Chapter 1
A Delegation Warmly Received

To Dr Smyth's activity and hearty zeal in our cause we were deeply indebted during our stay. Nothing was wanting on his part to awaken both our fellow countrymen and American Christians to the principles and issues of the recent struggles in Scotland

Impressions of America and the American Churches
from the Journal of Rev. G. Lewis 1845

Fertile Ground

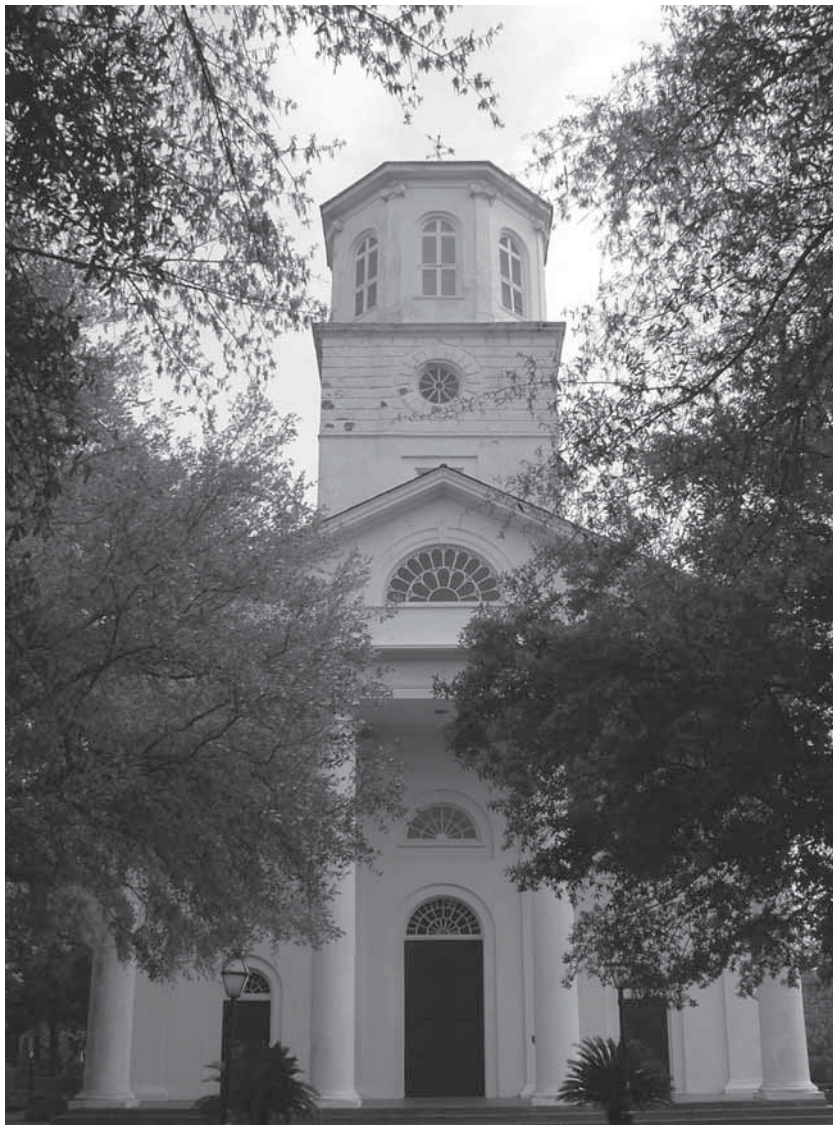
In the mid nineteenth century the American War of Independence was still a vivid memory in the lives of tens of thousands across the Atlantic. Rebellion against a supposedly tyrannical system had become a sacred duty in the minds of patriotic Americans, who hugged to their ideological chests the mantra of freedom from control. However ironic this would be, not least to millions of African Americans who suffered under the bonds of enslavement, it was so deeply rooted that any British citizen who sought to free themselves from restrictions on their liberty, might expect moral support from those who had any power and influence in the new world of the United States.

No part of this was more powerfully rooted than freedom of religion. The epic journey of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1619 would be followed by many other communities of faith who had found themselves in a minority in European nations, where they were at best marginalised by the official religion of the state, or at worst persecuted with threats to their lives. The irony in this situation was often lost in the new world. Puritan America would see the most appalling witch hunts of those who supposedly did not conform to the narrowest of doctrines or morality. Anti-Catholic prejudice was such that even in 1960 the election of a Roman Catholic President seemed as much of a shift in the template as the election of an African American one in 2008. Nevertheless, the belief in 1844 that America was a model for religious tolerance and would salute any who made a brave and sacrificial stand for their faith in the face of the religious establishment, was overwhelmingly strong.

Such ripe soil was attractive in the seventeenth century for English dissenters as for French Huguenots, Dutch Protestants fleeing the Spanish empire, and Romanian Unitarians later defying the Orthodox Church. No group at this time, however, were more in tune with the Free Church delegation than the numerous and widespread Scottish communities in the United States. Many had been there for generations, maintaining the traditions of the 'old country.' In recent decades, the 'improvements' made to Scottish agriculture by the introduction of sheep farming had led to tens of thousands of Highland and Lowland small-tenant farmers being evicted from their lands and forced to a seek exile in North America. The orders for this eviction had come from landowners, some of whom lived on the same land as their tenants, but many of whom lived far out of sight of the events. Some, like the Duke of Sutherland, whose estate became the scene of some of the most notorious of the evictions, lived much of the time in London. In 1852 the American anti-slavery author Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by this time was a best-seller, visited the Sutherlands at Dunrobin Castle in the northeast and wrote warmly of the Duchess's support for the cause of black liberty – yet another of history's ironies.[1]

Why should those who were exiled by the Clearances, as they became known, be inclined to give support to the Free Church of Scotland? It was not because they were naturally rebellious or militant – in fact many had maintained an almost myopic loyalty to those inheritors of the clan system, until it became all too obvious that there was not a shred of paternalistic care left buried beneath the overriding passion to take full advantage of profit. Peaceful resistance, or that accompanied simply by the threat of wooden sticks, was met by the full rigours of British military might when called into the service of the lairds. Few were as courageous or foolhardy as the tenant of the Duke of Sutherland who responded to the call to arms in the newly formed Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders – 'since your Lordship has preferred sheep to men, let sheep defend you'. In the face of such injustice, the best equipped to defend the rights of the tenant, armed as they would be with the prophetic heritage of Old Testament figures, would be their spiritual leaders. Who better able to quote to the powers that be those words from the prophet Isaiah: 'Woe betide those who add field to field until everyone is displaced and there is none left in the land but yourselves', but the parish ministers of the Church of Scotland?[2]

With few honourable exceptions, there was at best a deafening silence on the part of those whose livelihoods depended on the patronage of the very men who were busy substituting sheep for



Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina

tenants. Not a few found advantageous passages of scripture to quote in support of obedience to lawful authority, even when that authority had totally abandoned the kind of responsibilities for those under him that were implicit in Calvin's *Institutes*, let alone St. Paul's defence of the authority of the Roman Empire. Donald Sage, witness of the Sutherland clearances, said that the Church of

Scotland ministers 'discharged what they called their duty. . . they did not scruple to introduce the name of the Deity; representing him as the author and abettor of all the foul and cruel proceedings carried on'. [3]

One of the reasons that the Free Church of Scotland has a hold in those parts of Scotland most denuded in the Clearances, is that the Church of Scotland has not easily lived down the betrayal of those days. Even if few of those who left on the ships plying across the Atlantic had by 1844 managed to achieve power or influence in the United States, there were many Scots who preceded them and would find good cause to see the Free Church's separation from the Church of Scotland as a stand for justice and freedom against tyranny – the tyranny supported by the old established religion.

Of course the Presbyterianism which the Free Church delegates encountered in the United States had its own fragmentation. The Northern and Southern varieties were only just held together by compromises paralleled in the political system. A united Presbyterian Church in slave-ridden America was to prove in the end as impossible a body to sustain as a slavery-divided United States. Slave-ownership was that question which, however much they attempted to avoid it, would dog the Free Church delegates when they returned home.

Presbyterians in the United States divided in 1837 between groups entitled Old School and New School. The Old School represented traditional Calvinism. This was reinterpreted by the New School, who rejected some of the harsher doctrines, and drew on the Scottish 'common sense' philosophy that advocated moral government. At the 1837 General Assembly in Philadelphia the Old School majority expelled New School members who published a more liberal theological declaration. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania decided that the Old School were the true representatives of Presbyterianism. New School members tended to challenge slavery and many of their members were active in abolitionist circles.

Princeton and far beyond

William Cunningham and Henry Ferguson were the first to arrive in the United States in December 1843. Cunningham, although only thirty-three, had already made his mark as a church leader. After ministries in Greenock and Edinburgh he had, just months before setting out to America, been appointed to a Chair at the new Free Church College. He had suffered a tragic family bereavement

when his four-year-old son Willie died of whooping cough just weeks before he was due to sail. Nonetheless, having made this commitment to the church, he sought to fulfil it and he didn't return home until mid-May 1844. Robert Burns, William Chalmers, Henry Ferguson and George Lewis came over at the beginning of 1844. Most of the delegation returned by the time of the Free Church General Assembly in May, but Lewis stayed until July making by far the most extensive journey of all through two dozen states, North and South, and visiting Toronto and Montreal in Canada.

Although all of the delegation were mandated to present the case for the Free Church and 'gather in the fruits of American liberality', Cunningham's first priority was to visit what the Education Committee described as 'Some of the most eminent of the American Theological Institutions'. His recent appointment to a Chair at New College meant that he was seen as an ideal candidate to assess what could be learnt by the Free Church from those who had been teaching theological students for some decades. Early in the visit to the States no less than four members of the delegation arrived at that crucial centre of Presbyterian theological education, Princeton in New Jersey. Princeton's Scottish connections stemmed from Rev. John Witherspoon from Paisley, its sixth and best known President (Principal) from 1768 to 1797.

Cunningham stayed twice with the current President of the College, Dr Charles Hodge. He found it a rewarding experience. The President, an Old School Theologian, and a notoriously shy man, was later to engage in a vehement attack on Charles Darwin the naturalist. He told a mutual friend that he had rarely met anyone whom he held in such high regard on such a short acquaintance as Cunningham. Later he wrote that having him as a guest was a highlight of his life. A contemporary observer at Princeton described Cunningham 'altogether the most satisfactory foreigner I have seen . . . he has no airs of patronage'.[4] Certainly no Free Church leader could afford to be seen with such a characteristic. A visiting Professor, James Alexander, attended an hour long speech and was mesmerised by:

> Indescribable Scotch intonation (but little idiom) and convulsion of body, but flowing, elegant language, and amazing power in presenting argument. Though his manner is rugged and uncouth and he has no sign of imagination, yet when he gets to the subject of religion he is so scriptural and so sound that one is affected by what he says. I have seldom listened to a man with more instruction.[5]

Ferguson accompanied Cunningham to Princeton. At first Alexander was 'thunderstruck' by the sight of a man who had 'the dress and ways of a weaver' and was puzzled by the fact that he had been specially appointed to accompany Cunningham on the recommendation of Thomas Chalmers, already a revered figure at the college. 'My wonder ceased' he wrote 'when I heard him. He spoke an hour and three quarters by the watch; I wish it had been twice as long'. Despite Ferguson cutting a seemingly comical figure and with poor elocution, Alexander and his brother were deeply moved by his eloquence and passion. Although he wrote 'it is utterly vain for me to give you any idea of the degree of his [Ferguson's] power' and described his diction as 'elegant and sublime', he added, 'and yet he is only a merchant of Dundee'.

Cunningham preached a number of times at Princeton. On 16 March his text from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter five, verse fourteen – 'If one died for all then all died' was described as 'a noble sermon as plain and unillustrated as before but mighty in argument and robustly eloquent'. The impression he gave to his hosts, who judged him to be in his 40s, (he was 38) was of a mature and senior figure in the Free Church, with the necessary gravitas not evident in some others in the delegation. In a letter dated 20 Feb Alexander wrote, 'The Scotch delegates thicken upon us. We have had Rev. Dr Burns and Elder Ferguson and we are daily expecting Lewis, who has arrived at New York'. After Robert Burns preached, the comments were 'his manner in the pulpit (gestures excepted) is more outré than Cunningham's. But his sermon was noble, rich, scriptural and evangelical and in diction elegant . . . his closing prayer was seraphic'. Lewis, who was asked to conduct worship shortly after he arrived at Princeton, was described by Alexander as 'a gentlemanly man' who gave 'a delightful gospel sermon'.

With such goodwill evoked by the four delegates at Princeton, some tangible support was almost bound to result. In fact 500 dollars were subscribed right at the beginning of the visit – a reasonable sum from what was still a modestly endowed institution with a fraction of the students it would have when it achieved full University status.

The four delegates were never again to come together in America. William Chalmers made his focus the mid-West and did not join the others at Princeton but was later to be with Lewis at the crucial Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the slave-state of Kentucky. Robert Burns spent a good deal of time in Canada. He collected two-thousand pounds for the Free Church in Montreal and when Lewis was departing from Halifax, he learnt from various people

how successfully Burns had pled the cause in Nova Scotia. Some of the Canadians wanted him to be the first Free Church minister of the prestigious Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto, and their Synod invited him to develop a ministry to native Canadians. It would not be long until he accepted a teaching call in Toronto.

Before going north, Burns had secured an interview with the present incumbent at the White House, John Tyler, a former Governor of Virginia and the first Vice President to inherit the Presidency, holding it despite the resignation of his entire cabinet. Tyler, an Episcopalian, appeared to be impressed with the Free Church struggle for independence and commented 'in the United States we allow every man to get to heaven as best he can, if he gets there at all'.[6]

William Cunningham took a heavy programme on himself but mainly stayed in the east, visiting Washington, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Virginia. He was to have preached before members of Congress but illness prevented this. He was accompanied for much of the time in the eastern states by Robert Burns, but the two men did not adopt the same approach. Cunningham's style was that of the elder statesman, concentrating on the case for the Free Church to be recognised as the conscience of Scotland. He was treated almost as a surrogate Thomas Chalmers. In Lafayette College in Pennsylvania the Trustees told him before he left for home on 1 May that they would award a Doctorate to any minister in Scotland praised by him.

By contrast Burns, in a letter immediately after his arrival in Princeton, wrote that his 'testifying processes' began there and was part of his presentation. He admitted that Cunningham saw personal testimony as outside their remit, and had no intention of following him. The later success of Robert Burns in the north and Canada was probably increased by the principles of the Disruption being leavened a little by some personal witness.

The most extensive traveller, and one who left the most complete record of his journeys, was George Lewis. Lewis began by visiting as many churches in New York as possible, and at the end of each service tried to get opportunities to commend the cause of the Free Church. This intensive programme delayed his visit to Princeton, after which he also had an audience with the President. Tyler asked after Dr Chalmers's age and health. 'You are a people that go through with a thing', said the President to Lewis. 'John Knox did it and I fancy you are following his steps'.

While in Washington, Lewis and Burns attended and spoke to

the Baltimore Methodist Episcopal Church conference. For both men this was their first exposure to African American Christians and their short contributions were, in Lewis's account, 'received by many 'Amens' and 'oh, ohs.' When Lewis preached to the Conference on 16 March he was discomfited by what he thought were inappropriate interjections but was moved both by the messages of support from the conference and the generous gifts from what was a very poor church.

After visiting Washington, George Lewis and Robert Ferguson entered the Deep South. There they were to encounter the warm and generous hospitality that awaited any traveller, particularly from the 'old country', who was polite enough not to violate the code by raising questions about the South's 'peculiar institution'. Their host and guide in Charleston, South Carolina, was the Irish-born Dr Thomas Smyth, influencial minister of the Second Presbyterian Church and a friend of Thomas Chalmers. Lewis was later to write:

> to Dr Smyth's activity and hearty zeal in our cause we were deeply indebted during our stay. Nothing was wanting on his part to awaken both our fellow countrymen and American Christians to the principles and issues of the recent struggles in Scotland'.

But in some churches the Disruption was a sensitive issue and almost as taboo as the topic of slavery. Lewis declined one invitation to preach in a so-called 'Scotch Church' under these conditions and a Methodist minister who had left Scotland in 1832, argued with Lewis and Ferguson, maintaining that they should have fought patronage from within the Kirk.

Seeing slavery and hearing from the Presbyterians

In early April Lewis set off for Savannah, Georgia and then went through Alabama to New Orleans. Much of his travelling was by boat and he had the most first-hand experience amongst all the delegates of experiencing slavery in the raw rather than at a distance. He saw over one hundred slaves on the journey to Charleston and was struck by one young girl recognising her sister on the boat, from a separate batch of 'merchandise'. On another river trip he engaged some slaves in conversation, sharing a bag of oranges with them and hearing of their fears of being sold in Mississippi. At Montgomery, Alabama, Lewis observed a slave market which even his host showed him 'with shame'. In Savannah, he was told anxiously by a 'coloured' minister to avoid the topic of slavery and a Scottish immigrant who,

in Lewis's estimation 'had learnt to accommodate himself to the evils around him' asked Lewis 'are you come to spy on me?'

From the Louisiana coast Lewis journeyed back north to St. Louis and then to Louisville, Kentucky where the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in mid May. He was joined by Henry Chalmers on 24 May and together they addressed the Assembly, Chalmers on the facts of the disruption and Lewis on the principles. George Lewis reported that the two Scots were unimpressed by the informality and lack of order in the proceedings, although a motion to set up a committee to support the Free Church was unanimously passed. But, said Lewis, 'as much as our hearts were gladdened by this kindly welcome, so much more were we cast down by the reception which the Assembly gave to the question of slavery'.

Strangely enough 24 May 1844 was to see motions from synods on the subject of American slavery presented to the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church meeting in Kentucky and the Free Church of Scotland meeting in Edinburgh. The Free Church, as we will see, remitted consideration of the issue to a Committee. The Presbyterian Church in America voted to refuse discussion of the matter by 117 votes to 69. Lewis concluded that the great fear was the break up of the union both in church and state. He was twice asked to preach in Louisville and this time it was slavery rather than the Disruption that was the topic off limits.

While at the Assembly, Lewis asked a delegate whether it was true that state governments forbade the teaching of African Americans to read. 'It is too true' was the reply, 'we are not in this matter a free church but we cannot presently help ourselves'. Lewis retorted that this contradicted the scriptural injunction to all Christians to search the scriptures' and that the calling of the church was 'to tell the civil power to go back to its own place'.

The notes made by Lewis would be published the following year under the title *Impressions of America and the American Churches.* In 1846 a selection of his journal was given a separate imprint as *Slavery and Slaveholders in the United States of America.* How far these were revised in the light of events that were to follow is hard to judge, but George Lewis was considerably exercised by what he had seen of the American churches' attitude to slavery. It is certain that he believed slavery in the United States to be 'milder' than that recently abolished in the West Indies, something on which most modern historians agree. He was encouraged by churches such as the Associate Reformed Synod, which had declared slave-holding a sin, and the Methodists who recently called on a slave-holding bishop to resign. But he was disappointed that

although in the previous century the Presbyterian General Assembly had agreed slavery to be 'a great moral evil', nothing had been done about it since then. Even at Princeton, although the leaders were living in a 'free' state, they could not bring themselves to call slavery 'sin', with the consequence of seeing their southern colleagues and even the Old Testament patriarchs as sinners.

Lewis declared that to accept the law prohibiting African Americans from reading and writing was a grave failure of the Presbyterian church. Such a law, for him, was 'a plain violation of its freedom as a church'. His awareness that Presbyterians had not lobbied the legislature or attempted to rouse their congregations on the matter led him to say 'with solemn regret that our Presbyterian brethren in the States have come short of their duty'.

To those who would argue that slavery was sanctioned by scripture, Lewis responded that polygamy was also accepted in the Old Testament and never condemned by Jesus, yet the church today would have no difficulty in expelling polygamists. Although for him it was clear that 'the law of God as given from Sinai contained the germ of all our duties', it was also clear that God 'shed light from age to age'. Such a perspective clearly put George Lewis on the liberal side of the Free Church spectrum. His conclusions on what he called 'the foul spot' (slavery) on the nation and the duty of the Christian church to take strong action against its members who practised it, did not sit any too easily with many of his colleagues in the Free Church. Had he been able to attend the 1844 General Assembly in Edinburgh instead of the one in Kentucky and speak from personal experience, the outcome might have been very different. But already a strong wind had blown from the north and the flames were being fanned in Scotland.[7]

The Wages of Iniquity?

On 2 April a letter was sent to all the delegates from the Executive Committee of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. It was signed by nine members, including the businessmen brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan, who together had founded the Society in 1840. Anti-Slavery groups tended to imitate the churches in their propensity to fragment. The Tappans, being opposed to female suffrage and the participation of women in any anti-slavery activities, had parted company with William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, which they had both founded. Arthur Tappan was a corresponding member of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, whose

minutes indicate a great deal of mutual communication across the Atlantic. He would have been well aware of the travels of the Free Church delegation and the support that they had received in the south as well as the north.[8]

The letter began diplomatically, but rather romantically, by recognising Scotland's stand against 'ecclesiastical and civic tyranny'. In assuring the Free Church of its sympathy and support, it immediately linked that struggle with those 'professed brothers and sisters in Christ' in the Southern States whose situation was far worse than 'The Christian peasantry of Sutherland'. That subtle insertion showed that the Society had done their homework and they continued by a reference to dukes who required their tenants to listen to ministers chosen by them and who were supported in this by the Civil Courts. 'There are no Dukes', the letter continued 'in this republic, but there are thousands of tyrants, some of whom are called 'honourable', who will not allow their slaves to read the Bible or attend upon preaching of their choice, and the courts sustain them in their prohibition'.

Having made the direct connection between the causes in Scotland and America, the Society's letter turned to the prospects of gaining support and encouragement from slave-holders in the south, provided 'you seal your lips against any condemnation of slave-holding', Texts such as 'servants, obey your masters', would be acceptable to slave-holders, but not Paul's exhortation 'give unto your servants that which is just and equal'. The authors compared the complaints against Sir Robert Peel, the British Prime Minister, who would not consent 'that your Scotch brethren shall have the preacher of their choice' with the speech of a senator in South Carolina, who threatened to hang any who advocated that thousands of Presbyterian brethren in slavery should be allowed to read the Bible.

What started in measured tones then became more and more strident in considering the Free Church's receipt of any money at all from congregations which included slave-owners. 'You contemplate carrying that impious gold . . . to lay the foundations of Free Churches and raise roofs which are to echo the voices of Wishart, Hamilton, and Henderson'. 'Building a town with blood' was the implication of the receiving money in this way and of course silence on slavery was the price. 'The fiend' is well able, went the argument, to give tens of thousands because the approval of the Free Church is worth far more. Citing a veteran abolitionist and Free Church leader who died in 1831 they continued, 'If he [the slave-owner] can purchase the

silence of the successors of John Knox and Andrew Thomson, if he can number them among is allies, he will think his victory complete.[9]

The Society then turned to an appeal for support for the abolitionists. 'You will hear the abolitionists in this country' they said 'denounced by ministers, elders, and private professors of the Presbyterian Church, as well at the North as at the South'. However, they wished to assure the delegates from Scotland that 'our doctrines and measures . . . are identical with those of Wilberforce, Clarkson, Andrew Thomson and the other worthies who amidst threats, calumny, and violence, carried on the anti-slavery cause in our fatherland, under the Divine blessing, to a glorious consummation'.

However fine that rhetoric was, the Free Church delegation knew all too well that it was over-egging the pudding. Clarkson's life may have been threatened when collecting data in Bristol and Wilberforce and Thomson had been the subject of vicious verbal attacks from the West Indians, but it was nothing compared with the American experience of pastors driven from their parishes, death threats and severe beatings suffered by those who dared to raise the abolition cause, and not just in the deep South.

The letter recognised the support for the abolition cause by 'Christian brethren in England, Ireland, and Scotland' and argued not only that the acceptance of southern assistance by the Free Church would weaken the work of abolition in America, but that it would inhibit the Church from sending strong remonstrances to the American Presbyterians on slavery. It flew of into grand polemic with this warning:

> Respected Christian brethren: be warned! You are now sojourning in the house of the serpent. We have, it is true, his slime and his folds in the North but his head and fangs are in the South. Are you in no danger from the fascination of his eye? Beloved guests from our mother country, suffer our frank and friendly exposition. Is not the Free Church of Scotland virtually here in you? Can you fall into grievous error without injuring her? Consider, you left the establishment with nothing but your characters. Houses, lands, salaries – all was left behind except Christian character. Never did that jewel of your souls shine so brightly as in the dark hour when you went forth hearing the reproach of Christ. You are at war with oppression and you come to us for the sinews of war. Can you suppose that the wages of iniquity are of any value to *you?*

However fervent this appeal was, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society obviously realised that it came a little too late. Two of the delegation were on the last lap of their journey and Lewis had already left Charleston, the centre of his tour in the South and the place from where most of the Southern offerings had come. The question they posed at the end of the letter was what the reaction at home might be. 'What will the enemies of the Free Church- the State hirelings – say if you carry home the slave-holder's bounty? They would say that the Free Church of Scotland could not 'swallow the bread of their Sovereign' but were prepared to 'beg a pittance from the pulpits of tyrannical oppression in Washington, Charleston and New Orleans'.

As a final plea, the writers expressed the hope that if their urging to refuse money 'acquired by the sale of American Christians and men made heathens by the cruel system of slavery' was ignored, then on the return of the delegation 'your constituents, the Free Church of Scotland, will refuse to receive the polluted silver and gold and return it to those who gave it'. The 'Send Back the Money' campaign that for a short time was to divide churches, families and communities in Scotland and would see some great orators at packed Scottish meetings had just been launched in New York.

The letter to the delegation was made public through the press in the United States. James Alexander writing on 9 April to a friend commented 'you see the Abolitionists are out upon the Scotchmen for fingering the wages of iniquity [receiving donations] for the Free Church from slaveholders. They will learn a lesson as to the animus of the American anti-slavery men'.[10] Prophetic words for the next year or two in Scotland. But in the meantime two members of the delegation, William Cunningham and Robert Ferguson, were preparing to return home to report to the first General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. They had no intention of addressing the issue of slavery, still less to recommend the return of any money gathered during their stay.