

(William Ellery Channing and his position on slavery)

Channing was a major voice for American Unitarianism in the early and mid-19th century. He served as the minister of the prestigious Federal Street Church in Boston from 1803 to 1842. Throughout his career, Channing's sermons explored the relationship between humanity and the divine, put forth Jesus as a great moral teacher, and rejected the Trinity as non-biblical. As a result of both his stirring sermons and commitment to pastoral care, Channing's congregation grew significantly during his ministry.

In his youth, Channing had been exposed to the institution of slavery while he worked as a tutor for a slave owning family in Virginia. What he saw sickened him. It also led him to conclude that slaveholders were as much damaged by the institution as the slaves.

However Channing was slow to speak out against slavery. His position among the Boston elite and the marginalization he knew he would face if he spoke out led him to proceed cautiously. In 1825, when he finally began to put forth an anti-slavery position, he made it clear that while he was against slavery, he was also opposed to the radical rhetoric of the abolitionists.

Because the Federal Street Church membership included many of Boston's most powerful industrialists, who did not approve of Channing's anti-slavery position, Channing for the most part did not speak publicly on the matter. Conversations with the abolitionist and author Lydia Maria Child and with Unitarian minister Samuel J. May, both friends of Channing, caused him to change his course. In 1835, Channing published the book *Slavery* and began to advocate publicly for the gradual abolition of slavery.

This view met strong disapproval from the powerful Bostonians in Channing's congregation. The matter came to a head in 1840 when abolitionist Charles Follen, a close friend of Channing, died. Channing preached a powerful sermon following Follen's death, and was then asked by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society if a memorial service could be held at his church. When the congregation's Standing Committee rejected Channing's request to hold the memorial service at Federal Street Church, Channing essentially resigned as the congregation's minister.