

LET JUSTICE BE DONE

WRITINGS FROM AMERICAN ABOLITIONISTS
1688–1865

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PREFACE

I am an Abolitionist!
Oppression's deadly foe;
In God's great strength will I resist,
And lay the monster low.
—William Lloyd Garrison

Beginning toward the end of the seventeenth century and continuing until the end of the antebellum period, a prophetic crusade to eliminate the sin of slavery stirred the American conscience, inspiring some to wholehearted dedication to the cause and inciting others to furious resistance to it. Eventually, around the 1830s, the movement came to be called abolitionism.

Almost to a person, the abolitionists were deeply faithful Christians who believed that if anything was contrary to the will of God, it was human bondage. For five generations, in lectures, sermons, books, newspapers, and public demonstrations that became increasingly numerous and more zealous with each passing decade, they doggedly denounced it. Their numbers were never large, but their impact was profound. Thanks to the abolitionists' fervor and perseverance, people in both the North and South who may never have questioned the moral legitimacy of slavery, much less reflected on its incompatibility with Christian commitment, could no longer claim ignorance of its horrors. Even though there's no hard data, it's more than likely that the abolitionists' tireless condemnation of slavery converted a good number of people to their way of thinking. Prophets, even if reviled in the short run, often do succeed in touching hearts and changing minds.

The anti-slavery crusade was the first intentional interracial collaboration in the United States, comparable in that respect to the twentieth century's civil rights movement. Like that later campaign, it was based on biblical principles of human dignity, the right to freedom, and duty to God. Also like the civil rights movement, the abolitionist crusade frequently likened its struggle to the Exodus story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage.

The abolitionist struggle against one of the greatest evils to blemish American history demonstrated that religious faith can and rightfully should be a powerful force in calling out injustice, speaking truth to power, and influencing public opinion and policy for the better. These days, when Christianity in America is rocked by scandal, hijacked by ideologues, and distrusted—if not downright despised—by significant numbers of people, it's good to be reminded of what it once was and what it can be again. My hope is that the writings collected here will inspire Christians today to remember who we are and what we're capable of.



The selections in this anthology are only a small but, I trust, representative sample of American anti-slavery writings. Except for correcting typographical errors in the original texts, I've retained original spellings, punctuation, and even (in most cases) infelicitous grammar.

The abolitionists quoted scripture liberally, but usually without attribution; Christians were much more conversant with the Bible in those days than we are in ours, so I've supplied bracketed chapter and verse references when there are none in the original. The handful of footnotes are mine, as are all the ellipses, meant to indicate editorial breaks in the selections.

Readers wishing to explore American abolitionism in more detail may find the bibliography that concludes this volume useful.

INTRODUCTION

Let Justice Be Done though the Heavens May Fall

The New England poet John Greenleaf Whittier, Quaker and passionate opponent of slavery, awoke on the morning of January 31, 1865, to the sound of pealing bells. It signaled the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which ended slavery in the United States once and for all.

Like so many other Americans who deplored the “peculiar institution,” as proslavery senator from South Carolina John C. Calhoun affirmingly dubbed it, Whittier had been agitating for years for an end to the legalized reduction of black persons to livestock. When the day of slavery’s dissolution finally arrived, he marked the joyous occasion by composing a poem, “*Laus Deo*,” in which he said that he “heard God’s own voice” in the peals and then triumphantly proclaimed,

When was ever His right hand
Over any time or land
Stretched as now beneath the sun!

It was customary in Whittier’s time, as it is in ours, to invoke God’s name in public announcements of great events. It can scarcely be doubted that doing so, especially today, is sometimes little more than a *de rigueur* but noncommittal nod to religious sensibility intended to add a bit of heft to the occasion. But when Whittier and the vast majority of his fellow abolitionists appealed to God, they were perfectly earnest, convinced as they were that

slavery was an abomination in the eyes of the Creator and that struggling against it was a Christian moral duty ignored—or, even worse, resisted—at great spiritual cost. American abolitionism, beginning with its earliest public expressions in the late seventeenth century and continuing right through to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, was a primarily Christian crusade aimed at eradicating a great evil. The movement counted in its ranks women and men, blacks and whites, and church-going as well as “come-outer” Christians—those who, out of disgust for their denominations’ refusal to condemn slavery, walked away from church membership.

Some abolitionists actively aided runaway slaves by serving as conductors or stationmasters on the Underground Railroad, the maze of secret trails followed by fugitive slaves. Others contributed funds and supplies to build up the movement. Still others drew the general public’s attention to the horrors of slavery through essays, books, poetry, song, lectures, sermons, and journalistic articles and cartoons.

All of them risked public scorn, imprisonment, and even, at times, physical danger. William Lloyd Garrison, for example, was nearly lynched by a proslavery mob in Boston. Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and publisher of an antislavery journal, was murdered for his stance. Harriet Tubman, the “Moses of her people,” the ex-slave who returned to the South again and again to guide her men and women from bondage to freedom, had dead-or-alive bounties placed on her head by furious slave owners. Yet they all persevered, convinced that their fidelity to Christ gave them no other choice than to risk much and perhaps all to put an end to slavery. This, they accepted, was the time in which God had placed them and the task he had given them.

AMERICAN SLAVERY

The Jamestown colony in what is modern-day Virginia had been in existence for only twelve years when the *Jesus of Lubeck*, a

Dutch ship, landed there in 1619 and traded nineteen African captives for badly needed supplies. So far as we know, these were the earliest arrivals to the North American shore of Africans transported against their will.

The Jamestown Africans were treated as indentured servants and eventually freed, probably after they'd worked off the value of the commodities traded for them, and given land of their own. But by mid-century, what had begun as black indentured labor in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland had been transformed into lifelong coerced servitude, a condition usually called "chattel slavery." Slaves—a term that became synonymous with persons of color who couldn't prove their freedom—were legally forbidden to own property. They had no legal standing in court, couldn't engage in business or civic activities, couldn't marry legally or travel without permits, and were subject to routine physical abuse. The children of slave mothers were automatically born into slavery. They, and all other slaves, could be sold at their owner's will. And unless they were freed for one reason or another by a legal writ of manumission, they would die in slavery. Perhaps inevitably, the assumption that blacks were inferior to whites, and hence good only as slaves, also became widespread. It's difficult and probably impossible to determine the causal relationship between North American slavery and racism. But it's beyond dispute that the one served as a legitimation of the other.

Slaves, in other words, were the absolute property or chattel of their owners, a condition that reduced them to what historian James Oakes called "permanent outsiders" whose very humanity had been stolen from them.¹ Many ex-slaves testified to this horrible loss of identity. One of them, John Parker, a fugitive who became a key figure in the Ohio Underground Railroad, put it like

1. James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1990), chapter 1.

this: “It was not the physical part of slavery that made it cruel and degrading, it was the taking away from a human being the initiative, of thinking, of doing his own ways. Slavery’s curse was not pain of the body, but the pain of the soul.”²

The Revolutionary War’s Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality invited a reconsideration of the moral propriety of slavery and its consistency with the stated values of the young Republic. Northern state legislatures began eliminating slavery within their borders, Vermont first in 1777, followed by Massachusetts/Maine (one state at the time), New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and finally, in 1804, New Jersey. Congress banned the importation of slaves into the United States after 1808, and the 1787 Northwest Ordinance forbade the spread of slavery in the vast stretch of land—modern-day Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin—ceded by England after the War of Independence.

During this period, even the slave-heavy southern states began rethinking the value of the peculiar institution, not so much out of moral concerns as of economic interests. Sugar and cotton crops in the Lower South were so labor intensive that farmers who grew them tended to plant and harvest modestly, and so needed only moderate slave labor. As arable land in the Upper South lost its vitality through overplanting of cash crops like tobacco, slave labor in Maryland and Virginia became less essential, and thousands of slaves were manumitted by owners unwilling to shoulder the financial burden of keeping them, especially after they had grown old and were no longer able to work. The numbers of freed slaves swelled so alarmingly that several early Republic leaders formed the American Colonization Society in 1816 with the express purpose of transporting freedmen to Africa, despite the fact that a progressively enlarg-

2. John Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 25, 26.

ing percentage of them had been born and raised in North America. The Society would be excoriated by abolitionists as a racist-fueled engine of exile masquerading as a humanitarian effort.

The course of slavery changed abruptly in 1792 with Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin, a remarkably simple device that enabled the rapid carding of seed from raw cotton. Before its appearance, it took about ten hours for a slave to clean a single pound of cotton. With the gin, upwards of one thousand pounds could be carded in a day. Almost overnight, cotton production in the South boomed. Farms became plantations as enterprising southerners bought up huge tracts of land to raise more and more cotton, and this, of course, increased the market demand for slave labor. Just four years after Whitney's gin revolutionized the industry, the South was exporting upwards of two million pounds of cotton. By the mid-nineteenth century, annual production topped a million tons, and the number of slaves had mushroomed to around four million, 18 percent of the nation's total population. As South Carolina senator James Hammond frankly said, "Cotton is King, and the African must be slave, or there's an end of all things, and soon."³

Cotton, which quickly became the United States' chief export, boosted the economy of the entire nation. Northern manufacturers processed cotton into cloth, and retailers sold the products made from it. Upper South slave states profited from selling slaves to Lower South slave states, especially after the 1808 deadline on slave importations kicked in. As a consequence, most whites, who already believed in the inferiority of African slaves, accepted slavery as an economic necessity, even if it pricked their consciences. Many would have agreed with Thomas Jefferson's observation that slavery is "the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the

3. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 78.

other,” even if they might not have been as brutally frank.⁴ But like Jefferson, himself a lifelong slave owner, most Americans both tolerated and materially benefited from human bondage.

EARLY ANTI-SLAVERY SENTIMENTS

Most, but not all Americans tolerated slavery. Beginning as early as the late seventeenth century, a few voices began calling out slavery for the moral outrage that it was, and doing so from explicitly Christian perspectives.

The first public protests came for the most part from members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers. The sect’s founder, George Fox, had taught that “tawnies and blacks” were saved by Christ’s sacrifice just as much as whites, and that they should be treated accordingly. But this didn’t inhibit many of his American co-religionists from owning and trading in human chattel.

In 1688, several Germantown, Pennsylvania, Mennonites-turned-Quakers challenged their slaveholding brethren by issuing the first public anti-slavery statement in the British colonies. They argued that “traffick of mens-body” amounted to theft, adultery, and violence, none of which were compatible with Quaker principles. Their protest was received and promptly buried by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. But their cause was taken up a generation later by an itinerant and eccentric Quaker preacher named Benjamin Lay, and after him by the better-remembered John Woolman, who insisted that mistreating others by keeping them as slaves dimmed the Inner Light with which all persons were born. The anti-slavery campaign on the part of these Quakers eventually bore fruit. Ninety years after the Germantown protest, Quaker Meetings throughout New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia finally disowned the practice of slavery and threatened with expulsion members who persisted in owning or selling slaves.

4. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), IV:300.

Quakers in the colonial and early Republic eras weren't the only Christians to resist slavery. Although Catholic voices then and later were mainly mute about the immorality of slavery, Protestants such as Congregationalist Samuel Sewall and Presbyterian Theodore Dwight joined Quakers in their condemnation of it. Equally if not more important were the denunciations from persons of color that began to appear. One year before the eruption of the War of Independence, black poet Phyllis Wheatley published an open letter denouncing the "strange Absurdity of Conduct" displayed by persons who professed to love Christ while owning human beings. David Walker, a free black Baltimorean, argued in an 1829 book that slaves had a moral right to resort to arms if doing so was the only way to break free of their chains.

THE ABOLITIONIST CRUSADE

The earliest Christian objections to slavery in North America, even those coming from Quakers, tended to be individual and sporadic. But condemnation of the peculiar institution began to coalesce into an organized movement by the early 1830s.

Whereas earlier denunciations of slavery typically had called for the gradual and compensated emancipation of slaves, this new generation of activists more radically insisted on immediate and uncompensated abolition. Why, they demanded, should the moral blight of slavery be permitted to continue for even a day longer? And why ought men and women who owned slaves be rewarded for their sin? For this new generation of abolitionists, slavery was the nation's central and overwhelming sin, the one that spawned any number of others such as theft, greed, adultery, and cruelty. Therefore, it had to be ended immediately and completely. Although himself a gradualist, abolitionist Benjamin Lundy captured the urgency felt by antebellum opponents of slavery when he proclaimed in the masthead of his newspaper *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, "Let Justice Be Done Though the Heavens May Fall!"

Much of the fervor that the new abolitionists brought to their campaign against slavery can be attributed to the enthusiasm for large-scale moral reform precipitated by what came to be known as the Second Great Awakening, a largely Protestant revivalist movement that began at the end of the eighteenth century and peaked in the early 1840s. (The First Great Awakening revival, especially associated with figures like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, had occurred a century earlier.) The Second Awakening called for a renewal among Christians in regard to the spiritual states of their souls and their moral role as citizens. The first demanded personal repentance and conversion, the second a thoroughgoing reformation of society to eradicate social injustice and ungodly opportunities for sin. Accordingly, an entire spectrum of reformist movements—having to do with temperance, humane treatment of the mentally ill and the imprisoned, improvement of education, securing of women's rights, abolition of capital punishment, and even advocacy of a vegetarian diet—became popular. Proponents of the abolition of slavery were energized by the revivalists' reformist agenda, and eventually proved to be some of its most vocal and organized prophets.

Without doubt, the most influential white leader in this new wave of anti-slavery was William Lloyd Garrison, a one-time colonizationist and gradualist who grew so disgusted with slavery—a practice, he wrote, that made “angels weep”—that he launched the abolitionist newspaper *Liberator* on January 1, 1831, to agitate for immediate emancipation. His opening editorial was a bombshell that rallied fellow abolitionists and outraged slave owners and defenders of slavery.

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his

wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.

The *Liberator* became the movement's leading organ for the next thirty-five years before printing its final issue in 1865. Enjoying the widest readership of any of the many abolitionist publications that sprang up in the antebellum period, the *Liberator* gave black and white opponents of slavery a powerful and widely read platform from which to defend their cause. As a consequence, many of these people became household names. The Grimké sisters, Theodore Dwight Weld, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and of course Garrison himself all regularly contributed to the newspaper's pages.

Garrison and his fellow anti-slavery agitators recognized that the success of their campaign depended upon organized coordination. In 1832, they founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. Financed in large part by Arthur and Lewis Tappan, evangelical brothers who had made fortunes in business, the Society expressly welcomed black members to its ranks, something of an innovation at the time. The following year, abolitionism's growing popularity led to the founding of a national organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS). Its Declaration of Sentiments, largely written by Garrison, became a manifesto of sorts for the entire movement. Internal dissent within the Society, primarily over the role of women but also having to do with politics, would later lead to defections, most notably that of the Tappan brothers. But the AAS remained a strong force and spawned dozens of local abolitionist subsidiaries.

Members of the AAS, often and somewhat misleadingly called Garrisonians, believed that the proper weapon to use

against slavery was what they called “moral suasion”: moral and religious appeals to the consciences of southern slave owners and northern defenders of slavery. AAS members embraced a policy of nonviolence, although in a sometimes inconsistently hit-and-miss way. Garrison himself, for example, while not exactly advocating armed slave uprisings, refused to condemn them. Others, like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, actually served as a combat soldier in the Civil War. Still other abolitionists supported, even if only reluctantly, the war effort.

As the years passed and slavery remained intact, Garrisonians came to believe that Congress’s refusal to outlaw slavery in the southern states revealed the government’s utter moral corruption (to express his contempt, Garrison once publicly burned a copy of the Constitution) and they eschewed all involvement in electoral politics, even in the abolitionist Liberty Party that flourished for a short while in the 1840s. This position eventually led to a break between Garrison and Frederick Douglass, the leading black abolitionist of his day. Disdain was also directed at mainline Christian denominations that refused to condemn slavery or excommunicate slavery-approving members. For Garrisonian abolitionists, such churches were as fallen as the government.

One of the most distinctive convictions of the abolitionists, Garrisonian or otherwise—as well as being the cause of much angry resistance to them—was their view that the black and white races were, in God’s eyes, equally deserving of respect and moral consideration. Any intellectual or moral weakness displayed by slaves was the result of cultural conditioning rather than nature, and to believe otherwise was sheer prejudice. In hindsight, it’s clear that the abolitionists themselves weren’t immune from the prejudice they decried. They could be paternalistic and condescending in their collaboration with free blacks and quite hopelessly out of their depth when it came to relating to ex-slaves who were illiterate and uncultured. But their insistence on Christian egalitarian principles, even if they didn’t always honor them, was a mainstay of the movement.

Not all abolitionists adopted the Garrisonian strategy of moral suasion. By the 1850s, when a repressive law known as the Fugitive Slave Act made even free states unsafe for runaway slaves and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision stripped all blacks of constitutional rights, it became clear to abolitionist activists like ex-slaves Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet that the only effective route to emancipation was armed revolt. Both of them approved of the fiery prophet John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, which Brown hoped would spark a general insurrection among Virginia and Maryland slaves. When it ingloriously failed, Brown, convinced to the end that he'd been commissioned by God to lead slaves to freedom, was hanged. Although viewed by most Americans as a frightening zealot, he became a martyr and hero to the abolitionists.

That the abolitionists for the most part based their crusade on their Christian faith and the principles of morality did not go unnoticed by their opponents in both the North and South who frequently responded to them in kind. Defenders of slavery, ordained as well as lay, insisted that there was no scriptural condemnation of slavery. Even more, they often invoked Paul's Letter to Philemon as an express justification of it. Stretching scripture to the breaking point, they argued against racial equality by insisting that blacks were the result of a separate act of divine creation and hence not from the same stock as whites or, alternatively, that persons of color were the cursed descendants of Ham and specifically doomed to be subordinate to whites. They also justified the peculiar institution by claiming that the enslavement of Africans was actually in their best spiritual and moral interest because it exposed them to the saving doctrines of Christianity of which they would have otherwise remained ignorant. And, for good measure, they asserted that slaves were treated far more humanely by paternalistic southern masters than free wage laborers were by their money-grubbing northern employers.

A typical example of the many Christian rebuttals of abolitionism was the Reverend Ebenezer Warren's novel *Nellie Norton; or Southern Slavery and the Bible*. Explicitly advertising itself as a "A Scriptural Refutation of the Principal Arguments Upon Which the Abolitionists Rely," the book was obviously inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Warren's story, Nellie, a young woman returning to her "Southern soil and home" after a few years in a New England finishing school, has been more or less brainwashed by her sojourn in the North and has to be reeducated about the many virtues of slavery. In the tediously stilted dialogue that was all too common in bad nineteenth-century literature, Nellie is systematically purged of the northern criticisms of slavery she imbibed and providentially tutored in what Rev. Warren sees as the truth about slavery: that slaves actually prefer it to freedom, that it's scripturally warranted, and that to oppose it—not to mention seeking to abolish it—is to upset the natural order of things by interfering with the divine plan.

Difficult as it may be to comprehend today when the immorality of slavery seems so painfully obvious to nearly everyone, religious disagreements over slavery and emancipation tore apart Christian families as well as entire denominations in the antebellum period. The Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians all split over it, and abolitionists were quick to condemn fellow Christians who refused to repent of their defense of slavery or who sanctioned its horrors by their silence. In addition to criticizing churches, abolitionists blasted the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society for their failure to denounce the peculiar institution as antithetical to Christianity. Ex-slave and abolitionist William Wells Brown mordantly pointed out that the American Tract Society believed it a Christian duty to issue pamphlets on the "sin" of dancing but utterly ignored the far graver one of slavery.

By the time the Civil War erupted in 1861, the fault line between Christians who supported and Christians who opposed

human bondage had become unbridgeable and peaceful coexistence impossible. It's no exaggeration to say that each camp considered the other to be the Antichrist, each misusing the Bible for its own purposes, each distorting the faith to further an unholy cause, each unjustly condemning the other. The key difference, however, is that one side was objectively right, and the other objectively wrong.

THE CASE FOR ABOLITION

Although there were differences in methods endorsed by Christian opponents of slavery—gradual versus immediate emancipation, moral suasion versus armed resistance, and moral suasion versus political action—there was near unanimity among them when it came to spelling out the Christian case against slavery and for abolition.

As already noted, the abolitionists believed that all humans, regardless of their skin color, share the same essential nature by virtue of their common origin. Each and every person made in the image of God was seen as having been endowed with an identity that conferred upon him or her certain natural rights which simply couldn't be gainsaid without defying God's will. One of these natural rights was freedom. In its absence, humans—first the enslaved, but eventually the enslavers as well—are unable to flourish. Slaves suffer dehumanization—as Theodore Dwight Weld grippingly put it, slavery “unseats a man to make room for a thing”—and enslavers sink into the quagmire of moral corruption and religious hypocrisy.

The abolitionists also saw slavery as a totalizing embodiment of sin. There wasn't, in their estimation, a single one of the Ten Commandments left unviolated by the practice of chattel slavery. Consequently, as William Lloyd Garrison proclaimed, it was the “embodiment of all criminality.” Ripping Africans apart from their families or selling domestic slaves away from theirs was the cruelest form of theft. The sexual abuse of slaves by unscrupulous masters was both a crime against their victims and an

adulterous betrayal of their wives. Placing wealth in slaves ahead of obedience to God's will as expressed through the teachings of Christ was idolatry. Reducing creatures made in the image of God to the moral and spiritual status of soulless objects or dumb beasts of burden was murder. And so on.

Moreover, slavery encouraged a sin that was unknown to the ancient Hebrews and hence unspecified in the Decalogue but that the abolitionists saw as a particularly grave offense against both God and morality: the racist view that blacks were inferior to whites and hence properly destined to live subservient existences. Garrison coined an expressive word for this attitude. He called it "colorphobia": an aversion to persons of color so intense that it stifled both empathy and common human decency when it came to dealing with such persons.

Just as pervasively, slavery was a catalyst for mendacity and cowardice in both individuals and society at large. In order to justify the peculiar institution, its defenders had to ignore or distort facts, even to the point of blasphemy. Sometimes they resorted to outright mendacity, but more often than not they were the victims of self-deception and rationalization. Slaveholders often twisted scripture to legitimize their treatment of blacks by claiming that God had ordained slavery and falsely asserting that slaves were actually happier in bondage than they otherwise would be, or insisting that a free wage system was more inhumane than chattel slavery. Then there were those slave owners who, like Thomas Jefferson, had broken through self-deception to recognize slavery for the sin it was but were too intent upon hanging onto their personal wealth and privilege to abjure it. In their moral cowardice, they traded their slaves' birthright to freedom for a mess of pottage for themselves.

Abolitionists condemned slavery as an offense against charity, the primary virtue taught by Jesus and preached, even if not always practiced, by his followers. Both the Great Commandment to love God and one's fellow human beings, and the Golden Rule, to treat others as one wished to be treated, fell vic-

tim to the peculiar institution's erosion of loving empathy for the suffering of others. This absence of fellow-feeling went hand in hand, of course, with the underlying colorphobic assumption that slaves were somehow subhuman creatures who, if they suffered at all under bondage, would do so even more if not protected and cared for by paternalistic white masters. This self-serving condescension on the part of slaveholders presented itself as benevolence, a charade that especially incensed abolitionists.

A final and particularly frightful abolitionist trope in the case against slavery was that the existence of human bondage undermined the strength of the United States by eroding its moral and religious foundations. In genuine prophetic mode, opponents of slavery warned of coming disaster if the nation continued to turn a blind eye to the sin of coerced labor. The warnings generally took two forms. One was that the morally corrupting effects of slavery on slave owners rendered the "master" class lazy, undisciplined, and weak, and therefore easy prey to external enemies. The other was that the slave population, pushed to the limit by its barbaric servitude, inevitably would rise up in revolt on an apocalyptic day of reckoning. God's wrath would descend, and no person who had ever profited however remotely from slavery would be spared. To escape this day of destruction, the nation needed to undergo conversion and moral regeneration, and the first step to that was the abolition of slavery.

In the end, the day of wrath the abolitionists feared was more horrible than they could have imagined: a civil war that claimed six hundred thousand lives. Although the bloodletting culminated in the legal abolition of slavery, it eventually did little, despite the postwar efforts of some abolitionists, to ameliorate the economic condition of blacks or the colorphobia that relegated them to second-class citizenship and third-class opportunities. It would take a second faith-inspired campaign, the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, to do something about that.

Nonetheless, the abolitionists are to be admired for their steadfast Christian commitment to human dignity and freedom

and their tireless and even sacrificial efforts to pursue justice by preaching and living their faith. As enunciated in the American Anti-Slavery Society's 1833 Declaration of Sentiments, they dedicated themselves heart and soul

to overthrow the most execrable system of slavery that has ever been witnessed upon earth; to deliver our land from its deadliest curse; to wipe out the foulest stain which rests upon our national escutcheon; and to secure to the colored population of the United States, all the rights and privileges which belong to them as men, and as Americans—come what may to our persons, our interests, or our reputation—whether we live to witness the triumph of Liberty, Justice and Humanity, or perish untimely as martyrs in this great, benevolent, and holy cause.

Theirs was a bright shining moment in both the history of the nation and of faith.