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SOME OF THE MOST FAMILIAR STORIES in Congregational history are about abolitionists. Most of us have heard about Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or about Theodore Dwight Weld and his fiery band of Lane Rebels. The *Amistad* incident, the rescue of 53 Africans bound for the slave market, was made into a feature-film with even more familiar names: Steven Spielberg, Morgan Freeman, Anthony Hopkins, and Matthew McConaughey. This issue of the *Bulletin* features some lesser-known but equally important stories and people. We’re introducing you to Elijah Lovejoy and his printing press, Henry Ward Beecher and the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, Adin Ballou, and a few frustrated abolitionists who tried to found an anti-slavery Congregational church in Washington, D.C. We hope it’s also an invitation to explore more stories and to meet more people from the past—they’re all here and waiting at the Congregational Library & Archives.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR
Background

In 1842, Rev. Owen Lovejoy declared in an election sermon, “Religion and Politics have been separated long enough. It is just such a separation, as the Adversary of Good loves to see, I have no doubt.” He noted that in a monarchy like Britain, it is the king who is the ruler. But in a republic like the United States, each voter is a sovereign or ruler. His text was from King David’s last words in 2 Samuel 23:3. “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.” By putting together these two foundational convictions; “ruling in the fear of God” and “every voter is a ruler,” he launched a pastoral-political career which made a major contribution in bringing the issue of the immorality of slavery into the national political arena.

He became the leader of the Illinois religious political antislavery movement, participating in founding the state and national Liberty Party in 1842, the Free Soil Party in 1848, the Free Democratic Party in 1852, and the Republican Party in 1856. He became the leading antislavery voice in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1857-64, chairing three major committees and shepherding a major bill in the House of Representatives, which prohibited slavery expanding into any territory of the United States. Abraham Lincoln called him his “best friend in Congress” and his “most generous friend.”

He was the pastor of the Hampshire Colony Congregational Church in Princeton, Illinois from 1838 until 1856. It took a congregation of unusual faith and courage to cultivate such talent and character. They were God-fearing folk from different towns in

“I am prepared to say that the commands, precepts and instructions directed to the king, magistrates, rulers and other kinds of offices, are in their general principles applicable to every voter in this country; that whatever the Bible, reason, justice and humanity require of lawmakers, judges, and executives, and other such offices, they require of every elector.”

Hampshire County, Massachusetts who responded to an invitation in the *Hampshire Gazette* to attend the Illinois Colonial Association’s meeting held in the Warner’s Coffee House in Northampton on February 23, 1831. Months later, on May 23, 1831, attendees of that meeting organized the Hampshire Colony Congregational Church at another meeting, this one at the Northampton Congregational Church. They were sent off to Illinois with a donation of $54 to procure a communion service and a sermon on the text of Luke 12:32, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you his kingdom.” In 1831, they were among the first struggling Congregationalist congregations in Illinois. By 1835 with 48 members, some active in the Underground Railroad, they built their first Meeting House which provided for worship, schooling and public meetings. In 1838 they called Owen Lovejoy as their pastor. After three years of some dissension over his antislavery stances, in 1842 the congregation was united in the support of his ministry. After seventeen years as a “beloved pastor,” the congregation passed a formal resolution affirming their pride in his accomplishments in the pulpit as well as in “the philanthropic and reformatory movements of the day.”

His July 1842 election sermon, entitled “Religion and Politics,” was published in the January 20, 1843 issue of the *Western Citizen*, the leading antislavery newspaper in the “west.” The sermon defined the differences between the Eastern Garrisonian Immediatist Abolitionists and the Western Constitutional Political Abolitionists. The Eastern Abolitionists advocated immediate abolition in all states, even Southern States, despite the U.S. Constitution’s prohibition on any interference with slavery where it already existed legally through state laws. Also the Garrisonians believed that moral persuasion was the primary method of encouraging slave masters to repent of the sin of slavery. Garrisonian Abolitionists believed politics required compromise, which they believed had a corrupting influence on the soul. On the other hand, the Western Abolitionists accepted the Constitutional limitation that they could not end slavery where it already existed in Southern states. They also advocated that every voter should vote only for officials who would work to eliminate slavery in ways that the constitution provided.

This article explores the sources and the application of Lovejoy’s conviction that in a republic where citizens rule, they are required by the Bible, reason, justice and humanity, to rule justly by voting in the fear of God.

**SOURCES OF LOVEJOY’S CONVICTION TO FEAR GOD**

**His Mother and Father**

The Hon. Rev. Owen Glendower Lovejoy grew up in the wilderness region of Kennebec River in the District of Maine beginning in 1811. His father, tutored by the prominent Calvinist and Federalist Reverend Elijah Parish, was an itinerant Congregational preacher. His mother was a warm,
Free-Will Baptist nurturer, who became enlightened after reading Dr. Joseph Bellamy’s 1750 book *True Religion Delineated Or Experimental Religion*. She wrote that she considered this book so precious that she hoped every young person would read it.

Twice daily with his parents as “bookends,” Owen, with his four brothers and two sisters, would kneel before the stone hearth which served as a makeshift altar. His parents would earnestly “Address the Throne of Grace,” beseeching the all ruling Divine Sovereign to provide them and their children with faith, right living and wisdom. When Owen was forty-five years old, on February 22, 1856, he opened the First National Republican Planning Convention in Pittsburgh by “Addressing the Throne Grace,” when he said, “Wilt Thou move upon the hearts of the People to elect one to fill the Executive Chair; who will administer the Government in accordance with the great principles of Justice, Truth, and Freedom. . . . Hear us, O Lord, in these our petitions, and graciously forgive us our sins.” Despite the tragedy, Owen continued his studies at Bowdoin, enjoying his social life and literary pursuits in the classics, while chopping cords of wood for room and board and writing letters to his younger sister Elizabeth, expressing his concern about his father’s erratic behavior.

The Lovejoys had a gift of writing privately and speaking publicly. In sharing their words with you at some length, we hope you feel free occasionally to speak them out loud, to hear their abilities as wordsmiths.

When Owen was twenty years old and studying at Bowdoin College, his older brother Daniel died of alcoholism in upstate New York. His mother Betsey wrote Owen on March 30, 1831, “My Dear Child, I take the pen without knowing what to write. If I tell you I love you and feel anxious for you, that you know already; and as to advice, should I give any, you know what it would be—to love and fear God all the day long, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and he’s the wisest of our race that learns to serve him. And I do hope and believe it is my daily prayer that you may be endowed with that wisdom which is from above; for I do know all arts and sciences besides will do you little good, yes, little good in comparison with the love of God which is something that passeth all understanding and in theory you know all this. . . . There are many good at speculation who are bunglers of application. You know I have often applied that to you and I know you will continue so unless it pleases the blessed God to send down the influences of the Holy Spirit and turn your feet unto his testimonies.” Despite the tragedy, Owen continued his studies at Bowdoin, enjoying his social life and literary pursuits in the classics, while chopping cords of wood for room and board and writing letters to his younger sister Elizabeth, expressing his concern about his father’s erratic behavior.

A year later on April 12, 1832, his mother Elizabeth, feeling the absence of her four eldest sons and the loneliness for her wandering, erratic husband, and reflecting on the national leadership of President Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay wrote a Thanksgiving Prayer. “O that it might be a day of real humiliation fasting and prayer that we might be humbled as individuals and as a state…,” she wrote. “O that he would be pleased to give us wise and good men to rule over us, men that rule in the fear of God and hate covetousness . . . they to whom he has given enough and to spare, mayest deal their bread to the hungry and bring the poor that are cast out to thy home and clothe the naked.” On August 11, 1833 Owen’s father Daniel climbed a ladder to a rafter in the barn, took a rope, tied it to the rafter and then around his neck and kicked the ladder away, creating agony in his loving family.
His Brother Elijah

Members of the Lovejoy family tried to help each other deal with the tragedy during the summer of 1833. On August 19, 1833 Elijah, “the eldest and dearest” of the family, wrote to his youngest siblings, Sybil, Elizabeth and John, “Dear Sisters and brother, We are orphans. God has taken from us, and I doubt not, to himself, our dear and honored father. After a life of many vicissitudes, and much and varied suffering, he has laid down to rest in the tomb. . . . Why then should we mourn? Rather let us give God thanks that He so long continued to us the example and the prayers of such a father.”

A week later Elijah wrote to Owen from New York, “My dear brother, permit me most earnestly and affectionately, to exhort you to give good heed to the warning voice, which now calls to you from your father’s grave. Hear it saying to you, ‘My prayers, which have been constantly ascending for you since you was [sic] born, are now forever ceased—I cannot any more advise, instruct, exhort, or warn you to flee from the wrath to come’ . . . Oh my brother, though our dear father’s life failed to convert you, shall not his death accomplish it? Will you not hear him now, though you have hitherto neglected to hear him . . . make haste, and be at peace with God, through faith and repentance, and a belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

A few months later on February 28, 1834, Elijah, responding to Owen’s conversion, wrote, “I cannot say the glorious changes which God has wrought in you and for you, were entirely unexpected by me. I knew that God had styled himself a ‘covenant keeping’ God and I knew you to be, like myself a child of that covenant—and a son of many prayers, and sooner or later I doubted not that these prayers would be answered in your conversion. You say true—It is indeed a miracle of grace that so hard a heart as yours shall have been made to relent; but so much the more reason have you for gratitude to a Savior. Hard as was your heart, mine was still harder, and now we will together magnify the name of the Lord.—I sympathize with the joy you have afforded the heart of our dear Mother.”

“You ask for advice—I am but a young Christian myself yet all the advice I can more freely do I give you. . . . Bear your testimony to his love and goodness to you. Be much in prayer—in secret prayer—without this it is impossible to grow in grace. . . . I do not know what your vices may be, but I feel as if I could wish you to get right about the work of preparation for the ministry. This is the great business in which your many talents and education can do good.”

In November 1837, Owen and his younger sister Elizabeth arrived in Alton to assist and help protect Elijah, whose printing presses were being destroyed, his personal property stolen, and serious threats made against his life and family,
and joined in theological discussion with two newly ordained pastors. Elijah had broken with the Old School Calvinism of Princeton Theological Seminary and had become a reform minded New School Evangelical Presbyterian concerned with informing the moral agency of an individual’s free will for both personal and social betterment. Instead of insisting on right belief, New Schoolers sought to inspire others, through the power of Christ and his example of loving kindness, to give up their idolatrous ways and to seek God’s ways of concern for one’s neighbor through repentance.

On March 16, 1837, Elijah audaciously titled an article in the Observer, the “RIGHT REMEDY.” “The ‘gospel of the Son of God,’” he wrote, “requires not the ‘good treatment of the black man as a slave,’ but as a MAN . . . and the very first step in this good treatment is to SET HIM FREE.” One of Owen’s repeated phrases during his career was from the Isaiah 61:1, “to proclaim liberty to the captives—the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”

Elijah and Owen were also leaders in organizing the Illinois State Antislavery Society. Angry vigilante groups, sanctioned and instigated by political leaders and clergy, viciously threatened Elijah and his family. At a public meeting on November 3, 1837 a resolution was read that Elijah P. Lovejoy was to “relinquish his interest and connection with the Observer.” He got up from his seat and walked to the front of what he had hoped would have been a neutral group, and calmly made his defense of the liberty of the press. “But if by compromise is meant that I should cease from doing that which duty requires of me, I cannot make it. And the reason is that I fear God more than I fear men.”
On November 7, 1837 four men in an angry mob shot Elijah as he went to put out a fire on the roof of the warehouse that was storing his new printing press. Then they stormed the warehouse, smashed the press and threw it into the Mississippi River. For many years after, Owen would inspire antislavery groups with a description of what happened next. “Beside the prostrate body of that murdered brother, while fresh blood was oozing from his perforated breast, on my knees, while alone with the dead and with God, I vowed never to forsake the cause that was sprinkled with his blood. The oath was written in blood. It must stand. Am I alone in this matter? No, I thank God that I am not. I see by the tearful eye and compressed lip that there are others here, into whose welted hearts the fixed resolution is now sinking.”

Alton’s Intimidated Ministers

Owen chose not to seek revenge on those who pulled the triggers that killed his brother, but to expose the distortions, self-deceptions, and immorality of the spokesmen of the Slave Power, who promoted the illusion that slavery was a positive Good, while abolition agitators were the cause of the social unrest in the nation. Lovejoy fearlessly went to work to set the record straight. He admonished the ministers who were the “two chaplains of the mob,” whose voices were silent at the meeting that called for the support of a free press. Rev. Joel Parker had distributed pamphlets claiming that slavery was good, Christian and biblical, which encouraged the mob. Lovejoy described the pamphlets as “full of gross perversions, gilded over with a smirking cant of Christian sincerity. This tract with a specious sophistry well calculated to deceive, endeavors to prove that the Holy Bible sanctions the system of American Slavery.”

Rev. John Hogan remained silent in the meeting to defend the right of a free press. Lovejoy asked, “Was he “intimidated, seduced, or deluded, he presents the darkest and saddest of enigmas.” Twenty years later in an 1858 speech in Joliet, Illinois, Lovejoy transformed those dark degrading words into a bright uplifting compliment. “I am for Lincoln [for the U.S. Senate],” he proclaimed, “because he is a true hearted man and come what will unintimidated by power, unseduced by ambition he will remain true to the principles for which the Republican Party was organized.”

THE APPLICATION OF LOVEJOY’S CONVICTION TO FEAR GOD

Having been nurtured and supported by those who were keenly aware of the consequences of ignoring Divine Justice, he was prepared to move beyond speculation to application. His basic conviction was that ruling justly required fearing God as known in the Bible and interpreted through reason, justice and humanity. He applied this conviction in three ways: (1) by fearing God, not man, he could not be intimated by malicious threats and false accusations; (2) by recognizing that God judges finite institutions by God’s Righteous will, he dared to admonish both the church and nation; (3) by being aware of his own imperfections and inexperience, he was perceived as a trustworthy person by many, those in high places of power and even those who disagreed with him.

First, On Not Being Intimidated

In 1864, Lincoln returned Lovejoy’s compliment of 1858. Lincoln wrote, “It can be truly said of him that while he was personally ambitious he bravely endured the obscurity which the
unpopularity of his principles imposed and never accepted official honors, until those honors were ready to admit his principles with him.” Illinois Congressman Elihu Washburne announced Owen Lovejoy’s death in the Chicago Tribune March 26, 1864. He said Lovejoy served “with unswerving fidelity in the face of danger, obloquy and reproach. . . . The heated denunciations of partisans, the ridicule and clamor of the vulgar and the threats of the cowardly and the base, failed alike to turn him from the great purpose of his life.” Can these ways be applied meaningfully today to help restore morality in making public decisions?

Early in his ministry he was warned that if he showed up in Princeton at night he would be tarred and feathered. That evening he pranced his stallion in the town square and no one showed up. When told that if he harbored a runaway slave in his house, he would be sent to jail, he put an ad in the Western Citizen on June 1, 1843 inviting “the ladies and gentlemen of color of the South who wished to travel North to better their condition” to come for a free visit with him. Of many courageous admonishments, his most famous one was printed in fifty-five newspapers in the nation on April 6th 1860. The day before, in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives, he had given a speech on the “Barbarism of Slavery.” He said, “Slaveholding has been justly designated as the sum of all villainy. Put every crime perpetrated among men into a moral crucible and dissolve and combine them all, and the resultant amalgam is slaveholding.” A Congressman interrupted saying, “You are joking.” Mr. Lovejoy responded, “No, sir I am speaking in dead earnest, before God, God’s own truth.” Shortly after that exchange, thirty to forty members, from both sides of the aisle, surrounded Mr. Lovejoy in a fracas with pistols cocked, canes raised and a toupee knocked off. A neutral member trying to calm things down said, “We all know him to be a man of courage, and that he cannot be intimidated.” That night he wrote his wife Eunice in Princeton, “I had made up my mind to sell out my blood at the highest possible price.”

Second, on God Judging Men and Nations

In a Liberty Party Convention in Chicago in 1846, Lovejoy spoke on the subject of observing public slave auctions in the nation’s capital. Lovejoy shouted, “A man for sale!” What is this? Where did that weak and puny being get the power to keep in subjection these stout, athletic men? Could he do it alone? Where did he get the power thus to insult God, mock humanity, and bid off men like brutes? From us: 20,000,000 of us say, “We’ll stand by you [the slave trader] to the death. If you can’t master them, we’ll help you.” He was referring to the fact that when the District of Columbia was formed, six
thousand women, men and children in the District were legally free, but then the majority of members of Congress voted to enslave them again. Therefore, Lovejoy implied that members of Congress could vote to free them again. He told his awakened audience. “I can’t vote for slavery. Can you?”16 They responded with a resounding “NO!” Eighteen years later, in April 1862 in the U. S. House of Representatives, as Lovejoy voted his hearty aye to prohibit slavery in the District of Columbia, the crowd in the gallery responded with exuberance.

Lovejoy knew that the prevailing religious culture of the day was an Evangelical Protestant imperative to bring Christ’s righteous kingdom here on earth. By 1858, he and Abraham Lincoln both knew that the cause of stopping the spread of slavery “must be entrusted to those whose hearts are in the matter and care of the results,” which were the leaders of the political religious antislavery movement. They also knew that leaders of reason and philosophical enlightenment believed that moral imperatives, if ignored, will lead to tragic, enduring consequences. Lincoln and Lovejoy had learned how to communicate the immorality of slavery to both religious and secular persons of good will without alienating either. On January 6, 1862, on his 51st birthday, during the most productive 37th session of Congress, Lovejoy presented a speech “On the Conduct of the War.” “We are standing in the front, not merely of rebels, but we are standing before an incensed God—I prefer using the scriptural term to designate the Supreme Being—If any one prefers the phraseology, I will say we are standing in the presence of that divine Nemesis who has woven the threads of retribution into the web of national life no less than into that of individual life. We are put to flight because that divine power is against us. We must repent, and must proclaim liberty to the enslaved of the land.”17

**Third, on Accepting One’s Own Imperfections**

After Lovejoy’s first term in Congress, the Republican Party Convention in Joliet, Illinois unanimously nominated him to serve another term. In accepting the nomination he said, “Gentlemen, if I have uttered one heart-prayer to my God, it was for his aid, wisely to discharge the duties of my position, and faithfully to meet the trust committed to my care. That I have performed these duties imperfectly, and with inexperience, no one can be so well aware as myself. That I have performed them honestly, I am conscious before my God; and as long as you confide the standard of our common cause to my hands I hope to bear it aloft in the thickest of this moral conflict, firmly without obstinacy, fearlessly but not rashly.”18

On August 3, 1862, before ten thousand people in Chicago, it was said that two other congressmen warmed up the crowd rallying young men to enlist in the call for 40,000 more troops from Illinois, and that Congressman Lovejoy’s three minute speech was the most warmly received. “I have but little reputation as a conservative man, so far as I have been informed. Some people go so far as to say I am slightly tinctured with fanaticism in my views of the slavery question. For myself, I claim to be a sort of an anointed prophet of the Lord. I have faith in God, and next to Him, in the American people. . . . I don’t know what God wills, but I have a shrewd suspicion that He wills what we will. The maintenance of the Government and the perpetuity of the Union are a necessity.”19

In his reprinted prayer on Thanksgiving Day in Princeton 1863, he prayed, “We feel that thy
judgments are upon us, and justly we are suffering for disregarding thy commands. Our hearts are torn with anguish in view of the terrible calamities upon us, and we feel that thou art saying to the nation, let my people go, that they may serve me, that they may enjoy their rights, which thou hast claimed for every human being.”

Conclusion

In our recent book Collaborations for Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy we spelled out the many ways they trusted each other’s radical and practical tactics in attaining, maintaining and applying political power justly. In this article, we are exploring how their ability to be unintimidated by power and unseduced by ambition enabled them to stand up and expose the deceptions and distortions of the dominating Slave Power propagandists, the religious defenders of racial superiority, the intimidated clergy, and the misled citizens. Slavery was so entrenched in the American culture, that Lincoln said on June 26, 1857, that the slaves were locked in a cage with a hundred locks, and one hundred different keys, hidden in a hundred different places. Slavery’s perpetuity had been successfully fastened on to the public mind by effectively silencing the voices of Divine Justice. Through ridicule and blame the abolitionist voices had been effectively silenced and marginalized. Slavery’s distorted religious theology enforced by dominating political power, had for decades erroneously convinced the public that it was the abolitionists, not the cruelty of slavery itself that caused the insecurity and fear of terrorist insurrections.

After working years with Lincoln and many other God-fearing people, Lovejoy’s way was made straight and his call was made clear. Lincoln said in his House Divided Speech in 1858, “The public mind will rest in the belief that it [slavery] is in the course of ultimate extinction.” In Lovejoy’s Congressional message that went to fifty-five newspapers on April 6, 1860 he announced, “Here and now I break the spell, and disenchant the republic from the incantation of this accursed sorceress—slavery. . . . The question is: Whether the 28,000,000 people who favor the free labor system shall be accommodated or the 2,000,000 people wrapped up in the slave system. . . . It is a poor, paltry patriotism that cannot take in the entire in the extent of its country.”

Enough God-fearing Voters in the 1860s did come to realize that African Americans were human beings created by God, that citizens had been deceived by self-serving demagogues, and that they were experiencing the erosion of the founding democratic principles of the nation. Many leaders like Lovejoy and Lincoln courageously exposed how elected political officials primarily represented the interest of the Slave Power, rather than the founding principles of liberty and justice for all.

In 1860, there were 394,000 slaveholders in a population of 31,000,000 which comprised 1.3% of the population.

Today a similar economic, political elite comprising 1% of the population dominates the government and is eroding the rights of democracy. Many religious traditions claim, “God rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove, the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love.” The political contributions of Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy demonstrate ways to tether the economic elite to
the moral imperatives of religious convictions and
the founding principles of the nation. They leave
an enduring legacy of how we can collaborate
with those who love liberty, unselfishly and for all.
President Abraham Lincoln wrote of his intimate
friend, the Congregational minister Owen Lovejoy,
that his monument is an “enduring one in the hearts
of those who love liberty, unselfishly, for all.”23

ENDNOTES
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2014, frontispiece. *Bureau County Republican.*
Retired UCC ministers William and Jane Ann Moore, authors of *Collaborators for Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln and Owen Lovejoy* have been researching the life of Owen Lovejoy for twenty years. They edited *His Brother's Blood: Speeches and Writings of Owen Lovejoy 1838-64*. Both books were published by the University of Illinois Press. Having served as the co-directors of the Lovejoy Society of the Prairie Association of the UCC, they organized symposiums and presented numerous papers now available at the Illinois Historical Survey, University of Illinois. Many of Lovejoy’s own papers can be found at the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

Mr. Moore graduated from Bates College and Boston University School of Theology, and pastored the North Leominster, MA Congregational Church and Pilgrim Church UCC, Wheaton, MD. He also served as Moderator of the Potomac Association of the United Church of Christ.

Mrs. Moore graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, Yale Divinity School and received her PhD from Boston University African Studies Program. She taught Sociology and African Studies at Howard University, edited *Cry Sorrow, Cry Joy: Selections from Contemporary African Writers* for Friendship Press 1971. She served as co-pastor with her husband in Irvine, CA, Cedar Hills, OR, Benton Harbor MI, and DeKalb IL.
In his 1855 *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, Samuel Ringgold Ward singled out the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher for praise as an honor to his profession as Congregational minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, calling him "the bold, the honest, the self-sacrificing, the amiable Henry Ward Beecher." 

On October 10, 1847, Beecher preached his first sermons after he was called to Plymouth Church. In them, he defined the church’s ministry. At morning worship, he preached on “Jesus Christ as the source of true religion and the power of personal character.” At evening worship, he preached on “the relation of the Church to the public ethical problems of the day—specifically, its duty to deal honestly and courageously with intemperance and with slavery.” One church member said about the evening service, “to the astonishment of all, and dissatisfaction of some, he laid aside the doctrinal theologies of the morning, in favor of the living issues of the times, and boldly and clearly defined the position he had taken and intended to hold in reference to slavery, temperance, war, and general reform.”

These two sermons encompassed the Gospel and its application to moral issues of the day, including slavery, that had been a centerpiece of the evangelical reform movement growing out of the Second Great Awakening. As Beecher said at another time, “My earnest desire is that slavery may be destroyed by the manifest power of Christianity.”

Each year prior to the collection of the pew rents, he reasserted his opposition to slavery so that no one would be misled about his stand on the issue.

When he arrived at Plymouth Church, thirty-five year old Beecher did not look like a New York minister. Even though he had grown up in the East, he had spent thirteen years in the West. After graduating from seminary in Cincinnati, he had pastored churches at Lawrenceburg and Indianapolis, Indiana. He looked like a westerner, someone from the frontier. His hair was longer than fashionable for New York. His dress was careless, and he wore western boots. Plymouth Church member Susan Howard described him as “rather rough and ‘dreadful homely.’” But, he was animated. She said that he “can turn from grave to gay or vice versa about as quick as any fellow I ever saw.” She continued, “There is a sort of fascination about the man which I should think was produced in a great measure by his earnestness, his fervor, his impulsiveness, his seeming naturalness. He carries one along with him by the power of his own flow, like some mighty river taking the very rocks upon his bosom of impetuosity.”
From the first, Beecher was a hit. For an address at the missionary society before he was called to Plymouth Church, he had appeared before an audience of well-dressed ministers looking like a country bumpkin in “rusty” and ill-fitting clothes. As he started to speak, he introduced himself by saying that he could tell his audience about peddlers distributing the devil’s literature on Western steamboats. The reason was, he said, “I can go among them as you, brethren, could not; for you see that nobody would ever suspect me of being a preacher.” Looking at his rustic appearance, the New York audience started to laugh with him. As one biographer stated, “That opening sentence established his reputation, and he held his audiences spellbound from that time on.”5

A unique aspect of Beecher’s anti-slavery ministry was his dramatization of a slave auction to raise money to purchase the freedom of an enslaved person. Shortly after he arrived at Plymouth Church, the Brooklyn Eagle reported that he had given a “deeply moving address” at a meeting for the purpose of raising money to free from slavery the son of a black man who was a member of a local Baptist church. That newspaper article seems to have led members of the New York City anti-slavery office to send Paul Edmonson, a free black person, to ask Beecher for help to raise money to purchase the freedom of his two daughters, Mary and Emily, who were then in a Washington, DC, slave pen. The anti-slavery office wanted Edmonson to persuade Beecher to appear at a rally to be held at the Broadway Tabernacle, a large Congregational Church that had been designed for revivals by the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney. Beecher agreed.6

At the start of his talk at the Broadway Tabernacle, Beecher said that he was not talking about slavery or anti-slavery in general, but rather about people in trouble, specifically about two young girls in a slave pen. And, it was about their father. What was being discussed that evening was, he said, “a plain question of humanity, and will admit of but one answer.”

He admitted that the price being asked for the freedom of the two girls was outrageously high. He wished it were less. This was a unique case. “I should be ashamed if it were written down, that such an assembly was gathered here of more than two thousand souls . . . and the poor pittance of $2,000 could not be raised.”7

Beecher described Paul Edmonson as a “distressed father.” He urged the audience to put themselves in his position. He said, “His sons are long ago sold as slaves to labor on Southern plantations. His daughters, unless we can do something to detain them, must go too, to a worse fate. But I trust in God and I trust in you that it

Henry Ward Beecher’s freedom auction in 1856 of “Sarah.”
Image courtesy Plymouth Church.
shall not be heard from New York that an appeal like this was not [sic] made in vain, and that you will make it heard that these girls, must not, shall not, be slaves—they shall be free.”

As he was speaking, pleading the Edmonsons’ case, Beecher used the stage thrust into the semi-circular pews of the church to advantage. He engaged each person in the audience, walking back and forth on the stage. Leaning forward to reach out, Beecher used gestures to draw everyone in. His voice rose and fell according to his subject. Because of the acoustics, all could hear him clearly.

An eyewitness described what happened. Beecher dramatized a slave auction for the audience. As the observer recalled, “He made the scene as one of Hogarth’s pictures and as lurid as a Rembrandt.” Then, he became an actor, playing the role of the slave auctioneer, voicing the cadences he had heard when he was in seminary at Cincinnati and visited across the Ohio River in the slave state of Kentucky where he observed enslaved people being sold at auction: “And more than all that, gentlemen, they say he is one of those praying Methodist niggers; who bids? A thousand—fifteen hundred—two thousand—twenty-five hundred! Going, going! Last call! Gone!”

The impact on the audience was stunning! As was the result! The money needed to purchase the freedom of Paul Edmonson’s teenage daughters was raised.

Several times over the following years, Beecher conducted other freedom auctions. On February 5, 1860, at the end of the worship service, he called a nine-year old enslaved girl named “Pinky” to the stage and told the congregation her story. Pinky’s owner in Washington, D.C., planned to sell her to the Deep South, but he would allow her to be purchased for the price of nine hundred dollars. The congregation was so moved by the story that, when the collection plates were passed, eleven hundred dollars in money and jewelry had been collected.

On that day, Beecher baptized Pinky and gave her the name “Rose Ward.” Rose was for Rose Terry, a poet who had put her ring in the offering, and Ward was his middle name. He put the ring on Pinky’s finger and told her “with this ring, I wed you to freedom.” On the day after the church raised the money to purchase her freedom, Beecher took Rose to Manhattan where Eastman Johnson painted a portrait of Pinky admiring her freedom ring.

Plymouth Church was gathered by twenty-one people and grew quickly under Beecher’s dynamic preaching and ministry. In 1860, the church had 1,320 members. Abolitionists from Brooklyn and New York City joined the church. Several of these members were among the leaders
of the New York State Vigilance Committee of the Underground Railroad. Sometimes, the committee needed to hide people in Brooklyn. Vigilance committee secretary Charles B. Ray reported that he delivered “several” fugitives to Plymouth Church. The Plymouth congregation gave benevolences money to Ray for helping free enslaved blacks. In addition, the church had sources other than the vigilance committee for helping people who were fleeing from slavery. Abolitionists in southern states directed fleeing enslaved persons to go to Henry Ward Beecher. He had an arrangement with Louis Napoleon that, when an enslaved person was sent to him or the church, Napoleon would “fix things along the Central Railroad and see to it that the officials along the route were got into friendly disposition for the fugitive.” The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “dozens passed through Mr. Beecher’s hands in this way.” In one of his sermons, Beecher said of fugitive enslaved people, “I will both shelter them, conceal them, or speed their flight; and while under my shelter, or under my convoy, they shall be to me as my own flesh and blood; and whatever defense I would put forth for my own children, that shall these poor, despised creatures have in my house or upon the road.” Church tradition holds that fugitives were harbored in the underground basement of the church. A Plymouth Church historian called Plymouth “the Grand Central Depot of the Underground Railroad.” Recently, the U.S. National Park Service designated Plymouth Church as an Underground Railroad site on the Network to Freedom.11

Americans supported settlement of the frontier and building a transcontinental railroad connecting the Midwest with California. To prepare for the railroad, Congress passed a law in 1854 to open the territories of Kansas and Nebraska for settlers. The law provided that the decision of whether slavery would be allowed or banned in the territories would be made by the settlers themselves, an approach known as “popular sovereignty,” also called “squatter sovereignty.” As a result, pro-slavery and free-soil factions entered a competition over slavery in Kansas. Pro-slavery forces had the advantage since Kansas was bordered on the east by the slave state of Missouri, but abolitionist Yankees had organized first. In the November 1854 election of a territorial delegate to Congress and in the March 1855 election of a territorial legislature, Missouri “border ruffians” crossed into Kansas to vote for the pro-slavery candidates. In both elections, the pro-slavery candidates won easily. At that time, the pro-slavery candidates probably would have won a fair election, but a later
Congressional Committee concluded that they had won with many “fraudulent” ballots.

By the fall of 1855, the free-soil residents of Kansas outnumbered those who were pro-slavery. They decided to elect a territorial government of their own. Thus, by January 1856, Kansas had two territorial governments, a pro-slavery “official” one in Lecompton elected fraudulently, and a free soil “unofficial” one in Topeka that had used popular sovereignty to establish its government.

In response to the report that southerners were “armed to the teeth,” free-soil settlers armed themselves. After the election of the pro-slavery territorial legislature, the agent for the New England Emigrant Aid Society, an organization established in the summer of 1854 to promote free-soil settlement of Kansas, sent an urgent request to Boston for two hundred Sharps .52 caliber breech-loading rifles and two cannons.12

That same month, Beecher said he “believed that the Sharps rifle was a truly moral agency, and that there was more moral power in one of those instruments, so far as the slaveholders of Kansas were concerned, than in a hundred Bibles.” He continued, saying, “You might just as well . . . read the Bible to Buffaloes” as to the Missouri slaveholders who were fighting in Kansas, “but they have a supreme respect for the logic that is embodied in Sharps rifle.”14

In February 1856, Beecher preached a sermon, entitled “Defence [sic] of Kansas.” In it, he likened anti-slavery forces in Kansas to freedom fighters, drawing a parallel between the war in “bleeding Kansas” and the American Revolutionary War. He argued that people had to be prepared to defend freedom and appealed for money and arms.13

In March 1856, Beecher attended a meeting at North Congregational Church in New Haven to raise money for men of the Connecticut Kansas Colony who were going to Kansas as settlers. He made a stirring speech to the men. When he finished, an announcement was made that the men going to Kansas were prepared to farm, but they were not armed to fight. A Yale professor pledged to pay twenty-five dollars to purchase a Sharps rifle. Beecher announced that, if funds for twenty-five rifles could be raised that night, he would pledge to match that with twenty-five more from Plymouth Church. A Mr. Killam made the next pledge. “Killam,” Beecher joked, “that’s a significant name in connection with a Sharps rifle.” That evening, those at the meeting made pledges for twenty-seven rifles. In September 1856, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle referred to Beecher as “the Rev. Killem Beecher.”15

Shortly after the meeting at North Church, men heading to Kansas, calling themselves the “Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony,” marched through New Haven. Each carried a Sharps rifle and a Bible.
from Plymouth Church with the motto, “Be ye steadfast and unmovable.”

The Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony built a church in Wabaunsee, Kansas, called the “Beecher Bible and Rifle Church.” It continues to hold Sunday services today.\(^{16}\)

Later, the Plymouth Church congregation raised money for another twenty-five rifles that were sent to Kansas accompanied by twenty-five Bibles. In shipping weapons to Kansas through the slave state of Missouri, wooden boxes were labeled as containing such innocuous items as “crockery” or “tools.” Plymouth Church shipped Sharps rifles to Kansas in boxes marked “Bibles.” The press picked up on this and called Sharps rifles in the hands of free soil settlers in Kansas as “Beecher’s Bibles,” and Plymouth Church became known as the “Church of the holy rifles.” When Beecher was criticized for advocating violence, he responded, “There are times when self-defense is a religious duty.”\(^{17}\)

In addition to his freedom auctions, participation in the Underground Railroad and providing rifles to free-soil settlers of Kansas, Henry Ward Beecher preached two sermons to overflow crowds on Sundays, transcripts of which were published in newspapers, and he wrote antislavery articles for those papers. As a result of the activities of Beecher and the Plymouth Church congregation, Brooklyn truly became a center of the abolitionist cause.

ENDNOTES


7 *Rochester (New York) North Star*, November 17, 1848.

8 *Utica (New York) Liberty Press*, November 30, 1848.


14 *New York Tribune*, February 8, 1856.


Frank Decker, assisted by Lois Rosebrooks, wrote *Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church in the Civil War Era: A Ministry of Freedom* that was published by The History Press in 2013. He adapted this article from his book. A long-time member of Plymouth Church, he was a member of its governing council from 1993 to 1999. As the council president for three years, he led the church’s observance in 1997 of the 150th anniversary of its founding. In this connection, he studied the history of Congregational churches and that of Plymouth, especially in the Civil War era, and, thereafter, he taught church history in adult Christian Education classes. In 2007, after he retired from the practice of law, he and Lois Rosebrooks prepared and submitted for Plymouth Church an application to the United States National Park Service to have the church listed as a site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, with the result that the church is so listed. In 2009, he wrote and presented a paper on Henry Ward Beecher and the Plymouth congregation in the antislavery cause to a symposium on “Congregationalism in the Public Square,” that was published in the *International Congregational Journal*. In 2011, he and Lois Rosebrooks submitted a paper on the advocacy of human rights at the church before the Civil War to a conference on New York State history sponsored by the New York Historical Association. When he was going to law school, he was an associate editor for two volumes of *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton* (Columbia University Press, 1964 and 1969), writing commentaries on the documents that were published.
In 1904, the famed Russian writer Leo Tolstoy was asked a question by the co-founder of Cornell University Andrew Dickson White. “Who, in the whole range of American literature, [Tolstoy] thought the foremost?” Tolstoy, who admired Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Lloyd Garrison, and Theodore Parker, shocked White with his answer. “Adin Ballou” replied the Russian. “Indeed,” reflected White, “did the eternal salvation of all our eighty millions depend upon some one of them guessing the person he named, we should all go to perdition together. That greatest of American writers was – Adin Ballou!”

Indeed, like White, I was taken aback when I first came upon this interaction studying the life of Tolstoy in 2012 as a Graduate student in Heidelberg, Germany. Who was Adin Ballou, and why did he merit such praise from arguably the most important writer in the early twentieth century? How had I bypassed Ballou through my extensive study of nineteenth-century American Christianity and literature? Further inquiry evinced that I was not the only religious historian who was unaware of Ballou’s life and teachings. Somehow he was forgotten amid the plethora of religious and literary thinkers in New England during the nineteenth century.

As I began reading some of his works, I recognized immediately the window he opened into the complex New England Christian world during the nineteenth century. This led me to pursue my dissertation project of unearthing and resurrecting his musings and life to provide an intimate lens to explore the complicated family tree of American Protestantism and perhaps add new branches to its disorganized limbs.

Ballou was the quintessential “seeker.” One whose beliefs morphed with every new movement he joined. He was first a Six-Principle Baptist who converted to the Christian Connexion. After his excommunication from the Connexion, he became an influential Universalist preacher in Massachusetts. Eventually he formed a utopian community based on the teachings he amassed and conjured through his experiences with leading New England religious leaders, personal visions, and biblical inquiry in 1841. Unearthing Adin Ballou
has given me the opportunity to better understand the limitless possibilities the New Republic offered spiritual seekers and helps the contemporary student “walk at a human pace” through the “time of greatest religious originality in American history.” Grants provided by Heidelberg University, Brigham Young University, and the Congregational Library & Archives enabled me to travel to New England and search through the numerous archives that hold his unpublished newspaper articles, tracts, books, and letters. This article provides a glimpse of what I found regarding Ballou’s affiliation with the reform movements prior to the Civil War. Though not a Congregationalist, he rubbed shoulders with numerous Congregationalist clergymen during his time with the Anti-Slavery and Temperance movements in New England. He was also chosen to fill a Congregationalist/Unitarian pastorate in Mendon, Massachusetts, during his Universalism phase from 1831-1841. Although the majority of Congregationalists were frustrated by his appointment, the Unitarian leaning Reverend Bernard Whitman handpicked him to reactivate the former Congregationalist/Unitarians who had converted to an Evangelical Baptist association in Mendon. It was Ballou’s zeal and expertise as a preacher, debater, and pamphleteer in Massachusetts that led to Whitman’s endorsement.

The focus of this study is to better understand one issue that crippled and almost dissolved the American Anti-Slavery Society in New England prior to the Civil War—non-resistance. Few understand the reluctance of the majority of abolitionists to take up arms in defense of the slave prior to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. As I scoured through abolitionist newspapers and journals, it became evident that leading New England abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, were unable to wholeheartedly support violence as a measure to free the slave. Adin Ballou’s association with the American Anti-Slavery Society illuminates the contention among abolitionists to justify the activities of the insurrectionist abolitionist John Brown.

During the 1840s the American Anti-Slavery Society debated what the best solution was to end slavery. Some called for a constitutional amendment, others thought returning slaves to their native country was the best option. There were those who favored using the United States treasury to purchase the slaves and a very small number believed the only method to abolish the practice was by the use of force. The leading belief held by Garrison and Ballou was the use of moral suasion through the press and pulpit to turn the minds and hearts of the United States’ populace to recognize the nation’s need for penance, thus ending the “peculiar intuition”.

As the 1840s came to an end, slaves continued to be held in captivity. The abolitionist cause moved forward throughout the 1850s and the hopes that moral suasion would rid the United States of its national sin, began to appear inadequate. In November, 1851, the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society held its sixteenth annual conference. Invitations for speakers were sent to “Frederick Douglas, Samuel R. Ward, Charles L. Remond, Theodore Parker, Charles C. Burleigh, and our highly esteemed non-resistant brother, Adin Ballou.” Of those invited to speak, only three accepted, Douglas, Remond, and Burleigh. Ballou wrote a letter stating he had “other engagements” that prevented him from attending. Douglass spoke during the morning session about his fond memories during
the early days of the movement with Garrison, Abby Kelley, and others. During his speech an anonymous “colored man” rose and advocated “killing all who attempted to re-enslave a fugitive,” in reference to the Fugitive Slave Act that required citizens of the North to return runaway slaves to their masters in the south. Many abolitionists nicknamed this law the “Bloodhound Law” in protest. Quickly the meeting turned as Remond (a leading black abolitionist in Boston who frequently toured with Garrison), arose and discussed the subject of “self-defense.” He believed it was time for abolitionists to encourage “colored people” to use “all the physical power and means they could command to strike down the executors of the Fugitive Slave Law.” The leading men and women of the abolitionists, including Garrison, Ballou, Henry C. Wright, Kelley, and Amos Bronson Alcott, were part of another reform movement called the New England Non-Resistance Society that condemned the use of self-defense in resisting evil, including slavery. As a close friend of Garrison, Remond understood this and tried to appease non-resistant tenets by explaining non-resistants would not be expected to participate in the “shedding of human blood.” Theodore Parker’s belief was also represented at the meeting, even though he was not in attendance. S.W.W. (name unknown) read a portion of one of Parker’s speeches that said “I am no-non-resistant, but I am glad that the leading anti-slavery men are so.” Douglass, frustrated by the mutual exclusiveness, charged Parker and those attending the meeting with “inconsistency, and endeavored to show there was none in the language used.”

The evening session continued the discussion of violent opposition to slavery when Remond and Douglass justified the killing of the slave owner Edward Gorsuch during the Christiana Fugitive Affair in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where four fugitive slaves, along with local townspeople, resisted the captors by force, killing Gorsuch in the process. Douglass continued his remarks by promoting the killing of all slave holders. He referenced the Revolutionary War engagements at Lexington and Bunker Hill, and used the revered revolutionary Patrick Henry, to explain the just war of the slave. Burleigh finished the conference by refuting both Douglass and Remond and asserted, “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. Let us be faithful, abhor all compromise with evil, and in due time we shall reap, if we faint not.” According to the scribe at the meeting, Burleigh’s words received “continued applause— more than on both the previous days.” Non-violent abolition was the popular position in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Remond and Douglass left the meeting frustrated, but their pleas began resonating as the 1850s progressed primarily by the activities of the famous and infamous John Brown.

The advances of slavery seemed insurmountable and without war slavery would take over the West, primarily in the Kansas territory. One abolitionist, John Brown, was crucial to moving Kansas toward violence. Brown, a lifelong anti-slavery man, became disillusioned with non-resistant abolitionism’s attempt of moral suasion to rid the nation of its sin. The Fugitive Slave Act and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were proofs that slavery was increasing, and to defeat the figurative Goliath that was slavery, the New Testament God preached by abolitionists needed an Old Testament David willing to fight the behemoth. Before Brown went to Kansas he was already committed to a
violent war against slavery. Kansas presented him with the opportunity to not only help defend his elder sons who moved to Kansas, but to display God's sanctioning of violent opposition to evil. He petitioned the wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith for funds to buy guns and ammunition. Smith and others, primarily from Brown's birthplace in Ohio, funded his "army" to fight against the largely proslavery government in Kansas. The struggle commenced when a "Free-Stater" (those who believed Kansas should be an anti-slavery state) was shot by a pro-slavery settler. Brown, began his holy war by planning the murder of pro-slavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek. Five pro-slavery men were slaughtered by Brown's men at midnight. The war gained traction, and Brown was further incensed when his son Frederick and neighbor David Garrison were killed in Osawatomie by General John W. Reid's Missourian battalion. The border dispute between Kansas and Missouri turned into a war lasting nearly seven bloody years from 1855-1861. Brown's call to arms in Kansas in 1855 ignited a debate within the abolitionists on the merits of violent opposition to slavery.

Adin Ballou quickly published his beliefs in regard to the activities of Brown in Kansas. Ballou, who edited his Utopian Community's newspaper *the Practical Christian*, continued to be active in leading abolitionist circles, and his musings were frequently published in Garrison's abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. In an editorial titled, "Freedom in Kansas Vs. Christian Non-Resistance," he attacked abolitionists who financially or morally supported violence to emancipate the growing slave population. He lamented the "majority of those who at one time or another professed to adopt it [non-resistance] have fallen away from it . . . . The brave champions of Anti-Slavery, whom we have ourselves delighted to honor for their talents, eloquence and devotion to the cause, such as Gerrit Smith, Henry Ward Beecher, Theodore Parker and a host of their admirers, are almost overwhelming us [non-resistant abolitionists] with their chivalrous appeals." Ballou's primary argument was based on his current biblical exegesis on Christ's command to "turn the other cheek." He recognized that non-resistant abolitionists were losing the battle among some of the most esteemed members. Ballou did not see the battle in Kansas being a war based on abolishing chattel slavery in the United States, but rather deciding if Kansas would be a free or slave state. Both free and slave states participated in upholding slavery. This war, according to Ballou, was an economic battle between two differing bodies, and he pled with his fellow abolitionists to recognize the fight in Kansas was not over slavery. "Was it [Bleeding Kansas] whether Kansas should be a land of freedom for all honest and well behaved emigrants, black as well as white? No. It was merely whether it should be possessed and ruled by Free State men, or by Slave State men. All this was well understood by the spirants of both parties, and they went into the competitive struggle accordingly." For Ballou, this was more than an ideological battle. If abolitionists turned to the sword to defeat slavery and abandon their peace principles as outlined by Christ in the New Testament, abolitionism would lose the moral high ground and perhaps the blessing of divine providence. "Beloved friends, Smith, Beecher, &c., &c., &c., pray spare your eloquence awhile; for we have small relish for the banquet to which you invite us," he remarked, "Freedom in Kansas will, no doubt, be a fine thing for such white people as are leagued with slaveholders against four millions of slaves . .
...but for ourselves, we prefer Freedom of a better quality.” By taking up arms to defeat the “border ruffians” in Kansas, he believed abolitionists were “deluded into shedding human blood.” For him the war in Kansas was a struggle between white men and for white men. By supporting the violent efforts of Brown, abolitionists, such as Ballou, were left in a doctrinal quandary. The majority of New England abolitionists in the early 1850s ascribed to the tenets of non-resistance, but recognized their efforts of moral suasion from the pulpit and the press did little to slow down the economic power of the United States’ “peculiar institution.”

In 1859, the debate among non-resistant abolitionists and insurrectionists fermented into a theological struggle after Brown was sentenced to death and hung due to his involvement in the Harper’s Ferry Raid, in Virginia. Ballou immediately condemned the insurrectionist minded abolitionists and declared Brown’s actions egregious to the non-resistant wing of abolitionism that was committed to non-violence. He recognized his cherished non-resistance principles among the abolitionists were floundering and Brown’s example of manliness produced a seductive “argument for bloody resistance, insurrectionism, and revolution.” He frustrated other abolitionists by wishing “them [insurrectionists] no success, but the speediest failure.” An unknown abolitionist outraged by his debasement of Brown retorted, “Our bro. Ballou... in such a conflict... hopes the oppressor will succeed against the oppressed; that the wrong side will triumph over the right... that U.S. marines and Virginia troops may overcome the Virginia slaves in every encounter!”

The abolitionists struggled to find common ground between “ultra” non-resistants like Ballou, who were committed to non-violence, and the others who respected the activities of Brown. Amidst this philosophical battle, William Lloyd Garrison, the quasi-leader of abolitionism, was asked to respond to Brown’s death and violent actions. Garrison cleverly balanced his peace principles with the justifications of Brown’s insurrection. In a speech given to a group of abolitionists at the Tremont Temple in Boston, Garrison explained his reaction to the death of Brown. Unlike Ballou, Garrison diplomatically toed the line with those who were sympathetic to Brown’s fight against slavery. “Was John Brown justified in his attempt?” asked Garrison, “Yes, if Washington was in his... If men are justified in striking a blow for freedom, when the question is one of a threepenny tax on tea, then, I say, they [slaves, Brown] are a thousand times more justified.” Any abolitionist or American citizen who viewed Brown as a bloodthirsty “traitor is a calumniator,” explained Garrison. He understood there was a push among abolitionists, including Ballou, to see the movement as a vehicle to promulgate a form of Christianity rather than the sole purpose of the movement from the beginning which was to rid the United States of slavery. Abolition was not an attempt to convert the United States to the non-violent principles of Christianity. Garrison used the “American standard” to judge Brown’s violent opposition, and proclaimed, “I hesitate not to say, with all deliberation, that those who are attempting to decry him are dangerous members of the community; they are those in whom the love of liberty has died out; they are the lineal descendants of the tories of the Revolution, only a great deal worse.” This last proclamation was responded to with “applause” from those in attendance. Here
Garrison does not present an either or argument, rather an attempt to situate his own belief in non-resistance with those who believe the opposite. Garrison with his response to Brown, pitted two pillars of abolitionist belief against each other, namely non-violence and individual conscience and sought a form of middle ground. The same “inner light” that moved Brown to his actions was the same force that governed Garrison’s decision to abstain from insurrection. For Garrison, neither principle was mutually exclusive. Abolitionists could remain within the movement by adhering to the buffetings of conscience wherever those might lead. Each could decide in this time of peril on how best to follow God’s advice whether biblical or experiential and any attempt to demand absolute obedience to one particular principle discussed by abolitionists would lead to the movement’s failure.

Ballou was incensed by Garrison’s double talk and praise of Brown. He held a “special meeting” with the South Division Anti-Slavery Society in Worcester, Massachusetts after Harper’s Ferry. It was an attempt by Ballou to thwart the “eulogizing and glorifying” of Brown’s method from gaining traction among the abolitionists. Immediately he brought the peace principles of the “old platform” of abolitionism to the forefront. In a series of speeches throughout the day, he read from the anti-slavery declaration and constitutional pledge of 1833 written by Garrison that stated abolitionists would not resort to measures of “physical resistance” to abolish slavery. “Ours are such only as the opposition of moral purity to moral corruption – the destruction of error by the potency of truth—the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love,” wrote Garrison in the 1833 declaration. At the close of the meeting, Ballou’s resolutions did not receive acknowledgement and were “overborne by numbers” in opposition. The meeting ended by resolving “that as Abolitionists . . . we are unable to judge of the wisdom of their [insurrectionist abolitionists’] measures, we are prompt to avow our cordial sympathy with the spirit and our devout admiration of [Brown’s] heroism.” Frustrated by the resolution, Ballou did not sign it and left the “new heroes of the cause [abolitionism] to glory in the sword on their own responsibility.” After Garrison’s speech, Ballou frustratingly lamented “even Brother Wm. Lloyd Garrison . . . became more than an apologist, he became a eulogist of the blood-shedding hero of the Harper’s Ferry tragedy.” Ballou, along with other ultras, considered leaving the American Anti-slavery Society after hearing Garrison’s praise of Brown.

The American Anti-Slavery Movement responded to Ballou’s aggressive claims about Brown. In the Liberator, J. Miller McKim, a renowned Presbyterian minister and devoted friend of Brown, expressed his frustration with Ballou’s antagonism. “ Anything from the pen of Adin Ballou is worthy of attention” explained McKim, but he “is not infallible.” McKim admitted the “war spirit” spread throughout the abolitionists, however, “Our organization is made up of people of all varieties of opinion on the force question . . . no Society in the country embraces so large a proportion of peace men as does the American Anti-Slavery Society.” Displeased with Ballou, McKim pled with him to return to the movement. “Our friend [Adin] has done good service . . . heretofore: why should he now relax his efforts? At the very time we need him most . . . . This is not right . . . . This looks almost like shirking duty. The voice of the majority imposes no obligation of submission . . . . But he says, ‘We are rather inclined to retire.’ Let him not forget
that inclination and duty sometimes lead in opposite directions.” McKim, explained, “What if ‘now and then a little contempt of non-resistant softliness’ does tind [sic] expression? Cannot our friend, who knows he is in the right, bear that, and a little ‘laughter at his expense’ besides?” McKim explains that dissent can be useful in teaching forbearance and “it does us no harm to be occasionally ‘disgusted’ with other members of the abolitionist community. He implored Ballou to understand his criticisms came from a friend and to view them as “wholesome and edifying.” He concluded the article by pleading with Ballou to remain with the society. “But pray, friend Ballou, don’t leave our ranks. The cause has need of you. ‘The whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.’ I don’t think that we are nearly as warlike and venomous as you make us out to be, but still we are bad enough to need the antidote of your gentle spirit and peace-breathing doctrines. Don’t desert us.”

The debate continued as Garrison in the next issue of the Liberator published an article written by William H. Furness a leading Unitarian-Congregationalist minister in Pennsylvania on the difficulty with aggrandizing Brown’s actions. Not all the “new heroes” of abolitionism concurred with Brown’s approach. Furness saw in Brown a failure to use Christ’s example of non-violence as a method to end slavery. Furness used the biblical account of Peter’s use of force against Christ’s captors to understand how best to act with the abolitionist calls for violent uprising. The biblical account in John 18 explains Peter smote Malchus with his sword cutting off his right ear. Immediately Christ commands Peter to “Put up thy sword into thy sheath.” Christ miraculously heals Malchus and admonishes his disciples to abstain from further violent action. Furness likens this story to the situation with the slaves, and asks his fellow abolitionists, “What are we to do about him [slave] — we especially, of the North?” Brown, though justified in his use of force based on “public sentiment” that recognized the use of violence as a lawful instrument of justice and liberty, nevertheless by “drawing the sword for the slave . . . was wrong,” argued Furness. Similar to Ballou, Furness believed that the violent uprising by the abolitionists did more harm than good for their cause and the slave. “He [Brown] did not take into account the undeviating law, that violence produces violence,” and did not adhere to the council given to Peter by Christ. Furness ascribed to pre-Harper’s Ferry abolitionism that asserted, “Truth is . . . much more effectual than any brute force.” Furness sought a less polemic approach than Ballou, and explained Brown displayed “heroic courage” in his war against slavery. Brown was simply misguided and unlike trained clergy and itinerant preachers, did not spend his time pondering and debating the tenets outlined by Christ to his followers on how best to combat evil.

Ballou, along with a few ultra-non-resistants left the American Anti-Slavery Movement in roughly 1861 after it became evident the majority of abolitionists supported military action against the South. Even Garrison, who arguably was the strongest proponent of non-resistance, proclaimed with other abolitionists the oft quoted declaration, “I am a Non-resistant, but not a fool” and patiently waited with other non-resistants during four faith trying years of the Civil War to see if Providence could be found in violent action. Many peace men, including Garrison, saw their sons being drafted and some abolitionists volunteered to help the North defeat slavery. Repentance, at least in this particular instance, seemed to require the blood of
the North and South who collectively indulged in the pecuniary benefits of the nation’s vilest sin. The war ended. The slave was set free. However, for the non-resistant abolitionist, the question of whether the use of force was providentially sanctioned remained unanswered.

(Endnotes)

1 "Rhode Island A.S. Society” Liberator (1831-1865); Nov. 14, 1851; 21, 46; American Periodicals, 187. Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


14 Adin Ballou, “Freedom in Kansas vs. Christian Non-Resistance” Liberator (1831-1865); May 2, 1856; 26, 18: American Periodicals, 0_1.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Adin Ballou, “The Practical Christian” excerpt printed in the Liberator (1831-1865); January, 31, 1860; 30, 2; American Periodicals, 7. Andover Library

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.


22 Ibid.


24 Ballou, Autobiography, 419.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.


36 Ibid.

Utah native, Bryce Taylor, studied History at Utah Valley University, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in History. After touring the U.S. with his independent rock band, Taylor returned to Utah to teach high school level religion and history at the American Heritage School. Later he moved his family to Heidelberg, Germany and received his M.A. in American Studies at the University of Heidelberg in 2013 where he is currently finishing his dissertation in the PhD program in American Studies. He has taught United States Religious History at Heidelberg University and Brigham Young University and has given presentations on a variety of historical subjects in Ireland, Germany, France, and the United States.
AN ANTI-SLAVERY CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

An interview with

DAVID R. BAINS

David R. Bains is professor in the department of religion at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. He is currently working on Religious Capital: Representing Religion in Washington, D.C., a study that focuses the role of “national” houses of worship in the life of the nation and its capital city from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. He is also author co-editor with Theodore Louis Trost of the forthcoming of The Church in History: Selected Writings of Philip Schaff (Wipf and Stock) and co-chair of the Space, Place, and Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion. He enjoyed regular research visits to the Congregational Library when he was a Ph.D. student at Harvard University.

QUESTION: How did you become interested in the story of the First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C.? (and tell us something about the larger project you’re working on)

ANSWER: I’m interested in the efforts to establish churches that would ensure that American denominations were adequately represented in the nation’s capital. For some, this meant building a large church that would attract short-term residents and provide a suitable visible representation of the denomination’s role in national life. For others, like the Congregationalists, it meant establishing their first congregation in a city—and a region--where they previously had none. What all these projects, from the Washington National Cathedral, to the National Church of the Nazarene, to First Congregational Church, had in common was the promoters’ conviction that the church they were establishing was a national endeavor and deserved the support of members of the denomination from throughout the country.

First Congregational is an especially interesting case for four reasons. First, it occurred in the first wave of these efforts in the 1840s and 1850s. Most people who have looked at this “national church” phenomenon see it as beginning in the early twentieth century. Second, it occurred at a pivotal time in the formation of Congregationalist identity. In many ways Congregationalists were just at this time beginning to think of themselves as a denomination. The Albany convention of 1852 was pivotal in this regard, it was the first synod of Congregationalists since the seventeenth century. It endorsed the importance of national support for the Washington church. Thus the effort to plant a church in Washington was strongly linked to a new sense of denominational identity. Finally and most importantly, more than any other church I’m studying, the formation of First Congregational is tied to an important social issue: slavery. The motivation to found the church was as much anti-slavery as Congregationalism.

My first introduction to these churches actually took place when I was eleven. The pastor of my United Methodist church in Virginia took our confirmation class on a three-hour van ride to Washington to see some of these “national churches,” the National Cathedral, the National Shrine of the Immaculate
Conception, and Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist. Only decades later did I discover there were so many more and decide it was an important project.

**Question:** Tell us what Washington, D.C. was like during the time Congregationalists first attempted to found a church.

**Answer:** The decades before the Civil War were the first time that Washington actually began to look like a national capital. Prior to this time, streets were largely unpaved, and while there were some impressive government buildings—the White House, the Capitol, the Treasury Department—the city was far more humble than any other major American city. In the late 1840s and 1850s, however, the expansion of the Capitol Building to its current form commenced, the Patent Office (now the National Portrait Gallery) was begun, the Smithsonian Institution opened, and the Washington Monument began to rise. The monument was particularly important because at that time it wasn't being built with tax money, but with contributions from people throughout the country. This encouraged members of various denominations in Washington to see the capital as a symbolic center that people throughout the nation should be involved in supporting.

Life in Washington followed an unusual rhythm. The city’s only major business was government. Unlike other cities it was not a major center of trade or manufacturing. Congress was only in session for part of the year, usually from late fall into the spring. Many of the growing number of civil servants were political appointments and so depended on the party in power. All this meant that a large part of Washington's population was only in town for part of the year, or for a few years at most. You can imagine how difficult it was to sustain a church under these circumstances.

Perhaps most importantly, Washington was a Southern slave city. Washington was surrounded by slave states, Maryland as well as Virginia. The slave trade was legal in Washington until 1850. After that point while buying and selling slaves was illegal, you could still own them. The markets simply moved across the river to Alexandria. To anti-slavery advocates from New England, Washington was as rude an awakening as any Southern city.

**Question:** How do you explain the mysterious first founding of the church? Why do you think it hasn’t been known?
The first two ministers left in short order because of the pressures of the job in a strange and hostile city. When at last, in 1854, the congregation found a minister, Alexander Duncanson, who it thought was up to the task, they over played their hand. They invited a huge ecclesiastical council of ministers from eleven states invited to install him. The plan backfired. The council refused to install Duncan because in addition to being a Scot, he was a theological and social liberal. After that, fresh efforts were made to have regular worship every fall, particularly under the leadership of Joseph Bassett, but with rising tensions over slavery and the minister of Washington’s fashionable First Presbyterian beginning to preach against it, the small congregation never flourished.

The fine history of First Congregational by Everett Alldredge published in 1965, begins with the gathering of the current congregation in 1865. While there was some continuity in people, there was no continuity in organization and many more Congregationalists had come to Washington during the Civil War. Thus, the pre-1865 history is in many respects a prequel rather than a first chapter. So much had changed. Slavery had been abolished. The war had brought many more Congregationalists to Washington, and Congregationalists were establishing institutions throughout the South, including Howard University in Washington. In light of this, the pre-war efforts could be seen as a history of failure, not a past to celebrate. But I prefer to see it as a worthy struggle against the odds.

**QUESTION:** Would you characterize Congregationalists as abolitionists? What do you think your story tells about the denomination’s stand on social issues?
The Congregational Library & Archives, Boston, Massachusetts has been awarded $300,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities to enhance its acclaimed New England Hidden Histories program. The New England colonies stand out for the quantity and depth of their records, providing an unparalleled source of information about the roots of America’s political culture and the social diversity of early American life. The grant will be used to digitize and transcribe these unique documents and make them available to the public for the first time.

Dr. Jeff Cooper will join the staff and direct the program.

**Answer:** With the possible exception of Unitarians, Congregationalists were the major denomination that was least divided over slavery, in part because they had almost no Southern churches. But that did not mean that the denomination as a whole was of one mind on the subject. The idea that slavery was wrong and should eventually be eliminated could win fairly broad acceptance. But that is far cry short of denouncing slavery as a sin that required immediate abolition. The reticence of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (who also had missions among slave-owning Indians in the U.S.) to embrace anti-slavery principles had led to the formation of the AMA. Even in Washington, the leadership of the congregation was not always of one mind about how central anti-slavery was to their mission. While early documents were unambiguous, in 1857 when a Washington paper described the church as “anti-slavery,” it was forced to retract the phrase the next week due to the objection of a trustee.

The story shows that denomination had those within it who saw anti-slavery as central to the denomination’s mission. They wanted to exercise this witness in Washington where national policy was decided. Yet, as with most denominational voices in Washington, whether of “national churches” or “lobbies,” the positions expressed were far from uncontroversial within the denomination. After the Civil War, Congregationalists were able to rally more fully around its mission to the newly freed slaves throughout the South. Yet even then there was controversy over admitting African Americans to the same congregation as whites. First Congregationalist itself suffered a schism over this issue in 1869.
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