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English Baptists and American Slavery

THIS is a narrative, recounted partially by those who participated in the events, of the "why" and the "how" of the involvement of England's Baptist population in the travail of United States' slavery. A sequence of events is begun in December, 1833, by London ministers in a letter on the subject of slavery to their American brethren. Attention is subsequently focused on a two-man delegation from the Baptist Union of Great Britain to the Baptist Triennial Convention meeting in 1835, at Richmond, Virginia. The effects of this transatlantic liaison, complicated by an impassioned debate over the deputation's American deportment, could only be partially evaluated by the close of 1836.

I

Late in 1833, English Baptists turned their attention from the closed issues of West Indian anti-slavery to the involvement of American Baptists in the institution of slavery. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and the related Board of Baptist Ministers In and Near London, initiators of the liaison, sought, through a lengthy correspondence beginning in December, 1833, to influence their 600,000 American brethren. Their initial communication was with what seemed to them to be the logical group for the dissemination of their humanitarian sentiments, i.e., the Board of Foreign Missions at Boston, which in 1834 was the primary agent for the Triennial Convention of American Baptists. It was not known to the British correspondents that this Board, representing as it did both northern and southern Baptists, not only had a large number of slaveholders engaged in its varied activities, but also had been under the leadership of slave-holding presidents for twenty-one of its first thirty years (founded in 1814). Thus neither the Board nor its parent organisation should have been considered a fertile seed-bed for anti-slavery ideology.¹

The problems of the Triennial Convention lay in two differing philosophies of human relations. In the 1830s the Boston Board faced the emerging force of anti-slavery with a silence that was interpreted by the denomination's abolitionists as equivalent to a pro-slavery sanction. It must be understood that any action in favour of abolition would not only have exceeded the Board's stated constitutional function but would have certainly precipitated the

recall of the slave-holding missionaries from the foreign and home mission fields. Such a consequence would have led to the concurrent loss of the south's significant financial support of the Board's activities. Thus the problem of introducing British abolitionist sentiments into the convention threatened to dissolve the instrument by which United States Baptists sought to carry the gospel to the "heathen world."

Sometime in early 1834, Howard Malcom burst into a meeting of the Boston Board, threw a letter on the table, and declared: "There is a firebrand for our churches." The so-called "firebrand" was from the Board of Baptist Ministers In and Near London directed to the "Rev. Spencer H. Cone, President; the Board of Managers; and the Delegates of the Baptist Triennial Convention" and signed by William Harris Murch of Stepney College. Although representing a potentially explosive issue, it apparently did not arouse anxiety on the part of any of the other Board members.² In fact during the period in which the letter was forwarded to Mr. Cone and returned to the Board to be answered eight months later, the existence of the British query was a well-kept secret. The Board refused to acknowledge its receipt although the query had been specifically addressed to the "Pastors and Ministers of the Baptist denomination throughout the United States of America."

The London appeal was based upon England's recent struggle over West Indian slavery. Calling upon their counterparts of the American churches to take the lead in destroying American slavery, the London pastors noted proudly that they:

"... demanded of [their] legislature its immediate and entire destruction. Leaving to others the commercial and political bearings of the question, [they] felt it a sacred duty loudly to denounce Negro slavery as a palpable violation of the law of God. The Christian population of Great Britain responded to our appeal as the heart of one man, and their conduct has been sanctioned by the blessing of heaven."³

Its authors made it clear that, although they were pleading for spiritual action, they were not offering advice as to the actual methods of abolishing slavery. Their concern was rather with why slavery must, in the name of Christ, be ended. Although the intent of the letter was innocent of premeditated meddling, the suppression of the letter (1) magnified its initial impact far out of proportion and (2) was part of a pattern of censorship which had been developing from the time of the letter's arrival in Boston.

The curtain raiser for censorship was a review by J. N. Brown of the *American Baptist Magazine*, of an address delivered by Cyrus Pitt Grosvenor on February 24th, 1834, at the Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts. In the reviewer's opinion, the address was:

“ . . . an able and discriminating view of a subject of great and growing interest. It has all the author's usual power and pungency, with unusual richness of illustration, and many passages of thrilling and subduing pathos. The generous spirit of liberty, civil and Christian liberty, the piety, warms every argument, throbs in every line and triumphs over every objection. It would do honour to Patrick Henry. The Constitution of this Society claims ‘the immediate, simultaneous emancipation, with a view to their employment as hired labourers, of all the slaves in the Union.’ ”

Brown, in closing, added, “ May God speed the right ! ”⁵⁴ The article, provoking a furore within the Convention's pro-slavery bloc, was considered to be the equivalent of an official statement of policy by the Boston Board (mainly because Lucius Bolles was both the president of the Salem Society and secretary of the Boston Board).

The following issue of the *American Baptist Magazine*, carrying this insertion, thus signalled the inception of a ban on any discussion of slavery within the Convention's publications.

“ The Editor having ascertained that a Literary Notice inserted last month, is regarded as a departure from the settled purpose of the Board of Missions, not to make the Magazine as a vehicle for the discussion of slavery, takes this opportunity of saying that nothing further on the subject will be admitted.”⁵⁵

The Boston Board, on September 1st, finally forwarded to the London group a series of resolutions and a covering letter which amounted to an unqualified rejection. Bearing the signatures of Secretary Bolles, and the Convention's first vice-president, Daniel Sharp, the letter stated that, while appreciating the interest of their transatlantic brethren, the conditions in America were not analogous and the Convention could not take any action. Furthermore the Board had :

“ . . . the best evidence, that our slave-holding brethren are Christians, sincere followers of the Lord Jesus. In every other part of their conduct, they adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour. We cannot, therefore, feel that it is right to use language or adopt measures which might tend to break the ties which unite them to us in our General Convention and in numerous other benevolent societies; and to array brother against brother, church against church and association against association, in a contest about slavery.

We presume, that the people in England would feel somewhat differently on the subject of emancipation, if the slaves were among themselves, and the perils of this moral volcano were constantly impending over their own heads.”⁵⁶

When this letter arrived in London late in November, the ministerial group gathered at the Fen Court headquarters of the Baptist Missionary Society to consider a reply. The group, with F. A. Cox as chairman, noted with deep regret that, although their letter of the previous December could not be received by the Triennial Convention because of the character of its constitution, they would nevertheless continue to hope ". . . that such of our American brethren as concur in the opinions of that Communication, will adopt every means consistent with Christian principles, to diffuse their sentiments, and thus secure the immediate and entire extinction of their slave system." Prior to adjournment it was further resolved that the Baptist Union's member churches should financially support a projected delegation to the forthcoming Triennial Convention meeting in Richmond, Virginia.⁷

Such a delegation was the result of a decision made prior to the arrival of the Boston Board's reply (June 18th), i.e., the decision to send F. A. Cox, LL.D., the presiding officer of the Union and pastor of Hackney's Mare Street chapel, and the Rev. James Hoby, pastor of Mt. Zion chapel, Birmingham, to America. The deputies noted in retrospect :

"The object of appointing deputies from the Baptist body of Christians in England, being principally to obtain information respecting their kindred community beyond the Atlantic, and to hold a representative intercourse with them, our mission naturally assumed, not only a religious, but a denominational character . . ."⁸

Not having in its possession the requisite funds for such a project, the Union's circular of October 1st, 1834, appealed to each church for a minimum subscription of £1, promising among other things, that the representatives would ". . . promote most zealously, and to the utmost of their ability, in the spirit of love, of discretion and fidelity, but still most zealously, to promote the sacred cause of negro emancipation."⁹ John Howard Hinton in his 1863 *Address to the Baptist Union* recalled that the first list of Union member churches published in 1834 were ". . . attached to it not by any act of adhesion on their part, but solely by the fact of having contributed to the expenses of Dr. Cox and Dr. Hoby . . ."¹⁰ Manifestation of the struggle to secure this financial backing, even after the deputation's departure, was but one of the problems facing the Baptist Union in its decision.¹¹

The future of the metropolitan-centred Baptist Union was also hanging in the balance, for this fledgling body was struggling for nationwide support and permanence within a denomination all too proud of its principled disunity. The major problem appeared to be the willingness of the American brethren to welcome a "fact finding

mission" and to accept the advice that it might give. "What will you do?" Thomas Price asked Cox, shortly after his appointment; ". . . you know the prejudices that exist in America against the coloured people." Cox replied, "I go in the spirit of a martyr."¹² The Union's decision produced apprehension, opposition and criticism, as well as approval, both from within and without its small ranks.

Throughout this period it was the *Baptist Magazine* that provided a sounding board wherein the denomination, Union and non-Union, met in the fellowship of the printed word to debate the various contemporary issues. On occasion the editors vigorously defended the concept that the magazine, although London-published, was a denominational journal—not party orientated. Outside of the debates in the various Association meetings the battle over the Union's deputation was fought primarily within the pages of this monthly.

One "Baptist Minister," as he chose to identify himself, enthusiastically endorsed the proposed deputation, suggesting that the trip was agreeable to both nations. He defended this assumption by quoting letters originating in the United States that expressed eagerness for such a fraternal relationship. This minister concluded that the deputation was the way in which to show the American Baptists ". . . a more excellent way."¹³

Another supporter, Charles Stovel, pastor of London's Prescott Street chapel, in a letter (November 17th) to the *Baptist Magazine*, enumerated some of the specific advantages of the project which had not as yet been publicly noted. Stovel, in addition to suggesting that the deputation might be able to promote the comfort and deliverance of the slaves, placed a higher value upon its opportunity to witness religious freedom in action and to consequently find a way in which it might be translated to England; thereby emphasizing a dual purpose: friendly discourse compounded by mutual benefits.¹⁴

In a rather less optimistic vein, another correspondent whose particular interest was in the proposed side-trip to Canada, hoped that the deputation would visit Canada ". . . not merely to see the falls [Niagara], but to see the spiritual nakedness of the land throughout its wide extent."¹⁵

Southwark's New Park Street chapel was the site selected for a farewell meeting on February 19th, opened by the assistant pastor of the host chapel, Charles Room, followed by addresses by Stovel, Cox, and Edward Steane. Stovel and Steane spoke on the spirit in which the deputation was being sent and the advantages of the undertaking. Cox, however, who in a private understanding with the Union's executive committee had threatened to withdraw from the delegation unless he was given the complete assurance of his freedom of action beyond the restrictions imposed by the circular letter,

concluded on the more pragmatic note of the "manner in which the Deputation proposed to discharge their duties." Prayers were then offered for the success and safety of the mission by J. Dyer, J. E. Giles, T. Thomas and E. Carey.¹⁶

II

Thirteen months after the Boston Board had received the London query, the news of the correspondence reached the United States via the columns of the London *Baptist Magazine*. Until the New York *Observer* reprinted the correspondence, Americans were unaware of its existence. Cyrus Pitt Grosvenor, in February 1835, stunned by the *Observer* article, immediately contacted the *Christian Watchman* which already had made plans to reprint the story within a fortnight. Grosvenor, a leader of the abolitionist bloc, said that ". . . this attempt to keep in ignorance the churches of our country is without excuse."¹⁷ Thus the censorship provoked that which it had sought to avoid—controversy. The correspondence and its suppression clarified the lines of conflict within the American Baptist ranks and eventually stimulated the concerted action of the Convention's abolitionists.

March 12th, 1835, Cox and Hoby embarked at Liverpool convinced that :

"United by a common origin, a common language, a common Christianity, we are capable, if ready to act in fraternal combination, of impressing a character upon the destinies of the world."¹⁸

The problems that faced the deputation were best summed up in a letter of John Foster, a well-known Baptist essayist, to J. P. Mursell of Leicester :

"It would seem to me that the great absurdity was the *project itself*. For if the commission did combine the two objects, an amicable fraternization with the Baptists at their great convention, and a full, loud declaration against slavery in that assembly, it is quite clear the thing was impracticable: the whole thing would have been blown up at once."¹⁹

Although the mission was to be primarily fraternal, the abolitionist flavour accentuated the existent animosity within the participants of the Triennial Convention. The tenseness that prevailed at the eighth triennial meeting was compounded by its location in the slave-holding south, Richmond, Virginia. If it were not for the factors of location and the deputation's known abolitionist sympathy, their presence, although extraordinary, would certainly not have been controversial. The gentlemen, however, who were the

major source of concern, were not insensitive to the pervasive atmosphere of the convention.

"We perceived the agitation which was beginning to spread over the surface of American society in consequence of the rise of anti-slavery discussions; and while it was sufficient to inspire us with caution, it was necessary so to act as to unite a dignified consistency of principle, with a perfect exercise of Christian feeling."²⁰

The first business of the Convention, held in the First Baptist Church, beginning on Wednesday, April 29th, was the acceptance of the delegates' credentials and the re-election of its president, Spencer H. Cone. At the conclusion of this business, the Baptist Union's delegates were formally welcomed and the Union's letter of "fraternal expostulations" was accepted. Cox, in his acknowledgment, to prevent confusion, carefully noted that the author of the previous year's letter was the London Board of Baptist Ministers while the deputation's sponsor was the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Cox herein sought to deliver the deputation from any possible onus created by the London Board's letter.²¹ On the other hand, the letter of the Union made mention neither of slavery nor of its antithesis. When later criticized for not bringing anti-slavery admonitions to the floor of the Convention, Cox as one of the letter's signatories, retorted:

"Some surprise has been expressed that the subject of slavery and the degraded condition of the descendants of Africa . . . was not introduced by the delegates . . . but those who have remarked upon this omission . . . have forgotten that these topics were *carefully avoided* in the public letter. We were left, upon those important points entirely free to pursue such a course as we might think most judicious after having informed ourselves of the existing state of parties, and of the relative position of the different societies."²²

This letter, drawn up by a committee comprised of W. Newman, J. E. Giles, Charles Stovel, Thomas Thomas and Thomas Price, carried the signature of Cox as chairman, and Murch and Belcher as secretaries. It would seem that, although slavery was not mentioned and the delegates were free ". . . to pursue such a course as [they] might think most judicious," few conceived the possibility that the subject would be publicly avoided by the deputation.

"Expectations, it appears, were entertained, that [Cox and Hoby] should have stood forward, not merely as abolitionists . . . but as advocates of particular measures, and associates

with a specific agency, sent for the avowed purpose of lecturing upon the subject of emancipation."²³

Cox, dismissing the claims that he and his associate were religious "trimmers," pointed out that public discussion of abolition was actually forbidden by the laws of Virginia and that if it had been raised, even by the British visitors, the Convention "... would have been dissolved by the magistrates. . . ."²⁴

The Triennial Convention affirmed the value of exchanging delegates with the Union by electing two delegates and two alternates to the 1836 meeting. The delegates were to be Daniel Sharp of Boston, and Basil Manly, a Charleston, South Carolina, slave-owner. The alternates were Spencer Cone and his successor to the Convention presidency in 1841, William B. Johnson of Edgefield, South Carolina.²⁵

Cox and Hoby hosted a Richmond gathering to provide them with information on both the problems of the Negro and the American Indian. The intention was "... to invite those with whom it would be most important to confer, and from whose conversation the most information might be obtained to guide our own judgments relative to a public co-operation with the abolition agency, and the society about to hold its anniversary in New York (American Anti-Slavery Society)." Although the meeting contributed to their information on the situation, it did not resolve the question of public co-operation with the abolitionists; this was not solved until they reached New York some days later. During this meeting in Richmond (which the abolitionists claimed later was "packed" with pro-slavery and colonizationist elements) "... there [were] no terms in which [the deputation] had been accustomed in England to express abhorrence of slavery, which were not freely employed on this occasion."²⁶

Dr. Cox, to the exclusion of Hoby (accused by the American abolitionists of being not only an advocate of colonization but of compensated emancipation), received an invitation to present a resolution at the May 12th anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society. However "... being desirous of obtaining information before pledging ourselves to any particular proceeding, we returned no answer to invitations from the Abolition and Colonization Societies." It was not until Cox had boarded a steamship for the journey north, that he learned that his silence had been construed as assent to the anti-slavery invitation; it was thus the Society had advertized his attendance.²⁷

A deputation of ten Anti-Slavery Society members, including the controversial English abolitionist George Thompson, extended a personal invitation to Cox on the Monday before the anniversary meeting. Since Cox had not yet made a decision on the matter, he arranged for the committee to send a deputation early the next

morning, prior to the meeting, to receive a definite answer. The deputation was in turn presented with a letter to the Society in acknowledgment of the invitation and in explanation of Cox's decision that his attendance would be inappropriate, an action approved by Hoby as well. It reads as follows :

"Gentlemen, If I decline the honour of appearing on your platform this day, on occasion of your anniversary meeting, I must be understood to assume a position of neutrality, not with regard to those great principles and objects, which it is well known Britain in general and our denomination in particular have maintained and promoted, but with regard solely to the political bearings of the question, with which as a stranger, a foreigner, a visitor, I could not attempt to inter-meddle."

The letter was put in the pocket of one of the gentlemen and apparently never appeared again; it was perhaps deliberately forgotten.²⁸

That day, Tuesday, May 12th, Dr. Cox, in the company of a Dr. Milnor, visited the Deaf and Dumb Institution, while Hoby attended the Anti-Slavery anniversary as a spectator. When the Anti-Slavery meeting had been called to order and it was obvious that Dr. Cox was not present, the chairman asked Baron Stow, a prominent Baptist minister and member of the Boston Board, to take the seat set aside for the absent Englishman. Stow, a moderate abolitionist, declined, saying :

"I am requested to occupy the place of another who was expected to take part in these exercises, and of whose efficiency the highest expectations were rationally formed. Deprived as we are of his aid, I cannot consent to occupy his place, but propose the space be left, as he left it, blank."

There was no acknowledgment on the part of the chair or other officers of Cox's letter of regret. Stow, commenting later on the difficult position that the deputation was in, disclaimed, to Cox's satisfaction, any knowledge of the rather obvious misplacing of the letter. Although the Society's officers had apparently chosen to misrepresent Cox's intentions, it remained for his countryman, George Thompson to become abusive :

"Two of [my] countrymen had been deputed to visit this country, one of them a member of the committee of the British and Foreign Society for the Extinction of (sic) Slavery and the Slave Trade throughout the world, and belonging to a Christian denomination which has actually memorialized all their sister churches in this land on this subject. . . . Where

is he now? He is in this city. Why is he not here? The reason I shall leave for himself to explain . . . in this very fact, I behold new proof of the power, of the omnipotence of slavery: by its torpedo power a man has been struck dumb, who was eloquent in England on the side of the open opposers . . . if a man is not the same in every latitude; if he would advocate a cause with eloquence and ardour in Exeter Hall in the midst of admiring thousands, but because he is in America can close his lips and desert the cause he once espoused, I denounce, I abjure him as a coadjutor in the cause in which I am engaged. Let him carry his philanthropy home again; there let him display it in the loftiest and tenderest strains; but never let him step his foot abroad, until he is prepared to show to the world that he is the friend of every country."²⁹

Hoby, seated in the gallery among the Negroes, moved quickly to the railing and after being recognized, came to his colleague's defence, declaring to the assembly that Cox was,

" . . . Not a man to flinch from what his principles and duty dictate, as has been represented . . . We entertain the same views and feelings as yourselves relative to slavery; but we have entrusted to us a specific mission, and acting in the fear of God, and we trust with purity of motives, it is our desire not to compromise other interests in reference to which we are deputed."

When Hoby suggested that Cox's early morning letter might be found upon the secretary's desk—as perhaps a "paper among papers"—it was not to be found. At the conclusion of the meeting, Hoby moved down to the platform to clear up the misrepresentation by more fully discussing the topic. Returning to the Anti-Slavery deliberations the following day, Hoby was accompanied by Cox " . . . for the purpose of a conference with Mr. Thompson and his friends, on what appeared to be a very unwarrantable attack." The meeting proved to be unsuccessful. Before proceeding to Boston, Cox and Hoby attended a large party (which included Thompson) of "friends of abolition," meeting in the home of an unnamed member of the Anti-Slavery Society committee. Cox concluded the evening with prayer, and the two deputies left in the company of James Birnie.³⁰

A fortnight later in Boston, at the anniversary meeting of the Massachusetts Conference of Baptist Ministers at the Federal St. Baptist Church, Lucius Bolles moved: "That we greet with pleasure the arrival of our brethren from England, as a cheering indication of the union existing between English and American Christians, and that we cordially welcome them to our country, and

to a participation in the deliberations of this body." The deputies also attended meetings of the Massachusetts Domestic Missionary Society, the Massachusetts Baptist Convention, and the Foreign Mission Society. The only meeting that they evidently chose to avoid provided the spark that after five years of smouldering, blazed into the American Baptist Anti-Slavery Society.³¹

That was a gathering of fifty Baptist ministers at the Tremont Baptist chapel, led by Elon Galusta, President of New York's Baptist Missionary Convention, and Cyrus Pitt Grosvenor. Meeting specifically to formulate an answer to the London Board's query (now eighteen months old), the group affirmed: "SLAVEHOLDING [was] the most heinous sin with which America [was] chargeable" and that their efforts were pledged to the destruction of the "slavocracy". Also expressed was their deep regret that the London letter had not come to their attention until that February. Referring to the emancipation of the West Indian slaves, they wrote in glowing terms of the British contribution to humanity: ". . . and at length we beheld, in Great Britain, the majestic rising up of a god-like spirit and power amidst the churches, awakened by the gospel to rebuke and hush the tempest of aristocratic anarchy . . . and to vindicate the honour of insulted Christianity." Further they were convinced that the Board's letter would yet "produce a good result among our own denomination and others."

Among the 185 signatures affixed to this reply, beside Galusha's and Grosvenor's, were those of Baron Stow, A. T. Foss and George B. Ide.³² Although not a participant of this meeting, Cox claimed that ". . . the sketch of that document was read for his opinion, observation, and advice, by one of the strongest abolitionists in America, in whose house he was then residing; the document was read to him by the very individual who prepared it, and for that brother he preached that same evening to a very numerous assembly" [probably the individual in question was Baron Stow]. Cox said that this abolitionist document was ". . . expressive of their strong, their firm, their decided adherence to the cause of negro emancipation."³³ The failure of Cox and Hoby to participate in the public debate over slavery in New York and their subsequent rejection of the Boston invitation would be the major objects of censure when they returned home to face their financial sponsors.

At the conclusion of the May anniversaries of the various New York-centred and Boston-centred benevolent organizations, the deputation, in order to see as much of Jacksonian America as possible, parted—Cox travelling in New England and Canada, and Hoby throughout the mid-west. Hoby, travelling to Pittsburg via Harrisburg, took a boat down the Ohio River where he observed its ". . . richly-wooded islands with which it is studded, now touching upon the coast of freedom, and then sweeping by the land of

slaves.³⁴ Pausing at Lexington, with a letter of introduction from Providence College's President Francis Wayland, he met with Henry Clay. His arrival at the Clay house shortly after the departure of Harriet Martineau was indicative of the significant number of European travellers in America at that time. Hoby continued his trek into Indiana where he made a special point of visiting Robert Owen's New Harmony experiment.

Then back-tracking to Cincinnati via Louisville, he regretted his inability to arrange a meeting with Lyman Beecher, President of Lane Seminary where a large part of the student body had withdrawn (or had been expelled in some cases) because of their attachment to abolitionist principles. Spending the Fourth of July in that Ohio river town he was amazed to find that there "... was nothing worth the name of a celebration." Later that day he found himself quite willingly involved in an argument over the merits of emancipation. He mentioned that he "... endeavoured to maintain the title of the black population, though of African origin, to those rights of men about to be proclaimed." Taking licence with a storied housewife's futile attempts to drive the English channel flood tide back with a mop, Hoby compared colonization with attempting "... to dip the Ohio dry with a bucket."³⁵

Cox's performance had not been a flawless one. He had chosen, at the annual meeting of the Freewill (General) Baptists at Sugar Hill, near Lisbon, New Hampshire, to violate the deputation's firm resolve to avoid public abolitionist statements :

"On this occasion, I felt it a duty to express myself with decision, not only to show my consistency in the sentiments I had always entertained, but to prevent any misunderstanding of the motives which had influenced my neutrality on the question at New York."

With this breach of policy he furnished the radical abolitionists of both the United States and England with another opportunity to heap hot coals upon the deputation's collective head. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the pro-slavery elements were any kinder to the two members of the deputation.³⁶

One of the more vehement denunciations of the deputation came from the pages of *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionist*. This apologist, warning his readers of the danger of abolitionism penetrating the Christian church, noted that the English emancipation movement did not make substantial progress until supported by the clergy. Furthermore he warned that the Rev. F. A. Cox, using the text, "... deliverance must come out of Zion," was urging American churches to follow the British pattern and take the lead in American anti-slavery.³⁷

In review, it may be noted that Cox and Hoby, as moderate abolitionists, publicly refused to carry the anti-slavery banner. However, their journals and their subsequent protestations, indicate that abolition was a constant theme of private conversation with such men as Andrew Jackson, Martin VanBuren, Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, as well as with their fellow religionists.

Even before the deputation had left America's shores British Baptists loudly demanded to know *who* had silenced the deputation's abolitionist message. Cone, singled out by his position for exceptional abuse, defended himself in a letter to John Dyer, the full-time Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, on September 30th, 1835 :

"The course they have pursued while in this country . . . was not only dictated by sound discretion, but was in perfect accordance with the views of the Baptist General Convention, to which body they came as delegates. Any other course would have completely defeated the object of their visit to the American churches, and would have involved them in constant embarrassment. Did Englishmen know that the question *as now presented*, is equivalent to the question— "shall the Union be dissolved?" they would see that foreigners could not safely enter upon its discussion."

Although there is some question as to which Union he refers, his words proved prophetic for both the nation and the denomination.³⁸

Cox had some three weeks earlier received a letter from Daniel Sharp which claimed :

"Your prudence in not intermeddling with topics of a secular and political character, when strongly urged to do so, has won for you the esteem of the most learned, upright, philanthropic and pious men of every Christian denomination in the land."³⁹

After attending a farewell meeting at Spencer Cone's New York City chapel in October, the deputation set sail for an England that promised little more than a mixed reception.

III

The deputation's American conduct, made public in April 1836 by the publication of their book, *Baptists in America*, was the major topic of discussion when eleven associations—East Kent, Essex, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Western, Berks and West London, Yorkshire and Lancashire, East and North Riding of Yorkshire, Kent and Sussex, Southern, and the Evangelical General Baptist—met, during May and early June, to offer (among other things)

resolutions against American slavery. Also involved in the developing controversy was the suggestion that American Baptists should be excommunicated because of their connection with slavery. Six associations, going rather further, voted to sever the bond of correspondence with America and refuse to give to the Triennial Convention's projected deputation ". . . any other reception than that dictated by Christian courtesy and English hospitality . . ."40 This statement made by a group of Norfolk and Norwich churches, led by William Brock, was similar in content and intent to those offered by the Association of Baptist Churches in Wiltshire, the Suffolk and Norfolk Old Association, the Bristol Association, and the Midland Association. The Leicestershire Association went beyond mere declination of fellowship to say :

"We unfeignedly regret that the deputation from Great Britain sent out by the Baptist Union should have retained silence on this subject (slavery); conduct which, in our opinion, no considerations of expediency or feelings of policy could justify."⁴¹

In summary more than half of the Baptist associations passed resolutions that, although prefaced with congratulatory references to the religious zeal and success of the American churches, made "solemn protests against slavery in various forms." This included seventeen associations with a membership of 37,000 members and some 430 churches.⁴²

Cox finding it difficult to understand the demands for excommunication said :

"If our brethren in England had meant to say, We can have no fellowship with them because they are slave-holders—then why seek it?" Cox further pointed out that the Baptist Union's letter to the Triennial Convention made no mention of slavery and thus it was inconsistent to demand that they should have mentioned the subject notwithstanding the difficult circumstances.

Charles Stovel observed that ". . . none of the associations venture to dictate what particular measures should be adopted in removing this great national crime; but all unite in urging, with the most earnest and affectionate appeals, an immediate and entire devotion of all the moral power which the American churches can command to this great and arduous undertaking." However, as he views the resolutions from a different perspective—that of the empire—he suggests that there was in fact a skeleton hanging in their own closet that must be buried before they could demand anything of their transatlantic brethren. He said ". . . it is rather strange that no one association has referred to the state of our English colonies, . . . nor to the sorrows of Jamaica apprentices, who are still in bondage to their Christian brethren in our own

churches."⁴³ (This note of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the apprentice system, as a transitional stage between slavery and freedom, would be sounded frequently in 1836 until it was heard so clearly that British energies were devoted to the destruction of the system.)

The Baptist Union, having been accused of giving up its abolitionist principles, was host to the largest gathering of delegates in its history. Ministers and laymen from all across England gathered to participate in deliberations that threatened the censure of the deputation's actions and the suspension of the American correspondence. Thomas Price, pastor of London's Devonshire Square chapel and editor of the 4d. *Slavery in America*, noted :

"It is well known to the anti-slavery public that the Annual Meetings of the Baptist Union have been looked forward to for some months with a feeling of very deep and general interest. The conduct of the deputation recently appointed by that body to visit the Baptist churches in America having given rise to discussions which involved the consistency and character of the body itself, it was feared either that public principles would be abandoned, or that personal collisions of a most injurious and exceptionable kind would ensue."⁴⁴

The deputation's report to the assembled delegates stressed that they had acted in a responsible manner at all times and had not violated any instructions of the Union, neither in not actively supporting the American Anti-Slavery Society, nor in failing to introduce the subject of slavery upon the floor of the Triennial Convention. J. P. Mursell of Leicester, after first noting that the logical man for the task was T. Price (who had badly strained his voice), moved the following resolution (subsequently carried) :

" . . . we regret that the state of society rendered it advisable in their judgment, in order to the attainment of the more strictly denominational object, to refrain from introducing it in public meetings, and to withhold from the Abolition Society their encouragement and support."

Mursell added that it could not be ". . . concealed from this meeting that there is great dissatisfaction throughout the land . . . and that comparatively few justified the conduct of the deputies . . ."

Largely through the efforts of Cox and Hoby, discontinuance of fellowship proved to be unsuccessful. Defending the Triennial Convention procedure (it had not refused to accept the English resolutions but refused only to introduce them into the deliberations of the Convention—referring to the letter of the London Board of Baptist Ministers), their argument that good would come out of

continued fellowship prevailed. The delegates finally affirmed the concept of a "beneficial correspondence, having for its object the advantage of both parties." This was a timely decision inasmuch as the Union's committee had just received a letter from the Triennial Convention's Boston Board in response to the Union's address which had been carried by Cox and Hoby.

The response, as read to the assembled delegates of the Union, made no mention of the problem of slavery that was threatening to sever the dangerously taut thread of communication, but suggested continued correspondence between the two bodies. Thus, as a result of the passage of the day's third resolution, the Americans would be answered. All correspondence, however, would be under certain strictures applied by the radicals led by Brock, Mursell and Price. The resolution's interpretation, offered by Price and confirmed by the delegates, was that :

"If their American brethren told them that they could not lay such communications (anti-slavery) before the body, then the British Baptists were solemnly pledged . . . to tell them they could no longer hold intercourse with them."⁴⁵

After passage of a fourth resolution which deplored the ". . . deep rooted prejudice which so extensively prevails in America against free persons of colour . . .", further resolutions were offered which spoke of the liabilities of dissent as well as offering thanks to the host chapel and electing new officers to head the Union in 1837.

On September 13th, the final draft of the letter and copies of the June resolutions, signed by the Union's secretaries, Murch, Belcher, and Stean, were forwarded to the Triennial Convention. The covering letter was *not* an answer to the American letter (June) but a response to the Boston Board's letter to the Board of London Baptist Ministers in 1834. That particular letter had stated that the Triennial Convention could not discuss slavery and that in effect America's problems would not be responsive to English solutions. The Union's letter stated that, although their delegates of the previous year had not spoken of slavery publicly, since that time the feeling of British Baptists had ". . . grown far more deep and solemn . . ." on the subject of slavery. The letter in part said :

" . . . nor should we be silenced, by being informed, of what we very well know, that, in the southern states, 'slavery is a political institution'. We are not political meddlers, but we suppose that even 'political institution' of slavery does not deprive the freeman of his liberty. We appeal, therefore, still to the heart of a Christian, as to his individual choice. Our language is—fellow Christian, and, if, a fellow Christian, man of benevolent spirit, of universal love, will you hold a slave?"⁴⁶

Although the delegates to the Baptist Union had not seen fit to censure the conduct of Cox and Hoby, Thomas Price in reviewing the deputation's book had no such inhibitions :

"We not only remain unsatisfied of the propriety of the course which they adopted, but strong[ly] impressed with the conviction, that they have unintentionally inflicted on the cause of Abolition in America an injury, which it will require the utmost vigilance and most strenuous efforts of the Baptist denomination to remedy.

. . . Would that a Paul, a Luther, or a Knibb, had occupied their place! . . . We are persuaded that they were Abolitionists at heart, but they had not the moral courage and determination of character which fitted them for such new and trying circumstances."⁴⁷

The Union's proceedings had apparently led several of America's anti-abolition newspapers to assume that the anti-slavery ardour of the Union had cooled. However, William L. Garrison after reading the resolutions and letter to the Boston Board declared that ". . . the body was far enough from intending to approve the timidity of their delegates." The *Emancipator* of September 8th, stated : "We thank our Baptist brethren for it. It settles one great point, namely, that in Great Britain, Baptists as a body, are determined OPENLY to give to the ABOLITIONISTS OF AMERICA the benefit of their COUNTENANCE and SUPPORT."⁴⁸

George Thompson, after his hasty return from America, also played an important part in the widespread condemnation of the deputation's transatlantic activities. In this endeavour he was ably seconded by his friend, Thomas Price. The existent animosity was accentuated when Price took the deputation to task for ". . . those passages (*Baptists in America*) in which . . . they impeach the public conduct of our distinguished and noble-hearted countrymen [Thompson] . . . he does not need any vindication from us." That the ". . . English Baptist delegates, should join in the hue and cry against him, is deeply to be deplored . . ."⁴⁹

A further example of the tenseness of the situation occurred in the 1836 anniversary meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society in Birmingham. Hoby rose to urge moderation with regard to a motion that all slaveholders ". . . under any circumstances ought to be excluded from Christian communion." Price, in his report of this incident, claimed that the ". . . tone of the meeting, which was impassioned to a high degree, was still more excited by an amendment proposed by Dr. Hoby, who attempted the hopeless task of extenuating the guilt of slave-holding in America." Price's estimate of the final vote was five or six thousand to six (or eight) against the Hoby amendment. Birmingham was again in the denominational

spotlight when on October 25th its Bond Street church set aside the last Monday evening of each month to join American abolitionists in their concert of prayer for the end of slavery.⁵⁰

Baron Stow, the Union's official American correspondent (having received the resolutions and covering letter of September 13th), wrote to William Murch that the letter had been "... admired and commended, as truly fraternal and Christian. The effect will assuredly be good." The Board's official reply authored by Lucius Bolles stated :

"Whatever communication you may choose to make to this Board, on the subject of slavery, the only reply which *at present* you will receive, will be a disclaimer of jurisdiction in the case. Several members of the Board are sincere and pledged abolitionists, but they do not feel at liberty to urge the consideration of the subject in the meetings of the Board. Our constitution limits us to one subject [foreign missions]. The Board will not even *publish* your communications upon this subject."

In closing, as if to take some of the sting out of the Board's slamming the door on further communication, Stow added :

"So long as the Baptists of England maintain the kind, generous spirit exhibited in your letter and Resolutions, they can speak to us with the assurance of being heard calmly and fraternally. There are thousands among us who will welcome such communications, and thank you for them as proofs of a benevolence that is highly evangelical."

As one of the Board's moderate abolitionists, Stow sent his copies of the letter and resolutions to the *Christian Watchman* for publication.⁵¹

The reply of the Boston Board resolved the question of further communication on slavery—it was finished. The other problems that had arisen since the Baptist Union had sent Cox and Hoby on the road to Richmond could not be resolved so easily, at least not by the end of 1836. Their conduct had been begrudgingly vindicated yet they were keenly aware of the censorious esteem in which they were held by many of their brethren. Current issues, benevolently muted by time, dissolved the threat to the tenuous tranquility of the Baptist Union, as its humanitarian efforts turned back to the West Indian problem. Reports from Baptist missionaries and other sources indicated that apprenticeship (especially in Jamaica) was failing to achieve the earlier promise of the Emancipation Act. Tales of brutality accentuated the impetus for immediate freedom. Many Baptists had thought that the system would prove adequate and thus turned their attention to North America; but now finding their

earlier conjecture unwarranted refocused upon the evils of the West Indies.

This is not to say that interest in American slavery ceased, but only that the preoccupation of British Baptists with their own "skeleton" demanded a redistribution of their efforts. Nevertheless the contributions of British opinion to the growth of American Baptist anti-slavery is an interesting episode in any examination of the abolitionist impulse of the 1830's.

NOTES

¹ Cf. R. G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptist*, Phila., Judson, 1955, pp. 268ff.; A. T. Foss and E. Mathews, *Facts for Baptist Churches*, Utica, American Baptist Free Mission Society, 1850, p. 15. This volume, which is the official history of the Baptist abolitionist bloc, must be read with caution.

² Foss and Mathews, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³ *The Baptist Magazine*, 1834, Vol. xxvi, London, Wightman, pp. 504ff.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵ *loc. cit.*

⁶ *The Baptist Magazine*, 1835, Vol. xxvii, pp. 8-11.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 31. These resolutions were forwarded to the vice-president of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions at Boston.

⁸ F. A. Cox and J. Hoby, *The Baptists in America*, New York, Leavitt and Lord, 1836, p. iii.

⁹ Foss and Mathews, *op. cit.*, p. 297. (This source underlines the phrase ". . . but still most zealously" whereas the original contains no emphasis); T. Price, *Slavery in America; with notices of the Present State of Slavery and the Slave Trade throughout the World*, London, Wightman, 1837, p. 36.

¹⁰ E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, London, Carey Kingsgate, 1959, p. 64.

¹¹ *Baptist Magazine*, 1834, p. 477; *Baptist Magazine*, 1835, pp. 150f.

¹² Foss and Mathews, p. 298. Cox later remarked that as a result of the New York incidents that he felt like a martyr.

¹³ *Baptist Magazine*, 1834 (November), pp. 464ff.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 548f.

¹⁵ *Baptist Magazine*, 1835, pp. 54ff.

¹⁶ *Baptist Magazine*, 1836, Vol. xxviii, p. 107.

¹⁷ Foss and Mathews, pp. 16f. Grosvenor and another Salem pastor, Babcock, were members of both the Board of Education and the Board of Missions. As part of a personal arrangement, Grosvenor attended the Education meetings while Babcock attended the Board of Missions. Babcock, however, did not inform the absent Grosvenor of the correspondence. Although re-elected to the Board of Missions in 1835, Grosvenor declined to serve.

¹⁸ Cox and Hoby, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Letters of October 19, 1836 quoted in Arthur Mursell, *James Phillippo Mursell*, London, 1886, p. 51.

²⁰ Cox and Hoby, p. 47.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 69. Isaac Taylor Hinton, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond (1833-35), was the recently immigrated brother of John Howard Hinton. Cf. Howard Temperley, *The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society; 1839-68*, unpub. dissertation, Yale, 1961.

²² Cox and Hoby, p. 68—my emphasis.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁴ *loc. cit.*

²⁵ Foss and Mathews, p. 305.

²⁶ Cox and Hoby, p. 79; Foss and Mathews, p. 300.

²⁷ Cox and Hoby, pp. 100, 107. The invitation did not mention that Cox was a representation of the Union but treated him as an individual. This was one reason for his refusal to attend the meeting.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁹ American Anti-Slavery Society, *Second Annual Report*, 1835, pp. 21-3; Cox and Hoby, pp. 103, 109-11. Cox as a member of the British & Foreign Society for the Universal Abolition of Negro Slavery and the Slave Trade (which superseded the Agency Committee sometime in the spring or summer of 1834) had apparently come in conflict with George Thompson. Thompson, although a lecturer for this society, was sponsored in his trip to America by the radical Glasgow Emancipation Society. This was the help for which William Lloyd Garrison had asked from British abolition the previous year. Cox, having nothing to do with the appointment, refused to share the platform because in so doing he would give his sanction to Thompson's ". . . proceedings; and in one word, I COULD NOT DO IT." The emphasis is Cox's. Cf. also Raymond English, *George Thompson and the Climax of Philanthropic Radicalism*, 1830-42, unpub. dissertation.

³⁰ Cox and Hoby, pp. 102-06. By November, 1835, Thompson had chosen to return to England rather than to risk remaining in an increasingly hostile New England climate.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 130.

³² *Baptist Magazine*, 1836, pp. 289ff.; Foss and Mathews, p. 300.

³³ *Baptist Magazine*, 1836, p. 310. Stow, alone of the letter's signatories, was pastor of a Baptist church in the Boston area.

³⁴ Cox and Hoby, p. 265.

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 270-303.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 155.

³⁷ *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists*, Phila., 1836, p. 177.

³⁸ Cox and Hoby, p. 123.

³⁹ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ Foss and Mathews, p. 37. The American delegates did not attend the Union's anniversary. The reason no doubt lies in the fact that one of the delegates, Manly, and one of the alternates, Johnson, were slaveholders.

⁴¹ Thomas Price, *Slavery in America*, p. 22.

⁴² *Baptist Magazine*, 1836, pp. 302, 406, 592f. It was estimated that the entire denomination was composed of roughly 1,000 churches and 100,000 members.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 407.

⁴⁴ Price, *op. cit.*, p. 17. This monthly began publication in July, 1836 to keep Baptists abreast of the situation in the United States as well as to stimulate their corresponding with Americans on slavery.

⁴⁵ *Baptist Magazine*, 1836, p. 319. These strictures represented a victory for the radicals, since there was no doubt that the Boston Board would refuse to receive letters on slavery regardless of the source.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 494; full text on pp. 492ff.

⁴⁷ T. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, footnote on p. 108.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ Foss and Mathews, pp. 301-05; Price, p. 163.

⁵¹ Foss and Mathews, pp. 34f.