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Grace Without Borders

Acts 11:17

In 1835 the Presbyterian Church of Springfield, sometimes called the Sangamo Presbyterian Church, had been functioning for seven years and had 71 members. It had been led from the beginning by a minister from New Jersey, a Princeton graduate named John Bergen. But the relationship with John Bergen had not yet been formalized into an official call. Bergen came to Illinois as a missionary and was serving the Springfield church as a stated supply while he also helped organize other churches. As 1835 dawned, it was generally understood that the time had come to make the transition to a formal call.

It is at this point that the church records show that members were not in agreement about their vision for the future. Some members did not believe that Bergen should be called as pastor. They are quoted as saying that they have no specific objection to Bergen, but they believe they can do better. When a vote on the call to Bergen was taken on February 19 nine members voted against the motion. In March the dissenters filed an objection with the Presbytery claiming the call was not in order because non-members were allowed to vote. The objection was affirmed by Presbytery. But when this action was appealed to the Synod in April, it was reversed. John Bergen was confirmed as pastor. Then on May 26, 1835 two elders of the church and twenty eight other members asked Bergen to help them organize Second Presbyterian Church which would later become Westminster. The records show that Bergen “cordially assented,” even though he would be left with only 41 members.

These are the facts which are documented in the records.¹ How to interpret these facts has been a source of continuing disagreement between the two congregations for 175 years. At the heart of the disagreement is the question of whether differences over slavery significantly influenced the split.

My purpose today is not to fuel a new round of argumentation with our friends at First Presbyterian. The truth is much more complex than is often assumed. Certainly our celebration of Westminster’s abolitionist history should not be seen as placing the history of our sister congregation in a negative light. First Presbyterian had a 20-year pastor in John Bergen who was opposed to slavery. There were some members including three elders at First Presbyterian in the years following the split who were abolitionists (Bayard Catron). The presbytery, synod, and General Assemblies to which First Church belonged frequently issued statements condemning slavery. Anyone who says that First Presbyterian was pro-slavery in the 1830s and 1840s is plainly wrong. The evidence does not support such a claim.

What Presbyterians in Springfield had to deal with in 1835 and the years that followed was the breakdown of the consensus on slavery that had ruled the Presbyterian Church since 1802. Church pronouncements always condemned slavery as sinful, but no penalties were ever imposed against slave owners. Most Presbyterians were gradualists; that is they wanted to end slavery but to do it decently and in order. They agonized over the huge logistical problems that emancipation would create and

believed it should be implemented gradually. Abolitionists were a minority group in the church who believe there should be no delay in setting the slaves free no matter how difficult the logistics.

Something happened in 1833 and 1834 which energized the abolitionists to challenge the established Presbyterian consensus more aggressively than they had before. Action was taken in Parliament to outlaw slavery in Great Britain and its empire.² If it could happen that quickly for the British, why not in America too? Suddenly the old Presbyterian boundaries were no longer acceptable to the abolitionists. They saw what happened in Great Britain as a sign that God was changing the landscape.

It was also in 1834 that Albert Hale and his friend Theron Baldwin came to Springfield and accepted John Bergen's invitation to lead a revival. Their abolitionist views which were clearly established in the next decade were most likely expressed in those meetings.³ What was happening in Great Britain would have fueled their anti-slavery enthusiasm. All the sources agree that the vision which created Second Church was born in that revival.⁴

When the newly energized abolitionists became a threat to the long accepted Presbyterian consensus on slavery, their opponents struck first by taking control of the 1837 General Assembly and expelling the abolitionist leaning synods from the denomination.⁵ Those who were expelled became the New School. The coalition which forced the abolitionists out became the Old School. The Presbyterian congregations in Illinois had to decide which way to go. Second Presbyterian went with the New School which was "abolitionist friendly" even though gradual emancipation people were in the majority.⁶ First Presbyterian chose to go with the Old School which also had a gradual emancipation majority but was closely aligned with the interests of Southern slave owners. Both denominations kept the old anti-slavery policies on the books but everyone knew that in the Old School abolitionists were not welcome.⁷

These decisions of the two congregations just a few years after the split would indicate that the center of gravity of Second Church was from the beginning much closer to abolitionism than that of First Church.⁸ By the early 1840s the identity of Second as Springfield's "Abolitionist Church" was clearly established.⁹ But we should remember that in taking a different road First Church was able to nurture the family of Abraham Lincoln. As a man with political ambitions Lincoln could not afford to be identified with an abolitionist church. To do so would have been political suicide.¹⁰ Lincoln needed a church with a gradualist approach to emancipation and his southern-bred wife was comfortable with the Old School links to the South. By embracing the Old School First Church was positioned to provide the spiritual home the Lincolns needed.

In the 11th chapter of the Book of Acts, Peter becomes a reluctant agent of change. God calls him to break through the boundaries established by his faith and his culture. A Roman centurion named Cornelius comes to faith. Peter is told by God in a dream that Gentiles like Cornelius are to be part of the new community that God is bringing into being. There are no borders that can contain God's grace. When Peter goes to the home of Cornelius he breaks two specific taboos. He accepts Cornelius into the family of faith and then has table fellowship with him. When he goes back to Jerusalem to report to the church leaders there he is called on the carpet for what he has done. Peter explains himself in these words:

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God (Acts 11:17)?"

What Peter presented to the church leaders in Jerusalem was a redefinition of the meaning of human community. The most likely response to Peter's challenging message would be that the

gathering would do what the Presbyterian General Assembly did in 1837. But the Jerusalem gathering did not choose sides or split apart. Instead they listened and praised God for grace without borders.

And so it was for the two Presbyterian congregations in Springfield when African-Americans presented themselves for membership during the turbulent years of the 1840s. A 22 year old black woman who was a dressmaker was received into First Presbyterian in 1846.¹¹ An Underground Railroad conductor named Jamieson Jenkins and his wife Elizabeth, who were of mixed race, became members of Second Church in 1848.¹² These actions redefined what community meant in 1840s America. Though the congregations had taken different roads in pursuing a vision of justice, they both listened and praised God for grace without borders.

Endnotes

1. I am indebted to Bayard Catron for his careful examination of the First Presbyterian Church records concerning the 1835 division of the church.
2. Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*, pages 163-165.
3. Speaking at Albert Hale's funeral in 1891 John M. Palmer reported hearing Hale's preaching as early as 1835 and stated that Hale was giving anti-slavery sermons in 1836 and 1837. This was published in the *Daily Illinois State Journal* on February 2, 1891.
4. D. S. Johnson, "50th Anniversary Sermon," at Second Presbyterian Church in 1885 from *Clinton Conkling Historical Data*, Volume I, page 125. Clinton Conkling, who knew Hale, said in 1908 that Hale was invited to be the first pastor of Second Presbyterian Church soon after it was organized but he declined. Conkling's source was Albert Hale, Jr. who wrote a summary of his father's life and career which his sister, Sophie Hale, sent to Conkling in November of 1906. That summary includes this description of Albert Hale's role in the founding of Second Presbyterian:
He had been consulted freely by many individuals on the subject of the organizing of that church in '35, and when it had been organized he was the first man invited to become its pastor. However, he did not then accept.
5. James H. Smylie, "A Brief History of Presbyterians," pages 78-80.
6. Very little is known about Dewey Whitney's stance on slavery or the New School/Old School controversy since his pastorate at Second Presbyterian lasted less than three years. He was a New Englander who began his ministry in Kentucky. Whitney's views were likely influenced by Gideon Blackburn with whom he studied in Kentucky. Blackburn was a leader of the New School movement in the South and a charter member of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society after moving to this state (Lester Lamon, *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Winter, 1984, pages 354-367).
7. Smylie's analysis outlines the theological and organizational issues which were part of the New School/Old School controversy. While advocates of the Old School took great pains to argue that it was all about theology, slavery was clearly the "elephant in the room" which precipitated the division. Noted Presbyterian church historian, Lefferts Loetscher summed up this church controversy in his 1954 book *The Broadening Church*, "It is now generally recognized that the slavery issue—though deliberately deemphasized by many at the time—constituted a third important cause of the Presbyterian Old School-New School disruption of 1837 (page 6)."
8. The abolitionist center of gravity of Second Church was in fact becoming clear before the New School/Old School split. Ten of the twenty-one Springfield charter members of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society, organized in the Fall of 1837, were on the rolls of Second Church by August of 1837: Erastus Wright (joined Second in May 1835), E. B. Hawley (May 1835), W. M. Cowgill (May 1835), J. B. Watson (May 1835), J. G. Rawson/Ransom (December 1835), S. Conant (December 1835 from Springfield First), Z. Hallock (October 1836), R. P. Abel (December 1836),

E. W. Thayer (December 1836), and J. C. Bancroft (August 1837). Three other Illinois Anti-Slavery Society charter members united with Second Church subsequent to joining the society: Isaac Bancroft, Jr. (September 1840), Oliver B. Culver (January 1840), and Bishop Sealy (November 1853). In addition Second Church charter members Charles C. and Mary A. Phelps appear on the Springfield Anti-Slavery Society list and charter member Thomas Moffett subscribed to an emancipation newspaper (Bayard Catron). Charter member Ebenezer Phelps, Jr. served as a driver for the Underground Railroad in the 1840s (Floyd Barringer and Hamilton County, Nebraska Register, 5 November 1909). Thirteen of the twenty-eight men on the Second Church roll at the end of 1836 are documented as abolitionist or abolitionist friendly.

9. Richard E. Hart, "Lincoln's Springfield: The Underground Railroad," Part 2, pages 1-4, and D. S. Johnson, "50th Anniversary Sermon" at Second Presbyterian Church in 1885 from Clinton Conkling *Historical Data*, Volume I, page 178.
10. Lincoln scholar Philip Paludan made this observation to a Sunday morning class at Westminster Presbyterian Church in 2004.
11. From Bayard Catron's examination of First Presbyterian Church records.
12. From the records of Second Presbyterian Church (now Westminster).