

Friends of Humanity, Enemies of Bondage: Kentucky's Antislavery Evangelicals and Their Legacy

Andrew Landreth

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the United States came of age and expanded its outlook toward the west, an odd and seemingly contradictory pair of institutions rose to prominence, particularly in the South. Slavery and evangelical Christianity coexisted in early America with a relationship that was sometimes peaceful, sometimes turbulent, but always somewhat uneasy and paradoxical. This energetic breed of piety, which had firmly rooted itself in the South by the onset of the Civil War, preached a doctrine of equality of souls that seemed squarely at odds with an institution designed to perpetuate inequality and a strict racial caste system. The relationship between slavery and Southern evangelicalism eventually settled into a sustainable peace, but in the nation's earliest decades, their interactions could be unpredictable.

No state's experience better exemplified the tensions and contradictions inherent in these two institutions than that of Kentucky. In the decades surrounding 1800, Kentucky became a prominent battleground in the conflict over the morality of slavery among Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian leaders that revealed the growing pains in the young country and in the ascendant evangelical faiths. Controversy over slavery among Kentucky evangelicals persisted until around 1820, when a combination of internal and external factors caused it essentially to cease within the state's white churches. Some of the ideas and the people involved in these battles made their way northward across the Ohio River to other, potentially more fruitful areas, where slavery-centered debates continued in the churches until the 1830s and spilled into the civic arenas. Though the early antislavery evangelicals of Kentucky did not immediately succeed in ending slavery, they took advantage of the unique conditions of the frontier to raise crucial issues at a time and in a place where they had few visible allies, sparked debate and vitality among their churches, and saw some of their ideas carried into other areas in succeeding years, with somewhat more lasting influence. The causes of their rise and decline reflect broader trends among early Southern evangelicals while also revealing unique aspects of frontier-era Kentucky. Their story sheds light on the social, religious, political, and geographic elements of slavery, frontier life, and the growth of a uniquely Southern evangelicalism.

In order to understand the relationship between emancipation sentiment and evangelicalism in early Kentucky, it is important to understand why and how slavery and religious fervor first found their way into what is now the Bluegrass State. Kentucky sat astride the free

states and the slave states, though it counted itself among the latter, and so naturally found itself caught up in the sectional and ideological tensions that ultimately exploded into the Civil War. Just as importantly, between 1790 and 1830 Kentucky and its immediate surroundings constituted the western frontier into which multitudes of white settlers poured, mostly from Virginia and the Carolinas. Some of these settlers, naturally, brought slaves with them. Finally, Kentucky during the fervor of the Second Great Awakening saw great revivals that ignited religious passions, and conflicts, that were among the most powerful anywhere in the country.

Although slavery remained legal in Kentucky until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the institution did not dominate the state as it did in much of the Lower South. In 1790, slaves constituted 16.87% of Kentucky's entire population, compared to 33.95% for the South as a whole. The proportion of slaves in Kentucky grew slowly, peaking at 24% of the population in 1830 before declining to less than 20% on the eve of the Civil War.¹ Most white Kentuckians owned no slaves, but, as was true everywhere in the antebellum South, the system encouraged even the lowliest white man to regard himself as superior to any slave or free black person. The state also contained a disproportionately large number of small slaveholders; the large, organized plantations that dotted the Lower Mississippi Valley did not prevail in Kentucky. Kentucky's land and climate did not lend themselves to growing cotton or rice, the major Southern crops that demanded large-scale labor. Rather, crops such as tobacco and corn prospered. Some slaveholders who found the enterprise unprofitable sold their slaves to markets down the Mississippi River, where King Cotton created an insatiable demand. Portions of the state, particularly the mountainous areas in Eastern Kentucky, contained very few if any slaves. Slavery nonetheless had a significant presence in the state's social and economic life. Central Kentucky (the region known as the Bluegrass) and the fertile flatlands along the Ohio River were more amenable to slavery. Most of the evangelical antislavery agitators in Kentucky came from these central and northern regions, which had been most heavily settled and where the higher concentration of slaveholders made confrontation more likely.²

The land soon filled with settlers as the local population soared. In the decade between 1790 and 1800, during which Kentucky achieved statehood, the total population tripled.³ The Kentucky frontier held substantial appeal for white settlers looking for fresh opportunities and economic success. Ministers and religious leaders hoping to win souls closely followed them across the Appalachian Mountains. Often, they were one and the same. Virginia Baptist minister David Barrow, soon to be one of the loudest voices for emancipation in Kentucky, moved his family there in 1798. Explaining his relocation to his soon-to-be former congregation, Barrow

¹ Lowell H. Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 2.

² Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky*, 3-6.

³ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 99.

described the difficulty of providing a living for his family on his poor Virginia farm without resorting to such distasteful options as speculation or slavery, which he held as “contrary to the laws of God and nature.” Though he professed not to seek a worldly fortune for his posterity, Barrow, by selling his farm and heading for the more fertile lands to the west, where slavery had not yet taken root as deeply as in Virginia and had a less certain future, hoped to establish both a more comfortable and a more moral lifestyle.⁴ These mixtures of earthly and spiritual motivations launched an untold number of similar journeys across the mountains in Barrow’s lifetime.

The first evangelical antislavery leader to arrive in Kentucky was not the humble Baptist Barrow, however, but a polished Presbyterian. David Rice, a Princeton-educated Virginia minister called by one historian the “father of Presbyterianism in the West,” visited Kentucky in 1783 and soon decided, at the behest of some locals, to settle permanently in Danville and carry on his ministry.⁵ Rice formed several churches in the area and helped found the Transylvania Seminary in Lexington, which is today known as Transylvania University. He nursed a lifelong hatred of slavery, and his fast-growing influence combined with his gift for oratory to deliver one of the first and most memorable blows against bondage in early Kentucky.⁶

In 1792, the emergence of Kentucky as a candidate for statehood presented Rice with an opportunity to shape his new homeland to conform with his opposition to slavery. Rice was elected as a delegate to the first Kentucky constitutional convention that year, at which slavery emerged as a predictably contentious issue, and he wasted no time using his position to influence the future of the state. Shortly before the convention gathered in Danville, Rice published a pamphlet, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy*, which he then delivered as a speech to the convention.⁷ In this remarkable document, Rice made his case against slavery with a preacher’s zeal and eye for detail, confronting and deconstructing arguments for slavery that were fashionable in his time and continued to be so in the coming years.

Combining a spiritual foundation with an appeal to more secular ideals of justice and practicality, Rice laid out a case against slavery that found echoes in the arguments of emancipationists throughout the decades leading to the Civil War. Asserting that all “creatures of God” were equally entitled to liberty, Rice proclaimed that stealing a man’s freedom constituted the greatest possible theft one could endure. The burden of proof to show that a slave is “not a man, that he was not born free, or that he has forfeited or relinquished his freedom” lay with the

⁴ Carlos R. Allen, Jr., “David Barrow’s Circular Letter of 1798,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (July 1963): 444-445, accessed September 16, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1918956>.

⁵ Asa Earl Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850* (Louisville, KY: The Standard Printing Company of Louisville, 1918), 12.

⁶ *An Outline of the History of the Church in the State of Kentucky During a Period of Forty Years: Containing the Memoirs of Rev. David Rice*, ed. Robert H. Bishop (Lexington, KY: Thomas T. Skillman, 1824), 66-67.

⁷ David Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy; Proved by a Speech Delivered to the Convention, Held at Danville, Kentucky* (Philadelphia: Printed 1792).

slaveholder, not the slave, a firm rejection of the notion of inherent, divinely ordained black inferiority.⁸ Furthermore, slavery, in its attempt to keep slaves ignorant and uncurious, deprived them of the moral agency to pursue enlightenment and to study and carry out doctrines. In a speech tailored for a secular, governmental audience, Rice nonetheless denounced the idea that masters were willing to let slaves wallow in sinfulness and immorality, linking this to one of the great underlying fears held by innumerable slaveholders: that if a slave becomes capable to reason and think for himself, he may no longer be satisfied with his present station and demand freedom, even equality. Rice also brought his religious expertise to bear in dismantling the argument that American-style chattel slavery had biblical sanction. When the Apostle Paul admonished servants to obey their masters, Rice noted, he was operating as a subversive Christian in the context of a hostile Roman regime. Had Paul or any other early follower of Christ preached freedom, they likely would have only instigated chaos for the servants and condemned both themselves and their nascent religion to ruin. Besides, the version of “slavery” in the Bible did not condemn the children of servants to their parents’ fate. Rice argued that hereditary, perpetual slavery constituted a unique, unbiblical evil, suggesting the Golden Rule as a more reliable guideline for those wishing to discover God’s will in the matter.

He understood the implications of his ideas. If Kentucky outlawed slavery, it stood to reason that the influx of slaveholding migrants would cease, stunting Kentucky’s population growth. Rice conceded the point, seeing this as an acceptable price of keeping out the “great and intolerable nuisance” of slavery that caused only “ignorance and vice...national poverty and weakness” everywhere it spread. He asserted, however, that the ingrained nature of slavery made immediate emancipation unworkable. He proposed, rather, a plan by which the state legislature, in due time, could enact laws preventing further slave importations, establishing education for slaves, and culminating in gradual emancipation.⁹

Rice’s efforts proved insufficient. The antislavery forces at the convention faced a well-organized and socially dominant proslavery faction led by the prominent attorney George Nicholas. A motion to strike the constitutional article legalizing slavery failed by a vote of 16 to 26.¹⁰ The 1792 Constitution passed with an article depriving the state legislature of the authority to “pass laws for the emancipation of slaves without the content of their owners, or without paying their owners, previous to such emancipation, a full equivalent in money for the slaves so emancipated.” It also regulated slave importation and provided for laws regulating owners’ treatment of slaves.¹¹ Kentucky joined the union as a slave state. Even so, for the first time in the state’s short history, an evangelical leader had taken the opportunity publicly to oppose slavery

⁸ Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy*, 4.

⁹ Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy*, 15.

¹⁰ This was the only vote at the 1792 convention for which the yeas and nays were recorded. Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*, 16.

¹¹ Kentucky Constitution, Article IX.

and to articulate, from a religious standpoint, concerns about its consistency with justice and morality. For unclear reasons Rice resigned his seat just prior to the slavery vote, but six other evangelical ministers also served as delegates to the convention.¹² These men made their feelings known: all six voted to remove the slavery article.¹³

Rice represented the most forceful element of the antislavery strain in one of the three major evangelical sects in Kentucky. The Presbyterians experienced during the 1790s a spike in controversy surrounding the morality of slavery. Kentucky's Presbytery of Transylvania wrestled with the problem in a series of statements, but the question did not die entirely among the Presbyterians after the turn of the century. As late as 1816 the denomination's General Assembly pronounced slavery a "mournful evil."¹⁴ Barton W. Stone, a Presbyterian minister who led the famous 1803 revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, professed disgust toward slavery after seeing the conditions of slaves on a trip through South Carolina. He later freed his own slaves, allegedly at considerable personal financial cost. Stone later left the Presbyterian Church to become a co-founder of the Disciples of Christ denomination and eventually took his ministry to Illinois, but he never abandoned his opposition to slavery.¹⁵

The Methodists, meanwhile, made an assertive initial strike against slavery, but they quickly retreated. In 1780, the denomination's Annual Conference registered its disapproval of those members holding slaves. By 1784, the Conference went further, providing for the expulsion of those who bought slaves "with no other design than to hold them" as such, a rule that extended to ministers as well as the laity. The sect later outlined a plan whereby its members must gradually emancipate their slaves or withdraw from the church. The next year, however, deciding that these stringent, unprecedented guidelines "would do harm" to the church, the Conference suspended enforcement of the provision while noting once again its moral condemnation of bondage. Slaveholders and non-slaveholders thus remained in fellowship, and Methodism as an institution soon acquiesced to slavery, in practice if not entirely in principle.¹⁶ Some of the faithful, however, refused to remain silent. Peter Cartwright, the self-styled "Backwoods Preacher," became the foremost Methodist emancipationist in Kentucky. Cartwright denounced slavery as being "at war with the attributes and perfections of God," casting particularly harsh judgment on his fellow ministers who preached "free salvation" yet held men in bondage.¹⁷

¹² Three of the ministers were Baptists, two (plus Rice) were Presbyterians, and one was a Methodist. There were 45 delegates total. Martin, 17.

¹³ Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*, 17.

¹⁴ Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*, 36.

¹⁵ Barton W. Stone, "A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone Written by Himself," in *Voices from Cane Ridge*, ed. Rhodes Thompson (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954), 31-134.

¹⁶ A. H. Redford, *The History of Methodism in Kentucky, Volume I* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1868), 255-259.

¹⁷ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: L. Swomrstedt & A. Poe, 1859), 164.

Of the emancipationists in the three major evangelical denominations in Kentucky, those among the Baptists showed the greatest level of zeal, organization, and commitment. Only among the Kentucky Baptists did the slavery controversy trigger a local schism. The antislavery Baptists' ideas also had the most lasting impact. The movement among the Baptists constitutes the most extensive antislavery activity in early Kentucky; this sect also left the most extensive record of their motivations and their work. Like the Methodists, national Baptists quickly acceded to the institution after some initial controversy.¹⁸ Locally, however, battles continued to be fought. Dissent over slavery apparently made its first appearance among Kentucky Baptists in 1789, when at a meeting of the Salem Association in Nelson County, a query was read from the Rolling Fork Church: "Is it lawful in the sight of God for a member of Christ's Church to keep his fellow creature in perpetual slavery?" The association nervously responded that to render judgment on such an "important and critical" issue would be "improper." This sidestep did not satisfy local antislavery ministers Josiah Dodge of Rolling Fork Church and Joshua Carman of Mill Creek Church, who promptly withdrew from the Salem Association and formed their own congregation, to which they welcomed all local like-minded Baptists.¹⁹

A similar, though more extensive, dispute entangled the nearby Elkhorn Association. After an announced plan to take up the slavery question met with hostility from member churches, the association dropped the idea and remained silent. Some in the churches, however, did not go quietly. Several opponents of slavery resided in the clergy of the Elkhorn Association, and throughout the next decade they preached abolition from the pulpit. Unfortunately, these sermons are lost, but based on the association's subsequent reaction, they must have been troubling to those wishing to maintain peace and to keep the focus strictly on religious matters. Antislavery agitation among Kentucky Baptists continued to grow, and matters at Elkhorn came to a head in 1805, when the association felt compelled to declare it "improper" for "ministers, churches, or associations to meddle with emancipation" or "any other political subject" within their "religious capacities."²⁰

The Elkhorn Association's attempt to restore harmony backfired. It only stirred the ministers to intensify their "meddling," culminating in the only explicitly religious antislavery organization in early Kentucky. Local emancipationists took umbrage at the resolution and ramped up their activity, with the resulting chaos dividing member churches. The Baptists' uniquely decentralized culture, emphasizing the autonomy of individual congregations, contributed to the split. In 1807, local Baptist minister William Hickman declared himself out of

¹⁸ Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky*, 21-22.

¹⁹ J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885, Including More than 800 Biographical Sketches, Volume I* (Cincinnati: J. H. Spencer, 1886), 162-163.

²⁰ "Minutes of the Elkhorn Baptist Association, Kentucky, 1785-1805," in *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830, A Collection of Source Material*, ed. William Warren Sweet (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 508.

fellowship with slaveholders and withdrew from the Forks of Elkhorn Church.²¹ Hickman later returned to the church, but his temporary break foreshadowed a more permanent exodus that divided several small associations. Two other Elkhorn Association clergymen, John Sutton of Clear Creak Church and Carter Tarrant of Hillsboro Church, combined their antislavery factions into a new congregation, and rebellious blocs from other local associations soon joined them. These renegade emancipationists, whose ranks also included Dodge and Barrow, pooled their talents to create an entirely new association, The Baptized Licking-Locust Association, Friends of Humanity.²² The Friends of Humanity made no secret of what set them apart from their former brethren: their unyielding opposition to “unmerited, hereditary, perpetual, absolute unconditional slavery.”²³

The full extent of the controversy aroused by the Friends of Humanity may never be known, but the antislavery Baptists, as with the Methodists and Presbyterians, constituted an unpopular minority in Kentucky. Tarrant, who authored the only comprehensive account of the association’s membership and activities, obviously felt the sting of judgment, even persecution, claiming that he had personally been the subject of “about twenty trials” in Kentucky on account of his actions. Tarrant compared the present strife among Baptists to the arc of the Pilgrims, who fled persecution in England only to resume the “horrid practice” of enforcing rigid conformity once they had become the “reigning sect.”²⁴ Self-aggrandizement among religious dissidents is as old as religion itself, but no reason exists to doubt the sincerity of the men who joined the Friends of Humanity. They took substantial personal risk to push an issue many more wished to ignore. No doubt the resulting rancor ruined some friendships and stunted some prospects for worldly advancement among those devoted to the cause.

When observing the totality of these evangelicals’ activities, all of which occurred within a roughly common timeframe of three decades despite no apparent cooperation between the denominations, the question arises as to what caused this phenomenon. Individual backgrounds and convictions, developed through personal experiences, provide part of the explanation. Rice, the son of a “plain farmer,” took after the example of his parents, who considered owning slaves an economic as well as a moral burden.²⁵ Cartwright’s travels on Methodist circuits revealed to him the damage the slave system wrought not only on the slaves but on the masters as well.²⁶ Some of the motivation took a more contingent nature. Questioned as to why the Friends of Humanity had continued in fellowship with pro-slavery Baptists for so long before finally

²¹ “Records of the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church, Kentucky, 1800-1820,” in Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 338.

²² Also sometimes written as Friends to Humanity. Spencer, *Kentucky Baptists*, 186.

²³ Carter Tarrant, *History of the Baptized Ministers and Churches in Kentucky, &c. Friends to Humanity* (Frankfort, KY: Press of William Hunter, 1808), 23.

²⁴ Tarrant, *History of Baptized Ministers*, 33.

²⁵ Bishop, *An Outline of the Church*, 14.

²⁶ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 128.

revolting, Tarrant echoed the wisdom of Solomon: “to every thing there is a season and a time.” Yet he also confirmed the Elkhorn Association’s 1805 rebuke as the true final straw.²⁷ Slavery by its nature caused controversy wherever it existed; some men and women, religious or otherwise, invariably felt compelled by various impulses to speak out against it. These movements intensified as slavery ingrained itself in the country’s fabric. The constantly shifting positions of the early Methodists and Baptists on the morality of slavery capture how the controversy unfolded on a national scale. The events in Kentucky took place within the context of this burgeoning struggle. However, two more specific influences may help further to explain how and why this antislavery sentiment found its way to Kentucky at this particular moment.

The activities of these antislavery believers occurred in an important time in American social and religious life. All took place in the same period of roughly thirty years around the turn of the nineteenth century, as western migration populated Kentucky following statehood. With such rapid growth, particularly coming from more established slave states such as Virginia, many new Kentuckians, like Barrow had done in 1798, brought their opinions on slavery with them to their new home. In August 1789, when Kentucky was still part of the Old Dominion, the General Committee of the Virginia Baptists adopted a resolution declaring slavery a “violent deprivation of the rights of nature” that violated republican principles and urging the speedy demise of this “horrid evil” through “every legal measure” available, becoming the first Southern religious association officially to condemn the institution. Kentucky Baptists, few in number and isolated on the remote frontier, nonetheless maintained lines of communication with their fellow believers back east.²⁸ Only two months after the Virginia resolution, Kentucky’s Rolling Fork Church shook the Salem Association with its query. Westward migration thus made Kentucky the scene of slavery debates that spilled over from Virginia.

Just as importantly, this era also saw the peak of the Second Great Awakening as emotional religion flourished. Ministers, like numerous others, flocked to the frontier to seek new opportunities. Many also came with the determination to plant churches and spread the word of God. The revival at Cane Ridge remains a seminal event in Kentucky’s religious history. It also featured cooperation among all three evangelical sects.²⁹ While the scarcity of evidence makes it impossible to establish with certainty a direct relationship among the antislavery activities among Kentucky denominations between 1790 and 1820, it is significant that these events occurred alongside the surge in piety and religious expression brought about during the Awakening. The emancipationist ministers, steeped more than anyone in evangelicalism’s radical demands for directness, passionate testimony, and transparency, may have been encouraged by their religious enthusiasm to express their deeply held feelings on slavery.

²⁷ Tarrant, *History of Baptized Ministers*, 6.

²⁸ Spencer, *Kentucky Baptists*, 183.

²⁹ Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 432-433.

The story of Kentucky's antislavery evangelicals arrives at an end around 1820. J. H. Spencer, writing in his 1886 history of Kentucky Baptists, expressed a characteristic view of his sect's early emancipationists, concluding that their "hopeless" cause "accomplished little or no good and a vast amount of evil" by dividing churches, stirring up rebelliousness among slaves, and turning some talented preachers into pariahs.³⁰ Spencer saw the early antislavery Baptist leaders (and one can assume he would have held the same view of those in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches) as well-intentioned zealots who pursued an admirable but quixotic cause and, in their insistence on injecting a divisive issue into the daily lives of their churches, and in dividing the membership over a non-theological issue, detracted from the preaching of the gospel, the true and overriding mission of the church. Rice, Barrow, Tarrant, and their fellow travelers did indeed fail to prevent or end slavery in Kentucky or to establish a lasting white antislavery religious faction in the state. White churchgoers in Kentucky, like their preachers, soon fell silent on the issue. The peculiar institution continued to exist. Several factors help to explain this failure and to illustrate why the movement effectively ended in Kentucky after 1820.

First, the spirit of evangelical churches, especially those on the frontier, emphasized the need for harmony and cooperation while discouraging any distractions from the overriding need to win souls and to preserve the community. Early evangelicals preoccupied themselves with preserving unity and avoiding unnecessary discord.³¹ Faced with uncertain futures in the remote and unforgiving frontier, and convinced of the pressing need to spread the faith, many looked askance at antislavery agitation, which bore no direct biblical connection to salvation. The Elkhorn Association had issued its anti-"meddling" admonition in such a spirit. The West Lexington Presbytery feared in 1800 that the discussions around slavery threatened to "occasion much trouble and division in the churches of this country," and two years later it barred its churches from refusing communion with slaveholders unless a contrary decision came from a higher church authority.³²

Emancipationist sentiment also risked rousing the slaves. The hardships of bondage sometimes combined with the intensity of evangelical expression, moving enslaved blacks to express their faith and their humanity in the presence of startled whites. Emancipationist preaching added fuel to a fire that threatened to burn over into outright rebellion. In 1807, Winney, slave of Ethel Boulwares of the Forks of Elkhorn Church, declared that while she used to believe it "her duty to serve her Master & Mistress," the spirit of God had convinced her that no true "Christian kept Negroes or Slaves" and that there were "Thousands of white people Wallowing in Hell for their treatment to Negroes— and she did not care if there was many more." The church expelled Winney for her insolence.³³ Whether the emancipationist ministers directly

³⁰ Spencer, *Kentucky Baptists*, 187.

³¹ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 85-86.

³² Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky*, 23.

³³ "Records of the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church, Kentucky, 1800-1820," in Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 328-29.

inspired her outburst remains uncertain, but Hickman's rupture with the same congregation notably occurred only six months later. Cases like hers must have lingered in the minds of proslavery or indifferent laymen whenever the issue surfaced.

The second factor concerns how Southern evangelical churches transformed themselves in response to a changing culture. In *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, historian Christine Leigh Heyrman argued that evangelical churches, particularly the Baptists and Methodists, initially rejected by many white Southerners who had grown accustomed to the Anglican establishment, slowly adapted their teachings and practices to conform to Southern society.³⁴ As they did so, these churches gained new adherents, growing to dominate the region's religious culture by the middle of the nineteenth century. As Heyrman described, adjustment on slavery constituted one of the major changes these churches undertook to pacify Southern whites. The Methodists, whose early boldness gave way to meek conformity, illustrate the point most clearly. In churches of all evangelical sects, the leadership curtailed the privileges and visibility of black worshippers when they appeared to threaten white superiority. Antislavery preaching grew less common. Debates about slavery's morality in the churches all but ceased.³⁵ Kentucky, like the rest of the South, saw its evangelical denominations accept bondage. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Cartwright watched in horror as his fellow Methodist ministers, once united in opposition to slavery as a "matter of conscience," soon justified its legality and pronounced it "not a curse, but a blessing."³⁶

Third, this antislavery agitation seems to have been an overwhelmingly clerical undertaking. The ministers took the personal initiative in expressing their opposition to slavery. To the extent that any of them built movements, they tended to be based on personal appeals, persuasion, and relationships. More evidence may exist, hidden away in dusty church record books or in unread journal entries, showing greater lay involvement in these activities. Some may simply be lost. The available information, however, points toward the evangelical ministers as the primary source of early religious opposition to slavery in Kentucky. This personality-based leadership meant that when the leaders disappeared, so did whatever could be called a movement. By 1820 many of the prominent antislavery ministers had grown old, died, left the state, or turned their attentions to other subjects. Barrow, for example, arguably the spiritual leader of the Kentucky Baptist emancipationists, passed away in 1819.³⁷

Even while the ministers were active, they hardly could have been mistaken for radicals. Each still placed his commitment as a preacher of God's word above any earthly concerns, however pressing those may have been. The emancipationist ministers' rhetoric on slavery's evils burned with intensity, but succeeding generations would have viewed many of their substantive positions as milquetoast. When they articulated specific views of how slavery should end, most

³⁴ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

³⁵ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 155.

³⁶ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 157.

³⁷ Spencer, *Kentucky Baptists*, 197.

avored gradual emancipation, accompanied by careful, lengthy preparation of the slaves for the challenges of freedom. Cartwright, presciently envisioning the “death and carnage” of a civil war if slavery could not be resolved peacefully, wrote in his memoirs that he had always distrusted the “rabid” abolitionists and instead advocated a course of “moral suasion” that could end slavery without risking the salvation of either the slaves or the masters.³⁸ This incremental approach characterized most antislavery activities in the early nineteenth century, when even the more combative emancipationists sounded more cautious tones than those advanced by William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists starting in the 1830s, when the increasingly polarized slavery debate seemed to call for a more aggressive approach.³⁹

The ministers likewise made no evident effort to enlist blacks, enslaved or free, in their cause. While many local slaves heard their sermons and possibly their views on bondage, open insubordination in the church, like that exhibited by Winney, evidently was not widespread. Slaves in Kentucky, as everywhere in the country, played a central role in the struggle to attain their freedom.⁴⁰ However, in a place and time in which even sympathetic emancipationists regarded blacks as being a degraded race unready for civilized life, and in which most masters kept their slaves unable to read or write, the opportunities for slaves to cooperate with their white allies proved rare. Some, like the Friends of Humanity, severed fellowship with slaveholders and thus with the slaves. They cleansed their own consciences but in so doing removed themselves from those they wished to help. In addition, Kentucky’s free black population remained extremely small throughout the antebellum period, depriving local emancipationists of potential allies, had they been so inclined.⁴¹ Kentucky’s evangelical emancipation movement appears to have been driven primarily by white men who held positions of clerical authority and who possessed a conscientious objection to slavery. Slaves became the objects of their activities, but not actual participants.

The final and most important factor is that the controversy took place almost entirely within the churches and the religious associations. The ministers who opposed slavery gave voice to their convictions in pulpits and in association meetings, but with the notable exception of Rice’s effort at the constitutional convention, none of these evangelical leaders attempted to move the slavery debate from the religious to the civil sphere while in Kentucky. While the votes of the ministers at the 1792 convention proved antislavery evangelicals willing to put their principles into practice when called upon to do so, they seldom sought those opportunities and sometimes consciously avoided them. In explaining the mission of the Friends of Humanity,

³⁸ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 129.

³⁹ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 101.

⁴⁰ An overview of the antislavery activities of black Kentuckians can be found in Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky*, 79-97.

⁴¹ Free blacks never surpassed 1% of the state’s total population. During the peak decades of evangelical antislavery activity, the figure was lower still. Harrison, *The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky*, 2.

Tarrant took pains to refute the accusation that the association had attempted to interfere in legal affairs. Tarrant centered his desire to transform the religious rather than the political realm. While conceding his wish that every citizen would condemn slavery, he insisted that “religious society should do right whether the nation does or not.” Tarrant dismissed those who insisted on legal remedies to slavery as serving up “blind offerings” to God. While he personally supported gradual emancipation, Tarrant’s preferred method of achieving that goal lay in the actions of believers and individual masters, not in the decrees of the state.⁴² Tarrant became involved in the Kentucky Abolition Society, which he helped found in 1808, but this secular venture made little impact, and his activities within it lasted only a few years.⁴³ Many Methodist ministers likewise did not see an obligation to make their opposition to slavery a political matter, but to testify to its moral depravity. Cartwright felt confident that if men of God continued “bearing honest testimony” about the evils of slavery, emancipation would arrive in due time.⁴⁴

The language in which these men articulated their opinions on slavery proves the point. With Rice, in his denunciation of slavery as bad policy as well as bad religion, once again the lone exception, they voiced their condemnation in spiritual terms, divorced from civil considerations. For these men, opposition to slavery was a matter of moral principle; they preached against it and most strove to keep their own lives free of its stain. The rest lay beyond their purview. Illustrative of this tendency was Methodist stalwart John Ray who, according to a friend, frequently asked a simple question to those who offered him lodgings: “Have you any negroes?” An affirmative answer prompted Ray to decline the hospitality if possible.⁴⁵

Though ineffective in attacking slavery as a legal institution, this view of slavery as primarily a matter of religious and personal morality alarmed fellow believers. Emotional expression of one’s convictions, though usually praised by and even expected of evangelicals, made unsympathetic brethren uncomfortable when used to preach emancipation.⁴⁶ The focus upon slavery’s moral dimensions ran completely counter to the view of many evangelicals, like that which the Elkhorn Association had advanced to convince its ministers to stop pressing emancipation in their churches.

With their evident disinterest in slavery as a civil matter, these men had little initiative to leverage their emancipationist projects into lasting movements with implications outside the churches and associations to which they belonged. Secular antislavery movements continued in Kentucky until the Civil War. In the pulpit and the pews, however, the question seemed to be settled: white Kentucky evangelicals gave slavery at least tacit approval. However, the legacy of Kentucky’s evangelical emancipationists did not end entirely after this acceptance became the

⁴² Tarrant, *History of Baptised Ministers*, 48.

⁴³ Charles Tarrants, “Carter Tarrant (1765-1816): Baptist and Emancipationist,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 88, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 121-147, accessed September 30, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23382461>.

⁴⁴ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 128.

⁴⁵ Redford, *The History of Methodism in Kentucky*, 130.

⁴⁶ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 93.

norm. The constant movement of people on the Western frontier carried with it the potential to spread movements and ideas far beyond the areas of their origins. One need only glance northward across the Ohio River to follow this story beyond the first two decades of the nineteenth century and into another decade of fierce debate and antislavery activity, particularly in Illinois, where continued migration and increased opportunities for civic involvement gave it new life.

The most obvious example of the direct influence of Kentucky's evangelical emancipationists outside the state took place in the Indiana Territory, encompassing the portion soon to become Illinois. There, at the same time as migrant preachers planted churches to bring spiritual nourishment to the rough frontiersman, the territory of Illinois wrestled with its emerging political identity and prepared to enter the union. The ideas of antislavery Kentuckians, specifically those of the Friends of Humanity, exerted an influence in both of these realms. The Northwest Ordinance outlawed slavery in present-day Illinois and Indiana (among other locations), but in practice French slaveholders who already resided there maintained their slaves. Proslavery forces made numerous attempts to introduce bondage into the area in the early nineteenth century. Thus, when these territories entered the union as states, the issue had not been entirely settled.⁴⁷

The instigator of the Baptist movement in Illinois was minister James Lemen. Lemen's descendants, long after his death, claimed dubiously that he had been in contact with and operating on behalf of then-President Thomas Jefferson.⁴⁸ The extent, if any, of Lemen's contact with Jefferson will likely remain unknown, as will the extent of his contact with emancipationists in Kentucky, but the record certainly indicates his work against slavery in the Illinois frontier and that he took influence from the Friends of Humanity. In 1808, Lemen's Richland Creek Church adopted Tarrant's "rules" concerning association with slaveholders, and Lemen spoke against slavery.⁴⁹ These activities precipitated a schism the next year; Lemen led an antislavery faction that broke from Richland Creek Church and formed The Baptized Church of Christ, Friends to Humanity, which later attracted other churches, growing into an association by 1820. Lemen also involved himself in political matters, becoming a delegate to the Illinois constitutional convention in 1818, which outlawed slavery in most of Illinois, requiring slaves already in the state to remain in bondage but providing for the emancipation of their children upon reaching adulthood.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 89-90.

⁴⁸ This claim, the so-called Jefferson-Lemen Compact, is based upon possibly fraudulent documents produced by Lemen's grandson. For a detailed account of the complex affair, see James A. Edstrom, "'A Mighty Contest': The Jefferson-Lemen Compact Reevaluated," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 192-215, accessed September 21, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40193650>.

⁴⁹ Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 89; for a complete list of the "rules" by which both iterations of the Friends of Humanity operated, see Tarrant, *History of Baptised Ministers*, 38-39.

⁵⁰ Illinois Constitution of 1818, Article VI.

As part of the larger national expansion into territories previously unsettled by whites, people as well as ideas traversed the river. Some pious Kentuckians, including a number of ministers, repulsed by their state's increasing acceptance of slavery, among other, more mundane motivations, removed themselves to states or territories where it did not predominate. Religious disputes with contemporaries, for example, prompted Stone to relocate his family to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1834.⁵¹ Once arrived, many continued their religious calling and some carried on the fight against bondage.

At least one former Kentuckian felt compelled by his antislavery views to enter civic life in another state. Cartwright, who had been riding circuits in Kentucky and Tennessee, by the early 1820s found himself fretting over rising land prices and the impact they would have on his ability to provide for his growing children. He also grew increasingly distressed by white Kentuckians' moral acceptance of slavery and by the institution's gradual assimilation into the local culture. Cartwright lamented the "degradation" of work among young white men as toil came to be seen as the lot of the slave, wishing for his own children to earn a living, not to profit from the exploitation of others' labor. He watched with disgust as even his fellow ministers became "entangled" in slavery's snare by marrying into slaveholding families or otherwise adapting to Southern ways of thinking. Noting the desire for freedom from the "evil of slavery" as his first motivation, Cartwright, after much thoughtful prayer, removed his family to Illinois in 1824.⁵²

Cartwright and his fellow travelers had been unable to prevent slavery from taking root in Kentucky, but after arriving in Illinois he found fresh incentive to renew the cause. Illinois' first constitution, thanks in part to Lemen's efforts, had made the state, if not entirely free, mostly so, and it certainly provided for slavery's eventual extinction. Efforts had been afoot, however, to call another convention and revisit the matter. Believing he had "bid a final farewell" to the peculiar institution when he left Kentucky, Cartwright could not idly tolerate its potential spread into his new home state. The controversy roused him into action: breaking with the tendency to shun political involvement he and the other emancipationists had exhibited in Kentucky, Cartwright ran successfully in 1828 for a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives. Cartwright, an antislavery Democrat, believed that public service and Christian convictions, which for him included emancipation, could be compatible as long as voters disregarded party and elected "honest and capable men." His time in office proved more prosaic. Slavery never again seriously threatened to reenter the state; Cartwright's later antislavery efforts mostly took place in the Methodist General Conference. The bald "corruption" of legislative politicking appalled the pious Methodist.⁵³ However much the wild, worldly "muddy waters" of frontier politics may have repulsed him, Cartwright nevertheless remained politically involved in Illinois through 1846, when he lost a bid for the United States House of Representatives to another transplanted

⁵¹ Stone, "A Short History," in Thompson, *Voices from Cane Ridge*, 31-134.

⁵² Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 245.

⁵³ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 265.

Kentuckian with a well-known distaste for slavery, a rising young Whig legislator named Abraham Lincoln.⁵⁴

These evangelicals' outspoken opposition to slavery, though brief and long past by the time the country rent itself to the point of civil war, caused tumult and controversy among the faithful in the Kentucky frontier. Their activity came as emerging religious denominations worked out their positions on slavery, disputes that followed migrant clergymen over the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia. It arrived with the Second Great Awakening and the revivalist fever that swept the country, prompting intense soul-searching and professions of conscience. It divided churches, it helped to launch obscure country preachers into prominence and notoriety, and it forced Kentucky's believers at least to consider an uncomfortable issue.

By 1820, as the preachers of emancipation went their separate ways, this small movement met its end. Never advancing past the religious realm nor swelling into a popular uprising, it faded as these men died, moved, or found other preoccupations. As the slavery debates of the nineteenth century reached a fever pitch in the 1840s and 1850s, Kentucky's white evangelicals behaved in a similar manner to their fellow believers in other Southern states, discarding their reservations about slavery and presenting a united front against Northern abolitionists. The desire for unity triumphed over any serious qualms with slavery. The emancipationist spirit found a revival, however, for another decade and beyond in the territories and states north of the Ohio River, where men such as James Lemen and Peter Cartwright carried their convictions into civil affairs. Later decades saw slavery's roots grew deeper into Southern soil, and as Northern backlash reached new heights, the slavery debate came to occupy the nation's attentions until it could no longer be settled peacefully, as the emancipating ministers had wished. Their story may have been a brief one, forgotten in the grand narrative of the rise and fall of American slavery, but Kentucky's evangelical emancipationists followed the dictates of their consciences in a hostile world.

Andrew Landreth is a graduate student in history at Murray State University.

⁵⁴ Lowell H. Harrison, *Lincoln of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 53-54.