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VIRGINIA'S STEWARD: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF
THORNTON STRINGFELLOW 1788-1869

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ABSTRACT

Historians have done a tremendous job at their inquiries into biblical proslavery ideology, even though their focus is primarily on the apologists' arguments in regard to slavery. These historians gave the scholarly world a clear understanding of how and why men defended slavery, but they only focus on their proslavery thought, which creates an incomplete picture of the apologist.

This work focuses on a minister named Thornton Stringfellow who lived in Culpeper, Virginia during the nineteenth century, in the tumultuous time leading up to the American Civil War. By examining Stringfellow's personal background, the historical events that took place during his life, and his lesser-known works, it is clear that Stringfellow should be remembered for much more than his proslavery ideology: he should be remembered as a well-educated man that toiled and labored most of his life fighting for the Christian faith. His primary focus in all of his writings was not slavery or even the events of the time. His primary purpose was to share the love of God through the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even if he believed that purpose could be best accomplished without the abolition of slavery.

By broadening the historians' view of Stringfellow's life and works, a new understanding of Stringfellow is created.

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INTRODUCTION

In a church cemetery near the Chancellorsville National Battlefield sits a worn chalky white tombstone with yellow moss covering the name “Thornton Stringfellow.” Stringfellow was a minister near Culpeper, Virginia who lived in a somewhat chaotic time. With the outbreak of violence and denominational split, it appeared Stringfellow’s society was on the verge of ruin. As a minister of the Gospel, he felt it was necessary to defend slavery as a means to defend his society. He also defended slavery because it seemed that he thought the South, if it were to abolish the peculiar institution before God’s time, would be in a state of turmoil. Therefore, he defended slavery as a way of protecting his community. Stringfellow was not a pastor who just wrote defenses for slavery, but he was a pastor who wrote on several ecclesiastical issues that he felt impacted his congregation.

Considering Stringfellow’s background, historical context, and additional writings, it became clear that his works on slavery do not possess any unusual characteristics. Most of Stringfellow’s books, articles, and pamphlets contain specific characteristics that permeate his writing. His writings on slavery are simply an extension of his pastoral writings. His writings possess the same characteristics and show a pastor concerned for an individual’s spiritual well-being, but several historians only focus on his proslavery thought. The possibility of forming an incomplete interpretation of Stringfellow, by only focusing on proslavery writings, will happen if other factors are not taken into account.

The Method

Focusing on a proslavery minister comes with some challenges and questions. How can scholars look at a proslavery minister without diminishing the fact that he defended slavery, and how can scholars look at a proslavery minister without placing prejudice on this man because he defended slavery? The answers to these questions involve three stages that are recommended to help avoid removal of the fact that a minister defended slavery and to try to remove any prejudice. The first stage is to look at what scholars say about proslavery ministers in the nineteenth century. This process involves a look at a proslavery minister, like Thornton Stringfellow, and learning everything about this man at face value. In other words, the first stage is to look at everything dealing with his proslavery thought and actions.

The second stage is to research everything there is to know about the proslavery minister to become familiar with the man beyond his proslavery thoughts. For example, Stringfellow was a Virginian who defended the slavery using the Bible, but he was also a man who had a family, and he was a minister concerned for the well-being of his community. The second phase will help develop a lucid picture of the individual.

Finally, the consolidation of the first and second stage will lead to the third stage. This third stage will create the clear and un-prejudiced picture of the minister without diminishing the fact he defended slavery. For example, Thornton Stringfellow was a pastor who was concerned for his community and defended slavery due to the chaotic times of the nineteenth century, and by looking at all of Stringfellow's, it is determined that his defense of slavery possessed no unusual characteristics. Therefore, his writing on slavery is better understood as an extension of his pastoral career.

Historiography

Historians cover the area of Stringfellow's defense of slavery and why he defended the peculiar institution, and they do an admirable job, but their picture of this slavery apologist is incomplete. So far historians look at the historical context, but do not consider the other factors of his personal life and additional writings in their coverage of Thornton Stringfellow. These historians paint a picture of Stringfellow as an "apologist," but this picture has a void. Looking at Stringfellow as a pastor will complete the painting and show Stringfellow cared for his flock as a pastor and moral steward and that is why he defended slavery. Stringfellow saw himself as a pastor, and thus it was his role to care for his flock. Therefore, his writings on slavery were an extension of his ministerial career.

Works by Eugene Genovese, Larry Tise, Drew Faust and other scholars dealing with the biblical defense of slavery omit additional writings by Thornton Stringfellow. The main focus of their writing, and understandably so, is on Stringfellow's works defending slavery.

One of the most recent works detailing proslavery thought in the American South is Charles F. Irons' *Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*. Irons' work appeared in 2008 to offer an interpretation on why the South defended an "evil institution." Irons focuses on white evangelicals and their changing opinion toward the African and asserts that white evangelicals shared beliefs and experiences with black Christians, but after 1831, an egalitarian view held by the white evangelical turned into an authoritative view. Irons shows that white evangelicals, like Stringfellow, were Christians, but their role as

Christians who saw the black man as their spiritual equal developed into a role as men who were Christians but defended the manumission of the black man. Irons argues that Stringfellow defended slavery from a racial perspective and not from a pastoral point of view. Stringfellow's work, argues Irons, was a representation of the misconceptions southern ministers held when it came to racial issues in antebellum Virginia.

Irons says that evangelicals like Stringfellow built the toughest defense of slavery and argues that Stringfellow's argument placed missionary work to the slaves at the center of the biblical defense.¹ Irons is correct in arguing that Stringfellow's defense focused on missionary work to the slaves. One of his passions was to spread the Gospel and encourage educational reform among the Christian populace.

Larry Tise gave a historiographical account of proslavery ideology in his work "The Intellectual Appeal of Proslavery Thought." Tise's point of interest is on ministers who possessed proslavery thought and how it represented a body of thought about American society and how a society should be structured. Stringfellow fits well within Tise's argument as a minister who focused on his society. Tise mentions scholars in the field of proslavery ideology like Eugene Genovese and William Jenkins. Tise believes that Jenkins's *Proslavery Thought in the Old South* left the impression that proslavery thought emanated from the South. Tise gives a profile of three generations of slavery defenders. The first generation was men born between 1785 and 1836 in the northern United States and educated in the North. Stringfellow, born in 1788, is an exception to

¹ Charles F. Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1, 2, 13, 214.

Tise's theory, and though he does not mention Stringfellow, Irons gives an accurate portrayal of men like Stringfellow.²

In December 1989, in *Civil War History*, Mitchell Snay published an article that looked at how historians have examined the biblical defense of slavery since the 1970s. Snay declares that proslavery rhetoric conformed to the "moral laws of God."³ This is true of Stringfellow because he believed slavery was a moral issue, and one's spiritual well-being should be a moral concern of godly men. Snay proclaims that the defense of slavery was the self-assurance that their cause was an honorable one. Though he focuses on proslavery ministers who held to this view, Stringfellow disagreed because he never said it was an honorable cause; it was a cause the South did not ask for, but should accept the responsibility.⁴ Finally, Snay states, "To Christians throughout the South, the ideal society was molded around the principles of patriarchy and subordination."⁵ Stringfellow's writing does exhibit a sense of moral stewardship by showing concern for the welfare of all men.

Mark M. Smith's 2001 *The Old South* contains several articles by top scholars in the field of southern history. Smith says the white southerner defended slavery because that institution helped define the freedom of the white southerner and his society.⁶

Included is a work by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese entitled "Slavery

² Larry Tise, "The Intellectual Appeal of Proslavery Thought: An Ideological Profile of the Antebellum American Clergy," in *Proslavery Thought, Ideology and Politics*, ed. Paul Finkelman. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 62-72.

³ Mitchell Snay, "American Thought and Southern Distinctiveness: The Southern Clergy and the Sanctification of Slavery," *Civil War History* 4 (December 1989) 312-13.

⁴ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, May 22, 1856.

⁵ Snay, "American Thought and Southern Distinctiveness," 324.

⁶ Mark M. Smith, ed., *The Old South* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 5.

Ordained of God.”⁷ Although they do not focus on Thornton Stringfellow, they focus on the social order in the South contrasted to the North. Stringfellow, like those the authors focus upon, focused on the social order of his community. They argue that proslavery ministers/Christians observed the North and their bourgeois characteristics and became appalled at the un-Christian nature exhibited there. Southerners looked at their own society and defended it using Christian morals found in the southern United States. The Genoveses argue that proslavery evangelicals shared a zeal for Christian principles in a Christian society where “those principles made God’s will manifest in the legitimate authority that some, as members of specific groups, wielded over others.”⁸

The Genoveses’ article also focuses on the Old School Presbyterian from South Carolina—James Henley Thornwell. Thornwell, considered to be one of the South’s leading theologians, argued that slavery was a system ordained by God. Like Stringfellow, he showed concern for the social stability of the day. The Genoveses argue that proslavery evangelicals wanted to show that the “wage labor” system in the North was the prime example of un-Christian behavior. Stringfellow, in his *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*, argued that the wage laborer is a slave and money is the “master of poverty.” Also, the wage laborer, according to Stringfellow, was in a worse condition than that of the slave in the South.⁹ The authors also show that proslavery Christians in the South were not ignorant men but intelligent men. They point out that these men exhibited concern “with modern developments in science and

⁷ The article was originally published in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 1987.

⁸ Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Slavery Ordained of God,” in *The Old South*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 127, 129, 133.

⁹ Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 128-29.

epistemology, in social, political, and economic theory, and in theology.”¹⁰ Stringfellow fits well within this description given the fact he strongly held to the fact that the Scriptures contained the truths in every issues, even if that issue was slavery.

Like Snay, the Genoveses, in their impressive *Mind of the Master Class*, focus on the social aspects of the defense of slavery. Like their article, this particular work deals with social classes and the condemnation of capitalism by the apologists who worked toward improving their society. The authors describe the problem that occurs when an apologist’s ministerial work is not taken into consideration, and the proslavery work is the only focus. “Our culture’s categorical condemnation of slavery has made it easy for ideologies to demonize the slaveholders, even dismissing them, with breathtaking absurdity, as premature Nazis.”¹¹ The authors argue that slavery was a social issue encompassing the moral values of both the North and the South. They claim the master class pushed for a better world, and defense slavery was the best way possible to achieve a better society and combat the social upheaval that was in the North.¹²

Stringfellow’s work confirms this point, but his additional writings on other issues like baptism and church membership also support the arguments that the Genoveses make. The authors do capture the social turmoil the occurred between northern and southern churches when personal attacks began proslavery and abolitionist ministers. Northern abolitionists condemned southern clergy for proslavery sentiments, and their southern counterparts responded and showed how un-Christian, in their view, the

¹⁰ Genovese, “Slavery Ordained of God,” 128.

¹¹ Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

northern United States appeared to the world.¹³ Though *Mind of the Master Class* is one of the most influential works dealing with proslavery ideology, the focus of evangelicalism and its influence on proslavery ideology is missing from this prominent work. However, the omission of the evangelicalism of the proslavery minister does not take away from a point the Genoveses make. Like in their article “Slavery Ordained of God,” they construct a view that proslavery men were deep thinkers. Among the subjects these thinkers focused upon was the subject of history.¹⁴ Southerners turned to history for instruction, and by Stringfellow’s focus on Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he strengthens their argument that these men were thinkers. The Genoveses argue that Edward Gibbon was used by men like Stringfellow because Gibbon supported the argument that slavery possessed humane characteristics.¹⁵

Like Mark Smith, John McKivigan and Mitchell Snay compiled several essays to make up their *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*. In this work they proclaim that the debate over slavery in the antebellum era developed within a society saturated by evangelical Protestantism. Unlike Smith’s article, McKivigan and Snay focus on the United States and not just the southern states. Both sides—the North and the South—believed it to be important to support their arguments by using the basic source for their Christian faith—the Bible.¹⁶ Among the scholars in this work is Beth Schweiger and her article “The Restructuring of Southern Religion.” Her focus is on the ideological

¹³ Ibid., 411.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 269.

¹⁶ John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 1, 9.

implications of the slavery debate and the social consequences of proslavery Christianity for pastors and their churches. Schweiger states that the slavery debate in the South brought denominational schism that brought changes in the way one experienced church life. By this she means that the slavery debate changed the way southern ministers viewed their own personal identity.¹⁷ For example, Stringfellow's participation in the slavery debate changed the way he saw himself as minister and protector of the moral fabric of his community.

In *When Slavery was Called Freedom*, John Patrick Daily focuses on evangelicalism and its use in the slavery debate in the nineteenth century. Daily's work includes Stringfellow a few times to support his argument that defenses of slavery from an evangelical standpoint furthered racist rhetoric in the antebellum South.¹⁸ Daily's work focuses on evangelicalism and what it meant to be a proslavery evangelical. Daily's view of evangelicalism is more anthropocentric in that he focuses on individualism because southerners in the nineteenth century, he argued, became self-conscious of their white identity.¹⁹ Stringfellow's defense of slavery did not center on his white identity, but that it was a system ordained by God. He saw slavery as divinely ordained and the best possible lot for the African as seen in his *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*.

¹⁷ Beth Barton Schweiger, "The Resurrection of Southern Religion," in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, (Athens: University of Georgia, 1998), 297.

¹⁸ John Patrick Daily, *When Slavery was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2002), 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

On the topic of evangelism, no other published work makes a better attempt at trying to paint a clear picture of Stringfellow than Drew Gilpin Faust's 1977 article "Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument." She says that Thornton Stringfellow demonstrated the evangelical impulse during the slavery debate of the antebellum period and does not miss the connection between Stringfellow's concerns and his role as minister. She reveals the clear characteristic of moral stewardship found in Stringfellow's writings. However, in addition to his role as moral steward, Stringfellow's lesser known writings, which Faust did not address, also reveal the clear image of him as a pastor. By offering a compelling analysis and focusing on Stringfellow's sense of moral stewardship, Faust shows that Stringfellow was an equal to northern reformers because of his evangelical and social anxieties.²⁰ Though Stringfellow's lesser writings do not focus on slavery, they do focus on issues like baptism and Bible distribution that revealed a pastor concerned for the well-being of his community. The questions that must be answered are: why he defended that institution, and was there more to Stringfellow than his proslavery ideology?

These historians' writings do not discredit proslavery Christians for being less than Christian. Modern commentator, John Robbins, on the other hand, in his *Slavery and Christianity* made the claim that those who defended slavery using the Bible either did not understand nor believed the Bible.²¹ Robbins's argument was not the first of its type.

²⁰Drew Gilpin Faust, "Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument: The Reverend Thornton Stringfellow of Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85 (January 1977): 4.

²¹ John W. Robbins, *Slavery and Christianity*. (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2007), 13.

Tracing this argument that proslavery ministers were poor Christians, or not Christians at all, can be linked back to the 1840s.

Charles Finney, in his memoirs, reflected that Southern slaveholders were less than Christians. He recalled a revival that broke out in the northern United States in 1857-58, but because of slavery, said Finney, the revival was shut out from the South. “The people there (the South) were in such a state of irritation, of vexation, and of committal to their peculiar institution, which had come to be assailed of every side, that the Spirit of God seemed to be grieved away from them.”²²

George Jeffrey agreed with Finney’s argument in a lecture where he argued that it was dangerous to hold communion with slaveholders. Jeffrey argued that Christians should avoid communion with slaveholders because of the pollution of slavery slaveholders brought into the sanctuary.²³ He argued that churches should admonish those who supported slavery.²⁴

This argument was not held by every individual who disagreed with the slavery apologist. Albert Barnes, in his *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, took a different approach when he looked at those who supported slavery. Barnes argued for both sides to take less extreme measures and look at what the Scriptures said about slavery. “I ask only the calm and honest reflection of wise and good men for truth. . . .”²⁵

²² Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1876), 444.

²³ George Jeffrey, *Pro-Slavery Character of the American Churches, and the Sin of Holding Christian Communion with Them* (Edinburg: Charles Ziegler, 1847), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1857), 380.

On the opposite end of the spectrum men like James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney disagreed with John Robbins, Charles Finney, and George Jeffrey. Thornwell, a South Carolina educator and theologian, argued that those condemning slavery do not understand the Scriptures. “They then corrupt the Scriptures and are exposed to the malediction of those who trifle with the Divine Testament.”²⁶ He argued for denominations to not break unless a church does not tolerate another church’s liberty. If a church, according to Thornwell, does not respect another church’s liberty—in the case of ownership of slaves—the “disrespecting” church should be censured.²⁷

Robert Lewis Dabney, former chief-of-staff to “Stonewall” Jackson, in his *A Defense of Virginia*, defends slaveholders as Christians by saying Christ applauded slaveholders. Dabney looked at the story of the Centurion of Capernaum (Matt 8:5-13) and his slave to illustrate what he meant that Christ applauded a slaveholder. Dabney argued that since Christ praised the slaveholder for his faith and did not condemn him for being a slaveholder, Christ approved of the institution.²⁸

These historians and scholars gave the scholarly world an interpretation of slavery apologists like Thornton Stringfellow, but their focus alone does not reveal a total picture of the apologist. A look at the Stringfellow’s proslavery thoughts scratches the surface, because there was more to Stringfellow than his defense of slavery.

²⁶ James Henley Thornwell, “Relation to the Church and Slavery,” in *Ecclesiological*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau, vol. 4 of *James Henley Thornwell* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 1986), 387.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁸ Robert Lewis Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia* (New York: E. J. Hale & Sons, 1867), 154-55.

CHAPTER ONE: STRINGFELLOW'S LIFE

Thornton Stringfellow was an individual who used the Scriptures to defend the peculiar institution of slavery, but he was a man who believed the Gospel and concerned for the spiritual welfare of others. Stringfellow's commendation for slavery came from his religious convictions and role as a minister. His life details a man who believed the Word of God, who was an educated man, and saw himself as a moral protector for his community and for men and women in bondage.

When looking at Stringfellow's life, it is important to note that Drew Gilpin Faust's article on Stringfellow is the only substantive biography to date. A high percentage of work about Stringfellow is located in works by Drew Gilpin Faust and Mason I. Lowance Jr.²⁹ There are several other sources that still exist, either written by Stringfellow or about him, that do not include his proslavery thought. These additional works give a deep insight to his thinking and life.³⁰

Life

The Stringfellows' history in America dates back to 1720, when German and English immigrants migrated to the United States. Originally going by the name "Strongfellow," William Strongfellow/Stringfellow decided it would be more beneficial to change the family's name to

²⁹ See Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) gives a brief introduction to Stringfellow's life precedes her biblical defense of slavery. Mason I. Lowance Jr., *A House Divided*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003), 61 gives another brief description of Stringfellow's background

³⁰ Only a small amount of information about Thornton Stringfellow remains in existence due to a fire in the early twentieth-century. The lack of information available may be the reason scholars believe his life to be only of significance when it comes to studying proslavery ideology because the information is limited.

“Stringfellow.”³¹ On March 6, 1788, in what was known as “Liberty Hill” in Fauquier County, Thornton Stringfellow was born into a wealthy family, the son of Robert and Catherine Stringfellow—two individuals known to be soldiers of Christ. Originally planning to call him by another name, Robert and Catherine became convinced the name “Thornton” would be more advantageous for the child.³² The young Thornton was the youngest of ten children, and his family was of noble status in the Culpeper area, so the young Stringfellow grew up in an environment that knew of nothing but respectability and high social esteem.³³ Before he died in 1813, his father owned around one thousand acres. This land was not the only piece of propriety he owned. Robert Stringfellow was a slaveholder, but it is uncertain to this day how many slaves the elder Stringfellow possessed to work on his large tract of land.³⁴

Thornton Stringfellow’s early years contained curiosity and a sense of inquisitiveness to acquire as much information to satisfy his need for knowledge. A memorial to Stringfellow given at the one hundredth anniversary of Mt. Holly Baptist Church described the young Stringfellow as once “reputed to have been wild.”³⁵ He was an avid reader and developed a sense of skepticism that some may say came from his

³¹ The reason for the change is not clear, but it was possibly for financial and entrepreneurial reasons. William F. Broaddus, *Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist Historical Society, 1870), 12.

³² Broaddus, *Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association*, 12.

³³ George F. Stringfellow, “A Memorial of Pastor Thornton Stringfellow,” in *A Brief History of the Mount Holly Baptist Church 1833-1933*, ed. Chaz Campbell et al. (Remington, VA: The History Committee, 2008), 6.

³⁴ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 5.

³⁵ George Stringfellow, “Memorial,” 6.

reading of Tom Payne, Voltaire, and Huxley.³⁶ Stringfellow's avid curiosity, quest for knowledge and developing cynicism was the perfect mixture for a gentleman who wanted to further his education. Faust shows that there is no record of any formal education he received while maturing; however, his home life shows that his family supported higher education.³⁷ Eugene Genovese reveals that many southern clergymen were educated by their mothers.³⁸ This was the case for Stringfellow, because his mother was among the most intelligent citizens of central Virginia, and she believed the way to succeed in the world was through an education and close relationship with God.³⁹

Stringfellow's mother wanted her son to obtain a university degree. Stringfellow fully intended to pursue a higher education, but an ailment that harmed his nervous system and eyesight eventually confined him to his neighborhood.⁴⁰ Though Stringfellow was unable to obtain a college education, his illness did not hinder his desire to be well-read and well-versed. Several newspapers and other writings about Stringfellow depicted him as well-educated. His obituary in the *Religious Herald* described him as a man who possessed a "gigantic intellect."⁴¹ George F. Stringfellow, the grandson of Thornton, recalled his father describing Thornton Stringfellow as being an able writer and

³⁶ Ibid. George Stringfellow mentions Darwin in this memorial, but does not account which work by Darwin Stringfellow read as a young boy.

³⁷ Faust, "Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument," 5.

³⁸ Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 434.

³⁹ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 12.

⁴⁰ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 12; "Obituary of Thornton Stringfellow," *Religious Herald*, March 18, 1869.

⁴¹ "Obituary of Thornton Stringfellow," *Religious Herald*, March 18, 1869.

“assiduous scholar.”⁴² He read the Bible, and other literary works, for fifty days “storing knowledge.” The Bible was his primary reading tool since childhood.⁴³ Though he never earned a collegiate degree, he did receive two honorary degrees. He was honored with a master’s degree and doctor of divinity degree by Columbian and Richmond Colleges.⁴⁴ His writing leads scholars to believe that Stringfellow did receive some method of formal education. Stringfellow’s educational background came from his family who considered an education to be a respectable gift to have in his possession. This determination and love for higher education, along with his curiosity and instructive characteristics, were the appropriate blend to form a man wanting to spread the Gospel. Stringfellow’s passion for education was not uncommon for his day. In fact, southern apologists were among the top intellectuals of their time. Tise asserts that ministers who defended slavery were among the “superbly educated, socially aware and powerfully stationed leaders America could boast.”⁴⁵ This passion for education and love for the Scriptures led to a zeal for pastoral work and belief in a strong household where wives submitted to men, but the men loved their wives.

Conversion and Marriage

This “zeal” for pastoral work came from a gentleman suspected of being a favorite and well respected minister among several national officials. Jeremiah Moore, a minister in the Culpeper, Virginia region, was one of the most outspoken ministers in the

⁴² George Stringfellow, “A Memorial,” 6.

⁴³ Broadus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 13.

⁴⁴ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 6.

⁴⁵ Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), xvii.

area. He was a man not afraid of sharing the Gospel no matter what the risk. In fact his lack of fear led to his arrest for his presentation of the Gospel in Spotsylvania County.⁴⁶ Moore left a lasting impression on Stringfellow, but it was a visit to his parents' that led to conversion.

Stringfellow lived temporarily in South Carolina where he spent time in the state working for a mercantile business. He was surrounded by the religious teaching, "Do all the good you can, and as little harm as possible."⁴⁷ During a visit to his parent's home in 1811, he attended a meeting at Robinson River Baptist Church where he learned that the Word of God and the blood of Jesus Christ lead the way to salvation.⁴⁸ Though he baptized as an infant, he made the choice to be baptized as an adult and joined the Robinson River Baptist Church.⁴⁹ Given his life and work, the proclamation of God's Word was one of Stringfellow's loves in which he put many hours of devotion. In the same year as his conversion Stringfellow began to proclaim the Gospel to numerous individuals.⁵⁰

Stringfellow was "highly favored in his domestic relations."⁵¹ He married his first wife Amelia Walker in 1819, with whom he had two daughters: Penelope and Elizabeth. Recollections described her as an affectionate wife and mother; but because the absence

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 13.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ George Stringfellow, "A Memorial," 5.

⁵¹ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 15.

of baptism, she did not obtain membership to the church.⁵² Her death in 1829 left Thornton alone with two daughters. Soon after he met and married his second wife, Miss Ann Hill, she passed away in 1842. Stringfellow married his third wife, Mary Gibson, was a laborer for God. Unfortunately, she died in the mid-1860s. In 1868, Thornton Stringfellow married his fourth wife, Emily, before he died in 1869. She was as a woman who exhibited enormous faith and endured through the many hardships that came her way.⁵³

Genovese declares that southern ministers viewed a strong household as a symbol of a stable structure.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is possible Stringfellow married multiple times to uphold a strong paternal image. Nonetheless, Stringfellow began to be a prominent figure in society and possibly led to the creation of his self-image as a moral steward.

Pastor

Stringfellow obtained a considerable amount of wealth from his parents and Amelia. He used his money to purchase a large piece of land, a home he named “Bell Air,” and seventy to eighty slaves.⁵⁵ His wealth did not impact his life role. He was not best known for his money or power but for his role as pastor.

During the years before the American Civil War, a pastor in the American South was an influential figure in public life. Donald G. Mathews, in his *Religion in the Old*

⁵² A riveting fact is that Stringfellow wrote on this issue of baptism and membership. He took the side that the church should not turn anyone away who was never baptized. This incident with Amelia may explain his reason for writing on this issue. Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 15.

⁵³ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 15.

⁵⁴ Genovese, “Slavery Ordained of God,” 134.

⁵⁵ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 7.

South, says, “A projection of the people’s religious and social needs, the minister was at the same time someone special, around whom developed an aura of power and perhaps even mystery.” They were watchful protectors of moral and intellectual values in the local community.⁵⁶ Tise writes, “The clergy constituted the largest, the most highly educated, the most influential, and the most pervasive and cohesive group of men in antebellum American society.”⁵⁷ This coincides with Faust’s “moral steward” theory about proslavery ministers, politicians, and dignitaries. “Regarding themselves as rightful custodians of truth and scientists of morals, these Southern thinkers set out to claim their appointed social place; they would reform the South. . . .”⁵⁸ Though this is accurate for politicians and other public figures, it is more truthful for ministers because of their coupled sense of moral stewardship, desire to spread the Gospel, and educate the people in bondage and in freedom.⁵⁹

In sixteenth-century Germany, Martin Luther observed the ignorance of the laity and heads of family regarding biblical doctrine and teachings, and therefore prepared his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* to educate the masses. Stringfellow observed this same biblical ignorance in his state of Virginia. Though, unlike Luther who took issue with those who were uneducated when it came to Christian doctrine, Stringfellow saw a nation and his Virginia tainted with ignorance when it came to understanding God’s will

⁵⁶ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 84.

⁵⁷ Tise, “The Interregional Appeal of Proslavery Thought,” 63.

⁵⁸ Drew Gilpin Faust, “A Southern Stewardship: The Intellectual and the Proslavery Argument.” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63-80.

in the case of slavery.⁶⁰ Stringfellow's chief concerns were with understanding slavery as a Christian institution and using this institution to help save the heathen.⁶¹ Stringfellow is infamous for his approval of the peculiar institution, and that approval has created a fog of racism over his ministerial beliefs and work. However, biblical scholars do not discredit the reform efforts of individuals like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin because of their weaknesses. Is it reasonable to request the same for Thornton Stringfellow?

The medieval view toward the Jews in Germany was, according to H. G. Haile, the common view during Luther's lifetime, and Luther's attitude toward the Jews was not out of the ordinary.⁶² Therefore, though one should frown upon Luther's attitude toward the Jewish population, he and his opinion about the Jewish populace was a product of his time. The same can be said with Stringfellow and his view of the African slave. Stringfellow matured in a household where his father was a slaveholder, and the mentality of most nineteenth-century Virginians was not one of freedom for all. The point is not to excuse his defense of slavery, but to help lift the negative fog that may have settled on Stringfellow's pastoral work by detailing his efforts to reform and educate his state. Thus, it should become clear that his religious convictions were a driving force for all of his ministerial work.

⁶⁰ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, February 25, 1841.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 288.

Stringfellow was concerned about the spiritual and physical well-being of the Christian, and the threat of Particular Baptists.⁶³ Stringfellow was highly evangelical and pleaded for his fellow man to repent because he believed and wanted others to believe that “Jesus was declared the Son of God with power, by the resurrection from the dead; and insisted that the reason why they refused to do either (believe and repent), was not found in any decree of God preventing them, but in the blindness of their own hearts.”⁶⁴ In regard to physical well-being, he tried to find cures to various ailments; this may be because he was concerned with his own disease distressing his nervous system.⁶⁵

Stringfellow’s long pastoral career involved educating his several congregations. He saw his role as minister to help educate the heathen whether they were free or in bondage, and he set out to improve the Christian and heathen through several means. In light of his concern over his congregants’ and other ministers’ lack of biblical knowledge, he saw that one of the best way to educate individuals in the Bible was through a Sunday school program.⁶⁶ Another way of educating the masses was through missions work.⁶⁷ Also, Stringfellow pushed for moral reform by active involved in the temperance movement. Finally, he was adamant in showing how the American South was more Christian in comparison to the northern states. All his works on slavery accused the North

⁶³ Stringfellow involved himself in temperance societies and movements. Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 4-5. Stringfellow also was concerned that his brothers and sisters in Christ were being turned away from churches, and eventually unable to hear the Gospel, because they were not baptized. Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, September 28, 1843. In the same article he urged believers to know that baptism was not the way to regeneration.

⁶⁴ Thornton Stringfellow, *Two Letters on the Cases of Cure at White Sulphur Springs* (Washington, DC: WM. M. Belt, 1851). 17.

⁶⁵ Broadus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 14.

⁶⁶ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 4-5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

of having a poor labor system that did not care for its workers, while the South's institution of slavery benefitted both the one in bondage and the master.⁶⁸ Stringfellow's career as a minister possessed these characteristics, and so did his writings, but he was also a man who loved the pulpit. Members of churches asked many times for him to lead several Baptist congregations.⁶⁹

Stringfellow's concern for his community began with his ministerial career in 1811 at the early age of twenty-three—before he was ordained. While young and able, he spent time, as was the manner in the antebellum era, visiting household after household. He spoke wherever he could gather an audience together to hear the message of the Gospel.⁷⁰ He became ordained in 1814, and began to assume responsibility for several congregations in the Culpeper and Fauquier county areas.⁷¹ He began his vocation as an ordained pastor at Jefferson Church where he preached from 1815 to 1818. During his time at Jefferson, he organized Grove Church where he preached until 1838.⁷² In 1833, with the assistance of W. F. Broaddus, he organized a small Baptist church at Providence Free Meeting House, one mile from the Rappahannock River.

“Brother Stringfellow,” as the congregation remembered him, began to preach at Providence Baptist Church every third Sunday and the Saturday preceding. George Stringfellow recalled that relatives suspected that it was this church that held a special

⁶⁸ Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views*, 114.

⁶⁹ Chaz Campbell et al., ed., *A Brief History of The Mount Holly Baptist Church 1833-2008* (Remington, VA: Mount Holly Baptist Church, 2008), 3-4.

⁷⁰ George Stringfellow, “Memorial,” 5.

⁷¹ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 6.

⁷² George Stringfellow, “Memorial,” 5.

place in Thornton Stringfellow's heart.⁷³ It was in the same year as the founding of Providence Baptist Church that he started the church he is best known for planting, Stevensburg Baptist Church near Culpeper, Virginia. During Stringfellow's pastorate at Providence, he became involved in the temperance movement in 1834, and also held his first extended meeting in August of 1836.⁷⁴ Stringfellow delivered his sermons to men and women of both races. In 1843, black members of Providence numbered at thirty-seven while white members numbered twenty-nine.⁷⁵ In 1844, Stringfellow's health became an issue and hindered his ministerial duties at Providence and Stevensburg.⁷⁶ He suffered from a nervous system disorder, but he continued to baptize.⁷⁷

A year later, in 1845, Providence Baptist Church moved to a more centralized location. In 1848, Stringfellow resigned from his position at Providence, and two years later the church changed its name to Mt. Holly Baptist Church. That same year, Stringfellow received a large family Bible from the congregation as a way of showing their appreciation for his services. During Stringfellow's period at Mt. Holly, he welcomed into the church twenty-three white members, and by the time his pastorate ended in 1848, the black members in the church grew to fifty-nine.⁷⁸ On the whole, Stringfellow's time was not idle while he served as minister of his many churches.

⁷³ Ibid. George F. Stringfellow, in his memorial to Thornton Stringfellow, describes his relative as having special affection for Providence Baptist Church.

⁷⁴ Campbell, *Brief History of the Mount Holly Baptist Church* 3-4.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "Obituary of Thornton Stringfellow," *Religious Herald*, March 18, 1869.

⁷⁷ Campbell, *Brief History of the Mount Holly Baptist Church*, 3-4. People, and sources show that the church began to provide special apparel for Stringfellow to perform the baptisms.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

With the growing distress between the Primitive Baptists and Separate, or “New Light” Baptists, Stringfellow began to take issue with the teachings of the Primitives.⁷⁹ Though this was an active task, it was not his passion. He used his active position in the ministry by promoting movements such as education. Like his mother, Stringfellow believed the best way to strengthen the mind and relationship with God was through education.

Education, especially educated ministers, was always a controversial topic in the antebellum area. Some individuals believed “human learning was of no use,” especially for ministers.⁸⁰ Under-educated pastors in the Baptist denomination were not rare in Virginia. Many evangelicals believed that citizens of a godly nation must be able to read and understand the Bible. Schools were established, but they kept close ties with the Protestant beliefs. Stringfellow became a member of the Southern Baptist Education Society and served on the Board of Managers.⁸¹ He served his community by using his wealth to help educate young people in teaching them to comprehend the Bible.⁸² Stringfellow believed that Sunday schools were one of the best methods of sharing the Gospel to his fellow man. While living in Fauquier County, he conducted a grammar school and began to show support for the Sunday school movement.⁸³ In 1846, he

⁷⁹ George Stringfellow, “Memorial,” 6. His parents were both “New Lights,” so it is certain that Stringfellow grew up in a home adhering to “New Light” Baptist theology.

⁸⁰ Reuben Edward Alley, *A History of Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist General Board), 143-44.

⁸¹ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 7.

⁸² George Stringfellow, “Memorial,” 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

quarreled with Stevensburg Baptist Church, because he felt they overlooked their Sunday school.⁸⁴

Educating his flock in the areas of the Bible was just one method of using education to help his community. He saw education as a way of helping his community be wary of alcohol. He took efforts to be as involved as possible in the temperance issues occurring in the nation during the years leading to the American Civil War. Stringfellow opposed the consumption of alcohol and believed the temperance movement was the work of God. He called for those who were models in the church to band together to remove the “leprous spots” of alcohol from all society. Stringfellow advocated the formation and rigorous involvement of temperance societies to help with the abolition of alcohol.⁸⁵ When he said it was the church’s social duty, he meant it was the church’s duty to show concern for man’s moral and spiritual needs.⁸⁶ He tried to visit and meet with people in his later years but his physical ailment kept him from visiting friends and family.⁸⁷

Stringfellow’s life, though not usually a main focus to some historians, contains a fascinating glimpse of the life of a man who believed God’s Word would guide all people in the areas of physical and spiritual reform. He saw it as his duty to make sure his community was aware of the benefits of God’s Word, and used his pen to spread his knowledge and concerns, but he did not write in a vacuum.

⁸⁴ Records of Stevensburg, Virginia Baptist Church, Shiloh Association, 1833-1927, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, University of Richmond.

⁸⁵ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, October 6, 1942.

⁸⁶ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, December 29, 1842.

⁸⁷ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, September 28, 1843. Stringfellow apologizes to “Brother Henley” for being unable to visit due to his “ailment.” This comment to “Brother Henley” reveals Stringfellow’s trouble with his ailment that affected his nervous system.

Stringfellow's stance on the issues made him a man who would face controversial topics in the years prior to the American Civil War. His attitude on slavery is the focus of scholars' interpretation of him, and he is mainly associated with his view of slavery because individuals are generally known for their positions on controversial issues. Though it may be risqué to excuse Stringfellow's opinion on slavery his life reveals a man who focused on his role as pastor and used that role to help his community. The one thing that is not revealed is the troubled times during his ministerial career. Therefore, before turning to his writings a look at the historical context is needed, because the time between 1830 and 1860 saw violence that would shake the foundation of Virginia and the United States.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eugene Genovese declares that ministers defended slavery because they saw the institution as a foundation of their social order.⁸⁸ Stringfellow defended slavery at least in part because he was surrounded by turmoil and was concerned for the order of his community's social structure. Thus, a study of his historical context reveals that he defended slavery because of his conviction and sense of stewardship for his society that was on the verge of ruin. Although Stringfellow focused mainly on the Baptist Schism (1845) and John Brown's Raid (1859), these two events characterized the overall tumultuous environment in which he ministered.

The violence and rhetoric that agitated that South was over slavery, and it was because of slavery that the social system was in danger. Antebellum Virginia was not a paradise, nor was the United States as a whole. Conflicts between members of the same denomination plagued churches and their ministers around the Old Dominion and other parts of the nation. Rhetoric from northern churches spewed like fire against those who used the Bible to defend slavery. Like Albert Barnes and others, some were more peaceful and logical in their condemnation of this peculiar institution. Politicians and other social figures in the southern United States began to caution the South against the attacks made by the North. This tension was a force that resulted in denominational splits and eventually four years of bloody conflict.

Uncertainty and fear plagued Virginia's planter class for many years preceding the American Civil War. Several acts of violence sent shockwaves through the American populace—especially in Virginia. On August 22, 1831, a revolt instigated by a rebellious Nat Turner created a panic in the planters' minds. In 1856, the territory of Kansas erupted

⁸⁸ Genovese, "Slavery Ordained of God," 128.

into what is considered the precursor to the Civil War. The escalating violence in Kansas resulted in violence in the Senate and senseless bloodshed at the hands of a zealous fanatic. Nat Turner's slave rebellion in 1831, escalating violence in Kansas in 1856, and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 led to Stringfellow's uneasiness about the situation of his community. These chaotic events were among the bloodiest events in the years leading to the America Civil War. They led southern ministers, politicians, members of the social elite, and citizens to defend an institution they claimed was sanctioned in Scripture.

Did Stringfellow sanction the institution of slavery because he saw a crumbling social structure that created a sense of anxiety within his heart? The answer is a definite yes. This era was filled with controversy and divisiveness, and these violent occurrences and denominational splits caused Stringfellow to write his defenses of slavery, but he wrote his defense as a pastor concerned for his flock and not only as defender of slavery. In fact, his 1861 work—*Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom*—is one of the best examples of his role as a pastor under conviction to inform his flock of the harsh times they lived in. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that this work did defend slavery and is probably considered one of his more racist works.

Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 helped escalate rhetoric in the defense of slavery because it placed so many planters on the edge. Therefore, attention must first be paid to Nat Turner's rebellion.

Nat Turner

Before 1831, the view slavery, once seen as a necessary evil, changed when Turner led his bloody revolt in Virginia causing many men to defend slavery as a positive good. Among those who believed slavery was a positive good was Thornton Stringfellow, but his focus was on the idea that slavery would help expose the slave to the Gospel message.

Sunday, August 21, 1831 was a peaceful evening in Southampton County for many families who sent their loved ones away to Gates County, Virginia for a camp meeting.⁸⁹ Hours later, early Monday morning, Nat Turner and a band of rebellious slaves crept into the homes where white families slept, and delivered one of the most devastating blows to a white society that supported slavery. Turner and his men killed sixty Southampton County whites, and shocked Virginia. Local whites banded together, and they stopped the bloody rebellion by that afternoon, killing those responsible and chasing Turner into the wilderness until captured. The uprising and actions that followed revealed a shift in the feelings between white and black religious communities.

The insurrection did not help to comfort white southerners who were already concerned with the threat of insurrection after the failed rebellion of Denmark Vesey.⁹⁰ The fear surrounding Virginia affected white Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists by causing them to be suspicious of their black brethren. White southerners began to wonder

⁸⁹ See Kenneth S. Greenburg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford, 2003); Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict 1740-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

⁹⁰ See Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean 1736-1831* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith, *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (New York: Harvest Press, 1999).

if they could really fellowship with their black counterparts. As news of rebellion spread, white evangelical Christians made sure they focused on the violence of the rebellion with an emphasis on the horrible act of slaying innocent women and children.⁹¹ The birth of the “positive good” argument for slavery had begun. Defenders began to argue that slaves were inferior to the white class, and slavery was the best situation for this race: it gave the slaves the best conditions possible for living while the planter class gained the benefits of a false sense of security and workers for the field. This unrest did not stop Baptist missionaries from taking the Gospel to those in chains. Charles Irons argues that Stringfellow’s attitude was in the same league with the post–Nat Turner era thought when it came to defending slavery. Stringfellow wanted to show slavery as a positive good that was sanctioned by Scripture, but he also began to show that slavery was the best method of spreading the Gospel to those in chains.⁹²

Denominational Splits

Turner’s rebellion changed on economic, social, and ecclesiastical defenses of slavery. Due to Turner’s revolt men like Stringfellow became concerned for their society and congregations. Stringfellow wrote in 1841, “our lives are in jeopardy. . . .”⁹³ as he defended slavery. The proslavery rhetoric began to have an impact on several denominations that led to three important denominational schisms.

⁹¹ Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia*, 199-200.

⁹² Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 215.

⁹³ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery.” in *The Ideology of Slavery*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1981), 166.

Northern ministers began to respond to the claims made by the southern defenders of slavery. Like Stringfellow who used the Bible to defend Slavery, these ministers looked toward Scripture to denounce the practice of human servitude. Other apologists looked toward other means of defending slavery—economics, science, and sociology. Many abolitionists rebuked southern slavery and its defense. For example, in 1846 Albert Barnes wrote *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* to counter many biblical arguments made by the proslavery ministers like Stringfellow. Because the Bible was the tool apologists used frequently, Barnes responded by using that same tool, focusing on the New Testament, to counter proslavery rhetoric. Barnes examined 1 Cor 10:29 and 1 Thess 5:21 to show that man had a God-given way of worshiping, and slavery was against the will of God because the master was in total control of the slave's actions.⁹⁴ Stringfellow's main defense of slavery was in the Old Testament where God decreed a state of slavery before it existed, and He recognized slaves as property on Mount Sinai.⁹⁵ For Barnes, as Kenneth Cleaver argues, the American system of slavery could not, because it was “so full of immortality,” survive in a Christian society. If it did exist, it would have to be a “non-rationally based, mutually agreed upon form of employment.”⁹⁶ Other anti-slavery ministers like La Roy Sunderland, Charles Elliott, and Joseph P. Thompson began writing biblical denunciations of slavery, thus contributing to the overall biblical debate and denominational schisms before the American Civil War.

⁹⁴ Phillip A. Kledzik, “Thornton Stringfellow and Albert Barnes: The Bible and Slavery in the 1840's” (MS thesis, Chicago State University, 1995), 30, 37-38.

⁹⁵ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 149.

⁹⁶ Kenneth G. Cleaver, “An Examination of Albert Barnes' Handling of the Bible in the Debate on Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth Century America” (PhD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002), 77.

The Baptists were not the only denomination experiencing problems in the antebellum period. In fact, the Baptist split was the third and final act in a series of denominational schisms infecting the nation. The Presbyterian split in 1837-38 opened the first major North-South wedge in American institutions. This divide was due to more doctrinal disagreements than disagreements about slavery.⁹⁷ The split concerned those in the nation who supported the theology of Old School Presbyterianism and supporters of New School Presbyterianism.

Individuals in the South turned this theological dispute into an argument over abolitionism.⁹⁸ Southern “Old Schoolers” like James H. Thornwell began to see a connection between New School theology and abolitionism. True, the New School harbored most of the abolitionists in the Presbyterian Church, but it should be noted that the Old School contained abolitionists, though the slavery apologists outnumbered them.⁹⁹ C. C. Goen argues that “Old Schoolers” in the North possessed a characteristic that maintained silence on the slavery issue. They did muster up the courage to admit that slavery was an evil, but the South was not responsible for the institution.¹⁰⁰ Supporters of the Old School in the South believed the New School theology stood on unsound biblical principles. Southern Old School followers viewed abolitionism in the same light.

Southern “Old Schoolers” viewed abolitionism as helping spread the New School thought

⁹⁷ Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 68.

⁹⁸ Supporters of the Old School theology were against the Second Great Awakening and spoke out against the Arminian theology of the New Haven Theology and interdenominational cooperation. Supporters of the New School theology supported interdenominational cooperation and enthusiasm for revivalism. New School Theology had its roots in the theology of Nathaniel Taylor. New School theology denied the effects of original sin and placed emphasis on man’s free will.

⁹⁹ Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 68, 71.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

of Perfectionism, and both ideas were bent on destroying the Presbyterian Church and ruining the link between the North and the South. While the Old School was the majority in the South, the New School minority showed the majority that it could press its heel upon the South's rights.¹⁰¹

In 1836, northern Old Schoolmen promised southerners they would oppose an attempt made by the General Assembly to condemn slavery. New School ministers obtained influence in the church, but then, in 1837, the General Assembly decided to purify the Presbyterian Church and side with the Old School and removed New School churches. New Schoolmen, to counter the attacks made by those in the Old School, focused on republican principles in defending their rights as a minority, and portrayed northern Old Schoolmen as tyrants.¹⁰² Eventually, in 1837, the Presbyterian Church split.

The issue of slavery was the main issue in the Methodist split of 1844, unlike the Presbyterian split, which resulted because of theological differences and the issue of slavery. Southern Methodists believed that the church had authority over slavery, and they believed this thought would be upheld. Northern Methodists, in 1844, began to put pressure on the General Conference to take a stronger position against slavery. On June 1, 1844, the General Conference asked a southern bishop to cease his position as long as he owned slaves. Southerners believed this act was a tyrannical move made by the General Conference; they withdrew in May 1845, and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separation in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 116-20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 122-26.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 127-29.

After the General Conference's decision to ask a slaveholding bishop to step down in 1844, southerners saw Northern agitation as a departure from Methodism. Southerners saw slavery as a civil institution free from the church's jurisdiction. Since the withdrawal from the General Conference in 1845, southerners justified their stance by declaring their honor and love for the Methodist doctrines and principles.¹⁰⁴ Like their Methodist brothers and sisters, the Baptists' faced their schism because of the issue of slavery. Coupled with the slave rebellion of 1830, and growing concerns from northern ministers, ministers like Stringfellow became concerned for his Baptist community and denomination.

In the years prior to the American Civil War, the Baptist General Tract Society did not want to overlook the issue of slavery. Northern abolitionists became offended that the Board of the General Missionary Convention did not take a stronger stand against slaveholders as potential missionaries. Instead, the board took the stand that southern slaveholders possessed the same love as non-slaveholding individuals, and the board should not interfere in the slavery controversy. During general meetings, those in charge decided they should focus on matters related to missions and not matters that would divide the denomination. The board could suppress the controversial issue for long because the slavery issue was a part of the social society. When the issue rose up again, southern ministers were outraged that their northern brethren proclaimed they would not appoint slaveholding missionaries.¹⁰⁵ This was not the first time there was trouble in the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 129-33.

¹⁰⁵ C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denomination Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 91-92.

Baptist church. This issue must have disturbed Stringfellow because of his passion to toil in the domestic mission field.

Though this threatened a division in the Baptist denomination, it was not as divisive as the dispute that brought about the controversial decision of 1845. In 1840, ecclesiastical abolitionists—men who wanted recognition within anti-slavery congregations because they grew tired of institutions that stifled their attempts to eliminate slavery—met and issued a statement that they did not recognize slaveholders as brothers in Christ. Tensions continued to grow between the North and the South, and in 1844, the General Convention made a stand to express their neutral beliefs on slavery, but the Acting Board of the General Convention determined that they would not appoint a slaveholder as a missionary. Southerners declared that the board had overstepped its authority.¹⁰⁶

The Virginia Baptist Foreign Mission Society promptly called for a convention to organize a new missionary organization. Proslavery Baptists gathered in Augusta, Georgia on May 8, 1845, to discuss this option of forming a new organization. C. C. Goen suggests that many Baptists were opposed to the schism.¹⁰⁷ Virginia's Stringfellow did not oppose the formation of a new organization that would benefit southern Baptists. He was disappointed that northern Baptist leaders refused to admit slaveholders as missionaries, and called for churches to join together to support a convention that would adhere to southern convictions and his own concerns.¹⁰⁸ Stringfellow saw the North's

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 95-96.; Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Religion and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 2-3.

¹⁰⁷ Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 97.

¹⁰⁸ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, April 7, 1845.

position on the issue as the cause of misguidance from abolitionists. Stringfellow's church, Stevensburg Baptist Church, took initiative and promoted unity for a southern meeting.

Stringfellow was asked to attend the meeting in Augusta, Georgia, and his passion for missions led to his being selected as Vice President of the newly organized Southern Baptist Convention's Domestic Mission Board.¹⁰⁹ Stringfellow's passion for evangelism and beliefs on slavery were intertwined. This growing tension between northern ministers against admitting slaveholders and missionaries and slaveholders was not the only reason for the unrest in the American South, but events like the insurrection of Nat Turner initiated a plague of panic which resulted in uncertainty, a schism within the Baptist denomination, and eventually led to one of the most violent years in nineteenth-century America.

Bleeding Kansas

The term "Bleeding Kansas" is the best way to describe the horrific events of 1856.¹¹⁰ Even though these events did not occur in Virginia, they still created a sense of uneasiness and concern. Although Stringfellow's specific thoughts on "Bleeding Kansas" are lost, the amount of coverage in publications like the *Religious Herald* assure that it was an event with which he was well acquainted.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Faust, "Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument," 14.

¹¹⁰ See James McPherson, "The Crime Against Kansas" in *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145-69; Jay Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border 1854-1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); and James A. Rawley *Race and Politics "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

¹¹¹ Thornton Stringfellow was one of the *Religious Herald's* main contributors. He published all his original writings and responses to scholars through this publication.

By spring of 1856, tensions were at an all-time high since proslavery Judge Samuel Lecompte decided to prosecute members of the Free State, antislavery government in Kansas on grounds of treason.¹¹² The focus turned to Lawrence, Kansas, which was believed to be the home of several prominent members of the new Free State government. On May 21, 1856, as the sun began to rise, citizens of Lawrence, Kansas saw the formation of militia, made of proslavery men, preparing to put their town under siege. Citizens could make out the shape of several artillery pieces pointing in their town's direction. The Free State government decided not to resist, which resulted in the destruction of several newspaper offices and the home of the Free soil governor. The Free-State hotel was approached by the militia, and with flags from Alabama and South Carolina waving high in the air, these men set fire to the hotel. The militia began to destroy the city to make sure the Free State government fully understood the cause and force.¹¹³

As the band of ruffians began to sack Lawrence, senators in the nation's capital argued over whether or not Kansas should be admitted as a free or slave state. Southern congressmen saw this as ominous for their own southern states. Both Democrat and Republican parties were unable to reach a decision about admitting Kansas because Republicans controlled the House, and the Democrats controlled the Senate. The Republicans decided to exploit the trouble in Kansas; they were under the mentality that by focusing on "The Crime Against Kansas" they could gather support for admitting

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border*, 56-57.

Kansas as a free state and gain support during the presidential elections.¹¹⁴ On May 19, 1856, Senator Charles Sumner, outraged at the situation in Kansas, pushed back his chair and began to deliver to the Senate galleries “the most thorough and complete” speech of his life.¹¹⁵

Sumner allowed his passion to take control of his words as he argued that the only remedy to the situation in Kansas was to admit the territory into the Union as a free state. Unfortunately, Sumner did not stop at this point, but instead attacked personalities of those in the Senate. His main target, Senator Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina, was absent on that day. Sumner called Butler the Don Quixote of slavery, and accused him of choosing a mistress to whom he made his vows, “and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his light . . . the harlot Slavery.”¹¹⁶ The Senate broke into an uproar. Democrats rebuked this Yankee, and some considered challenging this man to a duel. The problem with this was nineteenth-century culture dictates that the act of dueling should only be among equals, and these Democrats did not see Sumner as an equal. Therefore, Preston Brooks, Congressman of South Carolina and nephew of Andrew Butler, saw it as his duty to defend his family and state.¹¹⁷

Brooks decided Sumner was in the need of a horsewhipping. On May 22, 1856, Preston Brooks approached Charles Sumner, who sat at his desk in the Senate chamber, and furiously said, “I have read your Speech with great care and as much impartiality as

¹¹⁴ The phrase came from Charles Sumner’s two day address to the Senate on May 19-20.

¹¹⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 149.

¹¹⁶ Rawley, *Race and Politics*, 125-26.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

was possible and I feel it my duty to tell you that you have libeled my State and slandered a relative who is aged and absent and I am come to punish you for it.”¹¹⁸ Sumner listened to Brooks’ threat and began to rise from his chair when Brooks struck Senator Sumner thirty times over the head and chest with his gold-headed cane. Sumner fell to the floor, his head covered in blood, until another Congressman appeared preventing Brooks from doing further damage. These wounds inflicted by Brooks created mental difficulties that prevented Sumner’s return to the Senate for four years. During these four years, the Massachusetts legislature reelected Sumner as a symbolic chide to those supporting slavery.¹¹⁹

The nation was in shock that violence erupted everywhere. Angry and concerned citizens began to wonder if the next spark of violence would escalate into a war between their nation’s own citizens. One curmudgeon was angry at the chaos occurring in Kansas and Washington. A fifty-six year old man fumed in Kansas at the situation occurring in the territory, so he gathered a group of men—six of his sons and one son-in-law—and began to march toward Lawrence, Kansas until he received news that the town was sacked. As he processed the news, he became wild and frenzied as he expressed his anger toward others for Lawrence’s unwillingness to fight. John Brown, using his Old Testament belief of an eye for an eye, began to reckon that the proslavery ruffians must have murdered five or more Free Soilers in Kansas since the outbreak of violence in the territory. Brown decided to enact his Old Testament philosophy on proslavery individuals in his neighborhood near Pottawatomie Creek—individuals who had nothing to do with the violence Brown spoke of.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 152.

On the evening of May 24-25, 1856, Brown and his followers walked toward the Doyle home around eleven in the evening. During those night hours, Brown and his men, with the help of their broadswords, split open the heads of the male members of the Doyle and Wilkinson families and also William Sherman—totaling six deaths. Brown, in his eyes, evened the score.¹²⁰ The next day, as word of the massacre reached proslavery sympathizers, a band of men burned the homes of Brown and his sons. Therefore, this violence resulted in the bushwhacking war in Kansas that cost Brown’s two sons’ lives.¹²¹ As news of this massacre and violence in Kansas reached the press, shock waves of concern swept through Virginia.

Reaction and Raid on Harper’s Ferry

Thornton Stringfellow, at home in Culpepper, Virginia, read the articles in the *Religious Herald* informing Virginians of the violence spreading through the nation, and the pleas from ministers to not make a scene of the violence in Kansas. On May 22, 1856, Stringfellow wrote in the *Religious Herald* that the time to free those in bondage could only occur in God’s time. With the turmoil of Kansas on his mind, he argued that the time was not right for freedom. “We cannot put an end to African slavery, if we would—until God opens a door to make its termination a blessing. When he does that, slavery in this Union will end.”¹²² Stringfellow believed in an eventual emancipation, but turmoil in Kansas was the evidence he used to show that the year 1856 was not the time for emancipation.

¹²⁰ Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 134-37.

¹²¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 153.

¹²² Thornton Stringfellow, “Letter to Elder James Fife,” *Religious Herald*, May 22, 1856.

As the news of the bloodshed in Kansas began to spread, individuals expressed their concern for the stability of the Union, creating a sense of anxiety in southern and northern ministers. Southern writers, like John Taylor, placed the blame of those chaotic times on northern abolitionists and ministers, and warned of troubles ahead:

The present condition of our Country cannot but painfully affect the heart of every Christian patriot. The signs of the times are ominous. Most of the numerous indignation meetings recently held at the North, in reference to the assault upon an individual senator in Washington, have proposed extreme measures. Professed minister(s) (northern) are arguing for the formation of companies armed with rifles to march on Kansas and even southern States.¹²³

Taylor's article expressed the concern exhibited by ministers like Stringfellow who believed the best way to approach the situation was through the written word. Other ministers, like George Woodbridge, urged ministers to not become involved in the violence because he was concerned with the possibility of war. "We have seen, with painful solicitude, the agitations which have marred the peace and threaten the stability of the Union."¹²⁴ Stringfellow upheld Woodbridge's wishes and did not write anything for the *Religious Herald* involving slavery or the escalating violence, perhaps because the violence was a good distance away from Virginia. In 1859, everything changed when the Old Testament judge John Brown decided to make a strike at Harper's Ferry. This incident was too close for comfort for Thornton Stringfellow.

Most antislavery ministers refused to use violence to further their cause to condemn slavery. Though these men were of gracious character, some men were not so noble. John Brown fully believed that without the shedding of blood, there can be no

¹²³ Jason B Taylor, "Our Country," *Religious Herald*, June 26, 1856.

¹²⁴ George Woodbridge, "Appeal to the Clergy in Richmond," *Religious Herald*, June 26, 1856.

forgiveness of sins.¹²⁵ He became tired of the talking and decided that actions would speak louder than words.¹²⁶ With a group of men, including thirty-four blacks, he decided to use violence to change the minds of the slaveholders. They agreed that they would establish a new republic for freed slaves with Brown at the head of a newly formed government.¹²⁷ On October 16, 1859, he and his men captured the U.S. armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Unfortunately for Brown, his raid came to a screeching halt thirty-six hours later with the assistance of Col. Robert E. Lee and the U.S. Marines. News of the raid sent a wave of panic through Virginia, and the call came to hang John Brown.¹²⁸

Many southerners associated this type of extremism with the entire northern population. What was more shocking to the southern population, and especially to southern ministers, was the level of enthusiasm Brown had from northern supporters. Ralph Waldo Emerson compared him to Christ saying Brown would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross."¹²⁹ Hearing of northern church bells tolling commemoration of Brown's action and life made southerners believe that all northerners were ready to use violence to destroy their society. Stringfellow's *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History* deviated from the usual Scriptural justification of slavery and turned to more political and social matters because of his natural concern for his community. He wrote that Brown

¹²⁵ John Brown's favorite passage, according to James McPherson, was Heb 9:22, "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission." KJV.

¹²⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 203.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹²⁸ See Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood*; for an entertaining history on John Brown see Bruce Olds *Raising Holy Hell* (New York: H. Holt, 1995).

¹²⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 206-9.

was a perfect example of what happens when men and women begin to believe that all men should be equal in regard to intelligence, morals, and politics. Stringfellow believed that an adherence to this idea would only lead to murderous individuals like John Brown.¹³⁰

The 1845 schism that led to formation of the Southern Baptist Convention rocked Stringfellow's ecclesiastical foundation calling his reasoning into question for supporting slavery. Though this schism drew a bold line between the northern and southern Baptists, Nat Turner's Insurrection of 1831 helped create the change that lead southern apologists to make the argument that slavery was a positive good for both the slave and free man. Turner's rebellion created a level of uncertainty in which the white planter class had to prove that slavery was the only option to preserve the safety for southern society, and Brown's raid solidified those fears, emboldening men like Stringfellow in their proslavery stance.

As men of the South wrote tracts defending their institution, they soon began to realize that they had opposition, for ministers like Albert Barnes began to refute their positions by offering scriptural support for the abolition of slavery. Stringfellow's society seemed to be in a state of chaos, but the violence in Kansas and John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry proved to Stringfellow in 1856 and 1860 that a new defense of slavery based on Scripture was necessary—to fight those who justified the actions of men like John Brown.

¹³⁰ Thornton Stringfellow, *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom*. (New York: John F. Trow, 1861), 6.

It is clear that Stringfellow's place in this chaotic society was in question, and he used his role as a minister to show the danger of the emerging chaotic society. Clearly the violence and turmoil of the antebellum years impacted Stringfellow and his writings.

CHAPTER THREE: STRINGFELLOW'S WRITINGS

A survey of the archives of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society reveals that the majority of Stringfellow's writings probably consisted of more ecclesiastical issues than just slavery. It would be impractical to state his ministerial work revolved around defending slavery, because there is no true way of knowing what percentage of Stringfellow's works dealt with slavery. Therefore, current historians studying proslavery ideology must properly consider all available sources to form a clear interpretation of not only Stringfellow's life but also the lives of all proslavery ministers

A man's writing reveals his true character and allows the reader to see the true individual. Unfortunately, many scholars focus on Stringfellow's proslavery writings, and although these give an insight to his character, he did write on several other issues: Bible translations and distribution, baptism in regard to regeneration and church membership, and other controversial issues that show his nature as a pastor. His writings on slavery and other ecclesiastical issues reveal a pastor concerned for his community.

Stringfellow's other writings are usually ignored when looking at his life, but a close look at all his writings reveal several crucial characteristics.

First of all, most of his writings deal with controversial issues. Stringfellow saw slavery as an issue destroying God's church. Along with other ecclesiastical issues, slavery was not an exception to his writing. It should not be surprising that a man who tackled controversial issues tackled one of the most controversial issues of the nineteenth century. Second, his writing exhibits a concern for the well-being of his brothers and sisters in Christ. Stringfellow was concerned for the spiritual and physical well-being of all individuals whether free or in chains. Third, the concept that God's grace should not

be withheld from any of His children permeated Stringfellow's texts. Fourth, Faust is correct in her "moral stewardship" theory, because Stringfellow's writings possess a sense of moral guardianship for his fellow Christians. Finally, complete obedience to the Scriptures is necessary when dealing with matters like baptism and slavery. Therefore, these five characteristics show his writing on slavery was an extension of his pastoral career and should not necessarily dominate one's overall interpretation of the man.

These characteristics are the underlying issues in his writings; however, ignoring his defense of slavery would be careless. Stringfellow's writings on slavery argued to show the institution as being God-ordained. He wanted to show how un-Christian the North was compared to the South. Finally, Stringfellow maintained that God was in complete control of the issue, and man should not interfere with God's plan.

John Robbins, former president of the Trinity Foundation, argues, "The embarrassing and inexcusable association of Christian theology with Southern slavery has been a stain on Christianity in the South and a hindrance to the proclamation of the Gospel for two centuries."¹³¹ Those making the same argument need to take a closer look at all writings dealing with ecclesiastical issues. Performing this task of looking at all writings, not just proslavery ones, will show that those who defended slavery in the nineteenth century believed in the same Christianity as those who abhorred slavery. Thus, Stringfellow considered slavery to a Christian institution because he saw the peculiar institution as a system of order that would only lead to chaos if it the abolitionists had their way.

¹³¹ John W. Robbins, "Christians and the Civil War," *The Trinity Review*, Number 279, (October-November 2008): 1.

Stringfellow's pastoral character can be clearly grasped in his non-slavery writings. His proslavery writings do possess that same characteristic, but his non-slavery writings can give a clear image of that pastoral characteristic without the stigma of proslavery leanings. Within the category of slavery, it is best to examine each work in chronological order to maintain some form of organization. First, it is best to separate his 1856 writing—*Scriptural and Statistical View in Favor of Slavery*—into two works to prevent confusion. The first is his section of the former writing that was published in 1841 entitled *Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*. The second is the second half of his *Scriptural and Statistical View in Favor of Slavery*. Stringfellow's final work on slavery is his 1861 writing *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History, Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom*.¹³²

The Religious Herald

The *Religious Herald* was one of the best ways a minister could express his opinions to the state of Virginia in the nineteenth century, and it was certainly the method of choice for Stringfellow. Within this weekly newspaper, a reader found the latest news in Baptist missions, issues affecting the church and community, and daily devotionals. Readers would also have access to firsthand accounts of debates occurring between Stringfellow and other ecclesiastical scholars. Stringfellow used this medium to express

¹³² A mistake some scholars make is to treat his work located in *Cotton is King—The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation* as another writing by Stringfellow on slavery, but it is actually Stringfellow's *Scriptural and Statistical View in Favor of Slavery* under a different name. Therefore, other than showing Stringfellow's influence, this work will not be mentioned under this particular name.

his thoughts on controversial issues that concerned the spiritual and physical needs of those in his community and around the nation.

Non-Slavery Writings

Stringfellow's non-slavery writings reveal a pastor who focused on the spiritual well-being of his community and his congregation. In the middle of 1841, Stringfellow became concerned with the lack of Bibles being offered. He wanted a "correct translation of the Bible into English" and made a request in the *Religious Herald* for "competent" individuals to contact him in helping him create a better translation.¹³³ Though he did not mention his problem with the existing translation, Stringfellow was disappointed that he had made an earlier request to raise funds to help with the work and his request was ignored.¹³⁴ He admitted he was disappointed that the call to help translate Scripture was met with a "rather cool reception."¹³⁵ With disappointing results, Stringfellow made one last push to gain support and request the aid of translators. He urged competent men to put aside their opinions on controversial issues so it would not hinder the interpretation of the Scriptures. Stringfellow was very concerned about making sure his congregation and other believers received the right translation and interpretation of Scripture.¹³⁶

It appears Stringfellow looked at controversial issues like slavery as a secondary issue in the realm of biblical matters. When requesting individuals to make up the panel for translating the Scriptures he said, "They (those selected to translate) will be selected,

¹³³ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, July 29, 1841.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

if this proposition is carried out, for their linguistic skills, without reference to denominational views, or their opinions on any particular question which may be the subject of controversy.” Stringfellow continued, “Probably not one would be an abolitionist or an advocate for slavery. Few of our scholars have taken sides in this matter.”¹³⁷ Though Bible translation was not as controversial as some issues, it was Stringfellow’s interpretation of Scripture that he used during the controversial debate of American slavery.

A more controversial issue at hand included baptismal regeneration and baptism and church membership. This January 18, 1843 article began the publication of a series of articles dealing with the issue of baptism. Stringfellow knew this issue was controversial, and he wanted the readers and those opposing him to know that he loved them and did not want the conflict to create division. He declared his stand on Christian unity before tackling the issue. “The great subject of Christian union is near my heart.”¹³⁸ This comment reflects his concern for Christian unity between him and his fellow scholars, but also on the fact that in Virginia, baptism was seen as a way of offering salvation. Stringfellow wanted his flock to know that faith was required for salvation and not baptism. Though he saw not being baptized as rebelling against God, he opposed obedience to Christ through baptism as a means to bring salvation. Stringfellow argued that he held to a strict interpretation of the Scriptures, and he believed the Scriptures taught against baptismal regeneration.¹³⁹ He wanted his congregation to know the truth

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, September 28, 1843.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

and said, “Happy I should be to make the smallest contribution in effecting an end so desirable, as that of restoring the lovers of Christ to that position from whence they will reflect his glory.” He wanted to make sure believers knew the way to salvation, and it was not through baptism, but through faith.

The year 1843 was the year that Stringfellow tackled the discussion of baptism and membership in the *Religious Herald*. In his article, he argued that baptism should not affect whether or not an individual gained membership into the church. He reaffirmed to the reader that the only qualification necessary for salvation and baptism is faith. It is fascinating that he argued this because he was baptized as an infant. Nonetheless, he claimed baptism is an expression of faith. Stringfellow was aware of members not being allowed to become church members because of the issue of baptism, and he argued that baptism should be “the door into membership of a church because that would put the keys in the hands of the minister.”¹⁴⁰ Stringfellow wrote against the Episcopal model of church government, and he must have felt that not allowing members into the church because of baptism would create a hierarchy within the Baptist church.¹⁴¹ It is important to note that Stringfellow’s first wife, Amelia, suffered through this issue.¹⁴² Could this have been a reason for Stringfellow’s assertive stance on the issue of baptism? Resources on Stringfellow never mention the issue.

Stringfellow’s writing on controversial issues did not stop with baptism. He focused on other issues like Freemasons being allowed to be church members. He

¹⁴⁰Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, April 13, 1843.

¹⁴¹This type of church model is a top-down explanation for leadership in the church. The Roman Catholic Church would be an example of the Episcopal model. Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, April 13, 1843; Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, January 2, 1845.

¹⁴² Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 15.

focused on denouncing the Episcopal model for church leadership and argued that the true apostolic succession traced to the Baptists. He never furthered his argument, but he argued that the true church is not made up of bishops or elders alone, because membership “exclusion” can develop and hinder individuals from hearing the Gospel.¹⁴³

Regarding the physical health of individuals, Stringfellow produced a work on the healing powers of spring water in Fauquier County, Virginia in 1851. Stringfellow was surprised at the “power and adaptedness of the Fauquier White Sulphur water.”¹⁴⁴ He, in this unusual article, claimed the water, with all of its solid medicinal ingredients, cured anything from diarrhea to “female complaints.”¹⁴⁵ How does this factor into Stringfellow’s role as a minister? Stringfellow gives full glory to God for His grace which had given the people of Stringfellow’s region a “provision He has made for the relief of our physical maladies.”¹⁴⁶

This article reveals Stringfellow’s character as a concerned pastor and Christian brother. “But of late years I have been pained in contemplating an immense amount of suffering in our country, for the relief of which the healing art has discovered no remedy.”¹⁴⁷ Stringfellow wanted all those who needed physical healing to know that God’s goodness was in this water. “To be silent, therefore, while so many hopeless

¹⁴³ Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald*, December 19, 1844; Thornton Stringfellow, *Religious Herald* January 2, 1845.

¹⁴⁴ Thornton Stringfellow, *Two Cases of Cure*, 4.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 10-11.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

sufferers are strangers to this merciful provision of a gracious God, would be sin.”¹⁴⁸

Stringfellow slipped in this article the true remedy for the soul by stating, “Jesus has connected with the cure of the soul a knowledge of the remedy . . . The physical beneficiary should feel an obligation to proclaim the only remedy known on earth.”¹⁴⁹

This article, again, possesses a stewardship characteristic by admonishing the reader that the true reason for physical remedies is God, and because of Christ there is a spiritual remedy.

Proslavery Writings

Examining Stringfellow’s life comes with risks because of his sanctioning of the peculiar institution. Avoiding this issue is not an option—it is the popularly termed “elephant in the room.” Stringfellow did focus on the issue of slavery to help protect his social structure of his community. He saw slavery as an institution that was based on biblical principles and to oppose slavery would be going against a Bible sanctioned institution. Stringfellow believed that only if God allows the conditions to be acceptable should the slave be loosed. John Robbins believes that it is unthinkable for Christians to be strong believers in their faith and support the institution of slavery. Robbins wrote that “Those who favor slavery either do not understand or do not believe the Bible.”¹⁵⁰ Stringfellow’s *Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* refutes Robbins’ observation.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Robbins, *Slavery and Christianity*. 13. Men like Stringfellow turned to the Scriptures more than any other source, and one had to have believed in the Bible to use it to defend a society under attack. Therefore, their interpretation may be wrong and eligible to be judged, but their faith and commitment to Christ should be considered separately.

The background of this work is firmly grounded in the slavery debate of the antebellum era. It was originally published in the *Religious Herald* in 1841 in response to a debate occurring between two Baptist theologians, Francis Wayland, of Brown University, and Richard Fuller from South Carolina.¹⁵¹ This is an example of a historical study that traced slavery back to the founding of the system in the days of old—when God, according to Stringfellow, created the system. This work earned several commendations, such as the one from James Henry Hammond who said that Stringfellow’s argument was “the best scriptural argument” for the defense of slavery.¹⁵²

Stringfellow declared that his opponents, who used Scripture to renounce the institution of slavery, argue that this peculiar institution is a great sin. He offered a definition of sin as, “something which God in his Word makes known to be wrong, either by perceptive prohibition, by principles of moral fitness, or examples of inspired men, contained in the sacred volume.”¹⁵³ Stringfellow believed that the Bible should be the main source when dealing with slavery. He appealed that all Christians should develop a “thus saith the Lord” attitude when dealing with what is considered sinful in “the sight of Heaven.” He urged that all mankind cling to the Bible and turn to it when making any decisions or arguments. Stringfellow warned that before one is quick to condemn slavery they should turn to the holy text God has given.¹⁵⁴ He believed that the Bible contained the solution for the slavery debate that plagued churches and southern society. He

¹⁵¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South 1830-1860*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 137.

¹⁵² James Henry Hammond to William Gilmore Simms, June 11, 1852, Hammond Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵³ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 138-39.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

admitted that if the institution was deemed as sinful in the Bible, it would be expected of all mankind practicing human servitude to end the practice. “If slavery be thus sinful, it behooves all Christians who are involved in the sin, to repent in dust and ashes, and wash their hands of it, without consulting with flesh and blood.”¹⁵⁵ He believed thoroughly that the Bible is the solution to all debates, and thus, it is important to examine how he used both the Old and New Testaments.

First, he wanted to show that God sanctioned slavery in the Patriarchal age. He began his argument from the Old Testament with the case that most proslavery ministers use to defend slavery—the “Curse of Ham.” Stringfellow declared that it is in Gen 9:25-27 that God decreed the institution before it existed. He says that “the language is used to show the favor God would exercise to the posterity of Shem and Japheth, while they held the posterity of Ham in a state of *abject bondage*.”¹⁵⁶ Stringfellow used this passage to show that God has ordained upon the African race a system of human servitude. He held to the belief at the time that there were once three major racial groups that God created.¹⁵⁷ Stringfellow did not mention the differences in race unlike the apologetic set forth by individuals like Josiah Priest. Priest argued that there were three types of races—red, white, and black. Priest argued that Ham was black; therefore, since Ham was decreed a servant to Shem and Japheth, and Ham was black, all black descendants of Ham inherited the state of slavery.¹⁵⁸ Stringfellow never did take this obvious route in his

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 138-40, 166.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵⁷ Cleaver, *Albert Barnes*, 64.

¹⁵⁸ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: On the Origin, History, and Fortunes of the Negro Race*. (Glasgow, KY: Rev. W.S. Brown, 1853), 19, 33.

Brief Examination, but instead he showed that the “Curse of Canaan” supported the institution itself rather than the racial difference between men. He did, in a subtle way, agree with Priest that there were different types of races among men; “as well as the Canaanites or Africans, who descended from Ham. . . .”¹⁵⁹ The evidence to show that Stringfellow supported or did not support the popular belief in the “three race” theory is simply not there; therefore, one can only speculate.

Stringfellow showed that Abraham was the holder of many slaves. He pointed to Gen 14:14 to show that Abraham armed all male servants of his house—all three hundred and eighteen of them—to attack Lot’s captors. Stringfellow’s point was that even though Abraham was the holder of many slaves, he was still in God’s favor. “It is clear that the highest manifestations of good-will which he ever gave to mortal man, was given to Abraham. . . .”¹⁶⁰ He focused on the wealth that God had bestowed upon Abraham (Gen 11:16) that included “men-servants and maid-servants.”¹⁶¹ Stringfellow argued that slavery is not against God’s will, because Abimelech presented Abraham with items of extreme wealth that would not contradict Abraham’s moral obligations. Slaves, according to Stringfellow, was one of the most “highly-prized items of wealth.”¹⁶²

Stringfellow’s second point of his apology is to show that slavery was included into the only constitution coming from God. In this portion of his argument, Stringfellow pointed to Lev 25:44-46 (KJV):

¹⁵⁹ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 140.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 141, 149.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 142; Cf. Gen 20:14,16.

Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.

Stringfellow argued that these passages of Scripture were evidence that God had given the authorization to obtain and to own slaves. “I ask any candid man, if the words of this institution could be more explicit? It is from God himself. It allows foreign slaveholders to settle and live among; to breed slaves and sell them.”¹⁶³ He used this passage to argue that when God gave man a constitution of government, he gave the children of Israel the right to slavery. Therefore, God, according to Stringfellow, expressed no disapprobation to slavery. Stringfellow argued that there were two different types of slavery, hereditary and voluntary slavery, and he used Lev 25:39-43 to show that there are two states of servitude in the Bible.

Albert Barnes, on the other hand, looked at this same passage and argued that God did not institute anything to check this system of bondage. Barnes also argued that God did not set forth institute a set of doctrines that would lead “to its (slavery) perpetuity or the enlargement of its influence.” Barnes argued that sense none of these things occurred, it was unfair to assume God was friendly toward this institution.¹⁶⁴

The third component of Stringfellow’s argument is to show Christ recognized slavery as a legal institution among men. Stringfellow used various arguments from the New Testament to support his claim that slavery was sanctioned not only in the Old

¹⁶³ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 152.

¹⁶⁴ Barnes, *Inquiry into Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 244.

Testament, but also in the days of the disciples and the apostle Paul. Stringfellow directed his reader to the fact that Christ never gave a direct commandment against the institution of slavery. “Jesus Christ has not abolished slavery by a prohibitory command: and second, I affirm, he has introduced no new moral principle which can work its destruction under the gospel dispensation.”¹⁶⁵ Stringfellow assumed to know the mind of God when he stated, “Now, I say, here is the case made out, which certainly would call forth the command from Christ, to abolish slavery, if he ever intended to abolish it.”¹⁶⁶ Stringfellow made a convincing argument, but one should realize that Christ’s argument was an argument of silence.

Albert Barnes, in his *An Inquiry into Scriptural Views of Slavery*, refuted this claim when he argued that it was uncertain whether Christ ever came in contact with slavery at all. Barnes said that nothing was proven by Christ’s silence because “it was by no means his method to go out of his way to denounce sins which prevailed in other parts of the earth . . . He condemned the sins of his own age and country. . . .”¹⁶⁷

Stringfellow continued with his argument from the New Testament to show the system was legally recognized by the apostle Paul. He looked to the Epistles to show the system’s sanctioning among the Apostles. For example, Stringfellow argued that Paul, when writing to the church at Colossae, recognized three forms of relationships—wives and husbands, parents and children, and slaves and masters.¹⁶⁸ Second, Stringfellow took great care in showing his historical knowledge and concern for obtaining the best

¹⁶⁵ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 156.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁶⁷ Barnes, *Inquiry into Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 244.

¹⁶⁸ Thornton Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of Scripture,” 157.

understanding of the historical context in which Paul wrote. Other criticism is that this early work completely ignored the true brutality often associated with southern slavery. He ignored the separation of families and other acts of atrocity. Genovese praises Thornwell for being “the greatest theologian on the South.”¹⁶⁹ He argues that Thornwell knew much of the world because of his travels. Stringfellow, in contrast, spent the majority of his time, except for a brief time in South Carolina, in Virginia, because of his ailment.¹⁷⁰ Stringfellow probably never really had the opportunity to experience slavery in states other than Virginia.

Instead, Stringfellow, like many other apologists, turned to the pages of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁷¹ Gibbon did not hide the horrors of slavery, but nonetheless, Stringfellow found enough in Gibbon’s work to show there were humane characteristics of slavery. Genovese attributes this usage of Gibbon to Stringfellow’s perception of how Gibbon saw the racial thinking through Tacitus’ “barbarism of ancient Germans and by his description of the harshness of slavery among the Goths, Burgundians, and Franks.”¹⁷²

Stringfellow wanted to use a method of putting a barrier between the North and the South. He saw that the best way to bring peace to his home was to defend the institution that abolitionists abhorred. His *Brief Examination* was full of attacks reserved specifically for the abolitionist. He used Paul’s letter to Titus to show that some abolitionists reminded him of false teachers who are “abominable and disobedient” to the

¹⁶⁹ Genovese, “Slavery Ordained of God,” 131.

¹⁷⁰ “Obituary of Thornton Stringfellow,” *Religious Herald*, March 18, 1869.

¹⁷¹ Stringfellow cited Gibbon on several occasions throughout his *Brief Examination of Scripture*.

¹⁷² Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 268.

state and to God. He gave the example of Paul warning Titus of false teachers and warns the servants to be obedient to their masters (Titus 1:16 and 2:1-10).¹⁷³ His main focus was not on instructing the Christian in leading a spiritual healthy life, but it was more on the continuation of his passion for Bible translation. In other words, Stringfellow wanted to show how the Bible supported slavery through his way of interpreting Scripture.

Stringfellow's *Brief Examination of Scripture* gave clear examples of the four different characteristics that describe his writings. First, this writing is definitely controversial. Stringfellow, like his northern counterpart Albert Barnes, used Scripture, as Scriptural references or Scriptural arguments, over forty times to defend the peculiar institution. His work, when compared to apologists like Thornwell and Priest, was one of the most exhaustive defenses of slavery in the nineteenth century. Second, the writing exhibits a concern brought by as constant fear and exposure to division and violence. "Our citizens have been murdered—our property has been stolen—our lives have been put in jeopardy—our characteristics traduced—and attempts made to force political slavery upon us in the place of domestic (slavery), by strangers who have no right to meddle with our matters."¹⁷⁴

In 1856, the year of the violent outbreak in Kansas, Stringfellow's *Brief Examination* expanded into *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* and was published in the *Religious Herald*. This work is not only one of the most influential pieces in the slavery debate, but it is also one of Stringfellow's best examples of comparing the Christian character of the American South to that of the American North.

¹⁷³ Thornton Stringfellow, "A Brief Examination of Scripture," 160.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

His work did not fail to keep with the passion to spread the Gospel. Stringfellow firmly believed in the proclamation of the Gospel and used slavery as a means to do so. This passion was not unusual. In fact, this was seen in his early years of ministry.

As early as 1817, Stringfellow rallied support for missions from various Baptist associations like the Kettocton Association.¹⁷⁵ Stringfellow's goal was to be as persuasive as possible to gain support for spreading the Gospel to the heathen. In 1846, Stringfellow became Vice President of the Southern Baptist Convention's Domestic Mission Board.¹⁷⁶ He believed that God's work could be accomplished through missionary work. Stringfellow's enthusiasm about work in the mission field and was compatible with his view of slavery as a means of evangelization. He believed slavery was the best way to spread the Gospel to those who were forced to labor in the American South. Stringfellow, in *Scriptural and Statistical View*, said that the Gospel was to be preached to all men because faith in the Gospel created Christian men. Stringfellow asserted that the poor should have the Gospel spread to them unless evangelicals risk excluding Christ from their work.¹⁷⁷

Stringfellow claimed that the reason he argued against the North was because of an obvious law decreed by the Almighty. "The fundamental law of God, *for its propagation* requires the gospel to be preached to every creature."¹⁷⁸ Here Stringfellow argued that in the South, the African had a better atmosphere to hear the Gospel because the number of churches in the southern United States. "These slave states . . . have

¹⁷⁵ Faust, "Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument," 7.

¹⁷⁶ Broaddus, Minutes of Shiloh Baptist Historical Association, 14.

¹⁷⁷ Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views*, 114-19.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

erected nearly double number of churches, and furnished accommodation for upwards of a million more persons, to hear the gospel. . . .”¹⁷⁹ With the claims from the northern clergy that the southern slaveholders were un-Christian, Stringfellow used the number of both regions to disagree with this point.

Stringfellow also defended his society by showing the state of the African race in New England compared to the southern United States. To Stringfellow, the slave enjoyed peace and had a place to “soothe his wants.”¹⁸⁰ He showed that the slave in the southern United States was in a better condition than the wage laborers in the northern United States. The wage-laboring system was considered un-Christian. Stringfellow’s view was not uncommon for his day. George Fitzhugh, a prominent southern writer and speaker made the same argument in his book *Cannibals All!* Fitzhugh argued the slave was the recipient of good Christian morals displayed in the South, and it is because of this that the slave is content. “Good treatment and proper discipline renders the slave happier, healthier, more valuable, grateful, and contented.”¹⁸¹ Fitzhugh defended slavery in the context of Christian morals by arguing that the slave was kept in a system where he was cared for and protected. He argued that to emancipate the slave would only injure the slave and not benefit him.¹⁸² According to Faust, Stringfellow’s church was close enough to Fitzhugh’s home in Port Royal for the two men to meet and discuss their beliefs.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 115-16.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹⁸¹ George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*, (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857), 215.

¹⁸² Ibid., 218.

¹⁸³ Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” 13.

Unfortunately, there is no information that is in existence to indicate whether the two men met and exchanged ideas.

Stringfellow blatantly attacked the North for displaying un-Christian behavior to its laborers. Stringfellow's arguments appear to be concerned for the slave's spiritual and physical well-being. Synonymous with this is the fact Stringfellow clearly believed God's grace should be extended to all—even those in bondage were God's creatures and should not be excluded from God's grace. For Stringfellow, slavery was the best possible way of benefitting the African, especially after he researched the northern wage-labor system. Finally, Stringfellow's work possessed a unique characteristic: he believed in eventual emancipation, but he believed that it was to only be in God's time, and God would permit the conditions to loose the slave.¹⁸⁴

Many slavery apologists looked to Stringfellow's *Scriptural and Statistical View* to defend slavery on a scriptural level. One of the South's most radical nationalists, Edmund Ruffin declared that Stringfellow helped him defend slavery. Ruffin was "so impressed" with him that he incorporated Stringfellow's writing into his work offering numeral facts to defend slavery.¹⁸⁵ Ruffin did criticize him for speaking above the common man's intellectual capabilities.

The work was worthy enough to appear in E. N. Elliot's *Cotton is King*. Elliot complimented Stringfellow as being one of the best in arguing from the Bible. Elliot

¹⁸⁴ Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views*, 149. Stringfellow said, "We cannot put an end to African slavery, if we would—and we ought not, if we could—until God opens a door to make its termination a blessing, and not a curse. When He does that, slavery in this Union will end."

¹⁸⁵ William Kauffman Scarborough, ed. *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin: Vol. I Toward Independence October, 1856-April, 1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 327.

argued that Stringfellow delivered the scriptural defense with “irresistible force.”¹⁸⁶ In a letter written by James Henry Hammond to William Gilmore Simms, Hammond complimented Stringfellow for presenting the “best scriptural argument”¹⁸⁷ Eugene Genovese mentions that Stringfellow influenced several other individuals in their biblical defenses of slavery. Genovese credits Stringfellow influencing individuals like William C. Preston. He states that Stringfellow influenced Charles Campbell, a Virginia historian in the mid nineteenth century. Stringfellow’s *Scriptural and Statistical* impacted Campbell’s *History of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia* which was based in Scripture.¹⁸⁸

Stringfellow’s Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History, Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom

Among the other works Stringfellow used to uphold his southern society against northern arguments was his *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History, Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom*. It was in this work that Stringfellow argued that the North, if they held to their abolitionist beliefs, would provoke murderers like John Brown. Stringfellow pointed to John Brown as someone who would bring “destruction of all the safeguards of life and property.”¹⁸⁹ He warned that this radical abolitionist threatened the morality of his community by resisting personal and property rights.¹⁹⁰ Stringfellow informed the reader that there were those in

¹⁸⁶ E. N. Elliot, *Cotton is King* (New York: Negro University Press, 1860), xiii.

¹⁸⁷ James Henry Hammond to William Gilmore Simms, June 11, 1852.

¹⁸⁸ Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 494.

¹⁸⁹ Thornton Stringfellow, *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History*, 6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

the North who would embrace the Word of God. Stringfellow wanted to be the individual to help lead these people to Christ, “Hoping that God in his providence will make me an humble instrument in opening the eyes. . . .”¹⁹¹ In this work he also addressed epistle to Philemon. Stringfellow argued that it is in this book of the New Testament that Paul ministered to a slave, and Stringfellow believed that the same should be of those in the South.¹⁹² Paul was under no law to return Onesimus, but did so through inspiration.¹⁹³

One difference between this work and Stringfellow’s other writings on slavery like his *Scriptural and Statistical View* and *Brief Examination of Scripture* was that the tone of his writing was different. The language he used in this work indicates that he wrote to a scholarly audience even though it contains the same arguments. Stringfellow focused on the concept of liberty and argued that “Too large a measure or too great an abridgement of liberty is equally fatal to the welfare of a people and to the happiness of individuals.”¹⁹⁴ The difference can be seen in this work when he clearly stated that the African race was not qualified to govern or exercise power.¹⁹⁵

Beth B. Schweiger states that Stringfellow tried to appeal to a large and different type of audience in this particular work. Here, she says, Stringfellow was trying to show that the Bible was both morally and politically “expedient.”¹⁹⁶ She is correct in arguing

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹² Ibid., 54.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Schweiger, “The Resurrection of Southern Religion,” 301. Schweiger points out that Stringfellow placed his honorary “D.D.” on this writing, but she does not discuss the fact that this was one

that this work is more political than biblical, but it does contain Scripture and should be considered as part of Stringfellow's biblical argument.

The reason for the political tone of his work was probably because of the violence and turmoil spreading through the United States. Unlike his earlier writings on slavery, Stringfellow points to John Brown and warns of the chaos that was brought on by this man. Also, while his initial work stayed with the Scriptures, the 1856 edition contained traces of slavery being defended as a positive good. Finally, Stringfellow's 1861 writing was purely a political writing mixed with biblical arguments to show the turmoil occurring in the nation.

Stringfellow's pastoral career was filled with writing to God's children. He wrote to urge individuals to put their differences aside for the spiritual good of others when it came to Bible translation. He was adamant in letting believers know that their salvation was based on their faith in Jesus Christ and not in the waters of baptism. Third, Stringfellow wanted those in church leadership to know that baptism was not to be a prerequisite for church membership. He tackled other controversial issues which brought about many responses in the *Religious Herald*. Fourth, he was concerned with the physical well-being of others, all the while making sure they knew the ultimate source for their ailments. His belief in a Providence that provided kindness was a main characteristic in his writing, but he wanted to make it clear that God's love and grace should be extended to all, and it was through the institution of slavery where the African, so he believed, would be in a better condition to receive God's grace.

of his first writings since the honorary degree was bestowed upon him by Richmond College in 1856. See Minutes of the Richmond College Board of Trustees, June 24, 1856.

His work on slavery, other than the accusations made against the North, possessed the same characteristics as his other writings on baptism, Bible translation, church membership, and natural cures given by God. Therefore, Stringfellow's works, because they all possess the same characteristics were an extension of his pastoral career. Even his proslavery writings indicate a man who defended slavery because of his concern for the social structure of his community and state in general.

CONCLUSION

Historians have already covered the area of Stringfellow's defense of slavery and why he defended the peculiar institution, but their picture of this slavery apologist is incomplete because they only show him as one dimensional. A look at Stringfellow's personal life, his historical context, and additional writings complete the painting and show Stringfellow cared for his flock as a pastor and moral steward, and that is why he defended slavery.

His background reveals a man who came from a family where education was among the most important riches of the world. He used this passion for education to read and study the Scriptures. This passion led to a conversion experience that ultimately culminated in his ordination. He used his position as pastor to uphold the morals and spiritual well-being of his social community. He believed the Gospel was the roadmap of the journey of life, and it was that roadmap he used for his own personal life. Therefore, he believed defending slavery was his personal duty as pastor to uphold the Christian character of his society.

Stringfellow's concern with the social structure was based in the reality that the nineteenth century was not a time of peace or unity. The fear that followed Nat Turner's rebellion created a sense that the slave in the southern United States was an inferior and reckless being. Stringfellow believed slavery was the best institution to help educate the slave and protect his chaotic community from rebellious slaves.

Stringfellow was among those individuals who defended slavery in order to keep those like John Brown from ruining their society. He believed that if those who advocated radical abolition were allowed to practice what they preached then chaos and

sorrow would follow for his community. He warned that Brown, though dead, left many men behind who did not believe in order and obedience when it came to society and government. Stringfellow believed Brown resisted, and therefore threatened, these laws that protected his community's morals.¹⁹⁷

As the nation began to break apart so did different church denominations. The Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists all felt the divisive sword that was the slavery debate. The issue of slavery brought so much division that these three denominations decided that they best served their community, nation as a whole, and God as separate northern and southern sects. Stringfellow, since he was a Baptist, could not escape the divisive attitude. Because the issue of missions and evangelism was at the heart of the 1845 Baptist split, Stringfellow believed it was necessary for him to support his fellow Christian southerners in the split in order to have the opportunity to deliver the Gospel to those in slavery. Stringfellow argued that slavery was one of the best forms of evangelism and should be seen as a blessing to not only to the slave but to the community.

The violence of the nineteenth century continued when cooler heads did not prevail in the Kansas territory in the mid nineteenth century. With the violence in Lawrence, Kansas and the Brooks-Sumner incident in the United States Congress, the nation reached its boiling point. Men like John Brown wanted more severe action and less rhetoric. His actions in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry sent shockwaves through Virginia and especially at "Bell Air."

Stringfellow spent a lot of his time writing to express his concerns for the souls of his flock and congregation in the areas of baptism, Bible translation, church membership,

¹⁹⁷ Thornton Stringfellow, *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature, and History*, 26, 32.

and slavery. His non-slavery works reveal a man who saw himself as a pastor working as a moral steward to educate his flock. His three writings on slavery detail the same characteristics, but the stigma of proslavery thought rests on them. Nonetheless, all of Stringfellow's works show a man who looked to the Bible for guidance. He used this guidance to educate his community, so it would not crumble due to the tumultuous time. Stringfellow's defense of slavery was an extension of his pastoral career because he was a pastor who saw himself as steward guarding the social structure of his Virginia in a time when he must have felt that structure could collapse at any moment.

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