

Chapter 138 – The Slavery Issue Causes A Schism Within The Protestant Churches



Dates:
1607-1845

Sections:

- The Christian Church Is A Unifying Force In America’s History
- The Second Awakening Begins To Fray Church Bonds
- Laymen Critics Blast Church Silence Over The Slavery Issue
- The Anti-Slavery Societies Also Call For Church Action

Date: 1607-1825

The Christian Church Is A Unifying Force In America’s History



Church In Dunbarton, NH

Up to the 1830’s, America’s Protestant churches have played a powerful role in binding the nation together around shared Christian beliefs and aspirations - - as noted by the French visitor, DeTocqueville, in his journals:

America is...the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls; and the country where (Christianity) exercises its greatest empire is at the same time the most enlightened and most free.

This is true despite the vast proliferation of denominations that take hold, the most dominant in the early nineteenth century being the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians.

Number Of Churches In America

	1790	1860
Methodist Episcopalian	700	20,000
Baptist	900	12,000
Presbyterian	700	6,000
Roman Catholic	NA	2,500
Jewish Synagogues	NA	77

Mark Knoll, The Civil War As Theological Crisis

Amidst this diversity, the vast majority of Americans are active in their churches, either as formal members or as regular attendees at Sunday worship services.

For many, these gatherings are the centerpiece of their moral, intellectual and social lives.

Attendees look for daily guidance to their ministers, many of whom are trained at one of the nation’s sixty universities, almost all founded and run by the clergy.

American Universities Founded By Churches

Name	Year	Church Affiliation
Harvard	1636	Congregationalist
William & Mary	1693	Church of England
Yale	1701	Congregationalist
Princeton	1746	Presbyterian
Columbia	1754	Church of England
Penn	1757	Anglican/Methodists
Brown	1764	Baptist
Rutgers	1766	Dutch Reformed
Dartmouth	1769	Congregationalist

Each denomination develops its own doctrines, governing hierarchies and liturgies – and each is focused on solidifying and expanding its membership rolls.

Despite doctrinal differences, most church-goers hear a fairly common message from the pulpit. Read “the good book;” live according to the Golden Rule; band together to make America into St. Augustine’s “shining city on a hill,” a beacon of God’s light for the rest of the world to see and to emulate.

America’s churches and divinity schools and clergymen are there to insure, as De Tocqueville says, that the “soul” of the country remains enlightened and dedicated to “essential goodness.”

They are also there to preserve the Union. The old world has been torn apart by religious conflicts, but America has always found in its churches a powerful source of national unity.

Date: 1825 - 1840

The Second Awakening Begins To Fray Church Bonds

This church unity, however, begins to fray in response to the religious revivals of the 1825-1840 period known as the Second Great Awakening.

At first the turmoil centers on religious doctrine, mainly within the Presbyterian denomination. It pits the so-called “Old School” ministers such as Charles Hodge and Lyman Beecher, often associated with the Princeton Theological Seminary, against the “revivalist” preachers of the “New School,” such as Charles Finney and the Unitarians.

At stake, according to the “Old Schoolers,” is the very essence of Calvinism, which shuns the notion of individual men interpreting the Bible on their own, “reforming their own way” to salvation, or mixing religious and secular affairs.

Doctrinal Debate Among The Presbyterians

	“Old School”	“New School”
Salvation open to:	The Elect	Everyman
Based upon:	Predestination	Free Will
Bible interpretation:	Literal	Figurative
Final authority:	Church Hierarchy	Each Individual
Preaching style:	From The Pulpit	In The Crowd
Symbols:	Charles Hodge Lyman Beecher	Charles Finney The Unitarians

As “New School” revival meetings win more converts, it becomes clear that differences here are irreconcilable.

At their 1837 general assembly, the Old School faction carries a vote to oust the four main New School synods, thus effectively dividing the Presbyterians for good.

But the effects of the Second Awakening extend far beyond internal debates over Presbyterian doctrine.

Instead they foster a new generation who believe that every man is capable of achieving eternal salvation by striving for Christ-like “moral perfection” – reforming both themselves and their society as a whole.

Soon enough these “reformers” band into organized movements. Some promote temperance; others try to strike down abuses directed at child labor, the indigent or the incarcerated; a few seek greater rights for women, especially related to suffrage.

But one “cause” soon takes center stage – putting an end to slavery in America.

In large part this results from the work of one man in particular, the Presbyterian New School preacher Charles Grandison Finney – who directly touches the hearts and minds of many of the most important white abolitionists of the time, including Lloyd Garrison, Theodor Dwight Weld, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Gerrit Smith and James Birney.

Together these and other reformers begin to pressure the Protestant churches to end the “moral stain” of slavery.

Date: 1830's - forward

Laymen Critics Blast Church Silence Over The Slavery Issue

From Jamestown forward, the only consistent church opposition to slavery has come from the Quakers and from black clergymen.

The others have simply chosen to look the other way.

This evasion is now challenged by white reformers like Lloyd Garrison who call on the churches to play a decisive role in ending slavery.

Nothing but extensive revivals of pure religion can save our country. Emancipation has to be from Christianity.

By 1836, however, Garrison concludes that the institutional church has substituted “legal righteousness and ritual observance” for the true meaning of the Gospel. His wrath is particularly directed at the passivity of churchmen like his fellow Bostonian, Old School Pastor Lyman Beecher, who he says...

Sides only with the rich and powerful, goes with the South, lulls conscience-ness, aligns with traffickers in souls.

Garrison is not alone in his castigation of the white churches. Another very visible critic is the fiery Stephen Symonds Foster.

Foster grows up in New Hampshire, in a family which speaks out against slavery. He decides to do missionary work and attends Dartmouth College, where he invites the abolitionist Angelina Grimke to speak to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society. After graduation, he enrolls at Union Theological Seminary, but leaves when the administration tries to silence his dissent. Henceforth he will embrace the label of a “come outer,” after the biblical admonition “come out from among them...and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you.”

In 1839 Foster becomes an itinerant lecturer for the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, and is nearly beaten to death three years later by a mob in Portland, Maine, intent upon silencing his demand for emancipation.

In his 1843 book, *The Brotherhood of Thieves: A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy*, Foster skewers the church clergy.

Taken together they are apologists and supporters of the most atrocious system of oppression beneath which humanity has ever groaned – while Southerners perpetuate slavery for the sole purpose of supplying themselves concubines from among the hapless victims.

Foster is also famous for delivering his attacks by standing up during Sunday services and aiming his opinion directly at the minister in the pulpit, a practice which gets him ousted from his own Congregational church.

Later in life, Foster marries the reformer, Abby Kelley, and together the two crusade on for abolitions and for female equality and suffrage.

Date: 1840

The Anti-Slavery Societies Also Call For Church Action

Pressure on America's churches also comes from Anti-Slavery Societies at both the local and national level.

By 1836, the American Anti-Slavery Society has grown to over 500 chapters in the three short years since its founding through the combined efforts of Lewis Tappan and Lloyd Garrison and their inner circles.

Chapter resolutions related to church positions on slavery multiply quickly.

A New England convention in 1836 asks whether opposition to slavery should become a necessary sign of "the true and real church of God." A year later this same group adopts a call to "urge the necessity of ex-communication for slave owners."

The 1839 national convention passes a proposal to "push the slave question in churches, to abolitionize them if possible, and if not, to secede from them."

The Massachusetts Society in 1840 holds that "a man who apologizes for slavery, or neglects to use his influence against it, has no claim to be regarded as Christ's minister, and churches who do not take a stand against slavery should not be supported."

That same year the umbrella organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, splits in two over the issue of how best to achieve abolition -- with the Tappan/New York wing favoring political action and the Garrison/Boston wing holding out for grass roots public pressure.

Despite the division, both the national and local groups continue to call for the hierarchy within all churches to take a formal stand in favor of abolition and to cleanse their ministries of all slave-owners.

The effects of these efforts will soon be felt in America's two largest churches.