

GEORGE BOURNE AND THE MISSED MOMENT FOR AMERICAN  
PRESBYTERIANS

0HT607 AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

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## Introduction

“Therefore, every man who holds Slaves and who pretends to be a Christian or a Republican, is either an incurable Idiot who cannot distinguish good from evil, or an obdurate sinner who resolutely defies every social, moral, and divine requisition. Evangelical charity induces the hope that he is an ignoramus.”<sup>1</sup> With these words, the Rev. George Bourne sealed his deposition from the Presbyterian church on the one hand, and on the other he energized the abolitionist movement that eventually freed African slaves from bondage. He was a man of great passion, conviction and courage and was used greatly by God despite the errors of American Presbyterians. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1818 which upheld the decision of the Lexington Presbytery to depose Bourne (for the second time) was truly a missed moment in American Presbyterian history. It was at this moment, where the Presbyterian Church could have made a real difference and led the country away from her heinous sins. It was at this moment, that the Presbyterian Church could have exonerated Bourne and held true to her confession, censuring man-stealers (slaveholders) instead of the man who called attention to such a great evil. Instead, the assembly for many reasons pursued a false harmony in the Church which would eventually break during the Civil War. By condemning Bourne *specifically* and slavery *generally* in the same assembly, the court showed its hands. It would not pursue the issue of slavery with the tenacity of Bourne.

Had they followed Bourne, there would have been far reaching implications for Presbyterians. And perhaps something that has caused subsequent Presbyterians to repent,

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<sup>1</sup> John W Christie and Dwight L. Dumond, *George Bourne and the Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*, Presbyterian Historical Society. (Baltimore, MD: Historical Society of Delaware, 1969), 105.

would have been cause for celebration.<sup>2</sup> Imagine, just for a moment, what it would have been like had the church solved the issue of slavery rather than a war.<sup>3</sup> To understand why this moment was so tragically missed and the power it could have had on American Presbyterianism, I will briefly examine the life of George Bourne and his chief work *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*. Then I will look at the GA of 1818 and the missed moment for Presbyterians and the impact that George Bourne went on to have, primarily through the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. And finally I will conclude with some brief lasting impacts that this moment has had on American Presbyterians and how to move forward towards a multi-ethnic American Presbyterianism.

### George Bourne: His life and Work

There is precious little detail to the life of George Bourne and most of the biographical information in this paper is indebted to the work of John Christie and Dwight Dumond.<sup>4</sup> Bourne was born in England and came to live in America in 1804. Initially Bourne edited a newspaper in Baltimore, MD, but he eventually found his way to Virginia and the Presbyterian Church. It was there where his anti-slavery position was fully developed for in the South in the early 19th century, “one might defend it [slavery] or learn to live with the

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<sup>2</sup> Many Presbyterian denominations have repented of the failures of their covenant fathers in the faith on the issue of slavery. As a representative example of current Presbyterians in this paper I will use my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PCA repented of slavery in 2002, building upon an earlier National Association of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC) statement in 1977. The PCA statement can be found here: <http://pcahistory.org/pca/race.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Noll notes that in the Civil war, theologians essentially punted the question of slavery and the Bible to generals. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era)*, Reprint ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 160.

<sup>4</sup> *George Bourne and the Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* includes biographical information, details his ministry and in particular his trials in the Presbyterian Church and then includes a copy of Bourne’s book which is hard to find.

framework of its restraints but not ignore it.”<sup>5</sup> In 1812, Bourne was ordained in the Lexington Presbytery and continued in good standing, even representing the Presbytery at the General Assembly as a commissioner several times. It was his involvement with the men in the Presbytery that helped to confirm his anti-slavery position. He rightly noted that the Westminster Larger Catechism condemned slavery as “man-stealing” and therefore saw the continuing of this practice among elders and pastors as a scandalous denial of their very confession, and the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Bourne had consistently carried out his beliefs and had been excluding slaveholders from membership in his church. This became an issue when Bourne attempted to articulate his views at the 1815 General Assembly. Although he did not name any names, all his examples of the evils of slavery were drawn from fellow Presbyters and elders, which instantly created a set of enemies who sought to destroy Bourne without regard to justice.<sup>7</sup> This set the trajectory for the rest of Bourne’s ministry.

The details of his deposing from the Presbyterian Church are numerous, but a brief sketch will tell the tale. Bourne was deposed by his Presbytery in 1815, appealed to the General Assembly of 1816 at which he was granted a second trial by the same court. He was deposed again by the Lexington Presbytery in 1818, which led to the infamous General

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>6</sup> The condemnation of “man-stealing” is in the answer to WLC #142. At that time there was a note attached to the answer as well to which we will return below. The note connected slavery specifically with man-stealing as a violation of the eighth commandment. “I Tim.i, 10 (The law is made) for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for men-stealers. (This crime among the Jews exposed the perpetrators of it to capital punishment; Exod. 21, 16 and the apostle here classes them with sinners of the first rank. The word he uses in its original import, comprehends all who are concerned in brining any of the human race into slavery, or in detaining them in it....stealers of men are all those who bring off slaves or freeman, and keep, sell, or buy them. To steal a freeman, says Grotius, is the highest kind of theft. In other instance we only steal human property, but when we steal or retain men in slavery, we seize those who in common with ourselves, are constituted by the original grant, lords of the earth. Gen: 1, 28.” See Christie, 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> Later in life, Bourne did connect the stories he told of the atrocities of slavery with names which can be found in Christie, 26-48.

Assembly of 1818, where his defrocking was upheld. After reviewing the trial and the circumstances surrounding his deposing, it is hard to improve on the assessment of Christie and Dumond, “that Bourne was compelled to face such charges at the hands of erstwhile friends and colleagues when his ministerial life depended on the outcome is in itself proof that well-planned vindictiveness rather than even-handed justice animate their conduct.”<sup>8</sup> Before returning to the 1818 General Assembly and what I will argue as the missed moment for Presbyterians on the issue of slavery, it would be prudent to examine Bourne’s anti-slavery views.

### The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable: Its Context and Arguments

Before the publishing of *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* the general tone throughout America was that of acknowledging that slavery was not good, but a hesitancy to promote anything other than gradual emancipation. Although gradual emancipation was not the only abolitionist view, it was the widely held belief throughout the country. So, what was it about Bourne’s position that received such backlash? In order to understand this it is good to look briefly at some context. In 1792, the Reverend David Rice gave a speech in Danville, Kentucky (certainly not in a free state!) entitled “Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy.” In it Rice argued:

To call our fellow men, who have not forfeited, nor voluntarily resigned their liberty, our property, is a gross absurdity, a contradiction to common sense, and an indignity to human nature. The owners of such slaves then are licensed robbers, and not the just proprietors, of what they claim. Freeing them is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to the right owner; it is suffering the unlawful captive to escape. It is not wronging the master, but doing justice to the sale, restoring him to himself. The master, it

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 54-55. Christie and Dumond note that the charges against Bourne were trumped up and based on “common fame” which they say is a term “closely akin to common gossip.”

is true, is wronged; he may suffer and that greatly: but this is his own fault, and the fault of the enslaving law; and not the law that does justice to the oppressed.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly this view influenced Bourne as Rice is one author that he quotes from extensively throughout *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*. I bring this quote up here not to notice the influence on Bourne but the early date for such abolitionist tendencies, 1792. Clearly throughout the revolutionary period there was an anti-slavery movement.<sup>10</sup> Why did this not catch on? And more importantly for our purposes, why were Bourne's views, which were so similar to Rice's, met with such strong condemnation? Gary Nash points out several reasons in his book *Race and Revolution*, which are helpful as a backdrop to understanding the condemnation faced by Bourne for his antislavery position. First, was the economic reason. Even in the North, significant economic factors were at play when it came to slavery. "Thus Americans north of the Chesapeake demonstrated through their *inaction* in the late 1780s that economic interest outweighed moral commitment when it came to participating in a national solution to the problem of slavery."<sup>11</sup> Secondly, and perhaps the far greater issue, was the social question. The movement towards gradual emancipation and recolonization in Africa was so widely supported because slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike had a desire "to be quit of slavery but the simultaneous desire to be quit of blacks."<sup>12</sup> A decisive shift began to take place because of this growing social problem, particularly as blacks were freed through voluntary manumissions and proved to be far more capable to organize and survive than had

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<sup>9</sup> David Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 13.

<sup>10</sup> See also James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: the Abolitionists and American Slavery*. (Rev. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), especially Chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution*. 1st ed. (Madison, Wis: Madison House, 1990), 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

been thought by whites.<sup>13</sup> “The environmentalist belief of the Revolutionary period posited that circumstances, not inborn qualities, accounted for the degradation of Africans in America was weakening, with the old view that blacks were innately inferior making a resurgence.”<sup>14</sup>

With this backdrop now established, we can notice more effectively why Bourne’s argument that slavery constituted a personal sin of man-stealing, was so vigorously opposed. Bourne argued convincingly and systematically from the Catechism, the OT, the NT, and the creed of America, the Declaration of Independence, that slavery constituted man-stealing. “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (Ex. 21:16).<sup>15</sup> Starting from this foundation, Bourne offers his own thoughts while also quoting authors and Bible commentators to show that slaveholders in the South in the 19th Century were breaking this very command, which is an extension of the 8th commandment (Ex. 20:15). The foundation of this argument was the shared and *equal* humanity of the African slave and his white master. “As it is impossible to prove that the natural rights of man are not equally sacred in Africa as they are in America; would the law of this country permit, the trafficker in souls would no more scruple to kidnap, or purchase the son of his next neighbor, than he would the inhabitants of a remote continent or their descendants.”<sup>16</sup> This argument of shared equality of personhood runs through Bourne’s whole book.

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<sup>13</sup> Nash notes several examples primarily from the North, prior to the time of Bourne’s writing, of freed blacks organizing effectively and notes tragically on 73, “The revival of earlier patterns of racist thought that insisted on innate black inferiority occurred precisely during a period of impressive accomplishment among newly freed slaves.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise noted all Biblical Citations come from: *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton: 1 Standard Bible Society, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Quote from Wood’s dictionary of the Holy Bible by Bourne in Christie, 125.

Paul assured the Areopagites, that *God made of one flesh, all nations of men*. The dissimilarity of the rational species, upon the pretext of colour, is consequently a chimera; and if the members of the various countries of the globe are derived from a different origin, they cannot be bound by the same laws as ourselves. This aggravates the iniquity of Slave-holding to an inconceivable degree, because it pre-supposes the right to grasp every reasonable creature who bears not our own external conformation, or whose features differ: but the same principles in re-action would justify every country in enslaving its neighbors, and every individual, who could effect it, in stealing his inferior or dependent.<sup>17</sup>

He notes it again when he declares that slaveholding not only breaks the eighth commandment but the Ninth as well, “no man can possess a slave, until he has virtually sworn, that men, women and children are brutes.” First, the slaveholder lies about his neighbor, denying their humanity and second he covets, and third he steals.<sup>18</sup> The crucial thing to notice throughout Bourne’s work is that he does not ground his view of slavery solely in the wicked treatment of slaves, although he does document such abuses. He does not ground it in the fear of uprising that was growing throughout the nation. He grounds it in the shared humanity of the black African and his white master. If they are equal in value before God, then to steal another man or woman and restrict their freedom is man-stealing.

The second crucial point to notice is his identification of man-stealing as a personal and real sin of the highest degree. He notes Paul’s condemnation in 1 Timothy 1:10, and ranks slaveholders as those among the worst offenders of the law. Bourne asks rhetorically in his conclusion, “How can the Christian Church longer tolerate so shameless an absurdity as a

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<sup>17</sup> Christie, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 155.



profession of religion, and eternal man-stealing?”<sup>19</sup> By identifying this as a sin and therefore questioning the legitimacy of the profession of faith for all slaveholders, Bourne set out to make his position clear. If this was a sin, and not simply a ‘peculiar institution’ which had been unfortunately thrust upon this current generation by those in the past, than anything short of immediate emancipation was to compromise with sin. “Bourne held that moderation in the denunciation of sin was an absurdity and that one could not take away Christian truth from the body of doctrine and combine what was left with wickedness to make pronouncements palatable for sinners.”<sup>20</sup> In calling for immediate emancipation, Bourne set himself against the prevailing opinion of even those who had a disdain for slavery. He pushed the argument to places it had not gone before and as Christie and Dumond point out, “no churches and precious few individuals accepted Bourne’s position.”<sup>21</sup>

### The Missed Moment for American Presbyterians

With a fuller understanding of Bourne’s position we can now return to the important General Assembly of 1818. During this General Assembly, three important things took place which set the trajectory for American Presbyterians on the issue of slavery. First, the note on WLC 142 which connected man-stealing and slavery was removed, due to the procedure in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 193. It is important to note here that the question of whether or not it is possible to have been both a genuine Christian and a slaveholder is not within the scope of this paper. Bourne’s asking of this question is not *necessarily* his answering that in the negative. His point, which he immediately goes on to make is that if this is sin, Pastors and other officers in the church, in particular, and every Christian in general who is a slaveholder ought to repent and immediately abandon the practice. And if they refuse to repent the process of Church discipline, beginning with censure should proceed because they are in unrepentant sin. My point in writing this paper is not to pass judgement on whether or not slaveholding Pastors will be in glory for certainly the blood of Jesus can forgive all sin and we are often blind to our own sin. But my purpose is to point out that Bourne was correct in saying this was a real, personal sin which demanded immediate repentance and church discipline if not followed through and the refusal of the church to do so has had real and lasting effects.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 71.

which it was placed there in the first place.<sup>22</sup> However, the reality is that had Bourne not made such use of it in his writing, it would have probably continued to be ignored. This was a victory for the pro-slavery position. The second important decision was another victory for the pro-slavery position, and that was the assembly's decision to uphold the defrocking of Bourne. It was clear that the immediate abolitionist position would not be tolerated, especially when the advocate called for the discipline of slaveholding Presbyters. Finally, there was a statement condemning slavery. Now, to even the most casual observer this should seem like a contradiction. And this is the precise moment that I believe American Presbyterians missed. The statement, astutely noted by Christie and Dumond, "is a masterpiece of equivocation achieved by studiously evading the fateful question about man-stealing."<sup>23</sup> The statement includes declarations of slavery as a "gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God." And yet as something which "creates a paradox in the moral system" and a "practice into which Christian people have most inconsistently fallen" which sounds similar to Aaron's defense before Moses of the golden calf leaping out of the fire.<sup>24</sup> It includes an exhortation to those who "forbear harsh censures, and uncharitable reflections on their brethren, who unhappily live among slaves whom they cannot immediately set free." It fought against Bourne's immediate abolition and promoted the current thoughts of gradual emancipation and colonization based on the "number of the slaves, their ignorance, and their vicious habits generally." When viewed against the backdrop of the above discussion, it seems that the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Ex. 32:24.

assembly generally, and the writers of this declaration specifically (which included Bourne's most ardent opponent George A. Baxter) adopted the popular beliefs that blacks were inherently lesser and freeing them would ensure revolution and destroy the peace of the nation. Although it stated the antislavery position stronger than any assembly had before, the statement and its universal acceptance by even slaveholders had almost no positive affect in changing the situation. There were "no teeth in this resolution" or ability to take the statements about the inconsistency of slavery and christianity and make the church accountable. There were no threats of defrocking slaveholders but expressed for them "tender sympathy," and in fact an abolitionist was defrocked in the same meeting!

In all respects the emphasis was not on rights and equality of all men but upon welfare and harmony within the Church. The resolution was a pious declaration, both a generalization and a rationalization, *an ever ready defense for inaction*. It was a fitting climax to the endorsement of expulsion from the Gospel ministry of a great intellect, and man of courage, by what, on careful examination, bears all the markings of a Kangaroo Court.<sup>25</sup>

The General Assembly at this moment had an opportunity to lead the nation into repentance and new obedience. Had they reckoned with Bourne's prophetic call to immediately abandon sinful practices, hold sinful Presbyters accountable, and stand with the oppressed and marginalized, the history of America could look remarkably different. Instead, there were two outcomes which had lasting consequences. One was inaction. The church, which was not opposed to defrocking those it thought threatened her purity doctrinally, was content to call slavery evil and take no action against slaveholders *in her midst*. If the church refused to deal with the issue within her body, how was she to lead in this new 'christian' society. The impact of this inaction is noted in the defenses given during the Civil-War era

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 64, emphasis mine.

for slavery. Now, it is certainly true that the Church was desperately trying to avoid schism and war, so thought it best to not address slavery. In 1836, the General Assembly received a recommendation from a committee created to address the issue of slavery to “take no action.”<sup>26</sup> This stance of slavery as evil, but not something that the church will do anything about intensified the abolitionists and hardened the pro-slavery Presbyters. The open letter addressing the church from the 1861 General Assembly of the Confederate States used this logic of inaction to argue for its separation from the abolitionist Northerners:

In the first place, we would have it distinctly understood that, in our ecclesiastical capacity, we are neither the friends nor the foes of slavery; that is to say, we have no commission either to propagate or abolish it. The policy of its existence or non-existence is a question with exclusively belongs to the State. We have no right, as a Church to enjoin it as a duty, or to condemn it as a sin.<sup>27</sup>

This is one of the key points in which the Assembly of 1818 erred. By condemning *slavery* as evil, but stopping short of Bourne’s condemnation of it as *man-stealing*, a personal sin, the Assembly effectively handcuffed itself from further action. This meant that the church could argue that it is the abolitionist and not they themselves that are in err. In a pro-slavery Civil War preparatory sermon, Presbyterian Benjamin Palmer claimed that, “the Abolition spirit is undeniably atheistic.”<sup>28</sup>

The second negative consequence of the 1818 assembly is that its arguments for gradual emancipation and colonization continued on the false footing of white supremacy. As was noted above in the declaration, the prospect of immediate emancipation was dismissed

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<sup>26</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: a History*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 89.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice W. Armstrong, ed. *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 214-15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

because of the condition of the slaves. Now, this must be understood within the growing views of the nation towards the African slaves which was one of racial superiority. As freed blacks in the North like Richard Allen so effectively argued as early as 1794, “will you, because you have reduced us to the unhappy condition our color is in, plead our incapacity for freedom... as a sufficient cause for keeping us under the grievous yoke?”<sup>29</sup> If it is the conditions which slavery has created, which make immediate freedom supposedly not possible, how can those enslaved be blamed for this situation?

What Bourne had so accurately described in *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* was the equality of African Americans and White Americans. This is what made slavery such an evil *man-stealing*. The 1818 assembly did not take this position as it consciously avoided this language. And as the abolitionist movement gathered momentum under William Lloyd Garrison, the arguments put forward for gradualism and colonization were aptly shown in light of racial bias. Garrison, (as we will see below) under the influence of Bourne, fought for “the equal citizenship of black and white” and pointed out the racial superiority argument inherent in gradualism. Blacks could not be freed immediately because they were lesser was an absurd lie according to Garrison and Bourne.<sup>30</sup> Such support of gradualism in the 1818 assembly betrays the sense of racial superiority that was pervasive throughout the Presbyterian Church. Such arguments were hardened in the Civil-War era. Returning again to the 1861 General Assembly letter from the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States, “As long as that race [African], in its comparative degradation, co-exists, side by side, with

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<sup>29</sup> Nash, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 66.

the white, bondage is its normal condition.”<sup>31</sup> Although it is difficult to read, it is important to quote again from Palmer, noting that this sermon called for arms to protect the institution of slavery specifically on this foundation:

The worst foes of the black race are those who have intermeddled on their behalf. We know better than others that every attribute of their character fits them for dependence and servitude. By nature, the most affectionate and loyal of all races beneath the sun, they are also the most helpless; and no calamity can befall them greater than the loss of that protection they enjoy under this patriarchal system... Their residence here, in the presence of the vigorous Saxon race, would be but the signal for their rapid extermination before they had time to waste away through listlessness, filth, and vice. Freedom would be their vice.

Though the 1818 Assembly’s declaration does not rise to this level, it certainly exhibited the general feeling towards blacks that in their current condition, freedom was dangerous. And it did not assert their full humanity, when it had access to Bourne’s book, which did so compellingly. The combination of in-action and a racial bias against blacks mark the missed moment for American Presbyterians specifically on the question of slavery and more broadly on the question of race in the American experiment. The Assembly had the opportunity to set the trajectory before the Civil War towards an affirmation of the humanity of those who had been sinfully reduced to property. What if the assembly had sided with Bourne? Would deposing slaveholding presbyters, affirming the dignity and full humanity of blacks, and fighting for immediate emancipation have had substantial impact on ending slavery or preventing the Civil War? We cannot with certainty answer that question.

However, looking below at the impact George Bourne went on to have primarily through William Lloyd Garrison, and the subsequent history of the Presbyterian Church throughout America I wonder and shudder at the missed opportunity to stand with the Lord over and

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<sup>31</sup> Armstrong, 215.

against the evil of the world which had so deeply penetrated the thinking and practice of the church.

### Bourne's Chief Influence: William Lloyd Garrison

A full exposition on the influence of William Lloyd Garrison on the abolitionist movement is beyond the scope of this paper. Garrison was a northern journalist and editor of *The Liberator*, an abolitionist journal. In his landmark biography on Garrison, Henry Mayer says “in the long struggle to achieve equality in the United States, William Lloyd Garrison occupies a place as central in the history of the nineteenth century as that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the history of the twentieth.”<sup>32</sup> Garrison through his writing and speaking actively helped in the struggle for abolition. As a summary to Garrison's thoughts and influence I turn again to Mayer:

Most significant, Garrison did not shrink from the realization that the assault upon slavery would require a direct confrontation with American assumptions of white supremacy. He boldly coupled his demand for immediate emancipation with an insistence upon equal rights for black people, a principled stand whose moral clarity eluded every prominent political figure of his era. When emancipation finally arrived, it came therefore by indirection as a consequence of civil war and was accomplished in a halfhearted revolution that failed to achieve fully the moral transformation Garrison envisioned.<sup>33</sup>

The significance of Garrison in the scope of this paper, is the influence that Bourne and *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* had upon him. Bourne, who ended up as a mentor to Garrison<sup>34</sup> and wrote for *the Liberator*, had his biggest impact on influencing Garrison in his most influential idea: immediate emancipation. “When historians make their final account, George Bourne probably will be accorded the distinction of having been the first

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<sup>32</sup> Mayer, 631.

<sup>33</sup> Mayer, xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Mayer, 259.

immediate abolitionist in America.”<sup>35</sup> Garrison was in support of gradual abolition and colonization until he read Bourne’s book, which radically altered his views.<sup>36</sup> Garrison himself admitted this in commenting on Bourne’s book, “next to the Bible, we are indebted to this work for our views of the system of slavery.”<sup>37</sup> The ardent prophetic voice of George Bourne, which caused his expulsion from the Presbyterian Church found new life in the work of William Lloyd Garrison and led to the abolition of slavery. Bourne then set to writing for *The Liberator* and even was the editor for a time while Garrison traveled abroad.<sup>38</sup> The influence of Bourne may have gone beyond mentoring. In a comparison of Bourne’s works with that of Garrison, Christie and Dumond go so far as to say, “the more one compares the work of the two men, the greater temptation it is to substitute the name of George Bourne wherever Garrison’s is found.”<sup>39</sup> Writing in 1969, during the height of the civil-rights movement, they also offer this compelling summary of the impact of George Bourne:

Bourne played a tremendously important role in the emancipation of the slaves, but he could not, and sensed that he could not, do what has not been accomplished in 150 years since, namely, gain acceptance of the doctrine of equality for all men. If he could have brought the church around to his point of view, the battle would have been won at this point.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

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<sup>35</sup> Christie, vii.

<sup>36</sup> John Auping, *Religion and Social Justice: The Case of Christianity and the Abolition of Slavery in America*. (México, D.F: Universidad Iberoamericana, Dept. de Ciencias Religiosas. 1994), 88.

<sup>37</sup> Christie, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Auping, 112.

<sup>39</sup> Christie, 98.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 69.



Bourne stated prophetically that future generations would look with disdain upon this season of American History. “Will subsequent ages credit so monstrous a statement; that Preachers of the Gospel, 1800 years after Angels had sung, on earth, peace, good-will to men, where characterized as proverbially devoted participants in all the enormities and iniquity of man-stealing?”<sup>41</sup> No. They did not. And Presbyterians continue to struggle with this history and its implications today. I do not have space in this paper for a detailed analysis of this continuing influence, however I believe it focuses on the two factors that were at play in the 1818 General Assembly. The inaction of the church combined with the racial-bias against blacks not only caused American Presbyterians to miss a crucial moment in our nation’s history, it has continued to have lasting effects.

Just a cursory look at the writing of Presbyterian segregationists during the civil rights movement show calls for inaction continued under the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and a racial bias against blacks which were a lesser race. It led leaders in the church to argue for “gradual racial progress” rather than immediate integration, which sounds eerily similar to gradual emancipation.<sup>42</sup> In 1954, J.E. Flow argued for a separate Southern Presbyterian Church which was committed to five things which included among them, “the purity and integrity of the White man of North America upon whose shoulders are laid the burdens of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Statements like these a mere six decades, have been the occasion for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*. (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015), 121.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 101.

repentance among Presbyterian bodies today.<sup>44</sup> What had they failed to grasp? They failed to grasp what George Bourne had so profoundly argued 150 years earlier, that black men, women and children were made in the image of God and had full humanity, dignity, value and worth. And to treat them as property or lesser or to be fearful of their freedom was to sin. In 2002, the Presbyterian Church in America issued a statement of repentance connected with our covenantal sins as a church and built on the work of a NAPARC statement from 1977.<sup>45</sup> In the statement, man-stealing was specifically repented of and so were the sins of omission surrounding the ideology of white supremacy that have continued in our country since its inception. Had the work and effort of George Bourne been heeded by Presbyterians in his day, maybe the story would have turned out differently.

Today, if American Presbyterians are to honor the legacy of George Bourne, and more importantly bring glory to King Jesus, the savior of “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9) we must seek to dismantle any vestiges in our lives, our churches and our society of racial superiority and white supremacy. As we do we must make our churches a place that welcomes the diversity of our communities and seeks to share power and empower minority leadership. Unfortunately it is all too true that American Presbyterians today do not look much different demographically than we did 50 years ago. Let us use the example of a Presbyterian of great courage, George Bourne, to commit ourselves to praying and working towards a truly multiethnic American Presbyterianism for the glory of King Jesus.

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<sup>44</sup> See Overture 43 from Potomac Presbytery "Pursuing Racial Reconciliation and the Advance of the Gospel" which was accepted by the 2016 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. See <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Overture-43-Potomac-Pursuing-Racial-Reconciliation.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> A copy of the statement can be found here: <http://pcahistory.org/pca/race.html>

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