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ABOLITIONISTS ORGANIZE: THE MAINE ANTISLAVERY SOCIETY

by Edward O. Schriver
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Those who followed the banners of antislavery in America utilized the principle of benevolence, the practice of stewardship, and the organization of associations to develop their platform and to implement their program. The standards and the doctrines heralded by the other American moral trustees provided the basis of the principles proclaimed by the moral stewards in Maine. (1) Of the Maine men Samuel Fessenden of Portland, militia general and respected lawyer, the Rev. David Thurston of Winthrop, a Congregational minister and the Rev. Austin Willey of Hallowell, editor of *The Advocate of Freedom*, were the most typical. (2) The first principle of all three men was the moral governance of God, a rule which was based solely upon His Word, the Bible. Thurston spoke for Fessenden and Willey when he wrote that

the relations in which men stand to each other, in regard to society, or their political relations, affect not merely their outward conveniences, their liberty and their property, but their character and happiness, they are therefore moral. This is evident also from the instruction which God has given us in his word. He has made it our duty always to act from religious principle. We are not authorized to act from a principle of selfishness or party interest today, and of benevolence tomorrow. We are to be holy always in all we do. We are required to be as holy, that is to have a pure desire to honor God and to promote the welfare of men, at one time, as at another, on the second and third days of the week, as on the first. (3)

As a consequence of their belief that God was the moral governor of man, the Maine trustees condemned anyone who appeared to destroy, or even to modify, man's relationship to his Creator. They never tired of attacking the slaveholder, who, by holding the Negro in bondage, had severed the slave's relationship with God. At meeting after meeting with boundless energy and certain regularity, Willey, Thurston, and Fessenden would hammer home their conviction that slavery was "the vilest, guiltiest oppression on earth." And it was, they added, the cause of a whole series of other oppressions. It exacerbated relations between the North and the South. It

aroused passions, led to lynchings, mob violence, assassinations, murder, and duels in the slaveholding regions. Morality was completely corrupted by it. Austin Willey substantiated the charge of the trustees with further words of condemnation: "Examined by the light of God's word slavery appears not merely as a national evil, a physical inconvenience or calamity. It is sin, a plain violation of the law of God...." (4)

The cure for the sin of slaveholding was repentance, a change of heart, on the part of the offender. It was the duty of the moral trustee to play a leading role in this drama of the re-shaping of the human heart. By moral suasion, by an appeal to conscience delivered with good will toward the sinner, his mind and his emotions would be transformed. He would be ashamed for holding human flesh as property against the express command of God and would release the captive from his bonds.

The Maine trustees needed a vehicle to promote their message of repentance; so a group of them led by Samuel Fessenden and David Thurston gathered at Augusta on October 15, 1834, to organize the Maine Antislavery Society. Before any business was conducted, General Fessenden, true to his belief that God had called them to be moral stewards, successfully introduced a motion to acknowledge His presence at their meetings by prayer at the beginning and at the end of each session. Once the first such religious observances were completed, the delegates proceeded to lay the foundations of the new organization. A committee was chosen to draft a constitution; and, when it had finished its assigned task, all those assembled considered the document point by point.

The constitution of the Maine Antislavery Society reflected the belief of the moral trustees in the religious basis of their effort. God was the Creator of all men. He made them brothers and exhorted them to treat one another as neighbors. The framers of the constitution added a bit of natural rights philosophy when they insisted that God also endowed men with "certain inalienable rights among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." When these rights were not respected, it became necessary for God's representatives on earth, the moral stewards, to assert His demands. They were obligated to point out to all that human law depended upon Divine Law and that no human law which was not in agreement with its eternal counterpart would be allowed to stand. All human government was based upon the application of God's Law, and God would not long tolerate His legislation to be disobeyed. (5)



Samuel Fessenden
(1784-1869)

The only certain cure for the moral disease caused by slavery was the Word of God delivered in judgment to those afflicted with the malady. The cure was the radical reform of the individual, personal regeneration, based upon the acceptance of guilt by the offender and his consequent contrition and conversion. The journey to personal renewal, as outlined by the Maine stewards, required the pilgrim to pass three consecutive waystations. At the first he was confronted with the utter

horror and blackness of the crime he was committing in holding another of God's creatures in perpetual bondage. Here the magnitude of his dark deeds filled his soul and forced him to tremble with fear lest he be cast into hell. If he survived the rigors of the first stage of his journey, he struggled on to the second. At this point the sin of slaveholding became such a shameful burden to bear that he was totally overwhelmed by remorse, a remorse which prevented any peace in his soul until he acted to throw off his sin. At the third stage he experienced the saving conviction that God would show him mercy only if he acted as God had commanded, if he released the captives from their chains at once. Beyond the third stage, the forgiven offender found peace of mind and soul and, more important, peace with God his Creator. The rationale behind the belief of the Maine abolitionists in this three-fold method of attacking the problem of slavery was recorded in the First Annual Report of the Maine Antislavery Society:

We hear a voice from God, saying, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him!" The slaveholder is our neighbor. He is guilty of a great sin before God, in trampling his brother under foot, because possessed of a skin not colored like his own. We must charge him with his guilt, or God will not hold us

guiltless. We must reprove him, or we become partakers in his sin. (6)

Under no circumstances was violence or force, or any other form of coercion, approved to separate the slave master from his slaves. Moral suasion meant the peaceful and reasonable changing of the mind of the slaveholder. Such a method was possible only because the abolitionists believed completely in the power of truth and of love. Clubbing sense into the heads of slave owners was neither the proper nor the most efficient means to free the slaves.

Not only was the slave master expected to repent and to release his bondsman voluntarily, he was expected to do it immediately. The Maine Antislavery Society adopted the cry of immediate abolition, but never really defined precisely what was meant by the term. The closest the Society came to an exact definition was the adoption of a resolution that "immediate emancipation is the duty of the master and the right of the slave." (7) Either the abolitionists did not feel the need to define further what appeared to them to be obvious or they had expended so much effort upon the denunciation of slavery that little was available for extended explanation. Probably the Maine abolitionists were so wrapped up in the identification and condemnation of the institution that they overlooked the necessity of detailed explanation of what appeared so clear to them.

That the Maine abolitionists did realize, if only in part, the problems presented by emancipation was evident in their recognition of the need to work with free Negroes. One of the major purposes of the Maine Society spelled out the duties of the friends of the colored man in this regard:

This society will encourage and promote the intellectual, moral and religious improvement of the free people of color, and by correcting prevailing and wicked prejudices, endeavor to obtain for them, as well as the enslaved, an equality with the whites in civil, intellectual and religious privileges... (8)

As for practical programs, beyond a few individual attempts to help particular Negroes and the supporting of the establishment of Negro schools, nothing was accomplished.

Closely related to the Maine Antislavery Society were the local and county societies. (9) The vice-presidents of the state organization represented the different counties and were, more often than not, presidents and leaders in these



David Thurston
(1779-1865)

local and county associations. In organizational structure and approach these smaller units were mainly copies of the larger society and reflected its views. Apart from the rather loose connection maintained by the state organization with the smaller groups through the vice-presidents, through the state newspaper, *The Advocate of Freedom*, and through the travels of a small number of state agents, there was no attempt to coordinate a united antislavery effort. All the societies in Maine fostered the same view, but they did not get to the stage of working out a carefully planned common program.

One of the most effective methods at their disposal to promote what program they did have, however, was the traveling agent. Notable among the men who toured the state were the Rev. David Thurston; Charles L. Remond, a colored abolitionist from Salem, Massachusetts; Ichabod Coddington, who was an agent of the American Antislavery Society; and the Rev. Charles T. Torrey also of Salem, who was to die later in a Baltimore jail while in prison for helping fugitive slaves escape to the North.

The task of the antislavery agent and lecturer was to preach the antislavery message. Thurston, who toured the state in 1837 and 1838 and who spoke as a man whose lips were touched with the fire of abolition, carried the message from one end of the state to the other. During his term of ser-

vice as the agent of the Maine Antislavery Society, wherever he was able to find a building to use as his platform and whenever he could gather a small group to listen to him, he lectured and preached with all the zeal of a St. Paul. He shared his tenderness for the slave and his rebuke for the slaveholder with audiences from York County in the south to Piscataquis County in the north.

(To be concluded in the February Newsletter)

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(1) By and large, the social views of the Maine anti-slavery leaders paralleled those of the other moral trustees in America. For an example of how passionately they were concerned about the souls of their brethren, see Charles C. Cole, Jr., *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 99. Clifford S. Griffin in his *Their Brothers' Keeper: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960) outlines the way of moral trusteeship in America.

(2) Fessenden (1784-1869), the father of William Pitt Fessenden, worked as a lawyer in Portland during most of his legal career and was respected by all, if not liked by all. The Rev. David Thurston (1779-1865) was a Congregational minister and trustee of Bangor Seminary who spent most of his years in Winthrop, Maine. The Rev. Austin Willey (1806-1896) came to Maine from New Hampshire to attend Bangor Seminary and remained in the state to edit all but one of the anti-slavery newspapers.

(3) [Hallowell] *The Liberty Standard*, September 7, 1842. This was the Liberty Party newspaper which replaced *The Advocate of Freedom*, the organ of the Maine Antislavery Society, when it died in 1841.

(4) [Augusta] *The Advocate of Freedom*, May 9, 1839.

(5) The Preamble to the constitution of the Maine Antislavery Society.

(6) *The Report of the First Annual Meeting of the Maine Antislavery Society* (Brunswick: Joseph Griffin, 1835), p. 21.

(7) Adopted at the Sixth Annual Meeting, Hallowell, February 4, 1841.

(8) The constitution of the Maine Antislavery Society, article 3.

(9) At the peak of the antislavery agitation in Maine, there were about 34 auxiliary units. See *The Annual Report of the American Antislavery Society* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1836), p. 89.