

*Free Grace, Free Books, Free Riders:
The Economics of Religious Publishing in
Early Nineteenth-Century America*

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A FEW YEARS AGO I gave a lecture that opened with what I hoped would be a helpfully dichotomous proposition: Selling books is one thing; giving them away is quite another. My subject was religious publishing in antebellum America, especially the work of the American Tract Society. I argued that because the leaders of the Tract Society hoped to extend their message to everyone in America, regardless of ability to pay, they were unable to depend upon a market/price system to deliver their wares. To move their product outside the commercial market, even against that market, the American Tract Society gradually built a national organization that relied on management—i.e., organization, communication, and supervision—rather than upon the invisible hand of the marketplace—i.e., prices, discounts, and commissions. The mission to *give* rather than to *sell* drove the American Tract Society to become an innovator in the methods

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of modern business management, what the economic historian Alfred Chandler has called the 'visible hand' of administration.¹

Dichotomies, of course, radically simplify the messy complexity of history. That is why they are good for thinking (and good for lectures). But because they inevitably *oversimplify*, they offer easy access to critics—so easy, in fact, that I can't resist playing the critic myself and questioning my own dichotomy, giving vs. selling. Why focus so much on *giving* away tracts and books? I hear my inner critic ask. After all, most religious publishers gave away only some of their books; they sold most of them. Even when they worked against the commercial market, even when they sought to reach everyone regardless of ability to pay, they still sold more books than they gave away. Is this not important for understanding the business practices of religious publishers in the early nineteenth century? What do you say to that, Mister Wiggins Lecturer?

Tough critic. Good questions, too. And my reply is, yes, selling is important, and so is giving. It was not pure giving or pure selling, but the mixture of giving and selling in the same operation that characterized the practice of the large religious publishing organizations in early nineteenth-century America. And this is important, indeed, for it is in the management of that mixture that the economics of religious publishing is revealed.

Some organizations did not mix the two very much. Some small tract societies were givers only, while some denominational book publishers were sellers only, wholesaling their wares to their own preachers, churches, and schools. With some exceptions, they left the distribution of their material—whether via giving or selling—to others. But the largest religious publishers imagined universal circulation of their materials (genuine *mass media*), and for those publishers distribution could not be left to others or to

1. David Paul Nord, 'Systematic Benevolence: Religious Publishing and the Marketplace in Early Nineteenth-Century America,' in *Communications and Change in American Religious History*, ed. by Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 239-69. See also Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

chance. It required management, including a managed mixture of giving and selling. This could mean a simple distinction between what was given (small tracts) and what was sold (books). Or it could mean that books ordinarily were sold but were sometimes given away through special programs. It also could mean a more sophisticated marketing strategy, a strategy that economists call *differential pricing*. This was the strategy that several of the national publishing societies pursued in early nineteenth-century America. The idea was neither to sell books at a fixed price nor to give them away, but to sell them at a variable price, a price that each individual buyer was able and willing to pay *all the way down to zero*. That last phrase is crucial, for, on the one hand, setting a price at any level above zero would exclude some buyers: those who would be willing to pay less or to receive the product for free. And any number excluded is too many, if the goal is universal circulation. On the other hand, setting the price at zero, though splendid for universal circulation, would be unnecessarily inefficient, for it would subsidize those buyers who could pay and would be willing to pay. For a commercial business to produce and sell at a price of zero or at any price below the marginal cost (the cost of the last unit produced and sold) would be irrational. But for a religious publisher whose goal is not profit but universal circulation, selling at a price that falls to zero is not irrational; it is simply charity.

I hasten to add that the money men who managed the religious publishing societies were at least as rational as they were charitable. Like all sharp businessmen, they aimed to stretch their resources to the limit. The goal was universal circulation, but within the constraints of that goal they strived for production at the lowest possible cost and distribution at the highest possible revenue. Clearly, differential pricing, if it can be done, will produce universal circulation with maximum revenue and therefore least net loss. If most prices are at cost or below, all the way down to zero, there will be losses, and losses must be covered by subsidies, or, to use the philanthropic term, charitable donations. But

the smaller the losses, the smaller the subsidy, and thus the larger the circulation. That is the goal of differential pricing in charity book publishing.

In practice, low cost via high volume turned out to be a manageable task. It is this cost/production side of the business that led the large societies to adopt centralized, highly capitalized, high-tech printing operations early in the century. This is the story that has often been told by historians, including me.² On the other hand, the achievement of maximum revenue in a way consistent with universal circulation turned out to be more difficult. It is this revenue/distribution side that kept the societies so long wedded to a fragmented and frustrating localism that seems to us (and often seemed to them) inconsistent with their efforts to build modern national business enterprises. Some historians—including me—have portrayed the national/local schizophrenia of these societies as a story of historical change, as a movement from localism to nationalism over time.³ In a sense, that is true. The national societies did gradually extend the visible hand of administration down to the local level. But local decision-making had its economic virtue, and its long retention was not a matter of mere organizational inertia. I would now argue that nationalized production and localized distribution were two sides of the same economic coin, two simultaneous strategies within a single enterprise driven by the logic of differential pricing.

It is this two-tiered economic structure in large-scale religious publishing that is my subject. I will concentrate on the charity

2. David Paul Nord, 'The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835,' *Journalism Monographs*, no. 88 (May 1984); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17-18; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 141-45; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 277-78; and Paul Charles Gutjahr, 'Batling for the Book: The Americanization of the Bible in the Publishing Marketplace, 1777-1860' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1996), chap. 2.

3. Nord, 'Systematic Benevolence,' 254-55; Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 62-63, 71. See also Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), chap. 6.

Bible business in the early nineteenth century, with a few comparisons at the end to other large religious publishing societies.

Popping up from time to time in my story will be the role-playing character that economists and sociologists call the 'free rider.' A free rider is simply a consumer of something who gets more than he pays for. The free-rider problem is a central concern in the sociology of organizations. Voluntary organizations, including churches, produce 'collective goods,' but these goods benefit members as individuals. The sociologist Laurence Iannaccone explains what can and often does go wrong: "The problem arises whenever the members of a group receive benefits in proportion to their collective, rather than individual, efforts. Because each member benefits whether or not he contributes to the common cause, each has a strong incentive to minimize his own efforts and "free ride" off those of others. If enough members yield to this temptation, the collective activity will surely fail."⁴ The free rider plays a role, however, not just as a member of organizations, but as a consumer of mass media, especially religious publishing. In most ordinary commercial businesses, the free rider is excluded automatically by price. If he doesn't pay, he doesn't get. But in a business based on differential pricing the free-rider problem is endemic, because no one ordinarily wants to pay a high price for something that someone else is getting for less or even for free. Furthermore, in *religious* publishing, free ridership is not necessarily a problem at all, for the free rider may be the chief target of the publishing mission. The person who does not value the message enough to buy it because he has never heard it is just the sort of free rider the evangelical publisher would like to reach, with a free book if necessary.

The cost structure of religious publishing also complicates the free-rider concept. Some components of the publishers' product have no marginal cost; and if a commodity has no marginal cost, then there may be no economic incentive to expend resources to

4. Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'Why Strict Churches Are Strong,' *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (March 1994), 1184.

exclude free riders. The message (the word) is such a commodity. The vessel that carries the word, the book, has a marginal cost, but the word itself does not. Consumption (reading) of a message does not use it up. So, is it good business to exclude free-riding readers? It may be, if that is the only way to force anyone to pay. But sometimes it may not be worth the effort. The fact that publishers allow libraries to exist or that some computer applications are distributed as shareware suggests as much. Furthermore, the chief product of evangelical religion, the grace of God, has no cost at all. It is, as the apostle Paul liked to put it, abundant and free. (Even the strictest Calvinist in the early nineteenth century did not suppose that grace was a scarce commodity in the economic sense.) These products are what economists call 'public goods,' goods that have no cost at the margin because they are not used up when consumed. With such goods, if free riders don't add to costs or diminish revenues, then there is no economic incentive to exclude them.

Indeed, there may be compelling reasons to include free riders, even if they don't want to be included. This is dramatically true in religion and religious publishing, for the distributors of these goods reckon their utility (their use to the consumer) to be valuable beyond price. That utility is nothing less than salvation and eternal life. Yet the consumer may not recognize that value at all. He may even scorn it. Such a striking difference in the valuation of utility means that the consumer will surely buy far less of the product than someone else thinks is good for him. This is the prescription for subsidy. And subsidy, in this sense, is what religious evangelism—including religious publishing—is all about.

So, we have differential pricing, free riders, cost and utility, and subsidy: religious publishing generates such a fascinating collection of economic themes because it involves both the economics of religion and the economics of media, two of the most interesting subjects of contemporary economic analysis.⁵ But I've floated

5. On media economics, see Alison Alexander, James Owers, and Rod Carveth, eds.,

enough abstractions here at the outset. It is time for some historical substance to draw these ethereal themes down to earth. It is in the actual work of religious publishing that these themes are revealed and made flesh.

Let us consider the evolution of charity Bible work in the United States. In the decades after the end of the War of 1812, the distribution of Bibles as a form of evangelism came to be dominated by the American Bible Society. This national organization was founded in 1816 in New York City, and it grew into one of the largest publishing houses in the country by the 1830s. But the American Bible Society was not something new under the sun. It was patterned after the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804. More important, the American Bible Society was born into an America that already had more than 100 local and state Bible societies.⁶ Though the ABS styled itself the 'parent society' in American Bible work, it was really as much child as parent. The relationship between the national society and the re-

Media Economics: Theory and Practice (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993); Robert G. Picard, *Media Economics: Concepts and Issues* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1989); and John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994). On religion economics, see R. Stephen Warner, 'Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,' *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (March 1993), 1044-93; Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995), 76-89; Steve Bruce, 'Religion and Rational Choice: A Critique of Economic Explanations of Religious Behavior,' *Sociology of Religion*, 54 (1993), 193-205; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), chap. 7.

6. [William Jay,] *A Memoir on the Subject of a General Bible Society for the United States of America* (New Jersey: n.p., 1816), 6. For overviews of the pre-1816 Bible societies, see Eric M. North, 'The Bible Society Movement Reaches America,' ABS Historical Essay, no. 7, part 1 (New York: American Bible Society, 1963); Eric M. North, 'The Bible Societies Founded in 1809 in the United States,' ABS Historical Essay, no. 7, part 2 (New York: American Bible Society, 1963); and Rebecca Bromley, 'The Spread of the Bible Societies, 1810-1816,' ABS Historical Essay, no. 8, parts 1 & 2 (New York: American Bible Society, 1963). On the context of charity Bible work, see Conrad Edick Wright, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992). On the British and Foreign Bible Society, see Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

gional societies that became its auxiliaries not only shaped much of the history of the ABS in the nineteenth century, but the work of these local societies before 1816 laid a foundation for the economic arrangements that continued to undergird Bible work through the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

The earliest Bible societies in America were book-giving charities. They acquired books from commercial publishers to give to the 'destitute,' a term they used to mean lack of scripture and usually lack of money as well. The first Bible society in America was organized in Philadelphia in 1808. The opening sentence of its constitution made its charitable mission clear. That mission was 'the distribution of [the Bible] among persons who are unable or not disposed to purchase it.' In an address to the public in 1809, the organizers of the Philadelphia Society declared that 'it is the intention of the Society to offer the Bibles which they disperse, as the sacred treasure which they contain is offered, "without money and without price."⁷ This phrase, from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verse 1, is one of the many wonderful passages in the Bible that use commercial metaphors, in this case a metaphor of price to suggest pricelessness. It became a favorite of the American Bible movement. 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.'

The efforts of the Philadelphia Society to carry out its charitable mission were at first simple and unsystematic. They raised money through local membership subscriptions; they bought Bibles and New Testaments (mainly from Mathew Carey, the leading publisher of Bibles in the United States at that time); and then they gave them to the poor folk of Philadelphia and vicinity. They also sent copies off to distant lands with missionaries, travellers, and pious sea captains. This was standard charity. But in

7. *An Address of the Bible Society Established at Philadelphia to the Public: To Which is Subjoined the Constitution of Said Society and the Names of the Managers* (Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerer, 1809), 10, 22. On a similar effort elsewhere, see 'Address to the Public, the Massachusetts Bible Society,' in *The Panoplist* (June 1809).

their first door-to-door canvasses the managers of the Society were stunned by the magnitude of the problem they faced:

The deficiency of Bibles has been found to be much greater than was expected; and it is believed to be as great in many other places. The number of families and individuals, who are destitute of a copy of the Scriptures is so great, that the whole of the funds in the possession of the Society, could be profitably expended in supplying the wants of this city alone; and the opportunities of distributing them in other places are so numerous, that if their funds were tenfold as great as they are, they would still be inadequate to satisfy the demand.⁸

With this grim scene looming before them, the managers of the Philadelphia Bible Society made a fateful decision. They would become publishers as well as distributors of the Bible. And they would become capitalists, sinking all of their meager resources into one of the newest and most capital-intensive of printing technologies: stereotype plates.

In Philadelphia in 1809 this was a daring and visionary plan. Stereotype printing was a new process even in England, where Cambridge University Press had just a few years before begun to adapt it to Bible printing. In stereotypography, a plaster-of-paris mold was made of a page form of movable type, and in that mold a solid metal plate was cast. After each mold was made, the types could be redistributed and used again. In this way, a set of printing plates for an entire book could be made and then used, stored, and used again without the expense of keeping movable type 'standing' or of resetting type for each new edition. Stereotype plates were especially well suited to the printing of steady-selling books in many editions over time—books such as the Bible.⁹

But stereotype plates were expensive. The first set of plates that

8. Bible Society of Philadelphia, *First Annual Report* (1809), 4, 8–9.

9. Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, 77–79. On the stereotype process, see George A. Kubler, *A New History of Stereotyping* (New York: Little & Ives, 1941); and George A. Kubler, *Historical Treatises, Abstracts, and Papers on Stereotyping* (New York: Brooklyn Eagle Press, 1936). Two very early pamphlets on the process have been reprinted. See Charles Brightly, *The Method of Founding Stereotype*, and Thomas Hodgson, *An Essay on the Origin and Progress of Stereotype Printing* (New York: Garland, 1982). Brightly's pamphlet was originally published in 1809; Hodgson's in 1822.

the Philadelphia Society ordered from England cost about \$3,500, an enormous sum for the fledgling publishers. The managers of the Society were wary but resolute:

When they considered that the possession of a set of such plates would enable them to multiply copies of the Bible at the lowest expense, and thus render their funds more extensively useful; and still more when they reflected that it would put it in their power to give greater effect to the operations of other Bible Societies, which are springing up daily in every part of the country, the Managers did not hesitate to order the plates to be procured and forwarded from London as soon as possible. The expense is indeed great, when compared with the fund at their disposal; but they were willing to believe, that the obvious and high importance of the measure could not fail to draw from the public liberality a sum sufficient to counterbalance the heavy draught.¹⁰

This statement suggests the economic implications of stereotype printing. Even though the Society would continue to contract out its printing, it would henceforth be a publisher of Bibles as well as a buyer and distributor of them. And to derive the full economies of scale from its heavy capital investment in plates, the Society would have to become a *large* publisher, serving other societies' needs as well as its own.¹¹

In other words, the Philadelphia Society would have to *sell*

10. Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Second Annual Report* (1810), 10-11; Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Third Annual Report* (1811), 7. The plates arrived in October 1812 and were turned over to the Philadelphia printer William Fry, who immediately struck off an edition of 1,250 copies, the first stereotyped Bible in America. By 1816 the Philadelphia Society had printed more than 55,000 Bibles and New Testaments from several sets of plates. See Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Fifth Annual Report* (1813), 9; Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Eighth Annual Report* (1816), 3-4. See also Margaret T. Hills, *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of Editions of the Bible and the New Testament Published in America 1777-1957* (New York: American Bible Society and New York Public Library, 1961), 37.

11. In the Philadelphia book trade in this era, the role of the publisher was splitting away from the role of the printer. See Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). In Bible work, this distinction existed as well, but the long-term trend was in the opposite direction; printer and publisher were coming together. From the beginning, Bible societies owned their own plates. Later they owned their own presses, even though their printers worked as independent contractors. In 1845 the American Bible Society took over its own printing; in 1848 its own binding; and in 1851 its own stereotype plate founding.

Bibles. This was a problem, for the constitution of the Society seemed to contemplate only free distribution. One way of solving the problem was to deny that it existed, at least at the wholesale level. The managers took for granted that they could sell at cost to other Bible societies. They were less certain that they could sell to outsiders at a profit. After some creative soul searching, they decided that they could, as long as profits were plowed back into the charitable enterprise. Their reasoning was ingenious, and it nicely reveals the seductive power of economies of scale in stereotype printing:

The copies of the sacred scriptures, from your press, it is expected, from the excellence and beauty of the type, will be much superior to those which are generally in our market; and the managers have, at several meetings, deliberated on the question, Whether it be their duty to use the means which Providence has put in their hands for increasing your funds (all of which must be expended in a gratuitous distribution of the sacred volume) by selling, at a moderate gain, to other persons, as well as to Bible societies, who may prefer their copies, and send orders. After mature consideration of this question, they have resolved, that . . . it is both their duty and their interest, to supply any orders that may be sent to them for Bibles.

From the start of stereotype printing, then, economic logic prevailed over constitutional scruple and over the traditions of charity. Indeed, of the very first stereotype edition of the Bible in America in 1812, 250 copies of 1,250 printed 'were on finer paper and for sale.'¹² Happily, duty and interest could be made to coincide.

Still, most of the new stereotyped Bibles were intended for *free* distribution. But here, too, the economies of scale in stereotype printing encouraged (even forced) the managers to expand their own work dramatically. How they planned to do this was outlined in a pamphlet widely circulated in 1810, shortly after they had decided to invest in stereotype plates. To raise money to pay for the plates and to set up a delivery system for the flood of Bibles that

12. Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Fifth Annual Report* (1813), 11-12; Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Sixth Annual Report* (1814), 13; Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Fourth Annual Report* (1812), 7.

would soon flow from them, the Society announced a plan to establish 'a little Bible Society in every congregation of Pennsylvania.' These congregational groups would collect donations and seek members for the Bible Society in Philadelphia. In return, they would 'be allowed to demand Bibles from the managers of the Society, at first cost, and to the full amount of the contributions made;—the Bibles to be distributed as a free gift, by the congregations, or by their agents, to the poor of their own neighbourhood, or to whomsoever else they may choose.' Though the Philadelphia Society would become a publisher and wholesale bookseller, the work of the auxiliary societies must remain pure charity. 'Let it be remembered,' the managers declared, 'that the sole object to which this money is to be applied—the sole object to which by our charter we can apply it—is the purchase and printing of the Bible, to be ultimately bestowed as a free gift.'¹³

Thus, as the production side of Bible work became more centralized, the distribution side became more localized. The central Society increasingly needed local auxiliaries, for two reasons. First, their large capital requirements now forced them to seek funds far beyond the city of Philadelphia, where they were beginning to tap out local largess. As the managers admitted, 'Those individuals among ourselves who could reasonably be expected to make donations of important sums, have mostly made them; and the contribution of five dollars, paid by each individual who becomes a regular member of the Society, and which can be demanded but once, has likewise been received.'¹⁴ They needed new money and therefore new people to get it. Second, they needed local organization in the hinterland to do the distribution.

13. *An Address of the Bible Society of Philadelphia to the Friends of Revealed Truth in the State of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerer, 1810), 6, 8–9. This system was different from the one developed by the British and Foreign Bible Society. In England auxiliaries were expected to sell Bibles, not to give them away; and they received Bibles in exchange for only one-half of their contributions to the parent society. The rest of the money was used by the parent society to fund translation and foreign work. From the beginning the Bible society movement in England was much more commercial and centrally controlled than it was in the United States. See Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, 42–43, 50–51.

14. *Address of the Bible Society of Philadelphia to the Friends of Revealed Truth*, 4.

Lacking the invisible hand of a price system to allocate the books, a conscious human choice—to give or not to give—had to be made. Only local people knew the local scene well enough to distinguish between the pious poor and the ‘impostor’—or, as I have called him, the free rider.

As distribution moved beyond their own participation and control, the managers in Philadelphia became more concerned about free riders. They directed the little Bible societies to make ‘the most particular inquiries . . . into the character of those who should apply for bibles. . . . The best endeavours should be used, before a book was bestowed, to ascertain that it was likely to be applied to its proper use. . . . All proper means should certainly be devised and employed, to prevent impositions and to detect impostors.’ At the same time, the Philadelphia managers cautioned Bible distributors not to exclude worthy free riders (the pious poor) or even to worry too much about seemingly unworthy free riders (impostors), for even they might benefit mightily in the end. As the managers put it,

Care, indeed, must be taken not to discourage, but rather to invite applications, from those who need, and who will duly prize the gift of a bible; . . . though the guilt of the frauds contemplated admits of no palliation, yet the favourers of this charity ought to be less influenced by the apprehension of them, than perhaps in any other concern; for though a bible may be improperly obtained, yet ‘wherever it shall be found, it will be a bible still; and it may teach the knave to be honest, the drunkard to be sober, and the profane to be pious.’¹⁵

By 1816, then, on the eve of the founding of the American Bible Society, the economic arrangements of charity Bible work were largely in place in Philadelphia.¹⁶ In less than a decade, the

15. Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Third Annual Report* (1811), 4.

16. A similar story might be told about the New York Bible Society, the only other state society that took up stereotype printing before 1816. On the New York society, see David J. Fant, *The Bible in New York: The Romance of Scripture Distribution in a World Metropolis from 1809 to 1948* (New York: American Bible Society, 1948); and Margaret M. McGuinness, ‘The Relationship Between the American Bible Society and the New York Bible Society, 1816–1987,’ ABS Historical Working Paper Series, no. 1990–3 (New York: American Bible Society, 1990).

Philadelphia Society had evolved from a local charity, passing out free books, to a substantial publisher and high-tech printer. At the same time, it had become the 'parent society' of a far-flung network of local societies. These two developments were inseparable. The Philadelphia Society required a multitude of local organizations precisely because it had become centralized and highly capitalized. After 1812, when it launched its stereotype printing enterprise, the Society needed to *sell* Bibles as well as *give* them; indeed, it needed to sell them in order to give them. Large revenues were needed to achieve the economies of scale required to lower the costs sufficiently to give Bibles away. That, of course, was the ultimate goal. The stereotype plates *and* the little societies made it possible.

As the Philadelphia Society experimented with ways to achieve both economy in production and efficiency in charity distribution they gradually adopted the rudiments of differential pricing. Essentially, they had four prices: (1) a premium price for trade Bibles on fine paper; (2) a price modestly above cost for regular Bibles sold to outsiders; (3) a 'first cost' price for Bibles sold to other societies and auxiliaries; and (4) a zero price for Bibles given to destitute persons, through the Philadelphia headquarters directly or through the little societies. Though the economic pressures to sell were great, the Philadelphia Society remained true to the traditional belief that charity meant ultimately giving, not selling. This fundamental principle, however, was already gradually eroding. It would erode still further in the era of the American Bible Society, which came upon the scene in 1816.

The founders of the American Bible Society hoped to adapt the techniques pioneered by the Philadelphia Society to a new scale of enterprise: the nation. Some Bible men doubted that it could be done, and chief among the doubters were the managers of the Philadelphia Bible Society. The Philadelphians—and others, too—believed that the new society would be too large, too centralized, and that it would sap the vitality of the state and local orga-

nizations.¹⁷ The ABS founders believed otherwise. They professed a simple organizational faith: 'Concentrated action is powerful action.' And they proposed to concentrate everything: capital, technology, information, and organization. The headquarters would be in 'the London of America,' as one founder called it: New York City.¹⁸

The concentration of capital and technology worked out well, even better than the founders had imagined. By 1816 it was already obvious that large-scale stereotype printing was the key to low-cost Bible production; and the first order of business for the new board of managers was not to acquire Bibles but to acquire stereotype plates. In August 1816 the managers contracted to buy six sets of plates, three in octavo and three in duodecimo. But even these ardent centralizers did not propose to concentrate all these plates in New York. They feared the country was too large for that. Instead, they imagined a network of several regional printing centers. In late 1816 the managers voted to send plates to Lexington, Kentucky, to serve the trans-Appalachian west. By 1819 the Kentucky Bible Society was printing Bibles for the ABS.¹⁹

Very quickly, however, the Kentucky experiment proved to the New York board that branch printing was a mistake. Western paper was expensive and poorly made; presswork was sloppy; bindings were inferior. An ABS committee reported that suitable materials and skilled workmen were not available in Lexington, and,

17. The debate within the Bible movement over the founding of the ABS is described in Eric M. North, 'The Pressure toward a National Bible Society, 1808-1816,' *ABS Historical Essay*, no. 9 (New York: American Bible Society, 1963), 46-76.

18. *Constitution of the American Bible Society . . . Together with Their Address to the People of the United States* (New York: G. F. Hopkins, 1816), 16. See also Elias Boudinot, *An Answer to the Objections of the Managers of the Philadelphia Bible-Society, Against a Meeting of Delegates from the Bible Societies in the Union* (Burlington, N.J.: David Allinson, [1815]); [Samuel Mills,] 'Plan of a General Bible Society,' *The Panoplist* (October 1813); and [Jay,] *Memoir*.

19. American Bible Society, Minutes of the Board of Managers, Aug. 7, 1816, and Dec. 4, 1816, in American Bible Society archives, New York; American Bible Society, *First Annual Report* (1817), 10, 21; American Bible Society, *Second Annual Report* (1818), 11-12; American Bible Society, *Third Annual Report* (1819), 10. See also Hills, *The English Bible in America*, 60.

in any case, the society there had neither the funds nor the demand to keep the plates efficiently employed. 'The Committee . . . feel confident,' they wrote in 1819, 'that the Auxiliary Societies in the Western Country would be more satisfactorily supplied with Bibles from the Depository in New York, notwithstanding the expenses of freight and transportation.' The New York board decided to keep the Kentucky plant going for a few more years, because of the currency crisis that had followed the Panic of 1819. (For several years, western money was virtually worthless in New York, and western Bible societies begged to be allowed to spend their bouncing banknotes in Lexington.) But, except for currency exchange, regional printing had few advantages, and the first branch was the last.²⁰ Moreover, with the advent of steam-powered printing presses and machine-made paper in the 1820s, the concentration of *all* Bible manufacturing in one place, New York, seemed ever more efficient, even providential. By the end of the 1820s, the American Bible Society's New York operation was one of the largest publishing houses in the country, virtually monopolizing the production of inexpensive Bibles in the United States.²¹

To power this enormous centralized publishing operation, the American Bible Society, like the Philadelphia Society before it, needed a decentralized network of local societies. As one of the founders of the Society, James Milnor, put it in the late 1820s: 'The machinery of a mill may be mechanically perfect in all its parts, but not a wheel will move without the impetus of water. And so those stereotype plates, giving so much facility to the art of printing, and those power-presses, multiplying with such unexampled rapidity impressions of the sacred pages, to produce their expected results, must be supplied, and for these means, the occupants of these plates and presses must be dependent on their Auxiliaries.'²²

20. American Bible Society, Minutes of the Board of Managers, July 15, 1819, Nov. 18, 1819, and Feb. 1, 1821; American Bible Society, *Fourth Annual Report* (1820), 8.

21. Nord, 'Evangelical Origins,' 10-14, 18; Gutjahr, 'Batling for the Book,' chap. 2.

22. James Milnor, speech text, in *Monthly Extracts of the American Bible Society*, no. 17 (May 1829), 239.

The American Bible Society was dependent upon its auxiliaries because it was a charity publisher. Like the Philadelphia Society, the ABS needed to sell books in order to give books away. Eventually, the ABS travelled farther down the road to selling than the Philadelphia Society had dared to go. To achieve real efficiency in charity publishing on a grand scale, the American Bible Society needed to develop a full-blown system of differential pricing. And the managers believed that only local societies could make that happen.

In the beginning the mission of the ABS was the traditional one in Bible work: 'gratuitous distribution,' to give Bibles away for free. Like the Philadelphia Society, they sold books at cost or even below cost to their auxiliaries, and the auxiliaries distributed them for free to the poor. In 1819, however, the Society changed policy and began to urge auxiliaries to move more into selling, but on a differential price basis. The charitable purpose and economic implications of the new plan are nicely summarized in the Society's annual report for 1821:

The plan recommended by the Managers, of selling Bibles and Testaments at cost or at reduced prices, where persons are able and willing to pay, has been highly approved by all the Auxiliaries from whom accounts have been received; and has been carried into effect, in many instances, with unexpected and very pleasing success. Those who needed Bibles have usually preferred to give something for them; and the process of distribution has not been impeded, if it has not been accelerated, by the measure referred to. The Auxiliaries have found their ability enlarged by it; and they have been enabled to supply more fully the necessity of those who were not possessors of the Sacred Volume, and yet could not, or would not, purchase it. For it should be distinctly understood, that the Managers were very far from designing, by the plan, to diminish the circulation of the Scriptures: they designed rather to add to it. They were satisfied that many persons would gladly become possessors of a Bible by paying the full, or a reduced price, whose feelings of independence revolted from receiving it as the gift of charity. On the plan which the Managers have recommended, the Scriptures are still given freely to the destitute who are without means, or without disposition to pay for them; while

receiving the whole, or a part of the cost from such as are willing to pay, the funds are rendered more availing, and a degree of security is obtained, that the volume which has been purchased will be prized, preserved, and used.²³

This policy of differential pricing was mainly a revenue enhancer. But it also suggests a psychological insight into pricing and utility, especially with a product as spiritual as religion. It is an economic truism that people will pay more for something they value more; but the reverse is often true as well: They will value something more if they have paid more for it. It is a twist on the old saying, 'You get what you pay for.' It may be that in religion that is automatically so.²⁴

The Society's new policy to sell, rather than to give, struck some critics of the Bible Society as confirmation of widespread Jacksonian suspicions—that the Society was a conspiracy of meddling and self-aggrandizing elitists whose aim was 'wealth and power' and 'political privilege,' not charity, as one writer put it in an 1830 pamphlet titled *An Expose of the Rise and Proceedings of the American Bible Society*. This anonymous pamphleteer, probably a disgruntled printer or bookseller, mocked the Society's embrace of the traditional motto of Bible work: 'without money and without price.' The reverse was true, he declared:

The Managers of the Parent Institution, in their Fourth Report [1820], mention the fact of their having sent a Circular to their Auxiliaries, urging them to use their influence and endeavours to *sell*, not to *give*, the 'bread of life.' This they have iterated and reiterated,

23. 'Circular Letter of the Committee on Auxiliary Societies,' in American Bible Society, *Third Annual Report* (1819), 74; American Bible Society, *Fifth Annual Report* (1821), 30; American Bible Society, *Sixth Annual Report* (1822), 32–33. Though the managers sometimes cited the sales policy of the British and Foreign Bible Society as a precedent for their own, it was in fact different. Within Great Britain, the BFBS policy was to sell only, never to give. And the poor who received Bibles were, in a sense, members of centrally administered Bible associations who received their books through small weekly subscriptions. See Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, chap. 2.

24. This idea, put more subtly, is a theme in the recent literature in the economics of religion. The argument is that strict churches do better than lax churches because members value highly what they and other church members have paid a high price to obtain. See Iannaccone, 'Why Strict Churches Are Strong,' 182–83; Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 249–50.

year after year, with a pertinacity worthy of a better cause. The effect of this has been to make almost every pulpit in our churches a stall for the sale of their books, or clerical bookstores of temples of worship; and our pious young men have become travelling peddlers and hawkers, forcing their entrance into families which they had never before seen, and urging them to buy, at reduced prices, the books issued by this 'National Institution.' They district cities, towns, and villages, and scour them, either singly or in squads, seeking purchasers with money, not the indigent without it.

Furthermore, the writer continued, 'the Managers . . . would render nugatory all competition.' By subsidizing the price of Bibles through charitable contributions, they were able to undersell and ruin all commercial competitors.²⁵

This latter judgment is fair enough. The Bible Society did hope to dominate—even to monopolize—the market for cheap Bibles. In that way only could they achieve maximum economies of scale in printing and thus the most efficient use of capital. But it does not follow automatically from this that they were interested in selling *only*. That judgment is unfair. The writer of *An Expose* assumed a false dichotomy between giving and selling: The former was charity; the latter, commerce. The ABS managers believed, on the contrary, that efficient charity required *both* selling and giving. That is, it required differential pricing, with the price falling to zero. And such a price system is what they tried to achieve, as they lectured, nagged, and cajoled their auxiliaries throughout the 1820s.

On the one hand, they regularly pressed the auxiliaries to sell books. (The writer of *An Expose* was certainly right about iteration and reiteration.) In a typical exhortation, they wrote:

The Managers deem it expedient to renew their recommendation to the Auxiliaries to sell the Scriptures at cost or at reduced prices, in

25. *An Expose of the Rise and Proceedings of the American Bible Society, During the Thirteen Years of Its Existence, By a Member* (New York: n.p., 1830), 13–14, 17–18. For a similar critique, focusing mainly on the American Tract Society, see [Herman Hooker,] *An Appeal to the Christian Public, on the Evil and Impolicy of the Church Engaging in Merchandise; Setting Forth the Wrong Done to Booksellers, and the Extravagance, Inutility, and Evil-Working, of Charity Publication Societies* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1849).

preference to distributing them gratuitously. There are some, and even many, cases in which it may be advisable to give a Bible or a Testament without receiving any amount as the price of its purchase; but in general this is found in our country and in other countries not to be the wisest course. Whatever sum may be obtained for a Bible or a Testament, is so much preserved to the funds whence the really needy are to be supplied.

And free riders must be closely scrutinized:

Those who are really unable to pay any thing, should be supplied gratuitously without hesitation: but this is by no means the condition of all who are not possessors of the Scriptures. And as to such as can pay, and will not pay any part of the price of a Bible or a Testament, there certainly is very little reason even to hope that they would use and improve the sacred Book, were it placed into their hands.²⁶

On the other hand, when some overly parsimonious auxiliaries took this as a mandate to grant *no* free books at all, the managers chastised them for being too strict with free riders. 'The principle of the Parent Society seems to have been misapprehended,' they wrote to one offending auxiliary. 'It is designed that the Scriptures shall be furnished gratuitously to those who are truly poor, and will faithfully use them. We would cheerfully *give* in such cases, and trust Providence to furnish means for the future.'²⁷

If the auxiliaries were good, the wide circulation of books through differential pricing seems to have worked. By the late 1820s ten state societies had launched 'general supplies' — that is, distributions of Bibles, through both selling and giving, to everyone in their states.²⁸ For universal circulation to succeed, the little societies at the local level had to make differential pricing work. And throughout the 1820s ABS annual reports and *Extracts* were filled with correspondence from auxiliaries describing their efforts to follow company policy, to sell *and* give simultaneously.

26. American Bible Society, *Seventh Annual Report* (1823), 24; American Bible Society, *Eighth Annual Report* (1824), 28–29.

27. American Bible Society, *Eleventh Annual Report* (1827), 37.

28. American Bible Society, *Thirteenth Annual Report* (1829), 25, 41–42; American Bible Society, *Fourteenth Annual Report* (1830), 89–90.

In a typical report, the officers of the Nassau-Hall Bible Society of New Jersey wrote: 'To some we sold Bibles at reduced prices; and before we gave gratuitously, we were careful to ascertain the inability of the persons to purchase, and their desire to use the Bible aright.' Meanwhile, they resisted the pressures of greedy free riders who 'were displeased because we did not give Bibles to them as well as to their neighbors, who, in their opinion, were not more worthy than themselves.'²⁹ Sorting the good free riders from the bad—the sheep from the goats—was not an easy task, but the energetic auxiliaries struggled to do it.

Not all auxiliaries were energetic, however. Indeed, the most troubling free riders turned out to be neither the unworthy nor the worthy poor, but the third kind, the kind the sociologists worry about, the organizational free rider—in this case, the lax and self-serving members of the auxiliaries themselves. Local societies often used Bibles as lures to membership, and many people, it seems, joined the local societies just to get cheap Bibles for themselves and their families. They paid little attention to the destitute. Some members were selflessly diligent for a while, but only a while. The managers in New York wrote constantly of auxiliaries 'languishing.' In 1824, in a typical lament, they complained that 'some of the auxiliaries were as if in a deep slumber, or slowly wasting away, or in the last feeble struggles of existence, or actually dead and existing only in name.' To boost morale, the New York office sometimes gave struggling auxiliaries free books. But, as with individual grants, this could have an effect opposite of the one intended, inducing 'a spirit of dependence' that seemed further to drain away their zeal.³⁰ Especially troubling, from a business point of view, many auxiliaries failed to pay for the books they had ordered on credit. By 1829 auxiliaries had run up some \$36,000 in unpaid bills, and the exasperated managers in New

29. American Bible Society, *Ninth Annual Report* (1825), 63.

30. American Bible Society, *Fifth Annual Report* (1821), 28; American Bible Society, *Seventh Annual Report* (1823), 11; American Bible Society, *Eighth Annual Report* (1824), 27; American Bible Society, *Thirteenth Annual Report* (1829), 43-44.

York seriously considered dunning them for interest.³¹ Worst of all, in many newly settled parts of the country, there were no auxiliaries of any kind, languishing or otherwise.

To stir up languishing auxiliaries and to spark the creation of new ones, the American Bible Society in the 1820s began to extend its managerial influence down to the local level. They did this through the use of paid agents. The first was Richard D. Hall, appointed in 1821 to work in the South and West. By 1828 the Society had twelve agents in the field. These agents were employees of the central office, and they brought the New York system to the hinterland—i.e., careful organization and record-keeping, financial accounting, communication with the central headquarters, and attention to the policy of differential pricing of Bibles. Certainly, their work had a centralizing tendency to it. That was the point. Yet the New York office made it clear in the agents' instructions that their mission was not to do the distribution work of the Society; it was to prod the auxiliaries to do it.³²

At the end of the 1820s, then, the American Bible Society had in place a system for conducting a charity through both selling and giving. Parts of the system were working well. Production of Bibles was prodigious—in both meanings of that term. With sixteen power presses and twenty hand presses on line at the New York Bible House by 1829, the managers were confident that they could produce enough Bibles to supply everyone in the country. Meanwhile, many state and local auxiliaries were running efficiently and were bubbling with enthusiasm. To many Bible men and women, the times seemed propitious for a great national commitment: the 'general supply' of the entire United States within two years. The New York managers were skeptical. They

31. American Bible Society, Minutes of the Board of Managers, June 18, 1829, and July 3, 1829.

32. American Bible Society, Minutes of the Board of Managers, Nov. 8, 1821; American Bible Society, *Seventh Annual Report* (1823), 20–21, 74; American Bible Society, *Twelfth Annual Report* (1828), 30–31; *An Abstract of the American Bible Society, Containing An Account of Its Principles and Operations* (New York: Daniel Fanshaw, 1830), 18–19, 38; *A Brief Analysis of the System of the American Bible Society, Containing a Full Account of Its Principles and Operations* (New York: Daniel Fanshaw, 1830), 27–30.

knew that many auxiliaries were neither efficient nor enthusiastic. They knew that money and Bible workers were scarce in the West. And they knew that everything would depend on the auxiliaries. Without water, the great mill in New York could not turn. But they agreed to try, and in the summer of 1829 the first great general supply of Bibles to the United States was launched.³³

On the production side, the general supply was a triumph. In the three years 1829–31 the Society's presses churned out more than one million volumes. In a country of fewer than three million households, this was an impressive and unprecedented publication performance.³⁴

But by the spring of 1833 the managers were disappointed. After four years, many remote areas remained entirely unsupplied. Even in areas fully canvassed, the managers said, 'the work was often imperfectly done—many families were overlooked.' Many auxiliaries defaulted on their special pledges for the general supply, and so the national Society was plunged even more deeply into debt to banks and paper suppliers. During the general supply, to help achieve the goal of universal circulation quickly, the Society allowed more free grants than usual, but this relaxed policy led many people who could afford to pay to demand free Bibles (free riders again). This, of course, drove up the cost of the enterprise. Most serious of all, even some of the stronger auxiliaries, which did conduct systematic surveys and careful distributions, could not sustain the effort for long, and 'apathy . . . followed the season of high excitement and great exertion.' In their 1833 report, the managers complained that 'many Auxiliaries which supplied their destitute families two or three years ago have

33. *Address of the Board of Managers of the American Bible Society to the Friends of the Bible of Every Religious Denomination, on the Subject of the Resolution for Supplying All the Destitute Families in the United States with the Bible in the Course of Two Years* (New York: J. Seymour, 1829). For narrative overviews of the general supply, see Creighton Lacy, *The Word Carrying Giant: The Growth of the American Bible Society* (South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1977), chap. 4; and Henry Otis Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), chap. 12.

34. American Bible Society, *Seventeenth Annual Report* (1833), 14. On production data, see Nord, 'Evangelical Origins,' 19.

not ordered a Bible since.' All in all, the managers of the American Bible Society judged the general supply a failure and the auxiliaries largely to blame.³⁵

Not surprisingly, after 1829 the Society experimented with strategies for improving the auxiliaries and for distributing Bibles outside the auxiliary system. They added more agents and new schemes for selling Bibles and raising revenue in ways more directly under the control of the New York office. In 1847, for example, the managers greatly enlarged their agents' authority to stockpile books and to sell them for cash to all comers. In many ways, paid agents became increasingly important to the work of the national organization. By the mid-1850s the Bible Society had county agents as well as general agents. These men were employed by auxiliaries but directed by New York. The *Bible Agent's Manual* of 1856 laid out a system vastly more centralized and businesslike than the system of 1829. Even the lowly county agent had fifteen different kinds of official documents and forms to juggle and, in many cases, to fill out and post to New York. When the Society decided to mount a second general supply in 1856, agents would play a much larger role than they had played in 1829, including a role in organizing distribution. The Society was determined not to repeat the failures of 1829. The managers admonished their agents and their auxiliaries that 'by whatever means the intended result must be reached.' If that meant that men must be hired and paid to distribute Bibles, so be it.³⁶

And yet the managers still stuck with the auxiliary system. They

35. *Monthly Extracts of the American Bible Society*, no. 26 (March 1830), 325; American Bible Society, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (1831), 6-7, 17-18; American Bible Society, *Seventeenth Annual Report* (1833), 16-17; American Bible Society, Minutes of the Board of Managers, June 18, 1829, and July 3, 1829; American Bible Society, *Twenty-fourth Annual Report* (1840), 25-26.

36. American Bible Society, *Thirty-First Annual Report* (1847), 37; American Bible Society, *Forty-Third Annual Report* (1859), 33-35; *Address of the Managers of the American Bible Society, to Its Auxiliaries, Members, and Friends, in Regard to a General Supply of the United States with the Sacred Scriptures* (New York: American Bible Society, 1856), 8-10; *The Bible Agent's Manual* (New York: American Bible Society, 1856), 4-8. See also Wosh, *Spreading the Word*, 70-71, 176-77; and Mary F. Cordato, 'The Relationship of the American Bible Society to Its Auxiliaries: A Historical Timeline Study,' ABS Historical Working Paper Series, no. 1991-1 (New York: American Bible Society, 1991).

remained devoted to the local voluntary association. Only local societies were equipped to sell and to give efficiently, they believed. The agent's main task was still to serve the auxiliaries, not to supplant them. And the more local, the better, the *Agent's Manual* declared:

The people feel that these local Societies, organized in their own neighborhoods, with their officers selected from among them, their annual meetings held in their midst, and of which all are invited to become members, are their *own*, and hence manifest much more interest in sustaining them than they would a mere county organization, having its head quarters at a distance, controlled by men with whom they are unacquainted, and the annual meetings of which they seldom or never attend.³⁷

The American Bible Society was the model for other national associations that defined their mission as the universal circulation of religious publications. The two most prominent were the American Sunday School Union (founded 1824) and the American Tract Society (founded 1825). Like the ABS, both of these societies became major publishers through investment in stereotype printing. The mission of the Sunday School Union was to found Sunday schools, but also to supply them with children's books and periodicals. The mission of the Tract Society was to distribute small tracts and religious books. Both concentrated their printing work (ASSU in Philadelphia; ATS in New York), and in the 1820s and '30s both followed the pattern of the Bible Society in distributing their books through local auxiliaries.³⁸

Like the ABS, the Sunday School Union and the Tract Society believed that the most efficient strategy for universal circulation was differential pricing. In its own version of a general supply in 1830, the Sunday School Union launched the Mississippi Valley Project, an effort to start Sunday schools (with libraries) in every

37. *Bible Agent's Manual*, 1.

38. For general overviews of the work of these societies, see Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Nord, 'Evangelical Origins'; and Nord, 'Systematic Benevolence.'

community in the West in two years. To accomplish this great work, they proposed to sell books at cost and to provide them at reduced rates or for free where needed.³⁹ In 1834 the Tract Society launched a similar effort in the South and West, called the Volume Enterprise, whose aim was to place at least one religious book into every household. Here, too, the strategy was differential pricing:

It is most clear, that the tremendous influence of the public press in our country *may not be left* solely to the operation and influence of sales for the purposes of gain. The most valuable books must be *prepared in an attractive style*, and *furnished at cost, or less than cost*, and Christian efforts must be put forth all over the land to *place them in the hands of people*—by sale, if it can be done—gratuitously, if it cannot. . . . To every donor to the Society there is also this encouragement, that as the volumes are chiefly *sold*, the amount of each donation returns with every sale; is sent out again, and again returns; and thus continues to revolve, and may, and probably will revolve long after the benevolent donor shall be sleeping in dust.⁴⁰

Also like the ABS, these societies grew frustrated with their auxiliaries. Though it had an extensive network of auxiliaries by 1830, the Sunday School Union turned increasingly to the employment of paid agents and missionaries during the Mississippi Valley Project.⁴¹ The Tract Society moved dramatically in 1841 to sidestep its auxiliaries and to distribute tracts and books through its own paid agents. This was the beginning of a system for which the ATS became famous: colportage.⁴² “Colporteur”

39. American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Annual Report* (1830), 3, 18–19; American Sunday School Union, *Seventh Annual Report* (1831), 30–36; American Sunday School Union, *Eighth Annual Report* (1832), 36–38.

40. American Tract Society, *Eleventh Annual Report* (1836), 41–44. See also *Proposed Circulation of the Standard Evangelical Volumes of the American Tract Society to the Southern Atlantic States* (New York: American Tract Society, 1834).

41. American Sunday School Union, *Seventh Annual Report* (1831), 9, 30–34. See also Boylan, *Sunday School*, 75.

42. For contemporary overviews of ATS colportage, see the special report “Ten Years of Colportage in America,” in American Tract Society, *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report* (1851), 45–72; *The American Colporteur System* (New York: American Tract Society, [1843]), reprinted in facsimile in *The American Tract Society Documents, 1824–1925* (New York: Arno Press, 1972); [R. S. Cook,] *Home Evangelization: View of the Wants and Prospects of Our Country, Based on the Facts and Relations of Colportage* (New York: American Tract Society,

was a term applied to a book distributor who was not a local volunteer but an itinerant who earned his living in the work. For religious publishers in the 1840s and '50s, colportage was a seductive panacea, a way to centralize control of distribution, an apparent solution to the nagging problems of languishing local auxiliaries.

In the weak form of colportage, a religious colporteur was little more than a travelling bookseller, working on commission. Colporteurs for the Baptist Publishing Society and the Methodist Tract Society worked largely on commission, though they sometimes received a modest stipend from the central office. Giving away books was only a minuscule part of their mission.⁴³ And as commission agents, their economic, if not their evangelical, incentive was always to sell, not give, and thus to go where the money was. In the strong form of colportage, on the other hand, the colporteur was a salaried employee, not dependent on sales commissions for income, and therefore free to go to any house, every house, regardless of the potential for sales. The American Tract Society pioneered this form of colportage. By 1851 the ATS had more than 500 colporteurs in the field, all hired, paid, and supervised through the New York headquarters. This was the most centralized, most nationalized, effort by any American religious publisher before the Civil War.⁴⁴

[1849]); R. S. Cook, 'The Colporteur System,' in *Proceedings of a Public Deliberative Meeting of the Board and Friends of the American Tract Society, Held in Broadway Tabernacle, New-York, October 25, 26, and 27, 1842* (New York: American Tract Society, 1843); [Jonathan Cross,] *Five Years in the Alleghenies* (New York: American Tract Society, 1863); and *Toils and Triumphs of Union Missionary Colportage for Twenty-Five Years, by one of the Secretaries of the American Tract Society* (New York: American Tract Society, [1866]).

43. J. Newton Brown, *History of the American Baptist Publication Society, From Its Origin in 1824, to Its Thirty-Second Anniversary in 1856* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, [1856]), 156-57, 170-71; American Baptist Publication Society, *Sixth Annual Report* (1845), 38-39; American Baptist Publication Society, *Seventh Annual Report* (1846), 17-18; Abel Stevens, comp., *Documents of the Tract Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 22; Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journal of the General Conference* (1852), 120, 123; Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journal of the General Conference* (1856), 229.

44. The story of the centralizing mission of colportage is told in Nord, 'Systematic Benevolence.' See also David Paul Nord, 'Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America,' *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Summer 1995), 241-72.

The American Tract Society quickly fell in love with colportage. In the first ten years of the program, ATS colporteurs distributed more than three million books, along with many millions of small tracts. Most of the books were sold, but some 650,000 were given away—about 21 percent of the total.⁴⁵ Impressed by the success of the ATS, other societies took up colportage as well. Only a handful, however, such as the Presbyterian Board of Publication, employed fully salaried colporteurs on the ATS model, and no one before the Civil War fielded as many colporteurs as the American Tract Society.⁴⁶

The strong colportage system—the ATS model—seemed to solve or sidestep several of the free-rider problems that faced religious publishers. Salaried colporteurs who called on everyone, including the destitute, and who had authority to give away books were able to reach the obviously good free rider, the pious poor who merely lacked the money to buy. If giving away books had been the only task, the travelling colporteur, who knocked on every door, would have been the best person to do it. Strong colportage also sidestepped the problem of organizational free riders in the auxiliaries. Colporteurs were employees, not volunteers, and their morale and conduct were dependent upon compensation and supervision flowing from New York. They had their own morale problems, of course, but those problems were different from the free-rider problems of voluntary organizations. The colporteur was not equipped, however, to solve the problem of the bad free rider, the person who sought a free book but who could afford to pay or who received a free book but may have made poor use of it. As an itinerant outsider just passing through the neighborhood, the colporteur was in no position to sort the good free riders from the bad—that is, to administer a full-fledged differential pricing system.

45. 'Ten Years of Colportage in America,' 64–65.

46. On the colportage program of the Presbyterians, see *Instructions for Colporteurs of the Presbyterian Board of Publication* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.); *Presbyterian Board of Publication, Its Present Operations and Plans* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1848]).

Most denominational book and tract societies dealt with this problem by drawing a distinction between what was to be given and what was to be sold. Tracts were to be given; books were to be sold. Always. The colporteur had no price decision to make. ATS and Presbyterian Board colporteurs had authority to give away books, but the subtlety of differential pricing was gradually replaced by a dichotomous sell/give decision. Even so, the question of when to sell and when to give, the crucial economic decision, was not easily made. To simplify the decision process, ATS colporteurs were permitted to give away only certain small, cheap volumes (often Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*). These were the give-away books; the others were to be sold.⁴⁷ ATS colporteurs were supposed to judge the recipients of their books, but it was an impossible assignment. And this system really looked ahead to a simpler style of religious book distribution in which some books are given, some sold, but no attempt is made to sort the good free riders from the bad. Everyone gets a cheap book, no questions asked. That, of course, is the modern style of print-media evangelism, the style that we all routinely run into on the sidewalks of American cities and college campuses.

The American Bible Society, willing to try most anything to get the Bibles distributed to everyone, also adopted colportage. Indeed, after 1869, colporteurs—supervised and paid by New York—became an important part of the ABS system.⁴⁸ But for the Bible Society this change came slowly and reluctantly. Long after the Tract Society had largely given up on its auxiliaries, the Bible Society managers remained steadfast in the belief that an itinerant colporteur could never do what a local society could do. For

47. *Instructions of the Executive Committee of the American Tract Society, to Colporteurs and Agents, With Statements of the History, Character, and Object of the Society* (New York: American Tract Society, 1868), reprinted in *American Tract Society Documents*, 38–41. Nearly identical editions of this handbook were published from the early 1840s into the late nineteenth century. See also [Cook,] *Home Evangelization*, 86–87. On the use of Baxter's *Call* by colporteurs, see *Colporteur Reports to the American Tract Society, 1841–1846* (Newark, N.J.: Historical Records Survey Project, Work Projects Administration, 1940), *passim*.

48. Lacy, *Word Carrying Giant*, 96–100; Dwight, *Centennial History of the American Bible Society*, 180.

more than fifty years, despite deep frustration and incessant complaint, the American Bible Society retained, even sometimes celebrated, the auxiliary system. As late as 1860, the managers declared: 'The Board have by no means lost confidence in the auxiliary system. We believe it to be the only effectual one for carrying the Word of God to every door and every individual in the land. In no other way, we believe, could the Bible be so generally and so effectually distributed. . . . This is not mere theory. It is well sustained by facts.'⁴⁹

My point this evening has been nearly the opposite. The 'facts' weighed heavily against the auxiliary system. Time and time again, the managers of the American Bible Society (and other societies that depended on auxiliaries) were disappointed in practice. But the theory was a good one. From an economic perspective, the Bible Society's strategy was clearly the least-cost route to universal circulation. National concentration of capital and production coupled with distribution through differential pricing was the most efficient way to go. And only local decision-makers could administer a differential price system effectively. Only they could size up a customer's ability and desire to pay; only they could exclude bad free riders while including the good ones; only they could sell and give simultaneously. Of course, the managers recognized the problems that could bedevil the local societies, and they searched for ways to punch up the morale of languishing auxiliaries. But for decades they believed that the economic advantages of the local auxiliary system outweighed these internal organizational problems. It may not have worked out in fact, but the theory was irresistible. In a sense, it might be said that the managers of the American Bible Society were better students of the economics of media and evangelism than the economics of organizations.

Current sociologists of religion, on the other hand, are better

49. American Bible Society, *Forty-Fourth Annual Report* (1860), 21-22.

students of the economics of organizations than of media or evangelism. In their provocative study *The Churching of America*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark make much of the free-rider problem in church organizations. They develop what they call a 'rational choice' model of religious participation, arguing that 'religion is a *collectively produced* commodity,' that individuals gain religious rewards within a shared, communal experience. Free riders consume the group's resources—both material and psychic—without contributing their fair share. This saps the vitality of the church. Since the early nineteenth century, they argue, strict churches in America have been more successful than lax churches because they have devised ways to exclude these organizational free riders. By requiring more sacrifice of their members, strict churches raise the cost of membership, which screens out free riders and thereby raises the average level of participation. Paradoxically, in an organization such as a church raising the cost of participation can produce *more* participation, and therefore more individual satisfaction.⁵⁰

But what about the other kinds of free riders that I have talked about, the free riders in the realms of religious evangelism and religious media? These are not savvy consumers seeking religious utility. They are not seekers at all. They won't buy because they do not value the product. These are the free riders *sought* by evangelism. They are lost sheep, whom the things of this world have led astray; 'rational choice' will not bring them into the fold. Though I am using Biblical imagery here, the religious publishers of the early nineteenth century were just as adept as Finke and Stark at putting the matter into economic terms. In the words of the Presbyterian Board of Publication, 'Religious knowledge is a benefit, of which men less feel the need the less they possess of it. Here the demand does not create a supply, for the demand may not exist, however extreme the necessity. The gospel provides for

50. Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 252–55. See also 'Why Strict Churches Are Strong,' 1182–83.

its own dissemination. It was never contemplated that men would 'seek,' and hence the command is 'to send,' 'to go,' and 'to preach.'⁵¹

And, I would add, to print. Religious evangelism and religious publishing merged easily because their economic natures are the same. Once produced, the word (whether the Gospel or any media message) is free. Like its subject, the grace of God, the word has no cost at the margin. These are 'public goods,' goods that are not used up when consumed. 'One taper kindles many without diminishing its own light.'⁵² The common mission of the evangelist and the publisher in early nineteenth-century America was to deliver the free word as freely as possible. The free rider could be carried at little cost and that cost could be subsidized (indeed, in a latter day, the age of broadcasting, that person could be carried at no cost at all). In organizations—including churches and little Bible societies—the exclusion of free riders through strictness, discipline, and sacrifice may well be needed to achieve strength and vitality. And that is important. But evangelism and mass media move in another economic realm, a realm of infinite abundance. The Bible has passages aplenty to vindicate the purveyors (and the economists) of religious strictness and discipline. But the religious publishers sang a different economic song: 'Freely ye have received, freely give.' 'The Word of the Lord has free course, and is glorified.' 'Yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.'⁵³

51. *Principles and Plans of the Board of Publication of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1854]), 19–20.

52. *Utility of Religious Tracts* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh [1826]), 1.

53. These passages—from Matt. 10:8, II Thes. 3:1, and Is. 55:1—appear from time to time in Bible societies' reports. See, for example, American Bible Society, *Fifth Annual Report* (1821), 13; American Bible Society, *Third Annual Report* (1819), 15; and Bible Society of Philadelphia, *Address of the Bible Society Established at Philadelphia*, 10.

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