Quaker Antislavery: From Dissidence to Sense of the Meeting

Early in the nineteenth century Philadelphia Friends began pondering their role in early antislavery and using their antislavery credentials to assert their significance in Pennsylvania and American history. Roberts Vaux’s account of the lives of Ralph Sandiford, Benjamin Lay, and Anthony Benezet and the canonization of John Woolman as the patron saint of abolitionists boasted Friends’ self-esteem in their own eyes and in the regard of others. Thomas Clarkson’s history of the abolition of the slave trade paid tribute to Anthony Benezet and made British Friends’ roles as agitators equally prominent.¹ In the nineteenth century American Friends dominated the manumission societies in North and South and they sent petitions to the state and federal governments. Thomas Garrett and Eli Coffin gained fame as conductors on the Underground Railroad, while Lucretia Mott and John G. Whittier joined the traditional Quaker style of quiet reform with the rhetorical fury of William Garrison and the American Abolition Society. Any questions about the moral fervor and rectitude of Quakers abolitionists should have been removed by the idyllic picture of the Halliday family in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

There was a counter image of Quakers as fanatics, even held by some Friends. In 1790 during the First Congress, after a Quaker petition against slavery was introduced, Congressman Smith of South Carolina recalled the compromises of the Constitutional Convention: “We took each other with our mutual bad habits and respective evils, for

better, for worse. The Northern states adopted us with our slaves, and we adopted them with their Quakers.”² It was not just Southerners who in the decades before the Civil War saw the Friends as fanatics. Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1858 described meeting a man who glowed with “that religious elevation which is itself a kind of refinement, - the quality one may see expressed in many a venerable Quaker face at yearly meeting.”³ This description was of John Brown who had just met with his backers including Higginson to brief them on his plans for a raid on Harper’s Ferry. Brown had two Quaker young men with him at Harper’s Ferry. Most Friends would have cringed at seeing Brown as Quaker-like, but a majority of Hicksite and Orthodox Friends by the 1840s would have argued that the rhetoric and political activities of the abolitionists were the products of an enthusiasm that was unQuakerly and was more likely to lead to war than the end of slavery. Abby Foster Kelley was one of many Quakers who found the hesitancy or open opposition of the yearly meetings destructive of the antislavery movement and who publicly resigned their membership in the Society of Friends.

The history of Quakers and slavery is much more complex and nuanced than the popular images, and scholars have often dealt with many themes: the moral fervor of a few, the opposition or apathy of many in the eighteenth century, the condemnation in 1755 and 1758, the eventual triumph of abolitionism during the Revolution, the endeavor to find a satisfactory way of opposing slavery in a way congruent with other Quaker principles in the nineteenth century. Racism, colonization, free-produce, politics, class and the debate over how to treat free blacks within and outside the meeting influenced

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antislavery agitation. In addition, there were major regional differences in antislavery work in New England, the Middle Colonies, the South, and in the Middle West. Another geographic factor was very different history of British Friends’ influence on American Quaker attitudes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their roles in Parliament’s ending the slave trade in 1807 and abolition in 1831. In order to accurately assess the Quaker impact as individuals and as a collective unit on slavery and abolition, historians must continue to address all these subjects. However, my focus will be much more modest – a reassessment of the few men who pioneered the antislavery movement by publishing tracts between 1675 and 1754.

The Quakers initial encounter with slavery came in the 1650s when a few traveling ministers attempted to convert the West Indies planters and is notable for one phenomenon: neglect of any mention of the institution with no great concern for the enslaved. This absence of discussion of slavery from these radical Quakers who fearlessly denounced many ills of society continued for fifteen years. Fox in a missionary journey to Barbados first raised the subject in 1671, beginning a discussion of the morality of perpetual bondage and its effects upon the enslaved and the enslavers that would continue with fits and starts until after the Civil War.4

The most original and revolutionary contributions of Friends to antislavery came before 1758 when Quakers conducted, largely among themselves, a debate as to the morality of slavery and whether its practice was compatible with Christianity. Thomas Drake, David Brion Davis, Jean Soderlund, and Gary Nash have ably described the

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events and various responses of Friends so that we have a sense of social context and the intellectual debate and various responses of Quakers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. What I would like to do is to re-evaluate the published works of the earliest few with the courage to examine slavery in print with or without the consent of the meetings. I am less interested in their frontal attack upon slavery than their digressions – comments on subjects that only indirectly if at all related to their primary themes. Most of these digressions are either exegesis of scripture or discussions of themes directly related to the Society of Friends. Since the authors saw these subjects as relevant to slavery, examining them will help us to understand the world views of these early radicals.

Fox’s Gospel Family Order, based on notes taken of a sermon preached in Barbados in 1671, was published five years later and reprinted in Philadelphia in 1702. This was one of a few Fox items reprinted in early Pennsylvania and I have argued elsewhere that it was done as a way to assuage the controversy between radicals and conservatives and to end public debate about slavery. John Hepburn’s 1715 American Defense of the Christian Golden Rule appeared when he was optimistic that the Pennsylvania Assembly’s recent prohibitive duty on imported slaves could be followed by an end to slavery there. Ralph Sandiford, A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times (1729) and Benjamin Lay, All Slave-keepers . . . Apostate (1737), though very different in style and tone, should be linked together because the authors, who knew each other, shared many ideas not just about slavery but in their digressions. Finally, John

Woolman, Serious Consideration on Keeping of Negroes (1754) showed how carefully slavery had to be discussed in order to gain the meeting’s approbation.

II. George Fox

Fox gains his abolitionist credentials from one paragraph coming after fifteen pages of exhortation on his major themes and to which he returned for an additional four pages. If a planter had dozed off for one minute during the course of this twenty page extemporaneous sermon, he would have missed Fox’s suggestion that after thirty years slaves should be freed, a recommendation based upon the Hebrew jubilee practice that Jewish servants be freed after seven years and other servants during the fifty year commemoration. Christians should go beyond the Jewish dispensation and free their servants after thirty years. There are no manuscript versions of other Fox sermons in Barbados and it is impossible to know whether Fox mentioned the thirty years while slaves were present. The two published versions of this sermon make the suggestion even more vague, a “Term of Years,” and we do not know who made the change - Fox, the committee in London that read all religious publications, or both – or why.

We also do not know who titled the tract “Gospel Family Order,” although the title is significant. Normally Friends used “Gospel Order” to apply to the practice of disciplining a member, with the word “Gospel” meaning that the customs derived from the New Testament’s teachings. Gospel Order could also refer to the entire structure of

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Quaker meetings and practices supposedly also derived from Jesus’ words for the early church. Establishing this “Gospel Order” among the newly established meetings from Rhode Island to the West Indies was a major goal for Fox and the Friends who accompanied him on this journey.7

Fox’s other mission was converting people to true Christianity, i.e., Quakerism. What was new in this sermon was Fox’s use of “family” to accomplish this goal. Before 1689 family nurture was distinctly secondary in Quaker apologetics, but after the Edict of Toleration when there was a decline in the numbers being convinced, the family emerged as a major concern, with parents being responsible for rearing their children in a plain style.8 Fox’s Barbados sermon reflects a traditional version of family nurture where the father took responsibility for the religious training not only of his immediate offspring but the servants. Fox recorded that his “Spirit” was “troubled” and “burdened” when he came to Barbados. Friends had often insisted that “fathers” had responsibility for the religious life and moral life for their household, but had not extended the term “family” to include day laborers or tenants who worked the fields. Now Fox extended the concept of

7 “The following Discourse is as it was taken from the Mouth of George Fox at the Men’s Meeting at though. Rous his House in Barbados . . . the Government of Families according to the Law of Jesus.” There is a ms. copy of this sermon in the Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore. The style of the sermon, with frequent references to bible verses and repetition of emphases, is typical of Fox. Evidently other sermons of Fox were taken down as he gave them; see J. W. Frost, “Quaker versus Baptist: A Religious and Political Squabble in Rhode Island Three Hundred Years Ago,” Quaker History (1974), 46-47; “George Fox’s Ambiguous Antislavery Legacy,” in New Light on George Fox, ed. Michael Mullet (Sessions: York, England, 1991), 69-88.

8 For example, William Dewbury writes many tracts and epistles to Friends from the 1650s until the 1680s, but his first full-length tract devoted to the family appears in 1687. The Faithful Testimony of that Antient Servant of the Lord, and Minister of the everlasting Gospel William Dewsbury (London, Sowle, n.d. ca. 1689). Frost, The Quaker Family in Colonial America: A Portrait of the Society of Friends (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), 93.
the family. Family order seemingly was the only biblical or English concept he could employ to make sense of large-scale plantation agriculture and to reform the treatment of bond or bought servants.

Virtually all of Fox’s biblical precedents come from the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Pentateuch. Abraham stood as the model master because he circumcised his family and his “bought” servants. (Circumcised seems to mean they had accepted the religion of Yahweh, i.e., converted to Judaism.) In Leviticus 24:22 (not 14 that is erroneously listed as the source in the published version) Moses was told by the Lord that no stranger should observe the Passover but “every man’s servant that is bought for money, where thou has circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof.” For Fox, the bought servants of the Jews are the equivalent of the Negroes, whom he never calls slaves. His only reference to slavery is indirect, asking the planters to consider appropriate treatment of the Negroes now considering what would be right if their children should become “slaves.”

Abraham’s physical circumcision of his servant became for Fox a type for the “spiritual circumcision” that the masters should practice on their “servants.” After all, all people were of one blood, Christ died for all, and Philip had converted an Ethiopian. The main thrust of Fox’s sermon was before the enslaved could be converted, they had to be treated decently and to observe the moral law. That is, they should receive adequate food and clothes, their marriages should be regularized, and they should be allowed time (two

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hours on Sunday) for religious services. The family should be ordered according to the “Law of Jesus.\textsuperscript{10}

If reforms did not occur, if immorality in the family continued, then the master became responsible and Fox quoted Jeremiah, Amos, and Zachariah, who prophesized God’s judgment and vengeance on those responsible, the planters. There was a sweetener, however, if the Negroes were included in the covenant then they “will not be negligent in outward things.”

Fox never addressed the institution of slavery – why it existed, the morality of the slave trade or perpetual slavery. His significant advance was in treating the enslaved as fully human, deserving decent treatment which would facilitate a necessary conversion. His concern for the Africans legitimated a similar focus for later Friends who did evaluate why the institution was created and endured as well as its effects on the human beings, black and white, who lived within its boundaries. All the other writers cited in this paper had read Fox’s tract and used it to justify their perspectives, even when they distorted what he had advocated into a condemnation of slavery.

II. John Hepburn

John Hepburn’s treatise, written in 1714 and printed in New York in 1715, remains the best organized, most coherent, and the most persuasive of all the early antislavery writings, and I include tracts of Woolman and Benezet. His small book is well organized and logical; he argued like a good lawyer and used terms like restitution

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 18, 22.
in a legal sense. Hepburn, about whom we have little certain knowledge, migrated to New Jersey around 1684 as an indentured servant and tells us that he had opposed slavery for thirty years. Although he appears to echo some of George Keith’s and other Friends’ most radical ideas, he identified himself with no sect, addressed the pamphlet to all Christians, and criticized the slave-keeping practices of Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers. He certainly did not follow Keith into the Church of England and his inclusion of and endorsement of Thomas Lowry’s writings shows that Hepburn could have been a member of no religious body except Quakers. In 1721, in attesting to his will, he identified himself as a Quaker, but he is not listed in any meeting records, some of which are missing for this period. My guess is that he was a backbencher, i.e., he attended meetings but was neither minister nor elder nor “weighty Friend.”

Hepburn knew of but did not quote the antislavery writings of Fox and Keith and had heard about the antislavery speeches in meetings of Thomas Chalkley and John Salkeld and the refusal of German-Quakers to buy slaves. He did not mention the

12 His “(I think) G. Keith his Party” shows uncertainty that Keith wrote against slavery. The thinks could mean that he had not seen or that he had read the pamphlet issued by the Christian Quakers (followers of Keith) but was not sure that Keith, who was not mentioned, had written it. Hepburn, American Defense, Preface. This paper, concentrating upon digressions, does not discuss the contents of Keith’s tract because it is clearly focused upon slavery. The pamphlet is theologically astute and carefully marshals scriptural quotations against slavery; so no one today questions Keith’s authorship. An Exhortation and Caution to Friends, Concerning buying or keeping of Negroes (New York, 1694), reprinted in Frost, The Keithian Controversy in Early America (Norwood, PA, 1980), pp. 213-218. Note that Hepburn did not say he had heard either Chalkley or Salkeld in Quaker meeting, and neither the ms. nor published version of Chalkley’s journal (1749) gives an indication that he was antislavery. Henry Cadbury, “A Quaker Account of Barbados,” Journal of Barbados Museum and Historical
Germantown Protest, the activities of Chester County Friends, John Farmer and William Southey. He made no reference to Samuel Sewell’s Selling of Joseph, but quoted Archbishop Tillotson and Cotton Mather in such a manner as to make them more antislavery than they were. He knew some church history, having read Eusebius, and was well versed in Quaker thought, citing Barclay’s Apology and Penn’s Key to the Scriptures. He acquired and reprinted a London Magazine article entitled the “Athenian Oracle” that influenced his perspectives on slavery and included thirteen pages of “Arguments against making Slaves of Men,” by a “Native of America.” (These arguments laid out in more orderly fashion than Hepburn’s essays seem almost lawyer-like. Since he characterized slavery as a purely American (rather than British or European institution), Hepburn may have hoped to gain English support against the slave trade. It is difficult to generalize about the intellectual attainment of early American settlers, but Hepburn appears to be a thoughtful, educated man.

Hepburn sounds like an early radical Friend, complaining against “gay clothing” and luxurious dress (powder, periwigs, ribbons) used by slave owners and their wives. He believes true Christians are strict pacifists, commending Shrewsbury and Amboy Friends for not paying a 1692 tax to support Albany’s war against the French and being distrained for their resistance. He condemned the Pennsylvania Assembly’s 1711 war tax as a betrayal of Christian purity and argued that when Friends became magistrates, they lost the purity of the gospel and their slaveholding was a symptom of their declension.\footnote{13}

\footnote{Society, X (May, 1943), 118-124 lists the omissions in the printed version of Chalkley’s account that refer to the cruelty of slavery but do not condemn the institution.}

\footnote{13 John Hepburn, American Defence of the Christian Golden Rule, Or An Essay to prove the Unlawfulness of making Slaves of Men (New York, 1715),3-4, 13, 15-17.}
The first paragraphs of the tract enunciate Hepburn’s theological attack upon slavery: God gave men free will and slavery denies to the Africans their free will and, thereby, negates their basic humanity. Freedom here is different from Fox’s spiritual freedom. Rather, in slavery the master’s control of the Negroes’ free will and the way the institution operates necessarily decrees that the enslaved will violate ALL of the Ten Commandments. Because the enslaved must behave immorally, Fox’s desire that slaves be converted is an impossibility. Hepburn laid out in graphic detail the ills that slavery required, beginning with the causing of wars in Africa, the destruction of families there and again in America, physical cruelty in forcing labor, inadequate food and clothing, particularly in cold New Jersey winters. The cause or ground for all this sinful activity is greed. Slavery has a pernicious effect not only on the Negroes but on the master, his wife, and children and on society in general. God will demand restitution for these injustices either in this life or the next or both.

Hepburn often uses biblical injunctions and assumes knowledge of the Scriptures (slaveholders desires are like unholy loves of Delilah and Diana) but rarely proof texts like Fox. Instead he provides lists: why each of the Ten Commandments must be violated, twenty legal arguments against slavery, answers nine objections, twenty illegitimate motives, and four proposals, including a tax to pay for the freedom of slaves already present and to send them back to Africa where they could convert their countrymen.

The theme of this paper is the material not on slavery in these early tracts. More than half of the hundred-page publication consisted of the writings of Thomas Lowry, a personal friend of Hepburn as evidenced by the tribute paid to him on the last page.
These writings had to be important enough to Hepburn that he was willing potentially to alienate theologically virtually all Christians to whom he had addressed his antislavery essays. Only Quakers would have approved of the content of Lowry’s essays that had been written at least five years earlier.

Little is known for certain about Thomas Lowry. Most likely, he was Thomas Lawrie, Hepburn’s father-in-law who had come to the colony as a member of the Society of Friends. The evidence in his writings proving that Lowry remained a Quaker is mixed. He addressed his readers (audience) repeatedly as “Dear Friends,” made two references to Penn’s *No Cross, No Crown*, and Quakers would have approved all the doctrines and sentiments in his essays – several appear to echo Barclay’s *Apology*. Yet Lowry was not listed in Quaker records and did not use distinctive Quaker language (Inward Light, Seed, concern, etc). Lowry attacked predestination, asserted the innocence and sinlessness of idiots and those who die in infancy, denied the necessity of outward baptism, and showed that sin required restitution. The common theme from both men was the merciful God of love who sent Christ for all mankind (and Lowry was politically correct enough to make explicit that the term “mankind” includes woman). Unlike Hepburn, Lowry frequently proof texts, cited no other sources than the Bible, and made no reference to slavery.

Why then did John Hepburn include these writings as well as making two trips to what he termed the Baptist “yearly meeting” in 1712 and 1714 to debate infant baptism

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14 I am indebted James Lobdell for extensive research in trying to figure out who Thomas Lowry might be and for finding evidence that he was a Quaker.

15 Thomas Lowry, “A Short Answer To that Part of Predestination,” 45-62; “Good News to All Parents of such Children, As die in their Infant state,”63-74; “Salvation Without Outward Baptism,”77-82; “What sins we are to Remit,” 83-89. The “Post-script, 90-94 is by Hepburn.
and defend Quaker orthodoxy? And what did he see in Lowry that was compatible with his views on slavery? The inclusions were not to attract readers who might not read a tract on slavery, because the title page mentioned slavery and did not refer to Lowry. It was not the Inward Light of Christ or inward revelation, because neither author discussed these ideas. Rather, it was the outward atonement that extends to all humanity: children, idiots, and slaves. There will be no election of a few, no original sin, no curse of Cain or Ham extending over generations, no need for outward baptism. Instead, all men and women were responsible before God and the slave-owners had usurped God’s prerogatives in denying the enslaved the right to exercise their freedom and the ability to lead a moral life. Lowry, like Hepburn, saw men and women as defined by free will. 16

Slave-owners were new Egyptian pharaohs who denied bodily and inward liberty. Slavery was a moral evil sustained by greed, and God would demand restitution for economic wrongs in this life and bring hell fire in the next for the sins against the Holy Spirit. Lowry’s God brought love, mercy, and restitution for all peoples, including Africans, and Hepburn God’s brought outward as well as spiritual freedom. Unlike Fox, Hepburn argued that slavery and Christianity were opposites and the institution could not be humanized.

IV. Ralph Sandiford

By 1729, when Sandiford published, the agitation against slavery and hope that Friends would refrain from buying or owning slaves had dissipated. Quakers continued

to purchase slaves and the meetings’ cautions brought no disciplinary action and, while they persuaded those who remained against slavery to remain quiet, did not stop even weighty Friends from acquiring slaves. Sandiford decided to have his tract published (by Franklin, who did not put his name on the title page) only after much soul searching and failure to persuade the meeting to discuss openly, let alone condemn slavery. Sandiford weighed the silence of Friends against a prolonged period of examination of his sense of divine leading and this results in his attractive mixture of humility, self-abasement, moral clarity and judgment. Unlike Hepburn and Lowry, the Quaker belief in authoritative personal revelation and his knowledge that there were many who agreed with him gave Sandiford the confidence to disagree with the weighty Friends who dominated the meeting.

External events also helped persuade Sandiford of his divine mission to testify against slavery. God had on two occasions saved his life by special providences. On a voyage to Barbados his ship was attacked and robbed by pirates who then sent him adrift. Marooned on an island in the Bahamas for some months, he was rescued and taken to South Carolina where he saw slavery, resolved to avoid its taint, and voyaged to Philadelphia where he became a merchant, but he could not avoid seeing slavery there because his shop overlooked the slave market. His second special providence occurred while attending a fair in Bristol when he narrowly escaped a fire that destroyed a house where he was staying.¹⁷

Special providence had not only saved Sandiford but had been instrumental in Pennsylvania. The province was a blessed land, obtained by peaceful means in virtually

miraculous fashion and had been favored by God with prosperity and peace. However, slavery created in the colony a web of evil that would bring God’s judgment. Sandiford argued that God for a time winked at evil done by those who were ignorant, but his patience was exhaustible and Quakers could no longer plead ignorance. Like Hepburn, Sandiford foresaw the justice of God demanding restitution, and punishment would fall upon all because the evil of slavery had spread throughout the whole society.

The seventy-four page tract was dedicated to Matthew Hughes, who had been marooned with Sandiford and who was now a magistrate, but the only fleeting reference to politics was in the Dedication. So even though Sandiford saw slavery as caused and perpetuated by economic motives – ease of labor, desire for luxuries, greed – he never addressed specifically merchants, farmers, or artisans - the groups that Soderlund and Nash proved owned slaves in Pennsylvania. Instead, he focused on Quakers ministers and their role in meeting. He believed that if he could persuade ministers to emancipate slaves then it would be possible to clear the meeting from this evil and thereby preserve Pennsylvania from God’s judgment.

Unlike the well-organized pamphlet of Hepburn, Sandiford could not stay on one topic and there were many digressions. He recognized this weakness, admitting after a

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18 Elihu Coleman’s 1733 *A Testimony Against that Antichristian Practice of Making Slaves* (1733) was published with the approval of New England Friends, perhaps because there is only indirect criticism of slaveholding Quakers and endorsement of Friends as the purest church. Like Sandiford, Coleman was a convert, invoked the experience of immediate revelation as the source of antislavery, and saw the fall of Israel as analogous to the situation of Friends in times of peace and prosperity. Like Sandiford, Coleman insisted that the virtue of a few virtuous antislavery Friends would not stop God’s judgment against the whole society. Coleman quoted the jubilee section of Fox’s “Gospel Family Order,” then listed the relevant Bible verses, and labeled wealth and a desire for luxuries as the cause or ground of slavery.
long discussion on the blood of Christ as providing the spiritual unity of the church that
“these points of doctrine not being my immediate concern.” ¹⁹ I suspect that Sandiford
patterned his narrative on the way Quakers preached in meeting; a minister in the middle
of his discourse could feel a leading to speak to someone’s condition and would abruptly
change subject. So having a coherent, orderly discourse was not a prime value either in
ministering or in this tract. Many of Sandiford’s digressions relate to Quakerism: tithes,
oaths, the anti-war testimony, plainness. Others pertain to slavery such as the law of
nations forbade the fomenting of unjust wars in Africa and did not allow captives to be
enslaved. Like Fox, Hepburn, Coleman, and Lay, Sandiford contrasted Christian
attitudes to the enslaved with the Muslims, who freed slaves when they converted. He
concluded that Christian slavery was worse than that of pagans, Turks, and other
Muslims. Sandiford deplored executions for theft, wanted one law and standard of
justice for whites and blacks, and condemned cruelty to animals (it was even worse to
treat black humans cruelly). ²⁰ Even when he concentrated upon one topic, like the
history of the prophetic dispensation, Sandiford cited Jesus and, similarly, when focusing
upon Jesus, he cannot refrain from mentioning Genesis and Isaiah.

Like Woolman, but in contrast to Lay, Sandiford assumed knowledge of slavery
and provided no first hand description of what it was like in the West Indies, South
Carolina, or Pennsylvania. His slavery was an abstraction, an embodiment of evil, and he
was most concerned to determine the ground or motives of the slaveholders. He
resembled Woolman in this and also in arguing that even those who keep slaves for the
purest of motives, for the welfare of the Negroes were complicit in evil. Like Keith and

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.
²⁰ Ibid., 38, 20-21,34
Hepburn, Sandiford argued that even if the masters desired to convert the enslaved to Christianity, the cruelty and oppression involved would make successful proselytizing unlikely. All the antislavery writers considered here argued that vesting absolute authority in the white master and his children would destroy the humility necessary to be a Christian.

The title of the tract, unlike the Dedication and Preface, gave no indication that the main subject would be slavery: *A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times, By the Foregoing and the Present Dispensation: Whereby is Manifested, how the Devil works in the Mystery, which none can understand and get the Victory over, but those that are armed with the Light that discovers the Temptation and the Author thereof, and gives Victory over him and his Instruments, who are now gone forth, as in the Beginning, from the true Friends of Jesus, having the form of Godliness in Words, but in Deeds deny the Power thereof; from such we are commanded to turn away.* The topic, to summarize, is conquering the Devil through the Light of Christ and the dangers of failing. Theological concerns dominate this strikingly original and ambitious tract that contains a history of good and evil from the creation until the eighteenth century with slavery as an embodiment of evil in all periods. Evil began with Lucifer’s rebellion against God, as described in the book of *Jude*, and entered the world through Adam’s fall and continued by Cain’s murder of Abel, and spread until God sent the flood. Neither the curse of Cain nor the Hamitic curse had any relevance to the Negroes because the Bible declared that all Cain’s descendants had perished in the flood and the Canaanites had been obliterated in the conquest of the land of Israel. His brothers’ selling Joseph into slavery was evil,
analogous to Judas selling Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and both were like the contemporary slave trade. 21

Sandiford cited the same verses as Fox about Abraham’s taking responsibility for the religious instruction of his family and used Lot’s welcome of strangers in Sodom and later punishment of the city as examples of good treatment and vengeance for evil. Moses delivered the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, and the laws promulgated in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy condemned man-stealing, provided for a jubilee year of freedom, and a mild law for theft. Here Sandiford digressed to complain about executing people for stealing rather than providing an ability for thieves to work off their punishment, but he also advised Blacks who were guilty to accept their harsh but just punishment. 22

The Jewish wars of conquest provided no precedent for the wars for slavers in Africa. These wars were unjust according to the law of nations, and captives taken in these wars should not be enslaved. The backsliding of the Jews and their sins that caused wandering in the wilderness for forty years, defeats in Judges, and eventual conquest were analogous to the sins of slaveholders that would bring destruction on Pennsylvania. Ministers who owned slaves were like the false prophets denounced in Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Isaiah’s prophecy of liberty and freedom for the oppressed was interpreted by Sandiford to conclude that the dispensations of the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets required the humane treatment of Negroes and the end of slavery.

The climax of history came with the birth, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus providing an atonement by conquering sin. Sandiford’s Anglican upbringing

21 Ibid., 2-5.
22 Ibid., 14
showed in his paraphrasing orthodox creeds and he almost forgot about slavery in his rapturous invocation of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount and parables about wealth and poverty were juxtaposed against the materialism and luxury underlying slavery and corrupting the owner and his children. In Pennsylvania, by the blessing of God, hard work resulted in an adequate standard of living, but, even if the alternative were poverty, it was better to be poor than to be corrupted by ill-gotten gains. The ministers who defended slavery preached good words about Jesus but words without the life led to death. Slavery will forfeit the dispensation of Christ’s mercy on Pennsylvania’s peace and prosperity because God metes out justice and slavery’s roots are so pervasive.

Sandiford then provides a brief history of Christianity as Quakers saw it, with the early church losing its purity after Constantine’s conversion when the faith was mixed with heathenism. The Reformation brought partial restoration, with the Quakers discovering the purity of early Christianity. The first Friends succeeded because they testified against lawyers, physicians, and hireling ministers and all forms of persecution and oppression “whether in Liberty or Estate or Person that all might enjoy Freedom, both inwardly and outwardly.” Seventeenth-century Friends knew that the slave trade was against their principles. The contrast between the rapid spread and devotion of early Friends with the apathy of the present came because of slavery. Now ministers preached vain words to little effect because their outward plainness hid their inner darkness. The early Quakers opposed an outward carnal ministry of those who oppressed others because they received from God the power to see the ground of “every Thought and Principle.”

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23 Ibid, 44-55.
24 Ibid., 59.
25 Ibid., 61.
The lesson should be clear: no minister should be an oppressor and Friends, like Sandiford, had the same ability from Christ to discern the ground of slavery. The title made clear a central focus by a condemnation of ministers “having the Form of Godliness in Words, but in Deeds deny the Power thereof.”

III. Benjamin Lay

Reading Lay’s All Slavekeepers . . . Apostate is very different from dealing with all the other antislavery treatises. The book is longer, 270 pages, and, in spite of enormous repetition, allows Lay opportunity for long sections in which is slavery is not mentioned, or as he phrased it, “I am apt to digress.” The book has many of the same topics but even less coherent organizations than Sandiford’s Brief Examination, and, rather than a chronological narrative, presents a series of meditations - the Quaker term was “openings” - on various topics. Lay would be thinking about or meditating on a subject and have an “opening,” and write it down. Franklin’s later quip that Lay did not care how the book was organized and that allowed him to put sections in any order has the ring of truth. We read about Benjamin and Sarah’s past history, how the meetings treated them, Ralph Sandiford’s death, Waldensians, imprisonment for debt, hard labor as

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26 Benjamin Lay, All Slave-keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostate Pretending to lay Claim to the Pure & Holy Christian Religion: of what Congregation so ever; but especially in their Ministers, by whose example the filthy Leprosy and Apostasy is spread far and near; it is a notorious Sin, which many of the true Friends of Christ, and his pure Truth, called Quakers, has been for many Years, and still are concern’d to write and bear Testimony against; as a Practice so gross & hurtful to Religion, and destructive to Government, beyond what Words can set forth, or can be declared of by Men or Angels, and yet lived in by Ministers and magistrates in America (Franklin: Philadelphia, 1737), p. 34.
a way for thieves to make restitution, loaning money at interest, drinking spring water, fasting and vegetarianism. Lay is our source for the antislavery writings of William Burling of New York and reprints Samuel Sewall’s Selling of Joseph, proving that its influence went beyond New England.

One of Lay’s most valuable digressions tells us how ministers slowly spread the antislavery gospel. When a minister committed to the cause was about to go on a preaching journey, Lay would give him or her a packet of materials to give to sympathizers. (Somehow I doubt that these were always handed out.) Later, in various places, the minister would meet with individual Friends who were antislavery. In his preaching the minister would use information gained from such Friends in his discourses in meeting for worship while being careful not to be “particular,” that is, he or she employing a quietist belief that God could provide information directly, would speak to states applicable to individuals but not mentioning them by name. Evidently, preaching about antislavery under the direct impulse of God could not be stopped. Note that all the writers following Fox, mentioned him as antislavery and stress the tradition of opposing the institution among many Friends and with the support of some other Christians. The importance of a sizeable antislavery community among Friends became crucial because it meant that for Lay and the other writers their singular revelations gained authority from group support.

Lay remained a fascinating figure with anecdotes about his tactics being circulated among Friends. Eventually, these stories would be combined by Roberts Vaux in the early nineteenth century into a biographical sketch. I am relying only upon the

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27 Ibid., 26-27.
information Lay himself provided as background. He termed himself “illiterate” of “so mean a capacity and little Learning,” but he also boasted of owning a library of 200 volumes and read widely and could quote from early Quaker writings, Christian devotional classics like Thomas a Kempis and Molinos, and even some church history.²⁸ (He wished that Eusebius could be republished in Pennsylvania along with Lives of Primitive Christians, Penn’s Address to Protestants, Elias Hooks, Spirit of Martyrs, and a history of the English taken captives by the Algers). Unlike most other colonial American Quakers, Lay had steeped himself in the writings of early Friends, not just the Fox’s Journal and Barclay’s Apology but Fox’s very difficult to read doctrinal works and the most radical of collected works of early Friends (Fisher, Howgill, Burroughs) and even the writings of George Keith before and after he was a Quaker. We do not know what Quaker books were in the substantial libraries of James Logan and Isaac Norris II (they did not catalogue them), but it appears that Lay had a better library of early Quakerism than any other Pennsylvania Quaker and certainly than what was in meeting libraries. Lay was an autodidact and shows both the assertiveness and deference characteristic of such people, a desire for unity with Friends and a willingness for a separation from them.

If All Slavekeepers had been well received, Lay intended to write more books – although I suspect that we already have read what he would have said about the heavenly Jerusalem, Christian perfection, true ministry, and early Christians, and endless circling of the themes enunciated in his long exegesis of Revelations, ch. 11 and 12 and the last

²⁸ Ibid., 18-19, 149-150, 156, 251.
There is little conscious art in many of the sections as Lay rambles from one subject to another, but he paints a more compelling portrait of the effects of slavery than any of the other writers considered here. Here is his description of wife Sarah’s encounter with treatment of the enslaved:

My dear Wife has often spoke of a Passage in or near Spike’s in Barbadoes; going hastily into a very plain-coat outside Friend’s House, there hung up a Negro stark naked, trembling and shivering, with such a Flood of Blood under him, that so surprised the little Woman she could scarce contain; but at last a little recovering, she says to some in the family, What’s here to do? They began exclaiming against the poor miserable Creature, for absconding a day or two, may be by reason of his cruel Usage.”

There was no portrait here of the Negroes as “noble savages,” rather, Lay described their tactics in stealing from his store in Barbados and recorded, to his regret, that he had them beaten. Citing as a source a merchant, Lay described the inhumanity of the slave trade and the sexual exploitation of black women during the Middle Passage. Most surprising to me, considering his audience, Lay like Sandiford, Keith, and Woolman, never provided similar anecdotes about slavery in Pennsylvania, causing one to wonder how much he knew about the institution in the Middle Colonies. He had become antislavery before he migrated to Pennsylvania. Perhaps for rhetorical reasons, it was better to condemn the institution in the abstract, so that those owners who insisted that they were acting for the Negroes benefit or those who provided for freeing the enslaved in their wills could be condemned as hypocrites. At the same time, he outlined a plan for gradual emancipation, sending Africans back to that continent to convert their fellows, and

29 Ibid., 101-110, 124, 145.
30 Ibid., 44.
asserted that their learning abilities would be equal to whites if they could gain access to books.

That Lay’s antislavery writings and tactics were singular cannot be gainsaid. The question that I suspect Friends asked then and historians should ask today: was he just eccentric or mentally disturbed. After all, an unbalanced person can be very perceptive on moral issues. Lay was a successful shopkeeper in Barbados and had enough money to support himself with money put out at interest in Pennsylvania, yet lived in a cave (I shudder to think of the effects of its dampness on his books) and some Friends believed he was partially responsible for Sarah’s death—a charge that greatly offended Benjamin. He had alienated Friends in Britain on issues not relating to slavery long before he came to America. They gave a certificate of removal to Sarah, but not to him. His discovery of the pervasiveness and complaints about false ministers and apostasy occurred before he came to Pennsylvania and before he had encountered slavery. Concern about the end of the world and judgment and the purity of ministry were a staple of eighteenth-century colonial religion; so we cannot see Lay emphases here as a symptom of instability. Apocalyptic judgment was also pervasive in the early Quaker writings that Lay knew so well. He may have seen himself as reenacting the pattern of symbolic gestures against evil set by Old Testament prophets and the First Friends. Still, there is anger and intemperance against opponents that seems just below the surface and ready to appear on any occasion.

More telling was his behavior in meetings. How many ministering Friends discussed slavery in the meeting for worship we do not know. Ministers under quietism

31 Ibid., 57, 63, 65, 124.
had some leeway in subjects, but, if John Smith’s diary is correct, in most meetings only ministers spoke.\textsuperscript{32} Others who spoke frequently had to have their spiritual gifts approved by other ministers or elders. Lay was not a minister, but it is clear he spoke often in meeting, attended many meetings to give his testimony, and could not sit quietly in them. Even before his behavior at the 1739 Yearly Meeting, he had been officially silenced and escorted from meetings either by Friends or constables from Philadelphia, Burlington, and Concord. He complained that in 1737 he was physically carried out of Abington Meeting even before he spoke. Being carried out of meeting did not worry Lay, because he claimed to have been persecuted by “three or four Men that has the Mark of the Beast. . . Slavekeepers . . . should have the whole Rule of Discipline and Govern contrary to all Justice and Equity.”\textsuperscript{33} Feeling his condemnations were unjust, Lay pictured himself as like the early Quakers suffering in New and Old England and William Penn on trial at the Old Bailey. Having been silenced in meeting, Lay decided upon a different approach: \textit{All Slave-keepers . . . Apostate} was the result. Many of the sections that Lay dates came in 1737; so the tract gives every indication that large sections were hurriedly put together after his silencing and soon after the death of Sarah.

For an historian at a distance of nearly three centuries, the safest conclusion about Lay’s state of mind comes from Emily Dickinson:

\begin{quote}
Much Madness is divinest Sense –  
To a Discerning Eye-  
‘Tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail-  
Assent – and you are sane–  
Demur – and you’re straightway dangerous –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} John Smith, Diary, ms. in Library Company of Philadelphia. See also, J. W. Frost, \textit{The Quaker Family in Colonial America} (New York, St. Martin’s, 1973), pp. 57-58, 247.
And handled with a Chain -\textsuperscript{34}

Lay echoed virtually every theme that Sandiford had used earlier. There was the same fall of Lucifer, apostasy of the Jews, purity of the early church and fall after Constantine, then the rediscovery of truth in early Quakers. Both agreed on the pervasiveness of evil and the threat that the particular sins of slavery posed to the Society of Friends. Like Sandiford, except on the title page where magistrates were mentioned, Lay ignored politics and the role of Friends in the governments of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Except for the role of Colchester Meeting in not granting Benjamin a certificate of removal, as a subject, England was ignored. Instead, Lay focused upon the Quaker doctrine of perfection and the role of ministers. He railed against the doctrine of forensic salvation, whereby sinners could obtain salvation because God overlooked their continuing sinful practices. Under the quietist theology prevailing among Friends, a minister in the meeting for worship became a spokesperson for God and spoke pure truth and a primary concern was fear of outrunning one’s gift, that is, allowing self-will to corrupt God’s instructions. Lay clearly believed in this theology of worship, but insisted that holding slaves corrupted the ministry. He wanted all slaveholding ministers to be barred from preaching and imposing discipline. A degenerate minister, who in all other respects appeared an exemplar of Christian piety, could not speak the truth and by preaching and example would lead not only himself but the entire meeting to hell, or as he phrased it, do more harm than twenty “Publicans and Harlots.”\textsuperscript{35} Lay referred twice to the story of Jezebel and Ahab and the four hundred false prophets who brought


\textsuperscript{35} Lay, 27, 221-226.
destruction to the House of Omri. Lay included pages of citations of early Friends on the dangers of a false ministry (without specifying that they were not discussing Quakers) and in an Appendix quoted John Milton on the same subject. Here is Lay’s description of a bad meeting:

When our Meetings on First-Days . . . are a little settled in Silence, and the Children in the Kingdom in their heaven Places, and their Father begins to feed them, up stands maybe a crackt Trumpet, with an uncertain Sound, or peradventure an old broken Cistern, with a little thick muddle stinking Water at bottom, kept in for the Meeting, and there thrown out among the Children, when in Truth it is hardly fit for Swine, nay, I think I may venture to say, the very Swine do not like it.  

For Lay Pennsylvania was a marvelous land, favored by God with outward plenty, peace and religious liberty, but it was endangered. He did not know why God had thus far spared the colony, but like the prophets of old, those who understand the Truth had to provide a warning to the inhabitants. There is only one passage where Lay departs from his preacher mode to rely upon secular arguments: “He that assumes in arbitrary Manner, unjustly, Dominion over his Fellow-Creature’s Liberty and Property, contrary to Law, Reason or Equity, He is a wicked sinful Tyrant.”

For historians, a crucial issue is whether Sandiford and Lay’s tracts helped or hurt the antislavery cause and the answer to that question depends on whether the ministry was the vulnerable place. For Friends, ministers occupied an exalted role as spokespersons for God and, therefore, had to exemplify moral rectitude. If the laity concluded that slavery was sinful, then all messages from slave-keeping ministers were

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36 Ibid., 131,152-156.
37 Ibid, 24, 43,140,
tainted. But if ministers could be persuaded to free their slaves and to preach against slavery, then the politicians, merchants, artisans, and planters who owned slaves could be silenced in the meeting. So Sandiford and Lay astutely dwelled obsessively on evil and the Quaker ministry. They correctly assumed that if the ministers became pure and antislavery, then slavery among Friends would end. Sandiford and Lay employed religious rhetoric arguing for a Christian battle against a new manifestation of evil that had even infected the ministry. Their tactics could not bring success, because they remained blind to the subtle ways Friends business meetings operated, but both men insisted that they published attacks on ministers only after all other methods failed. In so doing, they kept alive the strong abolitionist motives of many others who refused to buy Negroes and continued to work for changing the testimony within the meeting framework.

V. John Woolman

It may seem strange to include Woolman in the list of the early Friends who opposed slavery before Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s change of perspective in 1754 and 1758, but Woolman wrote his *Serious Considerations* in the 1740s at a time when it was still a disownable offence to publish on this subject. He also did a better job than Sandiford and Lay of integrating his choice of subjects to his central concern of slavery,

but a careful analysis shows that slavery was only one of his subjects and that he devotes as much space to other concerns. I also wish to add another perspective to our images of Woolman as mystic, quietist, social critic, enlightenment advocate, literary craftsman, minister; that is, John Woolman as literary politician. After Woolman gradually came to the belief that slavery was sinful, he faced that issue that had perplexed abolitionists since the first generation of settlers: how to gain Philadelphia Yearly Meetings’ censure of slavery when many weighty Friends, including some ministers and elders, owned slaves. Woolman had a better starting point than all the previous authors. Unlike Sandiford and Lay, he was not a recent migrant. He was not a first generation Friend and had been reared to understand the nuances of the plain style of life. He was a minister in good standing, a member of the select group that wrote epistles to other yearly meetings, and had been clerk of his own monthly and quarterly meeting. So he understood Quaker bureaucracy. From comments in his Journal and other sources, we learn that he not only knew but socialized with other important Friends, including Anthony Benezet and the Pemberton brothers. I believe but cannot prove that he had read Sandiford and Lay, but he surely knew that a frontal attack upon Quaker slaveholders or publishing without the consent of meeting would allow “conservatives” to change the subject to the gospel order among Friends. So he bore a quiet testimony to his neighbors and on his travels and

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wrote a tract. He tells us his father knew about it. It is likely that he showed it to some weighty Friends, but made no move to publish. Only after there were new overseers of the press, a new clerk of the yearly meeting, and a threat of war causing Friends to reconsider their favored relationship with God, did Woolman submit his writing. Being moral for Woolman did not require being foolish, tilting at windmills. 

_Serious Considerations_ did not directly attack ministers or weighty Friends who keep slaves, even though Woolman noted that the Bible proved that in ancient Israel, “men under high favours have been apt to err.” The tract was clearly addressed to Friends but by including other Christians who kept Negroes there was less of a frontal attack upon anyone. As Woolman phrased it, he was “not to be particular”, which meant that he would mention no group by name, acknowledge the differences in attitudes towards slavery, and seek only “close thinking” by “candid” people “who are concerned in the practice.” He made suggestions, gave hints, used reasoned discourse, never preached (even though the tract is essentially a sermon), and managed to conceal his prophetic indignation. In addition, he never mentioned slavery per se and referred only twice directly to “Negroes” and once to “poor Africans.”

There is no discussion of African wars, the effects of the slave trade, the breaking up of slave families, or the deplorable living conditions. Slavery is abstract. There is only one Quaker cited, Alexander Arscott, a rationalist eighteenth-century London Quaker whose book sought to explain Friends to outsiders. No early Friend or previous opponent of slavery was mentioned. By contrast, there was heavy reliance upon biblical citations; in a ten-page (in Moulton edition) pamphlet there are six New Testament and sixteen Old Testament

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quotations and several additional paraphrases. Some of the quotations had been used frequently in earlier antislavery writings, but most were new.

Woolman stressed themes that were staples of Pennsylvania Quaker self-understanding. The first was family. There are so many references to children and parents that the reader could easily conclude that his main subject is warning families of the cumber of material possessions and the desire for riches. The Preface focuses on the dangers of too much natural affection for wives and children, a staple of Quaker thought since William Penn most clearly enunciated this danger in No Cross, No Crown.

The family emphasis was useful to Woolman in another way – the Africans are part of God’s family and like all His children have “a natural right to freedom.” He paraphrased the Acts references to all being of one blood, but mis-cited the Bible verse as Genesis 3, which refers to Eve as the mother of all peoples. He also discussed Peter’s vision before converting Cornelius as an example of the expansion of the Christian message from Jews to Gentiles. The problem is that Friends did not see the Negroes as family because of self-love and they need to see them through God’s eyes. 41 The family linked Woolman to Fox’s Gospel Family Order. Fox had cited Abraham, Exodus, and Leviticus to show a master’s obligation to treat the enslaved well and to convert them. Evidently conservatives had argued that Abraham’s bought servants were not like African slaves. (Lay insisted that a good man like Abraham could not own slaves.) Woolman countered that it didn’t matter whether or not slavery was the same everywhere, because the stranger concept applied to all. The Negroes were “strangers”

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41 Woolman, pp. 198-199, 201
forced to come to the New World. So Friends remained under the obligation God placed on Abraham and Moses for the religious welfare of their bought servants.

If slavery were ended, there would be the problem of integrating the blacks who had reason to dislike whites into society. Woolman’s answer began by attempting to create empathy for the Africans by asking how would we feel toward an oppressor who stole our property (i.e. our bodies and our labor) and transported us across the seas. In addition, when he considered the treatment of the slaves in America, rather than employ righteous indignation like Lay, he expressed his discontent with one word: “alas!” Alas with its exclamation mark in the middle of a sentence was as close as Woolman came to anger. Woolman did not deny that the blacks showed resentment, but sought to understand their actions by citing Ecclesiastes, “Oppression makes a wise man mad.” 42 However, there were many examples of the Blacks transcending their treatment who had become Christians. In addition, God had taken oppressed Israelites slaves from Egypt and then from Babylon and they had proved capable of good. Just as God had sustained the Jews in slavery and freedom, so he will influence freed slaves. It was essential for Friends to trust in the providence of God who will reward those who end oppression by following His will.

The second theme, in addition to family, was God’s providential blessing on Pennsylvania and New Jersey. This theme had appeared in all the published antislavery pamphlets, except that of George Keith. God gave this land to us and the transformation of the wilderness into a place of peace and plenty had placed us under a special obligation that we must repay. Now that obligation has come due and it is our responsibility to free

42 Ibid. 202, Ecc. 7:7
the slaves. Linked to this duty is the alternative if we do not do justice to these people. God will bring his judgment and wrath upon us.

A third theme that permeates the entire tract is the nature of Christian life: moderate labor, self-denial, humility, distrust of wealth, reliance on the providence of a loving God, concern for all God’s creation. A benevolent Christian would bring true happiness to himself, his family, and his servants. One could argue that the *Journal of Woolman*, published twenty years later, sought to exemplify though his life the pattern of behavior recommended to others in “Serious Considerations.”

Woolman very carefully calibrated his brief tract to appeal to many Friends, those who sought abolition, those who opposed slavery but feared the effects of freeing Negroes on society, and those who still owned slaves but worried about the morality. So he stressed the benefits of freeing slaves for Quakers by appealing to traditional norms – the Bible, the family, God’s providence for Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and judgment. In the hands of a less skilled writer, the variety of subjects might have distracted from his analysis of the institution but Woolman using what Mike Heller terms “soft persuasion” created a tract that would not alienate even the conservatives among the overseers of the press and in the society who owned slaves. The final proof of Woolman conscious care would come in “Serious Considerations, Part II” published in 1762 after Friends had publicly condemned slaves and committees and traveling ministers were working to persuade members and Friends everywhere to free the Negroes. Now Woolman graphically pictured the evils of the slave trade and slavery and demanded the end to an evil institution founded upon greed and oppression. He countered the arguments,

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43 Woolman, 207
biblical and rational, of the defenders of slavery and used accounts of slave traders to show the enormity of evil. It was not that Woolman was less of a politician in 1762 than in 1754; rather, the religious perspective of the meeting had changed and with it the necessity of circumspection ended.

Conclusions

The examples of the digressions in early antislavery pamphlets shows how many of these themes were unique to Friends and help to explain the originality of Quakers in confronting the evil of slavery. The restoration of the true church in Friends, fear that Quakers, like the Jews and the early church, could forfeit the blessing of God, the denial of original sin, the authority of inward revelation, the attainability of perfection, the doctrine of the ministry, the centrality of family nurture, the special providences of God to Quakers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the fear that Friends, like the Jews and early church, could forfeit the blessing of God – all these beliefs could be linked to slavery because these beliefs already resonated among Friends. All the writers knew that they had to persuade virtually all Friends of the incompatibility of slavery with other beliefs all held in common and that slavery was evil, and they did so by seeking the ground or cause of the institution. Quakers were not just another denomination, they were the primitive church revived and their purity was essential. Slavery compromised the self-proclaimed purity of Friends.

Antislavery agitation gained strength from beliefs that Friends held in common with other Christians: God’s power to judge good and evil, the authority of the Bible, fear
of the devil and hellfire, and concern of the ill-effects of the pursuit of wealth. All could share in the desire to convert Africa; all knew the tales of Algerian pirates capturing Englishmen and women and feared the spread of Islam. Friends, like other Christians, lived in a cosmos in which the Bible was not just an historical document, but a way to understand and order their lives.

There are omissions in this early antislavery literature: no concern with political Quakerism, little discussion of Great Britain or Friends there, selective exegesis (no mention of Paul or his letter to Philemon), little examination of the practice of slavery in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, except in Hepburn. There was also no attempt to use the government to legislate an end to slavery. Rather, the writers focused upon Friends, and not all Friends, but particularly the ministry as the key. If the ministers and elders could be persuaded, then they could influence the entire Society of Friends by their preaching. Eventually, there might be enough righteous people to prevent God’s wrath.

There was a limited effect from these early antislavery writings. The Yearly Meeting pronounced against slavery in 1755 and 1758 but only after the onslaught of the Revolutionary War and their lose of political influence did the meetings require all Friends to free their slaves and the way the meetings brought pressure on recalcitrant owners to free slaves and make certain they would not become public charges reinforced the sectarian nature of Friends. If the antislavery testimony were to spread, it would have to lose its Quaker roots; Pennsylvania’s special place would need to be replaced by republican America’s providential destiny; natural rights be added to biblical advices on “strangers;” political maneuvering rather than Christian perfectionism would be required; rationalism and evangelicalism needed to replace Quaker quietism. In manumission
societies Friends in North and South would seek to influence their neighbors by a respectful testimony, but only a minority of Friends, like Mott and Whittier, embraced radical abolitionism in the 1830s. Woolman had no successor. Benjamin Lay did; not in his Christian perfectionism but in tone and radicalism Lay’s spirit would continue not in the meeting but in William Lloyd Garrison and Abby Foster Kelly, both of whom were very sane.

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