

Lyman Beecher: Conservative Abolitionist, Theologian and Father

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In 1834, as the conflicts over slavery in the United States were beginning to engulf the country, a group of perhaps the best and brightest students of the antebellum period of American history began debates on the issue of abolition. These debates, held at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, were sparked, in large part, by the controversial Lyman Beecher after he had warned the students not to mingle with the free blacks of Cincinnati because they would become “overwhelmed.” After the long and emotional debates on the abolition question, many of the top students within the seminary resigned the school and joined the newly formed Oberlin College. Students such as Theodore Weld and many others from the rebels of Lane Seminary began to alter the abolitionist methods to include more radical actions.¹

Full of controversies like the one at Lane Seminary, Lyman Beecher’s life and work is one of the greatest examples of American politics before the Civil War. Apprehensive about addressing the slavery issue, Beecher, just like many American politicians of the day, was strongly opposed to slavery, but he continued to support gradual abolition by supporting the Colonization movement.² Many historians claim that he never really embraced abolition, but rather he embraced colonization as the only alternative. Historians such as Larry Tise group Beecher together with pro-slavery ministers. Tise claimed that Beecher despised abolitionists like Garrison and had allied himself with pro-slavery ministers in order to suppress abolition agendas.³ However, more than once Beecher claimed, “Were it in my power to put an end to slavery immediately I would do it, but it is not. I can only pursue the measures best calculated, in my judgment, to get the slaves out of bondage in the shortest time.” He not only argued that

¹ Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 145-151.

² The Colonization movement called for the gradual removal of the African slaves back to Africa. The overall consensus of the movement was to place those slaves into American colonies. The country of Liberia is a direct result of this particular movement. For more information on the movement and its cause see, P. J. Staudenraus. *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.)

³ Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1801-1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 267.

colonization was the quickest way to emancipation, but in his own words, he claims that, if he could, he would emancipate all the slaves.⁴

Lyman Beecher clearly had a large influence on the American antislavery movement as a whole. Perhaps his greatest impact on the slavery movement was the beliefs that he instilled in his children. Nearly all of his eleven children became famous for the work they did for antislavery and other movements. Henry Ward Beecher became a renowned minister like his father, but he strongly supported immediate abolition and the American Antislavery Society.⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which is regarded by many historians as the most important antislavery work of literature in American history. Catharine Beecher founded a school for women and became one of the major influences on the American women's movement.⁶ Not only did he influence his children, but William Lloyd Garrison was a parishioner of Beecher's before Garrison devoted most of his time to the abolition movement and his abolitionist paper the *Liberator*.⁷ From his influence on his children to his impact on Lane Seminary, Lyman Beecher's clout encompassed religion, abolition, and the women's movement, and he remains as one of the most influential people that shaped and changed the antislavery movement. Yet, the most striking examples of his antislavery sentiments are found within his own writings and teachings. Lyman Beecher may have been a colonizationist in practice, but he was an abolitionist at heart.

Lyman Beecher was born on October 12, 1775, to David and Esther Beecher in New Haven, Connecticut. Unfortunately, his mother, Esther, contracted consumption (pulmonary

⁴ Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Saints, Sinners, and Beechers* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1934), 64-67.

⁵ The American Antislavery Society was founded by William Lloyd Garrison. Famous members include: Arthur Tappan and Theodore Dwight Weld, both of whom will play important roles in Beecher's life; The Grimké Sisters; Frederick Douglass. The society was instrumental in supplying the public support necessary for an effective Abolition movement.

⁶ Barbara A. White, *The Beecher Sisters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), ix.

⁷ Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 37-38, 45.

tuberculosis) during his birth. Born two months premature and unhealthy, Beecher was set aside by the midwife because she thought he would not survive in order to focus more on Beecher's mother. Fortunately, Beecher was spared death when a nurse found him alive. Yet, Esther Beecher died two days after Beecher was born. Beecher's maternal Aunt Benton came and took Beecher with her to North Guilford, Connecticut where she would raise him as her own until he went to college.⁸

From the moment he drew his first breath, Lyman Beecher's life was completely enveloped by Puritan principles. The city of New Haven as well as North Guilford, where he spent most of his childhood, was originally founded as a haven for Puritans. Both cities were built around the central square where the church stood. Beecher's father, uncle and aunt were well founded in the Puritan faith. Puritan ideology was quickly instilled in young Beecher one evening early in his childhood when the aurora borealis (northern lights) were extremely bright. His uncle remarked while Beecher gazed at the lights, "Ah! We don't know at what time the Day of Judgment will come – at midnight or at cock-crowing." The young boy began to cry and was consoled by his nanny Annis. Annis, being a devout Puritan, talked to Beecher about his soul and what one must do to survive the "Day of Judgment."⁹

After a failed attempt by his uncle to shape Beecher into a farmer and preparing for college, eighteen-year-old Lyman Beecher enrolled at Yale College, in 1793, and began the education that would define him until his death. His father had financed his entrance into Yale, and his aunt and uncle fed and clothed him. It was by this agreement that his father allowed him to enter the school. In his second year, Dr. Timothy Dwight became the president of the college. Dwight immediately took to Beecher, and Beecher idolized the man. By a stroke of fate, Dwight

⁸ Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 1: 10-11

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 8-11, 4-5, 12.

brought to Yale the unabashed energy and devoutness that Beecher would come to admire and emulate. The relationship between the two was as father and son. Beecher said of Dwight, “I loved him as my own soul, and he loved me as a son.” Through the relationship between Dwight and himself, Beecher began to pursue more knowledge of the Bible and the God that had so enthralled his mentor. By his third year at Yale, he had chosen to be a minister over the only other choice that was offered at Yale at the time, law.¹⁰

In 1797, Lyman Beecher graduated from Yale College along with thirty other young men. He attended Yale Divinity School where he was allowed to study under his hero Timothy Dwight. During his time at the Divinity School, Beecher studied the Puritan and Calvinistic beliefs that would later be evident in his own sermons and beliefs. Shortly after finishing at the Divinity School, Beecher was invited to speak at a Presbyterian church in East Hampton, Long Island where he had been skeptical of his chances of becoming the full-time minister. After a tedious and trying candidacy for the Presbyterian Church in East Hampton, Beecher was finally ordained as minister of East Hampton Presbyterian Church on September 5, 1799. Thus began the ministry of perhaps the greatest orator and minister of the antebellum era.¹¹

Very shortly after his ordination on September 19, 1799, he married his fiancée Roxana Foote. Foote was the first of three wives that he took during his lifetime. Roxana and Beecher had eight children -- Catharine, William, Edward, Mary, George, Harriet, Henry Ward, and Charles -- that survived. He later married Harriet Porter in 1817 only a little less than a year after Roxana had died from the same disease that had killed Beecher's mother -- pulmonary tuberculosis. Harriet Porter gave Beecher three more children to his already large family. Isabella, Thomas, and James Beecher were born with brothers and sisters who had already begun their

¹⁰ Stowe, *Saints, Sinners and Beechers*, 26-27.

¹¹ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 1: 44, 60, 67, 80.

famous work in their respective fields and would duly be influenced by that very same work. Unfortunately for Beecher, Harriet Porter also died, in July, 1835, of tuberculosis, the disease that seemed to kill the women of his family with dramatic frequency. Soon after her death, he married a widow by the name of Lydia Jackson who brought two children of her own to the Beecher household. She, however, outlived Beecher.¹²

Dr. Lyman Beecher quickly became known for his fiery sermons and his unapologetic hatred for intemperance. He was the minister of the East Hampton Presbyterian Church until 1810 when he moved to Litchfield, Connecticut where he began to pursue the ultimate goal of his theology: the suppression of all sin throughout the nation. He felt that only through the unity of religion would unity of the nation be fully achieved. Around 1813, after years of preaching that sin would destroy the republic, he founded the Connecticut Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Promotion of Good Morals. The name of the society conspicuously advertised its major goal: a Connecticut and an America free of sin and a shining example of morals for the world.¹³

Beecher wanted to extend societies like the one in Connecticut to the entire nation. Shortly after his founding of the society he began a religious tract war that would be his first attempt at creating a revival among Americans. One of the very first tracts he would print was his sermon on using societies to suppress sin called, *The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for that Purpose*.¹⁴ He quickly won fame for his efforts with the Connecticut society. Although the results of his first tract war were discouraging, he remarked in his autobiography, that “by voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals, (ministers) exert a

¹² Rugoff, *The Beechers*, 33, 160, 162. also Stuart C. Henry, *Unvanquished Puritan: A Portrait of Lyman Beecher* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 12

¹³ James W. Fraser, *Pedagogue for God's Kingdom: Lyman Beecher and the Second Great Awakening* (New York: University Press of America, 1985), 17, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 20-21

deeper influence than ever they could by queues, and shoe-buckles, and cocked hats, and gold-headed canes.”¹⁵ He still felt that ministers could establish societies that would ultimately change American morals to reflect the ideals he felt were necessary to fulfill his goals.

Lyman Beecher failed to realize that the immediate results were not the most important to history. His sermon on the practicality of using societies to suppress sin in America would inspire many other people to do the same. First and foremost, his children were those most affected by this sermon and others like it, for their attendance at church was compulsory. Therefore, Harriet and Henry Ward Beecher must have heard this sermon many times over. Henry Ward eventually became a minister like his father, but advocated the American Antislavery Society and its mission of immediate emancipation.¹⁶ However, Lyman Beecher’s influence on the most famous of all the abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, would be far more profound than Beecher could have known.

By 1826, Lyman Beecher had already moved to Boston to take up the parsonage of Bowdoin Street Congregation. That same year, William Lloyd Garrison came to Boston as a young idealist with his own views of slavery. Although he had not yet directly focused on the question of slavery before this time, he joined the African Colonization Society and determined to build support for it. Garrison joined the church that Beecher headed and quickly became impressed with Beecher and his fiery evangelism. The young idealist realized that Beecher was one to be imitated. Garrison accepted the colonization agenda for a while during his time in Boston, but quickly began to push Beecher to support immediate abolition. Beecher was tough to move, but Garrison began to use Beecher’s own principles to argue immediate abolition. He asked Beecher if slavery was a national sin to which Beecher answered in the affirmative, but he

¹⁵ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 1: 253.

¹⁶ Lyman Abbott, *Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Chelsea House, 1980), 167-168.

continued arguing that since Beecher favored immediate repentance of sin that Americans should immediately emancipate the slaves.¹⁷ Garrison must have used Beecher's sermon on the societies established to rid America of sin to argue this fact. In that very same sermon, Beecher stated that repentance if, "(at) once be attained... a benefit incalculable is secured."¹⁸ The very same sermon influenced Garrison's support of the American Antislavery Society. In the sermon, Beecher remarks shortly after he had included slavery in his list of sins, "Let the virtuous in every town unite, be vigilant, prudent and firm, and their influence will be felt. The cause of virtue will ultimately prevail. Let such associations be scattered through the nation, and what a barrier against the encroachments of vice."¹⁹ Beecher intended for societies to be established that would eliminate all sin in America and would establish a particular set of morals within laws and actions of Americans, and since slavery was considered by him to be a bane to society, he felt that slavery must be eliminated as well.²⁰

Lyman Beecher was beginning to realize just how volatile the slavery issue was in American life before 1830, but he attempted to avoid the issue by focusing on the alcoholism that he perceived to afflict the entire nation. Yet, his feelings on slavery would be incorporated into his sermons. He quickly became known for his fervor and spirit in fighting intemperance because his sermons on the subject were printed and distributed throughout the nation. The most famous of them all were actually a set of sermons bound together called "Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance." In these sermons, he attempted to equate slavery with intemperance. Several times throughout these sermons he compared the

¹⁷ Rugoff, *The Beechers*, 109.

¹⁸ Lyman Beecher, "The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for that Purpose", *Lyman Beecher and the Reform of Society: Four Sermons 1804-1828* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 9

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

²⁰ Lyman Beecher, "Six Sermons of the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils and Remedy of Intemperance", *Lyman Beecher and the Reform of Society: Four Sermons 1804-1828* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 64, 71.

evils of slavery with what he considered the evils of intemperance. In one particular sermon he declared, “We execrate the cruelties of the slave trade – the husband torn from the bosom of his wife – the son from his father – brothers and sisters separated forever – whole families in a moment ruined! But are they no similar enormities to be witnessed in the United States? None indeed perpetrated by the bayonet – but many, very many, perpetrated by intemperance.”²¹ He wanted to point out that intemperance created the same despicable evils that slavery had created among the slaves. He consistently pointed out the evils of slavery especially when it came to punishment. In discussing whether Americans should allow laws to propagate sin, he remarked that if America would allow laws to permit sin to exist, such as slavery in the southern states, that “we shall become slaves, and slaves to the worst of masters.”²² He claimed that if sin was allowed to persist protected by law, Americans would become slaves, like the slaves held in bondage by law, to their own sin.

Furthermore, Beecher established that intemperance would, like slavery, disappear from the nation if abolition laws were enacted. “It is the banishment of ardent spirits from the list of lawful articles of commerce, by a correct and efficient public sentiment;” he claimed, “such as has turned slavery out of half our land, and will yet expel it from the world.”²³ It was his idea that slavery would eventually disappear from America by enacting laws such as those that had abolished slavery in the northern states. However, he felt that only through overwhelming support of the public would the laws succeed. At the time of this statement, the public support for immediate abolition was minimal at best. It was for this reason that he began to oppose

²¹ Lyman Beecher, “Six Sermons of the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils and Remedy of Intemperance”, 71.

²² Lyman Beecher, “A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensable”, *Lyman Beecher and the Reform of Society: Four Sermons 1804-1828* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 64, 71.

²³ Lyman Beecher, “Six Sermons of the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils and Remedy of Intemperance”, 64.

immediate abolition. It was his feeling that slavery could only be abolished by using moral persuasion, which would build the support necessary for the success of antislavery laws.

It became clear that Lyman Beecher supported the emancipation of slaves, but what method would he employ? Most of the historians who have studied his effect on the antislavery movement quickly dismiss him as wholly colonialist, and some even proposed that he hurt the antislavery movement with his attempts to hold down the rebels at Lane Seminary.²⁴

However, Beecher thought the cause of the slaves subordinate to the goal that he laid out in his book, *A Plea for the West*. During most of the antebellum period, the West, which consisted of the Ohio Valley region at this time, was being settled rapidly by Americans. Eastern religious leaders felt that the newly settled West would become wild and non-religious. In addition, Protestants feared that the region might also become Catholic and therefore, Beecher believed that if the West was converted to Protestantism the entire country would follow suit.²⁵

Additionally, he felt that colleges must be bastions and lighthouses of virtue for the West to follow. He wanted colleges to become schools that trained new leaders of the morality-based society Beecher envisioned for the West, and in response to his feelings about colleges, he wrote another book upon the subject called, *A Plea for the Colleges*.²⁶

Beecher's ministry in the eastern United States came to an end after he received an offer to become president of Lane Theological Seminary in 1832. His tenure at Lane became the most controversial part of his life; the Seminary simultaneously became his greatest accomplishment and greatest downfall. At Lane Seminary, located in Cincinnati, Ohio, Beecher began work on his mission for the West. In preparing his students for the West he had so imagined, he allowed

²⁴ Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 128 and Louis Ruchames, *The Abolitionists: A Collection of Their Writings* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 235.

²⁵ Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Company, 1835), 25.

²⁶ Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for Colleges* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1836), 5-7.

for free discussion on any topic, and even encouraged discussion on the slavery topic.²⁷ He had not realized that Theodore Dwight Weld, the leader of the rebellion at Lane Seminary, would be as fiery about abolition as Beecher was against intemperance.

He immediately faced controversy when Arthur Tappan questioned why Lane Seminary's trustees had not taken action regarding Lane's acceptance people of color into the seminary.

Arthur Tappan was a major financial backer of Lane Seminary and thus had a very significant voice in the policies of the school. Beecher quickly replied to Tappan,

We have taken no order on the subject, as none is needed, and I trust never will be. Our only qualifications for admissions to the seminary are qualifications intellectual, moral, and religious, without reference to color, which I have no reason to think would have any influence here, certainly never with my consent.²⁸

Yet one particular example of his feelings on the Negro race would prove that Beecher had no prejudices against men of color and even welcomed their company. One evening at Lane Seminary, James Bradley, a former slave who had been admitted to the school by Beecher, was absent from a dinner party at the Beecher home. Theodore Weld confided to Beecher that Bradley had skipped the dinner because he was afraid of Beecher's feelings towards people of color. Beecher immediately expressed regret, "if I had thought of his feeling so, I would have gone to him personally, and told him he must come."²⁹ He had not shown any prejudices and even Theodore Weld had assumed they could trust Beecher. Weld would become an agent of the American Antislavery Society and would eventually come to the forefront of the Abolition Movement.

²⁷ Thomas D. Matijasic, "The African Colonization Movement and Ohio's Protestant Community." *Phylon*. Vol. 46 No. 1 1st Quarter (1985): 20.

²⁸ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2: 242.

²⁹ *A Statement of the Reasons Which Induced the Students of Lane Seminary, to Dissolve Their Connection with That Institution* (Cincinnati: 1834), 26.

Beecher's own words, and those of the students at Lane Seminary, clearly show that he held very little if any prejudices against color. Although he was not opposed to equal rights, he still supported colonization. When asked why he was still in favor of colonization, he remarked,

I am not apprised of the ground of controversy between the Colonizationists and the Abolitionists. I am myself both, without perceiving in myself any inconsistency. Were it in my power to put an end to slavery immediately, I would do it; but it is not. I can only pursue the measures best calculated, in my judgment, to get the slaves out of bondage in the shortest time and best manner; and this, as I view the subject, is to make emancipation easy instead of difficult; to make use of the current of human fears, and passions, and interests, when they may be made to set in our favor, instead of attempting to row up stream against them.³⁰

Clearly he was strongly in favor of freeing the slaves. This passage might even suggest he truly thought himself as an abolitionist. His statement that he did not perceive "any inconsistency" implies that his idea of proper abolition would be colonization. He truly felt that colonization was the quickest way to emancipate the slaves, and by colonizing the slaves, he could ameliorate the crisis without having racial conflict engulf the nation. He consistently felt that radical abolition would awaken the fanaticism of the pro-slavery cause.³¹ He was correct in this assumption, but it was this genuine fear that kept Beecher in the colonization camp.

Lane Seminary eventually brought Beecher, reluctantly so, to the forefront of the antislavery debate. He allowed the students of Lane Seminary to form antislavery and abolition societies, but would eventually lose positive control over the students' actions. Theodore Dwight Weld came to the seminary with abolitionist ideals and had become the president of the students. He was not the only student to come to the school with abolitionist ideals. Henry Stanton, the same man who would marry the same Elizabeth Cady who would help lead the women's movement, would eventually become an agent of the American Antislavery Society just like Weld. He was the one who suggested that the students get involved with the antislavery movement by going into Cincinnati and helping with the free blacks who were unable to secure a

³⁰ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2:242

³¹ Stowe, *Saints, Sinners and Beechers*, 59

decent income because of the anti-black sentiment in Cincinnati. He always felt that the unity of religious morals as well as unity of the nation was much more important than the plight of the slaves.³² But a storm was brewing in Cincinnati that even Lyman Beecher could not suppress.

Theodore Dwight Weld began to incite the anger of several of Cincinnati's most powerful citizens. Cincinnati was not known for its hospitality to free blacks and had once tried to expel African-Americans from the city altogether. The populous of Cincinnati were not pleased about radical abolitionist agitators working to educate the free blacks of their city. Cincinnati had ties with slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike, and the city would lose trade that normally existed between the South, Cincinnati and the rest of the northern states. Therefore, Cincinnati elites, concerned with Weld and the other students' actions, immediately went to the trustees and head of Lane Seminary, Lyman Beecher, to pressure the seminary into quieting Weld. Those same people came to the trustees of Lane Seminary and complained about the work that Weld and other students from Lane had been doing in the African-American neighborhoods. The trustees became disturbed by the actions of the students, but Beecher had authorized the students to go into Cincinnati and establish schools for free blacks. The trustees came to Beecher to see what could be done to stop the students from creating racial distress within the city. Beecher, however, decided that he would counsel Weld on the problems with visiting black families in the home.³³ When he spoke with the trustees about Weld he stated,

When they founded colored schools, I conversed with Weld repeatedly, and pointed out these things. Said I, you are taking just the course to defeat your own object, and prevent yourself from doing good. If you want to teach colored schools, I can fill your pockets with money, but if you will visit colored families, and walk with them in the streets, you will be overwhelmed.³⁴

³² Henry, *Unvanquished Puritan*, 190-193

³³ Lynne Marie Getz, "Partners in Motion: Gender, Migration, and Reform in Antebellum Ohio and Kansas," *Frontiers* Vol. 27, No. 2 (2006): 104.

³⁴ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2:244.

It appears that Beecher had a problem with the visits to the families, but the trustees and people of Cincinnati were angry about those visits. Since Beecher was more committed to keeping the peace, he spoke to Weld, warning him of the consequences of his actions. Beecher argued that Weld was doing worse by going into the homes of the free blacks, and it seems to contradict Beecher's initial backing of the project. However, Beecher was much more concerned with the effect it would have on Cincinnati; the last thing the aging theologian wanted was an all-out race riot.

This did not suit Weld and his fellow students. They decided to hold debates on whether they should officially support the immediate abolition that Garrison and the American Antislavery Society avidly supported. Beecher at first was excited about these debates and even placed his name on the list to speak on behalf of the colonizationist cause. Unfortunately, the trustees convinced Beecher to not take part in the debates. Lasting nine full days, the event was emotionally charged, but at the end of the arguments, Weld and the student body had officially supported immediate abolition and had formed an antislavery society within the seminary.³⁵

The trustees were furious that the students would declare that immediate abolition was the only righteous cause. They immediately set out to set up regulations that would immediately ban the antislavery society and colonization society from the school, and students who did not comply with the rules would be summarily dismissed. Unfortunately, Beecher did not take the opportunity to take a stand for the students. Up until this point during his stay at Lane Seminary, he had allowed and even encouraged the free discussion of ideas such as immediate abolition and colonization. Weld and many others from Lane Seminary were outraged at the trustees' move to abolish the antislavery society, and they felt abandoned by Beecher. Therefore, Weld led a large portion of the students out of the Seminary and into the open arms of the comparatively liberal

³⁵ Fraser, *Pedagogue for God's Kingdom*, 118.

Oberlin College.³⁶ Beecher allowed the regulations to be enacted, and in acting complacently, set loose Theodore Dwight Weld and many others like Henry Stanton to do their famous work for the antislavery cause.

Beecher was devastated by the turn of events. He quickly discovered the mistake he had made. He considered resigning, but could not because of his undying loyalty to the work of God and his quest for the spiritual and moral cleansing of America. He quietly wrote to Weld and other students of the group now, called the Lane Rebels, to try and persuade them to return to the seminary. However, the rules that were enacted by the trustees had so enraged the students that no matter how much persuasion was used by Beecher, the wayward students would not return. Lyman Beecher even stated that the rules would not be enforced and that free discussion of the slavery topic would continue to be allowed. Unfortunately, it was too little, too late for Beecher and Lane Seminary.³⁷

Fortunately, Lyman Beecher had a supporting cast of children who kept their faith in their father. Even after the Lane Seminary debacle, Henry Ward and Edward Beecher both stayed at the seminary to finish their education.³⁸ Considering Henry Ward's loyalty to the American Antislavery Society, Henry Ward idolized his father like most of Beecher's children, and therefore, Henry stayed enrolled at the seminary despite the mass exodus of some of the greatest characters of the antislavery story. However, Beecher raised his children in the Puritan lifestyle. Beecher was essentially an authoritarian in his conduct towards his children, yet he consistently treated his children compassionately.³⁹ He so loved his children that he continued to write letters to them long after they had moved out on their own and consistently is shown giving

³⁶ Constance, Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee: Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher, Horace Greeley, P.T. Barnum* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 46.

³⁷ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2: 246-248.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 2: 248.

³⁹ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 1: 6-7.

advice up until the day he died. Although it was very common to write letters between family members, the letters between Beecher and his children usually contained debates and advice and very little of day to day operations. Beecher was never unsupportive of his children's ventures, but always cautioned them (and even argued with them) on the possible consequences of their actions.

The most striking example of the compassion he showed to his children was given by Harriet when discussing her conversion at a church service of her father's. When asked about her conversion, she tells a story about when she was fourteen and sitting in the pews while her father preached a lively sermon. She stated that Beecher's extremely impassioned call for sinners to come and repent of their sins and give their souls to God had made her squirm in her seat. She quickly became engulfed by the guilt of her sin and began to pray for forgiveness. She immediately found a peace and joy after praying for salvation. Immediately after professing her conversion to the church and to her father, Beecher looked down to her, embraced her in his large arms, and said, "Is it so?" Harriet immediately looked up to her father and saw the compassion in his face. She described his face as "sunlight breaking out upon a landscape." She put her head back into his arms and began to cry and felt Beecher's tears fall upon her head as he said, "Then has a new flower blossomed in the kingdom this day." She never forgot this experience and always felt she was safe with her father around until the day of his death.⁴⁰

It was Beecher's compassion that helped to instill in Harriet the sympathy she would feel for the slaves. Moved by the plight of the slaves, she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which was by far the most influential and popular work of antislavery literature. The book was a fictional account that described the horrible conditions slaves were forced to live under. The book created

⁴⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), xi.

awareness among the people in the North of the evils of slavery. Therefore, her book brought huge numbers of people to the Antislavery Movement and became instrumental in bringing about a civil war. President Abraham Lincoln exclaimed to Harriet when he met her in 1862, “so you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!”⁴¹ This statement best describes Harriet Beecher’s famous work for the antislavery cause. She clearly had such a large effect on northern sentiment that it brought about a social change great enough to warrant a civil war.

Although his compassion and love for his children was important, Beecher’s relationship with his eldest daughter, Catharine, best models the influence that Beecher had upon all of his children. It was Catharine who decided to head into the educational field as a career, and wanted to open a school solely for women. She immediately began to discuss the project with her father. Several times throughout the process, she asked Beecher for advice and counsel regarding topics ranging from finances to classroom size. However, it was in the church where she became captivated by her father’s zeal and fiery demeanor while preaching from the pulpit that made her idolize Lyman Beecher and love the relationship with her father.⁴²

Catharine loved her father, and as a little girl she loved to play with him in the fields. Eventually she dropped the playful relationship for a more intellectual relationship. Kathryn Kish Sklar wrote about the influence Beecher had on Catharine stating, “Lyman Beecher was the source of learning, authority, and love. He was far more vivid to her than her mother, and he was a powerful model as well as a powerful influence.”⁴³ Catharine was dominated by her father’s presence, but she still loved to hear him preach. She wrote to her brother years after she had

⁴¹ Hedrick, John D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.

⁴² Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 52, 66.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 10.

moved out of the house and could only visit once in a while. She wrote, “Yesterday I heard two of Father’s very best sermons. The afternoon sermon perfectly electrified me. I wish it could be heard by all young men in the country.”⁴⁴ She loved his fiery sermons, and she loved the substance behind the sermon, and would long to go back home to hear her father preach and spend time with her father. Many times she wrote to her brother Edward about her desire for her father’s company, and in one particular instance she wrote vividly about her relationship to her father. In a letter to Edward she wrote, “You cannot imagine how much I enjoy this visit at home. You know how happy it makes us to be with father. His society seems always to give a new impulse to the affection of the heart, and to every intellectual power.” Additionally, she hints at the affection all of the Beecher siblings had for Beecher. She tells Edward, “You know how happy it makes *us* to be with father.”⁴⁵ Catharine must have known that Edward felt the same way about Beecher as she did.

Yet, Lyman Beecher’s greatest influence on Catharine was his influence and help with the school for women that she founded. Catharine Beecher did not have many career choices since women were not welcome in the work place, so she decided that she would enter the education field. However, she did not want to replicate the existing system of education that already existed within America. Instead, she determined to open a school solely for the purpose of educating women. Catharine immediately went to her father for help in realizing her goal. More than once, Beecher had cautioned her not to pursue the building of a school of such magnitude without Catharine spending all of her efforts and time on the school and its students. Consequently, Beecher helped her pursue her goal, and he gathered monetary and public support for a school within the town of Hartford, Connecticut. Once the support was gathered, he

⁴⁴ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2:6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 2:16.

continued to help Catharine with the logistics of her venture.⁴⁶ Beecher wrote to her after he had gathered the support necessary stating,

The point is, I think, well settled that such a school is greatly needed, and that scholars enough can be obtained to justify the opening. It will not, however, answer for you to engage listlessly, expecting yourself to superintend and do a little, and have the weight of the school come on others. I should be ashamed to have you open, and keep only a commonplace, middling sort of school. It is expected of a higher order; and, unless you are willing to put your talents and strength into it, it would be best not to begin.⁴⁷

He felt that a school like the one Catharine proposed was highly necessary for the community.

He realized that a school that would educate women would be required if the goal of national unity in morals and religion could be achieved. It seems that he did not trust Catharine with the responsibility of the school, but in reality, Beecher expected exceptional results from the school. For that reason, he cautioned Catharine not to take the school lightly because of his expectations of superior education. He never wanted a mediocre school for women; he felt that exceptionally well-educated women could provide for society just as well as well-educated men. This advice was taken by Catharine and eventually applied to her petitioning of government officials to end slavery and other such evils.

Also, Catharine was active in organizing women's groups in order to achieve moral change. She based most of her societies on Beecher's various societies that he formed for the reformation of morals in society. One particular area where Beecher was influential in Catharine's women groups was the petitioning of governmental officials to affect change. Lyman Beecher's campaign to petition the government to stop the movement of mail on Sundays was the first major petitioning of the Congress by the American people. They were drawing their petition ideas from the first amendment which guarantees the right to petition. Therefore,

⁴⁶ Sklar, *Catharine Beecher*, 52-53.

⁴⁷ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography*, 1:384.

Beecher's petitioning of Congress served as the model that women's groups, like Catharine's, used in order to establish petitions like the ones from the 1830's that tried to stop the forced removal of the Cherokees by Andrew Jackson.⁴⁸ Later Catharine would use the exact same tactics to try and persuade the rest of the country that slavery should be abolished as well whether through colonization or immediate abolition.

Catharine's relationship with her father was clearly a compassionate one at the very least. Her relationship serves as an example of the relationship the rest of Beecher's children would have with their father. Henry Ward Beecher is one that clearly tried to imitate his father. Henry Ward would write of his father later on saying, "To Lyman Beecher, I owe my principles, my knowledge, and that I am a Minister of the Gospel."⁴⁹ Henry's statement clearly shows that Beecher was the main influence on Henry's move into the ministry. Henry Ward became known for his fiery sermons as well, but he also advocated immediate abolition. It was his statement during one of his sermons shortly before the Civil War "America *shall be free*"⁵⁰ However, he always preferred moral suasion compared to politically and lawful abolition, but he felt that the slaves needed to be freed in whatever way would be the quickest. It was in Henry's idea of the fastest alternative to moral suasion that he differed from his father. Henry supported immediate abolition as the quickest route to freedom for the slaves.

Lyman Beecher established himself as not only an influential person in the antislavery movement, but the women's movement as well. Through his moral reform crusades he created templates for others like Garrison to follow when forming societies for the manumission of slaves in America. Moreover, Beecher's influence on the religious ideals of the nation is

⁴⁸ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), 18-19.

⁴⁹ As quoted in: Hibben, Paxton. *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait*. (New York: The Press of the Readers Club), 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 135.

immeasurable. Therefore, Lyman Beecher, through his religious ideals, had influenced his nation to discuss the topic of slavery freely, just like he encouraged his students at Lane Seminary. He could not take the leap towards radical abolition, but through his widely read ideals on the forming of societies to suppress vice, Beecher created models that big names of the antislavery movement, like William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Dwight Weld, used to establish their abolitionist societies.

Also, Beecher's inaction and complacency regarding the slavery issue caused the exodus of perhaps the greatest group of students of the antebellum movement to leave Lane Seminary and multiply their radical abolitionist efforts. If that was not enough to place him in league with Garrison and Weld, his own beliefs on the evils of slavery left an impression on his children who magnified his hatred of slavery into abolition feelings and activities. Harriet Beecher Stowe, after growing up hearing Beecher's sermons which describe the dark images of slavery, wrote a book entitled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that pushed the nation toward civil war and the end of slavery. Beecher's own son, Henry Ward Beecher, took abolition to another level by preaching it from pulpits around the nation. Thus, Lyman Beecher is a controversial and colorful figure that must be studied in order to fully understand the development of the antislavery movement.

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