministry that sought to rescue women from prostitution in the city’s notorious Boystown district.⁵ The authors praise this young woman’s gumption but fail to discuss the very real problem of contemporary sex slavery, which propels Boystown’s thriving prostitution scene. In fact, the authors blame Reynosa’s bustling sex market on “women

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⁵ Reynosa, Mexico, has been a popular destination for a generation of American evangelical youth missions trips. In the summer of 1999, I traveled with fourteen other teenagers from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to minister to the prostitutes of Boystown. Like Kelly Greene, our missions trip did not include an evaluation of the systemic causes of prostitution, and it would take over a decade before I understood the role of human trafficking in the brothels of border towns like Reynosa.
throwing their lives and innocence away because they had no other choice.” Unacknowledged by the authors, the reality of prostitution in border towns like Reynosa involves a far more complicated story rooted in networks of violence, human trafficking, and demand driven by American tourists. Beltz and Kallestad’s narrative has no room for serious social analysis, however. World Changers is not, in fact, about changing the world, but rather about encouraging readers to become their best selves. This is not to imply that evangelicals have not sought to transform places like Reynosa. Curious readers who look elsewhere may find that Tietstort and Emily Sengel built a ministry in Reynosa and began construction of a transitional housing complex for former prostitutes until, as Sengel describes it, “due to violence in the city and other circumstances, we all pulled out in the spring of 2010.” Despite the efforts of these world changers, Boystown remains a hotbed of violence and prostitution.

The resurgence of interest in William Wilberforce invites a reflection on the relationship between evangelicalism and the modern antislavery movement. American evangelicalism retains the eighteenth-century tension between conversion and purification, and this enduring tension continues to shape the way in which American Christians understand and seek to respond to social injustice, including modern slavery.

Among the many purificationist movements in contemporary evangelicalism, few wield the power of Focus on the Family. Founded in 1977, Focus on the Family has flourished in the past few decades as the religious right rose to be a powerful influence on contemporary American politics. The organization has been a major force in a variety of conservative social

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6 Beltz and Kallestad, World Changers, 62.

causes including condemnations of Roe v. Wade and opposition to same-sex marriage. President Barack Obama’s 2010 decision to name January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month provided Focus on the Family with an opportunity to highlight one of its favorite purificationist causes: connecting pornography to a host of social ills. James Dobson, the organization’s founder, has long described pornography as a plague on American society. Establishing the link between pornography and violence has been one of Dobson’s main ventures, a project that garnered considerable attention after Dobson’s 1989 interview with serial killer Ted Bundy. On the day prior to his execution, Bundy told Dobson that pornography led him to rape and murder at least thirty women. Focus on the Family’s press release responding to the president’s call for renewed attention to modern slavery shifted the focus back to pornography: “I wholeheartedly agree with President Obama, which is why I hope he – and all of us as a society – carefully examine the role pornography plays in the trafficking of humans for sexual purposes.” When seeking to understand the foundation of contemporary slavery, Focus on the Family emphasized “porn shops, strip bars, so-called gentleman's clubs, and the proliferation of hardcore pornography on the Internet.” This obsession with sex, however, obscures the relationship between modern slavery and contemporary global capitalism.

Zach Hunter represents the many young evangelicals who are moving beyond the politics of the culture war embraced by Focus on the Family and organizations associated with the religious right. At the age of twelve, Hunter started the student-led group Loose Change to

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Loosen Chains. He describes the origins of this movement as an offshoot of his seventh grade Black History Month reading. After reading of the exploits of abolitionists like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth, Hunter grew “frustrated that he hadn't been born earlier—he felt an affinity for these leaders who used their freedom to bring hope to others.”

Hunter created a movement encouraging school children to collect change that would be given to the International Justice Mission and other modern evangelical antislavery groups.

Hunter claims that some evangelicals have criticized his social activism, asking him “why aren't you just preaching the gospel when your whole generation is going to hell?” In a Huffington Post article titled, “Will a Bible Fill an Empty Stomach?” Hunter rejects the binary that Christians must either preach the Gospel or live a Christian social ethic, understanding both as mutually reinforcing. But the progression of Hunter’s ministry embodies an enduring tension between conversion and social activism. Hunter’s first book tackled the issue of contemporary slavery directly, his second offered a broader account of Christian social activism, his third began an inward turn with an emphasis on igniting the individual passions of his readers, and the fourth eschews a discussion of public action in favor of private spiritual development, a theme quite similar to Beltz and Kallestad’s Wilberforce-inspired World Changers. The conversionist impulse leads Hunter to focus on the self rather than social structures just as it had done for evangelicals in prior centuries. In his words, the latest book offers “a discussion of what justice would look like in our own personal lives,” and he hopes his readers will be “transformed internally.” In this latest book, Hunter encourages his readers to develop their “personal code of

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honor” by “taking principles of the knight’s code of conduct.” These principles include admonitions to “never attack from behind,” “keeping promises,” and “practicing self control.”

Hunter, like evangelicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth century before him, believes that internal transformations promise a sure route to wider social reform. When the world transforms into chivalrous Christians, problems of injustice will wash away. Hunter does not ground these expectations in an explicit millennialism—the millennial imagination of contemporary evangelicals is largely framed by dispensationalist pessimism—but he does cling to the expectation that internal changes will nonetheless yield dramatic external transformations, both for individuals and for larger social structures as well.

The largest and most influential evangelical antislavery group currently active draws its theological inspiration from similar sources yet adopts decidedly different tactics. The International Justice Movement (IJM) understands its core commitments in light of “the tradition of heroic Christian leaders like abolitionist William Wilberforce and transformational leaders like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr.” By standing “against violent oppression in response to the Bible's call to justice,” IJM seeks to “restore to victims of oppression the things that God intends for them: their lives, their liberty, their dignity, the fruits of their labor.” The resume of Gary Haugen, the founder and current President and CEO of International Justice Mission, is remarkably impressive, including stints as a member of several major institutional human rights initiatives. Two of his earliest experiences fighting injustice include his participation on the executive committee for Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s National Initiative for Reconciliation and his service as the lead investigator for the United Nations’ Center for Human Rights inquiry into the Rwandan genocide. In 1997 Haugen founded IJM, an evangelical human

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rights organization that describes its mission as “bring[ing] rescue to victims of slavery, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression.”

IJM takes its theology seriously, funding and staffing an Institute for Biblical Justice. Bethany Hoang, a Princeton seminary graduate, leads the Institute and grounds her social activism firmly in her evangelical faith. In a very brief book, *Deepening the Soul for Justice*, Hoang argues that a vital Christian prayer life is necessary for an effective social justice mission. Without faith, Hoang argues, non-Christian social activism often leads to “the commodization of justice.” Non-Christians “pursue justice more as a means of self-actualization rather than as a means toward the true end of freedom.” Hoang blames the pursuit of self-actualization on non-Christian activists, but the work of Beltz and Kallestad and Zach Hunter illustrate the power of this discourse within evangelical communities as well. While framed as a comment on non-Christians, Hoang’s language may well be a veiled attack on certain subsets of contemporary evangelicalism.

IJM presents a fascinating theological puzzle, combining a thoroughly evangelical theology, epitomized by the work of Hoang, with an agenda for reform that emphasizes systematic change. The willingness to recognize the complexity of contemporary slavery and a willingness to marshal international coercion as a weapon distinguishes the antislavery of IJM from that of Focus on the Family or the work of Zach Hunter. All three have wrestled with the role of conversion and purification in their theologies of reform, but despite theological common ground, distinctions prove immensely consequential in how each understands and seeks to respond to social injustice.

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The current evangelical antislavery movement may prove, like its eighteenth and
nineteenth century predecessor, to be a dead end. But the present is not the past. Perhaps, in fact,
today’s evangelical abolitionists may be at the forefront of a new transnational movement that
challenges the complex systems of slavery within an increasingly globalized economy. Future
historians will analyze and judge the motivations, methods, and meaning of this modern anti-
slavery movement. Whether they deem it a success or failure, the enduring tensions between
conversion and purification will continue to challenge evangelicals who seek to save souls and
fulfill the call of the prophet Isaiah to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the
captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”
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