

## *No Ordinary Sin: Antislavery Protestants and the Discovery of the Social Nature of Morality*

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**I**N *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), Walter Rauschenbusch compared the sin of speculating in land to the sin of slavery. The great theologian of the Social Gospel tried to open his audience's eyes to the sinfulness of land speculation by reminding them that not long ago, Christians had been unaware of the sinfulness of slavery. Before the abolition of slavery, he wrote, "there were millions of genuine Christians, honestly willing to see and do the right thing in other matters, to whom it seemed a preposterous proposition that slavery is incompatible with Christianity." To these honest believers, slavery was a necessary social institution like the family or the school. Today, he continued, most Christians, despite their genuine faith, do not realize "that it is a crying wrong to hold land idle for speculation in cities where men's lungs are rotting away . . . few who realize that it is a flat denial of Christianity to take advantage of the needs of your fellow man to buy his labor cheaply or sell him your goods dearly." Christians were blind to the evils of industrial society just as they had been blind to the evils of slavery. Both slavery and land speculation were social sins, morally deficient practices that were so deeply embedded in the economic and social structure that they seemed to be "a necessary and inevitable part of the structure of society."<sup>1</sup> Social sins were different than individual sins. "Genuine Christians" did not tolerate individual sins like drunkenness, adultery, or murder, but they had tolerated slavery.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 158.

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Antislavery Protestants were well aware of this difference. Antislavery figures including Francis Wayland, Leonard Bacon, William Ellery Channing, Horace Bushnell, and Edward Beecher labeled slavery a social sin well before the Civil War. Antislavery Protestants best articulated their understanding of social sin while making the case that missionaries to the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations could tolerate the slaveholding of their converts. The antebellum proponents of social sin were not abolitionists. Before emancipation, when the eradication of social sin was an unheard-of phenomenon, the idea of social sin rarely served the purposes of abolition. Radical abolitionists seeking to convict their audiences of the sin of slavery placed it in the category of the usual sins like murder or adultery that demanded immediate repentance. In the antebellum context, labeling slavery a social sin was nearly always a means of urging caution and moderation.<sup>2</sup> The idea of social sin emerged not from the call to reform but from the difficulty of dealing with Rauschenbusch's "genuine Christians." Antislavery moderates developed the idea of social sin in order to make room for compassion toward Christian slaveholders, to explain why southern and Native American believers failed to see the wrong of slavery, and to square the wrongfulness of slavery with its apparent biblical sanction.

The moderates had conservative aims. Yet the moderate notion of social sin had radical implications. Calling slavery a social sin drew attention to the social origins of moral behavior, weakened individual responsibility for sin and repentance, and suggested that complete repentance necessitated radical—if gradual—social change. The debate over slavery forced Protestant theologians to adopt a new understanding of sin that paved the way for the Social Gospel's acceptance of the social nature of morality.

## I. MODERATION AGAINST SIN

In 1797, a meeting of the Transylvania Presbytery in Kentucky considered the question, "Is slavery a moral evil?" The presbytery answered, "yes." They then turned to the question, "Are all persons who hold slaves guilty of all moral evil?" To this question, the presbytery answered, "no." Unable to answer the third and obvious question—"Who are not guilty of moral evil in holding slaves?"—they ended their discussion. Facing a sectional crisis, the

<sup>2</sup>Douglas M. Strong points to abolitionist William Goodell's social understanding of sin. Goodell described slavery as a web of evils that demanded "national along with individual reform." However, Goodell's aim was to convince reformers to use political methods and to broaden their attack beyond abolition. Unlike the antislavery moderates or the practitioners of the Social Gospel, he did not point to the social origins of sin or salvation. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 132.

antebellum moderates were not free to exercise such discretion. They had to explain how, despite slavery's sinfulness, a slaveholder could remain blameless.<sup>3</sup>

Moderately antislavery Protestants held two fundamental moral beliefs about slavery: one, that slavery was sinful, and two, that some slaveholders were good Christians. The individualistic antebellum Protestant moral imagination could not make sense of this pairing. Slavery was either a sin or it was not. Antebellum Protestantism defined sin as an individual's act of disobedience to God. If it was a sin, then individual slaveholders were sinners, and the abolitionists were right to call for immediate emancipation. Conversely, if a Christian could own slaves without sinning, then the defenders of slavery were correct to say that slavery was not a sin. Either the abolitionists or the defenders of slavery were correct. And yet moderately antislavery Protestants insisted on a third option. Their refusal to be either immediatists or defenders of slavery required them to find a new understanding of slavery's sinfulness. The moderates attributed the sin of slavery to a social system rather than to slaveholders. Slavery was a social sin, a sin for which society, rather than the individual, may be responsible.

The biblical record on slavery made moderately antislavery Protestants unwilling to claim that all slaveholders were sinners. Abraham had owned slaves and the Mosaic Law encouraged Israelites to make slaves from the nations around them. Jesus praised the faith of the Roman centurion without suggesting he free his slave, Paul did not demand that Philemon free his slave, and Paul provided moral instruction for both masters and slaves that included instructions to slaves to obey their masters, even cruel ones, with utter fidelity. For those who believed that the Bible was the Word of God and could not accept that God had ever sanctioned sin, it was extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to argue that slavery was a sin in every case, always and everywhere. Given the absence of an explicit biblical condemnation, the antislavery moderates believed that it was unfair to condemn Christians of good character solely on the basis of slave ownership.

And yet, the moderates did believe that slavery was a sin. The antislavery moderates argued that Christian principles opposed slavery. In his widely used college textbook, *The Elements of Moral Science* (1835), the Brown University president and moral philosopher Francis Wayland wrote: "The precept of the Christian religion is, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. . . . Everyone must admit, that, were this precept universally obeyed, slavery could not exist, for a moment, in fact, though it might exist for a while, in form." Likewise, prominent New School Presbyterian pastor Albert

<sup>3</sup>James Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals Against Slavery, 1770–1808* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 118.

Barnes argued that, “the spirit of the New Testament is against slavery, and the principles of the New Testament, if fairly applied, would abolish it.” The moderates argued that Christ and his apostles chose to abolish slavery through the gradual application and unfolding of Christian principles. Because slavery was a social sin, a sin with deep social and political roots, it merited a different treatment than other sins. Rather than offering an explicit biblical denunciation, the God of the New Testament established principles that would eventually spell slavery’s doom.<sup>4</sup>

This account of the Bible and slavery is familiar to readers of Mark Noll, E. Brooks Holifield, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese. Noll in particular has made the case for the theological importance of the slavery debates. However, while historians have recounted the ways in which the debates forced antislavery Protestants to alter their biblical hermeneutic, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the slavery debates altered their understanding of sin. When it came to biblical hermeneutics, radical abolitionists were the least orthodox participants in the debate. On the issue of sin, however, it was the moderately antislavery Protestants who abandoned orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

In his 1835 publication, *Slavery*, Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing distinguished between the wrong of slavery and the character of the slaveholder. Because all men “partake of the errors of the community in which they live,” explained Channing, “the same acts in different circumstances admit and even require very different conclusions.” While mitigating the slaveholders’ sin, Channing maintained that slavery was evil by attributing its evil to its operation as a system. It is “not less a curse,” he wrote, “because long use may have

<sup>4</sup>Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science* (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1835), 110; Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1857), 42; Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science* (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1837), 214–15; William Ellery Channing, *Slavery* (Boston: James Munroe, 1835), 111.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 473–565; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 494–504; Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Noll also discussed the slavery debates in *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 367–445. On the slavery debates, see also David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 523–56; J. Albert Harrill, “The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate,” *Religion and American Culture* 10 (Summer 2000), 149–86; Wayne A. Meeks, “The ‘Haustefeln’ and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge,” in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr. and Jerry L. Sumney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 232–53; Robert Bruce Mullin, “Biblical Critics and the Battle Over Slavery,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61 (Summer 1983), 210–26; and Caroline Shanks, “The Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument of the Decade 1830–1840,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (April 1931), 132–57.

blinded most, who support it, to its evils.”<sup>6</sup> The social system of slavery blinded the conscience of slaveholders.

In 1854, Wayland addressed a public meeting in Providence, Rhode Island, held to protest slavery in Nebraska. He began with the disclaimer that he would “avoid all denunciations of individuals.” Wayland told his audience, “It is my good fortune to know and esteem many of my fellow-citizens at the South, whom I believe incapable of performing an action which they see to be dishonorable or mean.”<sup>7</sup> Slavery, according to Wayland, was a wrong committed “by our friends and acquaintances.”<sup>8</sup> In 1845, Leonard Bacon, a prominent Congregational pastor, editor, and writer, explained that the question was not “about the moral responsibility of individual slaveholders,” but about “the moral character of this . . . system of slavery.” In his 1836 treatise on slavery, E. P. Barrows of Andover Theological Seminary argued that the system of slavery “is evil in all its tendencies,” but clarified that it was not his intention to charge the mass or majority of slaveholders with cruelty. With equal diplomacy, he clarified in his 1862 article for the *Bibliotheca Sacra* that he was discussing systems, not individuals. Given their culture, Barrows wrote, southerners would have to be angels to be as keen as northerners on the education and elevation of slaves. Bushnell explained the proslavery sentiments of the South by claiming that their social institutions prevented the moral progress that was occurring in the North. The degree of sinfulness that adhered to any one slaveholder depended on the laws of their society and upon the degree of moral progress that their society had attained.<sup>9</sup>

In order to avoid the outright condemnation of southern slaveholders, one had to believe that they were blinded, unable to see the full evil of slavery.

<sup>6</sup>Channing, *Slavery*, 11–12, 55, 58.

<sup>7</sup>*Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Providence, Held in the Beneficent Congregational Church, March 7, 1854, to Protest Against Slavery in Nebraska; with the addresses of the Speakers* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1854), 13.

<sup>8</sup>Francis Wayland, *The Limitations of Human Responsibility* (Boston: Gould, Kendall & Lincoln, 1838), 189.

<sup>9</sup>Leonard Bacon, *The Jugglers Detected: A Discourse Delivered by Request in the Chapel Street Church, New Haven, December 30, 1860* (New Haven, Conn.: Thomas H. Pease, 1861), 17; E. P. Barrows, *A View of the American Slavery Question* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 16–18; E. P. Barrows, “The Bible and Slavery,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 19 (July 1862), 563–606, here 580–81; E. P. Barrows, “The State and Slavery,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 19 (October 1862), 749–801, here 776–77; Horace Bushnell, *The Census and Slavery* (Hartford, Conn.: Lucius E. Hunt, 1860), 17–21. For other examples of the development of the distinction between a sinful system of slavery and the possible innocence of particular slaveholders, see Moses Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution, with Remarks on the Recent Speech of the Hon. Daniel Webster in the Senate of the United States on the Subject of Slavery* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1850), 34; and R. B. Thurston, “The Error and the Duty in Regard to Slavery,” in *Liberty or Slavery: The Great National Question. Three Prize Essays on American Slavery* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1857), 1–38, here 25–26.

After all, not so long ago, white northern believers had been similarly afflicted. According to the moderates, the sin of slavery was systemic, an indication of the state of slaveholding societies rather than of the character of slaveholders.

## II. SLAVERY AND THE ABCFM

The unorthodox idea of social sin found its clearest antebellum expression in the context of a debate about the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to the Choctaw and the Cherokee Nations. Members of both Nations held slaves, and the ABCFM mission churches contained both slaveholders and slaves. As the slavery debates intensified, the leaders of the ABCFM found themselves trapped between the Board's abolitionist donors, who demanded that the ABCFM denounce slavery, and its missionaries, who maintained that any such action would destroy their mission. In their doomed attempt to keep the peace, the moderate leaders of the Board insisted that it was possible to admit slaveholding converts to the church without condoning slavery. Because slavery was a social sin, the moderates argued, the missionaries could condemn slavery while welcoming slaveholders.

The controversy over the ABCFM's missions to the Cherokee and Choctaw brought the issue of social sin to the forefront of the antebellum slavery debates. Chartered in 1812, the ABCFM was the nation's first foreign mission agency. It was founded by Congregationalists, but included Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed and other denominations, and was largely a New England institution, with its headquarters and the majority of its leaders located in Boston. The Board contained abolitionist members who wanted the missionaries to denounce slavery and refuse to welcome slaveholders into their churches and a few conservative members who considered any discussion of slavery to be an inappropriate diversion from the Board's true business of evangelism, but the leadership and majority of the organization were moderates.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>On the ABCFM debate, see Robert T. Lewit, "Indian Missions and Antislavery Sentiment: A Conflict of Evangelical and Humanitarian Ideals," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50 (June 1963), 39–55; Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 119–25; Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1969), 226–32; Robert Cholerton Senior, "New England Congregationalists and the Anti-Slavery Movement, 1830–1860" (Ph.D.diss., Yale University, 1954), 308–26; and William E. Strong, *The Story of the American Board: An Account of the First Hundred Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1910), 52–55, 186–87. On missions to the Cherokee, see also William G. McLoughlin,

The ABCFM sent missionaries to the Cherokee in 1816 and to the Choctaw in 1818, by which time the Choctaw and Cherokee elite had had come to rely on slave labor. By 1845, thirty-eight thousand Choctaw and Cherokee together owned approximately two thousand slaves.<sup>11</sup> Cyrus Kingsbury, the superintendent of the Choctaw mission, and Samuel Worcester, the superintendent of the Cherokee mission, personally opposed slavery, but declined to denounce the institution outright. It had been the slave owning elites who had first welcomed the missionaries to the Nations, and they had done so for the sake of the mission schools rather than for any burning interest in Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The missionaries knew that a people who, in the words of Cherokee missionary Jacob Hitchcock, “have been oppressed, persecuted, and driven from their homes and the graves of their fathers at the point of the bayonet” would not take kindly to moral excoriations from the mouths of whites.<sup>13</sup>

The missionaries ran a real risk of being removed from the Nations. Worcester’s experience with the state of Georgia before Cherokee removal left him well aware of the delicacy of his position. Worcester had been active in the Cherokee resistance movement, and in an effort to silence him, Georgia passed a law requiring white persons residing in Indian Territory to be licensed by the state. Worcester, along with his fellow missionary Elizur Butler, were arrested by Georgia state authorities for violating the new law and sentenced to hard labor. Worcester was exonerated by the federal government in 1832, when the Supreme Court denied that the laws of

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*Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984). Similar debates occurred within the Northern Baptist Mission Board (later the American Baptist Missionary Union) and the American Home Missionary Society. On Leonard Bacon’s role in the American Home Missionary Society debate, see Hugh Davis, *Leonard Bacon: New England Reformer and Antislavery Moderate* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 157–59. On the Northern Baptist debate, see William G. McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting, Held in Boston, Massachusetts, September 9–12, 1845 (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1845), 58. On the development of slavery in the Cherokee Nation, see Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*, 50–69.

<sup>12</sup>Cyrus Byington to David Greene, January 28, 1845, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Papers (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library), Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.4, Vol. 6, No. 213A.

<sup>13</sup>Jacob Hitchcock to David Greene, April 10, 1845, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.1, Vol. 11, No. 69. There is no evidence to suggest that guilt over or even concern about the treatment of Native Americans affected the attitude of the ABCFM missionaries toward the Native American practice of slavery. Despite his evocative description of their experience, Hitchcock evidenced little actual sympathy for the plight of the Cherokee. In the same sentence quoted above, he also referred to the Cherokee as a “half-civilized people, who are, or at least have been, very ignorant and superstitious.” In spite of his past advocacy for the Cherokees, Worcester’s letters on the subject of slavery never mentioned their suffering.



Georgia had any authority over the Cherokee Nation. After a long-delayed release from state prison, Worcester travelled west to prepare for the arrival of the Cherokee. Despite their move to Indian Territory, however, Worcester and his fellow ABCFM missionaries remained on shaky ground. The U.S. federal agents among the Choctaw and Cherokee were southerners and slaveholders. If the Cherokee or Choctaw ruling elite wished them gone, the missionaries would have no recourse.<sup>14</sup> The ABCFM missionaries understood that they served at the pleasure of Native American slaveholders. Believing themselves to be following the apostolic example, the ABCFM missionaries allowed Christian converts into the church without regard to slaveholding.

In 1844, a group of abolitionist ministers expressed their dismay that slavery was tolerated in the mission churches amongst the Choctaws and other Indian tribes. Because of this state of affairs, they wrote, many supporters of the Board were withholding their contributions, and many others were giving with reluctance. The abolitionists asked the Board to report on the status of slavery among the Choctaw and other Indian tribes and to “entreat” its missionaries to proclaim American slavery to be “grossly at variance with all its holy doctrines and precepts.”<sup>15</sup> The Board assigned the task of answering the memorial to a committee, whose members included Andover President Leonard Woods and Calvin Stowe, professor of biblical literature at Lane Theological Seminary and husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Woods, Stowe, and the other members of the committee presented their report at the 1845 meeting of the ABCFM in Brooklyn. The report’s authors attempted to mollify the abolitionists by speaking of the “debasement, wickedness and misery” associated with slavery and calling its “entire and speedy removal an object of earnest and prayerful desire to every true friend of God and man.” However, they refused to instruct the missionaries to teach that slave owning was always a sin or to exclude all slaveholders from church fellowship.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees*, 279.

<sup>15</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting, Held in Worcester, Massachusetts, September 10–13, 1844* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1844), 66–67. At the 1840 and 1842 meetings, memorialists asked the Board to dedicate itself to the abolition of slavery, to cease soliciting funds from slaveholders, and to remove from service a missionary to West Africa who owned several slaves. *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-First Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Providence, Rhode Island, September 9, 10, 11<sup>th</sup>, 1840* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1840); *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Third Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Norwich, Connecticut, September 13, 14, 15, and 16<sup>th</sup>, 1842* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1842).

<sup>16</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting*, 56.



Apparently unsure of their own authority and voice on such an important and delicate subject, Woods, Stowe, and the other report authors turned to the formulations of the eminent Scottish moral theologian Thomas Chalmers. In 1844, Chalmers, organizer of the Free Church of Scotland, had sent a delegation to the United States to raise money for the new, un-established Presbyterian body. The southern Presbyterian churches were particularly generous, and abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic criticized Chalmers and his church for accepting “slave money.”<sup>17</sup> In his reply to these attacks, Chalmers wrote two letters to Dr. Thomas Smyth of Charleston. In the second, published in 1845, he wrote:

Distinction ought to be made between the character of a system and the character of the persons whose circumstances have implicated them with it. Nor would it always be just if all the recoil and horror wherewith the former is contemplated, were visited in the form of condemnation and moral indignancy upon the latter.

Chalmers applied this observation to the system of slavery. While slavery is a “system chargeable with atrocities and evils,” he wrote, we cannot treat every slaveholder as “an outcast from all the distinctions and privileges of Christian society.” Chalmers explained that a slave master might not have knowingly chosen evil; growing up in a slave economy might have inured him to the atrocities of slavery, and he might have inherited rather than purchased his slaves. Slavery clearly was not like the usual sins. Indeed, Chalmers would have been met with utter confusion if he had applied his distinction between the system of slavery and the act of slaveholding to other sins of concern to antebellum evangelicals, such as licentiousness or intemperance. The fact that slavery was a social and economic system altered its nature as a sin.<sup>18</sup>

The committee compared slavery to the castes of India, “deeply and inveterately inwrought in the very texture of society,” to the tyranny of “arbitrary government,” and to polygamy. The more it studied “God’s method of proceeding” with regard to such social wrongs, the committee explained, the more it was convinced that “in dealing with individuals implicated in these wrongs of longstanding, and intimately interwoven with the relations and movements of the social system, the utmost kindness and forbearance are to be exercised, which are compatible with steady adherence to right principle.” Social wrongs did warrant Christian action, but of a

<sup>17</sup>George Shepperson, “Thomas Chalmers, the Free Church of Scotland, and the South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 17 (November 1951), 517–38. See also Mark A. Noll, “Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) in North America (Ca. 1830–1917),” *Church History* 66, no. 4 (December 1977), 762–77.

<sup>18</sup>Chalmers quoted in *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting*, 59–60.

different sort. Truth and justice had to be balanced with patience, meekness, and forbearance.<sup>19</sup>

There were doctrinal and practical reasons to address social wrongs differently than individual wrongs. Christian truth, the report claimed, would in time work moral changes in the community, changing hearts and minds with regard to slavery. Christian social progress would not be abrupt or violent; the seed of Christian truth had to be planted and given time to grow. The committee asked, "May not the master be *prepared* to break the bonds of the slave, and the oppressive ruler *led* to dispense justice to the subject, and the proud Brahmin fraternally to embrace the man of low caste?" Each would do so cheerfully because of a newfound realization that they are all children of God. The proper and enduring change would not "be like that which works out a political revolution, but that which results by the Divine blessing, in great moral changes in the hearts of individual men." On a practical level, the missionaries had very little power, the report argued, to fight social wrongs. They had not instituted the slave codes, and they did not have the authority to change them. (The report blamed the Indians' white neighbors in the adjacent slave states for introducing slavery and its laws.) If the missionaries were to challenge the system directly, "disastrous consequences" would follow. The report did not specify what these consequences might be, but the insinuation was that if the missionaries publicly opposed slavery, they would no longer be welcome. The choice, then, as the committee posed it, was between deserting the Cherokee and Choctaw churches and schools and sending "back those who compose them to the shades of moral darkness and death, because some among them own slaves," and endeavoring to change the hearts of slaveholders with the power of Christian truth, "conveyed in a spirit of meekness and love."<sup>20</sup>

After the report had been read to the Board, a lengthy debate ensued between the moderates, namely Bacon, Stowe, and Congregational theologian Edward Beecher, and abolitionist members, the most vocal of whom was Amos Phelps. Bacon began with a point of clarification. We agree, he explained, that the system of slavery is an abomination, and that the Board has the power to demand that its missionaries act as it sees fit with regard to slavery. The essential debate between the antislavery memorialists and the authors of the Board's report, then, concerned "whether it is possible for a man in the practice of slaveholding to give credible evidence of being a Christian?" The memorialists said no, but the New Testament, Bacon averred, said otherwise. The Board ought to make the biblical record on this matter perfectly clear,

<sup>19</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting*, 56–60.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 56–62.

said Bacon. It was beyond dispute that the apostles welcomed slaveholders into the churches that they founded and guided. Bacon declared, somewhat grandiosely, "I will not consent to trample the New Testament under foot to accommodate the scruples of any man, however much I may desire to please him."<sup>21</sup>

The abolitionist members of the Board protested. William Brown of New York could not comprehend how the slaveholder could be a worthy Christian if slavery was an atrocious sin. A Dr. Ide of Massachusetts questioned the report's sincerity in denouncing slavery. The committee, he complained, would never have introduced so many "palliatives and exceptions" if they had been discussing theft, fornication, or idolatry. Amos Phelps protested that the report authorized disciplining slaveholders for the crimes associated with slavery—cruelty, buying and selling slaves—but did not advise discipline for slaveholding itself. Phelps thought it nonsensical to condemn the fruits of slavery but not the practice of slaveholding. He introduced an amendment calling for the Board to dissociate itself entirely from slavery and to require missionaries to discipline slaveholders as it would drunkards, gamblers, and other sinners.<sup>22</sup>

Beecher and Stowe responded to the abolitionists' criticism by elaborating upon the concept of social sin. We have biblical warrant for treating slavery differently than drunkenness, theft, or adultery, Beecher began, but there are other reasons for doing so.<sup>23</sup> "Slavery," he explained, "is an organic sin—the others are individual sins." "Slavery is the creature of law, it could not exist without law; it is the result or the action, not of an individual, but of the body politic." While a man lies or steals of his own accord, no individual could make himself a slaveholder without the aid of his or her society. According to Beecher, slavery always involved sin, but not necessarily the sin of the individual slaveholder, who might have inherited slaves and have no good way to emancipate them. It was above all, then, the sin of the body politic, a social sin.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>"Thirty Sixth Anniversary of the American Board," *New York Evangelist* 16 (September 1845), 149.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 150. While serving as the president of Illinois College between 1830 and 1844, Beecher had been one of the founding members of the first antislavery society in Illinois. A personal friend of murdered abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy, Beecher was closer to the abolitionist camp than most moderates. Edward Beecher, *Narrative of Riots at Alton: In Connection with the Death of Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy* (Alton, Ill.: George Holton, 1838).

<sup>24</sup>Beecher's formulation differed from that of his father, Lyman Beecher. In the midst of the ABCFM debate, Lyman wrote to his son Thomas that he wished Edward would "stop all this flummery" and admit that by organic sin he meant "national sin." Lyman's formulation harkened back to more traditional understandings of the sinfulness of society, specifically to covenant theology. Like Edward, Lyman wanted to avoid the abolitionists' unsparing attacks on slaveholders, but he did not believe that one needed to invent new moral categories in order to point to the shared responsibility

Stowe focused the discussion on the biblical method of dealing with social sins. The memorialists, he said, “would have the missionary make out a catalogue of all the sins of a people—their social practices, civil institutions and all and declare indiscriminate war upon them all.” But according to Stowe this was not the biblical method; Christ was not an immediatist. Stowe appealed to Christ’s method of dealing with the Roman dominion over the Jews. Roman rule was unjust and oppressive, but Christ did not condemn it, going so far as to commend the faith of the Roman centurion. (The memorialists, Stowe added, would have had Christ tell the man, “I will do nothing to recognize you as a good man, till you have repented of your oppression—thrown up your commission, and gone about some honest business.”) Stowe also used the examples of blood revenge and polygamy to prove that the biblical method of dealing with social sins was to tolerate them while establishing principles that eventually bring them to an end. Social sins, unlike individual ones, should be dealt with indirectly.<sup>25</sup>

After rejecting an abolitionist amendment presented by Phelps, the Board accepted the Brooklyn report as its authoritative statement on the slavery issue. This was the last straw for the abolitionist members of the Board. They had a long list of grievances against the ABCFM, dating back ten years. The Board had solicited funds from slaveholders, had hired slaveholding missionaries in Africa and in the Indian nations, and had allowed slaveholders to be members of its own organization. In 1846, four break-away missionary societies joined to form the American Missionary Association (AMA), which would exclude slaveholders from membership or mission work, refuse funds from slaveholders, and stand solidly against slavery. Northern congregations responded enthusiastically to the AMA, and the ABCFM began to feel financial pressure to act more decisively on the slavery issue. In 1847, the Board determined that the governing Prudential Committee should write a report, to be presented at the following annual meeting, on the moral responsibility of the Board for the teaching of its missionaries and “the character of its churches.” The Prudential Committee sent Board Secretary Selah Treat on an extended tour of the Indian missions to collect information.<sup>26</sup> He returned and filed his report in June 1848.

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of all Americans to rid their nation of slavery. Edward did not accept his father’s suggestion. While the category of “national sin” served to draw attention to shared moral responsibility, Beecher’s “organic sin” served the more specific purpose of maintaining the sinfulness of slavery without calling all slaveholders sinners. March Maxine Arkin, “Edward Beecher: The Development of an Ecclesiastical Career, 1803–1844,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983), 446–47.

<sup>25</sup>“Thirty Sixth Anniversary of the American Board,” 150.

<sup>26</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Eighth Annual Meeting, Held in Buffalo, New York, September 8–10, 1847* (Boston: T. R. Marvin,

Treat's report was not encouraging. He found that in the Cherokee churches there were 237 members, of whom twenty-four were slaveholders and twenty-three were slaves, and 872 members in the Choctaw churches, of whom thirty-eight were slaveholders and one hundred and four were slaves. Both missions employed slave labor. The Cherokee mission employed only one slave, at the slave's request. However, the Choctaw missionaries employed at least ten slaves and indicated an unwillingness to end this practice. Treat reported that, having obtained their views on slavery from white slaveholders in neighboring states, the Indians expelled freed slaves, excluded abolitionists, and discouraged emancipation. Slaveholding converts received no instructions different from other converts and were never excluded from the church. Treat complained that it did not seem to be the aim of the missionaries to exert any "direct influence" on the system of slavery.<sup>27</sup>

In their communications to Treat, Worcester, and Butler of the Cherokee mission expressed an unwillingness to apply the discipline of the church to evils that were only "impliedly condemned by the general law of love." Choctaw mission leader Cyrus Kingsbury reported that he found nothing in the example of the savior or the apostles to warrant condemnation of slavery as a system. The Choctaw mission, he explained, followed the apostolic example in restricting their efforts to instructing masters and servants on their mutual obligations.<sup>28</sup> The *Independent*, a popular antislavery newspaper, published a letter from an unnamed Choctaw missionary who claimed that during his visit, Treat had tried to convince the missionaries to ask for a dismissal from the Board. At the time of Treat's departure, the Choctaw mission drafted a letter requesting separation from the Board, but then decided against sending it. Other missionaries wrote that they should not have to resign since the Board, not the missionaries, had changed its policies and departed from the scriptures.<sup>29</sup>

On June 22, 1848, Treat wrote a letter to the Choctaw mission that he sent to the Cherokee mission as well. He wrote on behalf of the Prudential Committee, but his tone was personal. Treat was too much of a moralist to exercise

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1847), 59; *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting, Held in Boston, Massachusetts, September 12–15, 1848* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1848), 80.

<sup>27</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting*, 81–92.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 92–102.

<sup>29</sup>"The Mission Among the Choctaws," *Independent* I (April 12, 1849), 4; Copy of a letter from the Choctaw Mission to the Prudential Committee, prepared about the time of Rev. Treat's visit and departure, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.4, Vol. 6, No. 74; "The Mission Among the Choctaws," *Independent* I (April 26, 1849), front page. On the *Independent*, see Hugh Davis, 141–64.

diplomacy. He informed the missionaries that “there are principles involved in your mode of procedure from which we are constrained to dissent.” We may admit, Treat wrote, that every act of slaveholding is not sinful, but nevertheless, slavery is always “opposed to the principles of the gospel.” It is understandable that you held your tongues while establishing the mission, he wrote, but now that you have become part of the community and have won converts, has not the time come to speak the truth? Without bothering to mince words or to soothe feelings, Treat told the missionaries to start preaching against slavery, particularly to slaveholding converts, and to stop exposing the Board to the embarrassment of hiring slave labor.<sup>30</sup>

Treat’s letter turned the missionaries against the Board. The Cherokee mission leaders felt that they followed the Board’s wishes more faithfully than had the missionaries to the Choctaw. Worcester chided Treat for not preparing a separate letter for the Cherokee mission and predicted that Treat’s correspondence spelled the end of the Board’s connection to the Choctaw. He reminded Treat that if the Board abandoned the missions, they would no doubt fall under the control of the Presbyterian mission board, which had proslavery leadership. Surely, Worcester thought, the Board could do more to oppose slavery by supporting the missionaries in their gradualist stance than by turning them over to proslavery governance.<sup>31</sup> For his part, Kingsbury refused to follow Treat’s instructions and suggested that the missionaries resign.

The Board turned to damage control. In February, they published a notice explaining that Treat’s letter expressed his own opinion rather than the Board’s instructions. The principles established in 1845 still held, and the

<sup>30</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting*, 102–10.

<sup>31</sup>S. A. Worcester to S. B. Treat, August 17, 1848, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.1, Vol. 13, No. 204. In 1853, Worcester wrote to Treat to describe the way in which Evan Jones of the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU) dealt with slavery. Beginning in 1821, Jones and his son John established a ministry among Cherokee “full-bloods,” meaning those whose primary language was Cherokee rather than English. Few full-bloods owned slaves, and there were only four slaveholding Choctaw converts in the ABMU’s mission churches. In 1850, Jones’s Union threatened to withhold financial support unless the missionaries removed all slaveholders from the churches. Jones did not believe that the slaveholding church members were sinners and was reluctant to carry out the Union’s wishes. Nevertheless, he capitulated and, in complete violation of the Baptist Churches’ congregational autonomy, presented the four slaveholders with letters of dismissal. Such letters were usually granted by pastors to church members who wished to leave one church and join another elsewhere in the same denomination. The four slaveholders, who did not wish to leave the church and had no other church to turn to, were livid. Jones’s failure to stand up to his Union appalled Worcester, who worried that Jones’s actions would give the ABCFM the impression that it was possible for the mission churches to affect a complete separation from slavery. Worcester asked Treat if he would have the ABCFM missionaries do as Jones did, and excommunicate slaveholders. S. A. Worcester to S. B. Treat, August 8, 1853, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.1, Vol. 13, No. 274. On Jones, see McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees*.

Board remained supportive of its missionaries and their decision to admit slaveholders to the church. The Choctaw mission's hiring of slaves remained an issue, one the Board hoped would soon be resolved. In April, after cordial relations had been reestablished, Kingsbury wrote a letter officially responding to Treat's June letter. Kingsbury assured the Board that the missionaries to the Choctaw were convinced of the evils of slavery, which had long been the subject of their prayerful deliberations. Ultimately, however, they had to choose between remaining in a place under the "dark and ominous shadow" of slavery and abandoning their evangelical responsibilities.<sup>32</sup>

Kingsbury turned to the one issue still on the table: the mission's use of slave labor. The Board had, he explained, greatly underestimated the difficulty of finding adequate free labor in the midst of a slave economy. What free laborers could be found tended to be disreputable and could not be trusted to work in the schools, which were "schools of females," and amongst the missionaries' families during their frequent travels. Local slaves, by contrast, were eager to work for the missionaries, who treated them well, and were often people of "established character." He assured the Board that the local population understood that the missionaries employed slaves reluctantly and from necessity. Kingsbury's letter revealed an unusually acute understanding of the moral complexities of slavery. "We are aware," he wrote, "that those living in the free states consider it impracticable to dispense with the products of slave labor." If you, living in a free state, cannot so much as do without southern cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco, he chided, do not ask us to do without slaves while living in slave territory. "We have no alternative. If we want a horse shod, a slave must do it. If we stop for the night at a public house, a slave must take care of our horse and cook our food. If we want repairs made, or a house built, or land cleared and cultivated, there is often no other one but a slave to do it." "The thought has occurred to our minds," he wrote, why we should be rebuked for adding in the smallest way to the profits of slavery while the rest of the world pours far greater sums into the slave economy without suffering the slightest guilt.<sup>33</sup> Passive aggressive

<sup>32</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting*, 102–11; *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Fortieth Annual Meeting, Held in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, September 11–14, 1849* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1849), 73–78; "Letter from the Choctaw Mission," *The Puritan Recorder* 34 (September 1849), 153.

<sup>33</sup>*Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Fortieth Annual Meeting*, 76–77; "Letter from the Choctaw Mission," 153. Bacon wondered why the mission could not find Indians to serve as free laborers: "Here is a mystery to us. Can not the *Indians* work? Or will they not work? Are they all too rich to work? Or are they all too proud to work?" The apparent absence of any Indian labor might have had something to do with the fact that mission converts tended to be either slaves or Indian elites. [Bacon], "The American Board and Slavery," 284.



though he was, Kingsbury had a far deeper understanding of social sin than did any of the theologians of the Board.<sup>34</sup>

In 1853, the Choctaw Council passed a law forbidding the teaching of slaves or their children to read and write in any of the schools of the Nation. The Board and the missionaries were now in agreement. Together they decided to close down all mission schools and restrict the mission to preaching, which was not affected by the new law. However, the Board continued negotiations with the Choctaws to reopen the schools. In 1855, in a final effort to hammer out a compromise between denouncing slavery and supporting its missionaries, it sent its new secretary, George W. Wood, to meet with the missionaries to the Choctaw and Cherokee to draft a Declaration of Principles. The resulting document clearly stated that the system of slavery was always sinful, but listed conditions that mitigated the sin of slaveholders, including laws against emancipation, the obligations of guardianship, and the “demands of humanity.” The declaration warned the missionaries not to make “this plea of necessity or the good of the slave” a pretense for failing to encourage emancipation.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this agreement, abolitionist pressure intensified. In 1858, Treat suggested to the Choctaw mission that they terminate their connection to the ABCFM and affiliate with the proslavery Presbyterian mission board. Kingsbury expressed shock. On what basis, he asked, can you possibly condemn us? We adhere to scripture and to the Board’s instructions as agreed upon in 1845. And yet, Kingsbury complained, you are abandoning us to proslavery religious bodies that have been charged by the Board with “a lamentable defection from some of the first and most elementary ideas of Christian morality.” From the missionary’s perspective, the Board’s actions were unjustifiable. The Board was in an extremely difficult position. Even the *Independent* admitted that the missionaries had the better of the argument. And yet the Board had to answer to its donors, who had decided, by 1858, that the missionaries’ moderation was not acceptable. The middle ground had given way, and if the missionaries refused to act as abolitionists,

<sup>34</sup>Charles Hodge agreed with Kingsbury on this point. By claiming that hiring slaves was wrong because it gave encouragement to slavery, he wrote, the Board was “straining at a gnat, while swallowing a camel.” Hodge continued, “The encouragement given to slavery by the missions in hiring a few slaves, much to their own benefit, is as nothing, compared with that afforded by the wholesale use of the products of slave labour, by the good people of Boston.” Hodge, “Article I,” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 21 (January 1849), 1–42, here 27.

<sup>35</sup>*Report of the American Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting, Held in Hartford, Connecticut, September 12–15, 1854* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1854), 23; *Report of the American Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Presented at the Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting, Held in Utica, New York, September 11–14, 1855* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1855), 18–31; “Meeting of the American Board,” *The Puritan Recorder* 39 (September 1854), 151; “Meeting of the American Board,” *The Puritan Recorder* 40 (September 1855), 150.

the only support they could find would come from a proslavery board. The ABCFM severed its connection to the Choctaw mission in 1859. In 1860, soon after Worcester's death, the Board ended its dwindling mission to the Cherokee. The Board no longer harbored any hope that it could persuade the Indian nations of the evil of slavery; the sin of slavery had proven itself not only to be organic but also to be a prolific and resistant weed.<sup>36</sup>

### III. SOCIAL SIN

The ABCFM controversy spilled over into the pages of the nation's periodicals and antislavery pamphlets. In strongly worded condemnations of the Board, abolitionists, along with the conservative Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge, argued that the idea of social sin diluted individual moral responsibility and blurred moral reasoning. Their criticism illustrated how far the moderates had traveled from an orthodox understanding of sin.

The *Christian Citizen* argued that the idea of social sin absolves individuals from blame for "incorporated or organized sins," even though these individuals may be "stockholders and directors in the hugest systems of iniquity that was ever organized and sanctified by two centuries of legislation." If this is true, the author added, then idolatry and the burning of widows are just organic sins "for which the nation is responsible, not its constituents, every one of whom participates in these inhuman rites." The leaders of the ABCFM apparently believed that there could be sins without sinners.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Prudential Committee to the Choctaw Mission, October 5, 1858, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.4, Vol. 6, No. 82; Copy, C. Kingsbury to the Rev. S. B. Treat, December 24, 1858, ABCFM Papers, Film Manuscript No. 32, Series 18.3.4, Vol. 6, No. 82; "The Mission Among the Choctaws," *Independent I* (April 12, 1849), 4. In January, 1860, Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church debated the question of funding the ABCFM. Henry Ward Beecher supported the ABCFM. In the end, the church decided to continue funding the organization, against the vociferous objection of Theodore Tilton. Tilton, at the time a close friend of Beecher's, would later accuse Beecher of committing adultery with Tilton's wife. Tilton, then twenty-four years old, delivered a two-hour speech in which he argued that the real issue was not the question of slavery's being a sin per se, but the right of the Church to set moral standards and its need to avoid the appearance of tolerating evil. Tilton appealed to the claim of Albert Barnes that without the support of the church, slavery could not continue to exist. If the Board, with its wide influence and power, had chosen to act against slavery in the beginning, Tilton argued, then it would have "been like a battering-ram against the bulwark of oppression." Tilton ended his speech with theatrics. He pulled out one of the Sharpe's rifles that Beecher's church had sent to Kansas in 1856 to arm antislavery settlers against the slavery supporters pouring into Kansas from Missouri. Once, Tilton continued, Beecher had supported liberty with arms—could he not do so now with words? William Henry Burr, *Speech of Theodore Tilton, Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, January 5, 1860* (New York: John A. Gray, 1860), 43. On the place of this debate within the Beecher–Tilton scandal, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher–Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup>"The Late Meeting of the American Board," *Boston Recorder* 30 (October 1845), 166.

William Lloyd Garrison argued that the only way to maintain moral clarity was to define slavery as a sin in every case. He feared that admitting the possibility of sinless slaveholding would alleviate the guilty consciences of slaveholders and weaken their urge to repent. Garrison understood the need to convict slaveholders of their sin. "Paradoxes may amuse," he wrote, "but they never convince the mind." "To descant upon the wrongs of the slave-system, and yet exonerate supporters of it from reprehension, is to deal in absurdities: we might preach in this manner until the crack of doom, and never gain a convert." No slaveholder would choose to endure the sacrifice of freeing his slaves if he did not believe that doing so was necessary for his salvation.<sup>38</sup>

In 1845, the Glasgow Emancipation Society published a pamphlet accusing the ABCFM of using the good name of the Reverend Chalmers "to build up a system the most impious, unjust, and anti-Christian, that perhaps ever was attempted to be established by men calling themselves by the name of Christ." The Emancipation Society argued that this system, that is, the idea of organic sin, subverted the foundations of moral government. They took the Board to be arguing that slaveholders should be treated differently than other sinners because their sin is of "longstanding and intimately interwoven with . . . the social system." They wrote, "Thus you consider the individual sinner less blameworthy, in proportion to the number whom he can induce to join him in his sin." By this logic, a murderer would be less guilty if murder had become "interwoven" in society. One man holding slaves, alone, would be an abomination, whereas a slaveholder in a slaveholding society merits kindness and forbearance.<sup>39</sup> The Board's critics insisted that the fact that slaveholders had managed to spread slavery throughout southern society did nothing to mitigate their sinfulness.

During an exchange of letters with Beecher published in the *Boston Recorder*, Phelps summed up the abolitionist case against social sin. He wrote that the idea of social sin:

confounds all moral distinctions; which denies that they have their foundation in the nature and relation of things as God constituted them; which makes that wrong today which was right yesterday, and that right in South Carolina which is at the same moment wrong in Massachusetts, and that sin in me which is holiness in you; which maintains, in a word, that what human civil law ordains and general social custom demands,

<sup>38</sup>William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (New York: Arno, 1969), 66.

<sup>39</sup>*The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the Rev. Dr. Chalmers, on Christian Fellowship with Slaveholders: An Address, by the Glasgow Emancipation Society, To Christians of All Denominations, but Especially to Members of the Free Church of Scotland* (Glasgow: David Russell, 1845), 1–11.

however devilish in principle, in both right and duty in practice, provided it be only done reluctantly and in the hope of something better by and by.<sup>40</sup>

The Bible, Phelps argued, never distinguishes two categories of sin, one to be denounced immediately and one to be patiently endured. Slavery was either a sin or it was not.

Although he was no abolitionist, Charles Hodge agreed. With his keen nose for unorthodoxy, Hodge detected heresy in Treat's letter to the Choctaw Mission. Treat had argued that slavery was a sin, but that an individual could hold slaves without guilt if he did so for the good of the slave. Hodge argued that Treat's letter to the missions was founded on the doctrine of expediency, a philosophy that equates right and wrong with beneficial and injurious, and "makes the end sanctify the means, and teaches that an action may be externally wrong and internally right." According to this doctrine, a man can commit an acknowledged sin without guilt if he does so for the sake of the greater good.<sup>41</sup>

Hodge explained that this was morally pernicious logic. According to Hodge, "No man can sin innocently. No man stands acquitted in the sight of God for doing what God forbids. If slaveholding is sinful, all slaveholders are sinners." Of course circumstances are relevant, but circumstances can never justify a man in committing sin. Treat's advice to the missionaries revealed the absurdity of the moral logic behind the idea of social sin. Treat had written, in Hodge's words, that "slaveholding is sinful, but you need not say so. You may choose your time. You may wait for suitable occasions." No one would speak this way of an actual sin, Hodge explained. No one would tell a missionary to take their time in denouncing murder or robbery. Hodge quoted the abolitionist William Goodell to disparage the antislavery moderates, who tended to be Congregationalists or New School Presbyterians: "When you convince an Old School man of sin, he will forsake it. But when you have convinced a New School man that a thing is sinful, you have still to satisfy him that it is expedient to abandon it."<sup>42</sup> Hodge agreed with the Board's abolitionist critics that slaveholding was either a sin in every case or not a sin in itself. Abolitionists believed the former, and Hodge the latter. Where the abolitionists found moral cowardice in the Board's reasoning, Hodge saw the inevitably illogical results of the effort to categorize the morally neutral act of slaveholding as a sin. Despite their biblical heterodoxy, political radicalism, and social marginalization, the abolitionists shared with Hodge an evangelical understanding of sin. Sin was disobedience to God; it imperiled

<sup>40</sup>Amos Phelps, "Prof. Stowe's Bible Method Examined," *Boston Recorder* 30 (December 1845), 194.

<sup>41</sup>Hodge, "Article I," 36.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 35–36, 40–41.

the soul and the church. It had to be eradicated immediately. If slavery was truly a sin, then every man or woman who chose to continue to own slaves was rebelling against God, imperiling their souls, and undermining the sanctity of their community and the nation. Immediate emancipation was the only consistent, logical recourse. And yet, until very late in the game, most northern Protestants rejected this remedy and looked instead to gradual emancipation. Slavery was a sin, but the sort of sin that could be tolerated for a time. Most slaveholders were sinners, but their society's laws and customs limited their moral responsibility for slavery.<sup>43</sup> Through the power of moral suasion, Christians would convince slaveholders of their sins, and together, northern and southern Christians would bring about a peaceful, gradual end to slavery. As appealing and conservative as this plan must have seemed to them, it was radical in its approach to sin.

In their efforts to explain how a sin could be worthy of toleration, the moderates departed from their theological tradition. Protestant Christianity looked to individual salvation, moments of transfiguring grace that utterly changed the heart. Antebellum religion, with its revivals, perfectionists, and increasing focus on morality, put enormous faith in the power and responsibility of regenerated individuals. From perfectionists like Charles Grandison Finney to the Calvinist followers of Samuel Hopkins, Protestants looked to individuals to save society. The advocates of the idea of social sin seemed instead to see a church that gradually altered the organic sin of a community through moral and spiritual progress. The idea of social sin mitigated the moral responsibility of the individual and implied that salvation, both social and individual, might be gradual and evolutionary.

The moderates compared themselves to Paul, evangelizing unconverted slave societies without the power to overturn slavery. Speaking of Indian slaveholding, Beecher had argued that the Board had the right "to follow for a time towards communities in a low state of knowledge and moral culture the same forbearing course that the apostles did towards the newly converted

<sup>43</sup>Southern slaveholders did not necessarily appreciate the attempts of the moderates to limit individual moral responsibility for slavery. In 1856, proslavery Protestant William A. Smith, a professor of moral and intellectual philosophy and president of Randolph-Macon College, wrote on behalf of his fellow slaveholders: "We ask no mere apology on the score of necessity, and we can certainly claim none on the ground of ignorance." Smith agreed with the abolitionists that if slavery was wrong in the abstract, it was wrong in all cases; to call slavery a sin meant that every slaveholder was a sinner. "To say, as some are accustomed to do, that 'slavery is certainly wrong in the *abstract*,' that is, in plain terms, in itself sinful, but that they cannot help themselves, appears to me to be wholly unfounded. It assumes that a man may be absolutely compelled to commit sin. This certainly cannot be true." Smith was offended by the idea of organic sin, which he understood to imply that southern slaveholders lacked the moral or intellectual resources necessary to possess full moral responsibility. William A. Smith, *Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery* (Nashville: Stevenson and Evans, 1856), 12–14.

pagans of the Roman world.”<sup>44</sup> The supposed backwardness of the Indian nations meant that the biblical record on slavery was especially relevant to their case. The apostolic example applied directly to the Indian nations. It was the duty of the missionaries, then, not to foment social revolution, but to spread the faith, knowing that social progress would follow in the wake of Christian conversion.

Christian and democratic white society, however, had none of the excuses that the Choctaw, Cherokee, ancient Israelites, or Roman converts to Christianity could have proffered. The biblical example no longer applied; the time had come to eradicate American slavery. Beecher explained that God’s mode of treating organic sins such as slaveholding in a primitive age did not apply to the vastly differing circumstances of modern society.<sup>45</sup> While no one should ignore the biblical record and refuse in every case to include slaveholders in the church, he added, neither should modern Christians have to follow the example of the early church.<sup>46</sup>

The antislavery Protestant argument from biblical principles implied that morality had progressed. Despite the absence of any scriptural indication of slavery’s sinfulness, Channing, Wayland, Beecher, and other antislavery moderates insisted that slavery had always been a sin in the mind of God. However, God had chosen to reveal its sinfulness gradually, through the progressive unfolding of moral principles. The moderate argument from Christian principles implied that the progress of society altered the degree of individual responsibility for the sin of slaveholding. Perhaps the backward state of the Indian nations reduced the culpability of individual Choctaw and Cherokee slave-owners. However, the advanced development of American society had permitted the full flowering of revelation, the antislavery message of which was now clear to northern Christians.<sup>47</sup>

But how did one know when it was time to confront a social sin directly, and how would one go about doing so? The very status of slavery as a social sin made it very difficult to know when a society was prepared for emancipation. Slavery was, after all, organic, deeply interwoven with the laws, institutions, economy, and habits of a society. How would a society so enmeshed in a social sin come to understand and free itself from that sin? Did the very fact of a society being a slave culture not make it so morally

<sup>44</sup>Beecher, “Dr. Beecher on Organic Sins – No. III,” 174. Condescension could produce a very different perspective; Theodore Tilton concluded that if slavery under white Americans was brutal, slavery under barbaric Indians must be horrid beyond belief. Burr, *Speech of Theodore Tilton*, 17.

<sup>45</sup>“The Late Meeting of the American Board,” 166.

<sup>46</sup>Beecher, “Dr. Beecher on Organic Sins – No. II,” 170; Beecher, “Dr. Beecher on Organic Sins – No. 9,” 201.

<sup>47</sup>On antislavery and the idea of moral progress, see Molly Oshatz, “The Problem of Moral Progress: The Slavery Debates and the Development of Liberal Protestantism in the United States,” *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (August 2008): 225–250.

backward that it could not recognize its own sin? The moderates put their faith in moral suasion. The good Christian people of the North would persuade Christian southerners of the evil of slavery, and, once the leaders of society and the churches were convinced, slavery would end.

The moderate defenders of the Board apparently did not realize that the idea of organic sin undermined the hope of moral suasion. The moderates had labeled slavery an organic sin largely because they recognized how difficult, even impossible, it was for even the most well-intentioned individuals to extricate themselves from it. Slavery shaped the South's economy, identity, and culture and, according to the moderates, it limited the ability of individuals to act rightly. Yet, while they acknowledged the tremendous power of the organic forces of law, custom, and culture over the slaveholder's conscience and actions, they continued to insist that the moral suasion of individuals could end slavery. As the Civil War neared, the moderates' faith in moral suasion came into conflict with their observations about the moral complexity of slavery. Their lingering commitments to individualism made them unwilling to consider social means for eradicating social sin and left them without a viable plan for ending slavery. The North and the South were becoming two different societies. In the entire course of human history, it has never been easy to imagine how one society could peacefully eradicate the social sins of another.

#### IV. THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

Emancipation gave northern Protestant reformers cause for great optimism. If His servants could manage to find peaceful rather than violent means of overcoming social sin, there would be no limits to what God could accomplish. Whereas the antislavery moderates put the idea of social sin to essentially conservative uses, the leaders of the Social Gospel used it to argue for social reform. This change in the implications of social sin had everything to do with the example of abolition. In hindsight, slavery was the ultimate example of social sin, and the path to emancipation provided crucial lessons about and needed motivation for the overcoming of new forms of social sin. Writing in 1865, Edward Beecher portrayed the eradication of American slavery as the beginning of a grand social project:

We have seen the malignant power of slavery to corrupt religion and lead to apostasy. Unchristianized systems of political economy, commerce, and government, exert the same corrupting power. The leaven of the gospel has not done its work until it has leavened the whole lump. Now that God has smitten slavery unto death, he has opened the way for the redemption and sanctification of our whole social system, which was before



impossible. We are therefore loudly called upon to study this problem as never before."<sup>48</sup>

According to Beecher, God had at last removed the organic sin of slavery that had corrupted the faith and frustrated the progress of his kingdom. Perhaps because he had been aware of the ability of the institution of slavery to damage so many aspects of life, and of the incredible difficulty of ridding the nation of its organic sin, Beecher saw emancipation as a promise of greater transformations to come. The Church was ordained, he wrote, to bring the entire society—the government, nation, economy, the arts and sciences, and the schools—under Christian influence. Regenerate individuals, following the will of God and freed from the burden of slavery, would now Christianize the entire society. Interestingly, Beecher concluded his prophecy not with a call to pray, to discern God's will and draw on his power, but instead with an assignment. Edward Beecher's hopes rested on the study of social problems.<sup>49</sup>

Like Beecher, the early Social Gospel leader Washington Gladden associated victory over slavery with the fight against other complex social ills. "Now that slavery is out of the way," he wrote, "the questions that concern our free laborers are coming forward." Because labor issues were not only economic but also moral and religious in nature, "the pulpit must have something to say about them."<sup>50</sup> Slavery's defeat opened the way for other projects of

<sup>48</sup>Edward Beecher, "The Scriptural Philosophy of Congregationalism and of Councils," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 22 (April 1865), 284–315, here 312.

<sup>49</sup>Edward's more famous brother, Henry Ward Beecher, blamed "great organic laws" for the South's treason: "Why was the North valid, healthful? Because her laws and institutions promoted freedom and the doctrines of liberty. It was not because we were by nature more virtuous than the people of the South; but we were under the influence of great organic laws that were inciting us to conduct which was wiser and better than we individually knew or purposed. . . . And they of the South, on the other hand, were unconsciously under the influence of the great organic laws which sprang from radically vicious institutions. . . . The people of the South were what they were, not by reason of voluntary wickedness, but by reason of the institutions that were behind them, and that pushed them forward, as tides push ships; and our excellence was attributable not so much to ourselves as to the pressure of the great laws and institutions under which we were acting." A proponent of Herbert Spencer, Beecher believed in the progressive development of society. Like Spencer, and unlike the followers of the Social Gospel, he did not believe that this progress depended on the Christian reform of social and economic institutions. Henry Ward Beecher, "Conditions of a Restored Union," *Patriotic Addresses in America and England, from 1850 to 1885, on Slavery, the Civil War, and the Development of Civil Liberty in the United States*, ed. John R. Howard (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1887), 713–35, here 717–18.

<sup>50</sup>Washington Gladden, *Working Men and their Employers* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, 1876), 3. Aside from the first historian of the Social Gospel, Charles Howard Hopkins, who discussed a few examples of earlier interest in social salvation, Timothy L. Smith has been the only historian to argue for a direct relationship between the antebellum era and the Social Gospel. In his 1957 study, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon), Smith argued that the perfectionism, ecumenism, and millennialism issuing from

social reconstruction. Perhaps other complex social sins could also be overcome, and perhaps careful, expert attention could do the work previously accomplished by bloodshed and suffering.

Beecher, Gladden, and Rauschenbusch looked to the example of the abolition of slavery in the United States as a sign of both hope and of warning. The example of American abolition offered hope that social sins could be eradicated despite being profoundly embedded in the social fabric. The same example served as a warning that, unless Christians acted immediately, carefully, and in unison, social sins might find their end once again in violent fratricidal conflict.

In 1876, Gladden gave his take on the slavery debates. Full of the confidence of someone speaking about slavery after the Civil War, Gladden wrote that “there is no express legislation against it in the New Testament; but there is no great need of express legislation against wearing fur overcoats in July.” He repeated the antislavery biblical argument from principles: “What Christianity did was to create a moral atmosphere in which slavery could not exist.” Despite the efforts of those whom Gladden termed “pettifogging theologians” to confuse matters, it was clear to Gladden that the spirit of the Bible had successfully undermined slavery.<sup>51</sup>

And yet most Christians had resisted abolitionism. Gladden regarded slavery’s violent end as an object lesson in the need to accept and act upon newly emerging truths. In 1886, Gladden compared the rejection and eventual acceptance of abolitionism to the rejection and eventual acceptance of Galileo’s discoveries. In both cases, scriptural interpretation had stood in the way of truth, with lamentable effects. “If we had been able to comprehend [the sinfulness of slavery] a few years sooner,” wrote Gladden, “we should have been saved all the strife and bloodshed of the last generation.”<sup>52</sup> In an installation sermon preached in 1899, Gladden called on the next generation to embrace the task of social reform rather than to risk the “tempest of blood and sin” that the nation suffered for its cowardly temporizing on the issue of slavery.<sup>53</sup>

Eighteen years later, Rauschenbusch labeled the solidarity of the race in sin the “kingdom of evil.” Rauschenbusch argued that the surrounding society’s

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antebellum evangelical revivalism made Protestant a strong social force before the Civil War (161). On the theology of the Social Gospel, see William McGuire King, “‘History as Revelation’ in the Theology of the Social Gospel,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 76 (January 1983), 109–29.

<sup>51</sup>Gladden, *Working Men and their Employers*, 30–31.

<sup>52</sup>Washington Gladden, “Comprehension,” October, 1886, Washington Gladden Papers (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library), Film Manuscript No. 65, Roll 19, No. 290.

<sup>53</sup>Washington Gladden, “The Installation of a New Pastor, Toledo,” September 21, 1899, Washington Gladden Papers, Film Manuscript No. 65, Roll 31, No. 774.

moral habits and expectations, as well as the evils of previous generations, contributed to human sinfulness. He referred to slavery, racism, and lynching in order to illustrate the social and historical nature of sin:

When negroes are hunted from a Northern city like beasts, or when a Southern city degrades the whole nation by turning the savage inhumanity of a mob into a public festivity, we are continuing to sin because our fathers created the conditions of sin by the African slave trade and by the unearned wealth they gathered from slave labour for generations.

According to Rauschenbusch, slavery demonstrated the deep truth of original sin—we transmit our sins from generation to generation. And yet, Rauschenbusch believed there was hope. Drawing on the German theologian Frederic Schleiermacher, Rauschenbusch argued that because sin was predominantly social in nature, redemption must be a social process as well.<sup>54</sup>

We do not sin alone, and we can only be saved together. Remove the theological language, and this is the essential insight of modern social science—our actions have social origins and social consequences. It took the nation's most fundamental moral controversy to force Protestant intellectuals to begin to attend to the social nature of morality and salvation. The slavery conflict proved that sin transcended the individual and that mere individual salvation was insufficient.

<sup>54</sup>Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1917), 92–93.