

Liberty University

The Truth Shall Set You Free:  
The Bible, the Revolution, and the Debate Over Slavery  
in the American South

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by  
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## Introduction

Before the slavery debate pushed a divided American nation to the brink of civil war, the argument divided the family of God. By the time cannon fire erupted at Fort Sumter, Christians had already staked out positions based on sophisticated lines of argument they used to justify or condemn chattel slavery. The generation coming of age during the Civil War era witnessed a debate more intense and contentious than their ancestors had seen, but in terms of the arguments employed, it broke very little fresh ground. Contrary to the assumption that antebellum apologists in the South invented the defense of slavery as a positive good, the attempt to defend chattel slavery began long before ministers argued for the benefits of the institution in the 1830s.<sup>1</sup> People of God largely supported the growth and virtue of slavery based on a narrow

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<sup>1</sup> Defenses of slavery (beneficial for the slave and society) actually existed long before the 1830s and 1840s. However, one must read carefully to avoid getting the impression of a rather sudden appearance of those defenses in works by respected historians as well as textbooks for middle school and college students. Perhaps the best example of this thinking can be found in William Sumner Jenkins *Pro-slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935). Charles Irons summarizes a part of the historiography of the religious argument for slavery. “Others have generally agreed with (Joel) Williamson that, like southern politicians, southern divines invented ingenious new ways to justify their ownership of black men and women after encountering the scathing criticism of Garrisonian abolitionists in the 1830s.” Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 13. In the following passage, James McPherson uses the words of those living in the antebellum era to illustrate the point. “By 1840 slavery was no longer a necessary evil; it was ‘a great moral, social, and political blessing—a blessing to the slave, and a blessing to the master’.... ‘Instead of an evil,’ said John C. Calhoun in summing up the southern position, slavery was a ‘positive good...the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world.’” James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56. In a college history text the authors make the following statement, “By the 1820s the institution of Negro slavery had come to dominate all aspects of Southern society. Apologies for slavery as an unfortunate though necessary evil were beginning to give way to aggressive self-justification.” Later they state, “Meanwhile, sectional conflict had committed many Southerners to the dogma that slavery was a ‘positive good.’” Bernard Bailyn, David Brion Davis, David Herbert Donald, John L. Thomas, Robert H. Wiebe, and Gordon S. Wood, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, vol. I (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1977), 566, 581. A middle school text states, “During the 1820s and 1830s, some slaves rebelled and killed white people. After that, white Southerners started to be afraid of the slaves. Slavery became even more cruel.... Some Southerners began finding excuses for slavery. Others began to say it was a fine way of life—for slave and master.” Joy Hakim, *A History of US: The New Nation Book Four*, Revised Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153. While none of these statements are historically inaccurate, they speak to a common assumption that a new defense was devised in response to a fear of slave revolt or radical abolitionism. It is more accurate to note that the debate intensified and spread to a national stage, but the assertion of slavery as a mutually beneficial institution actually occurred long before the antebellum debate. For an excellent alternative assessment of the source of the “proslavery” or “positive good” argument see Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987). Tise’s

perception informed by their own personal experience. The slavery they knew was benevolent, not the degrading aberration described by abolitionists. The blacks they knew were not the social or intellectual equals of whites and thus, would benefit from being enslaved. The Bible they knew afforded proslavery Christians enough justification to support their preconceived notions. These factors combined to create a defense of slavery they viewed as consistent and justifiable.

Christians committed to the same Bible, arrived at completely different conclusions regarding the biblical sanction of slavery. Their willingness to make Scripture fit their preconceived notions concerning the nature of slavery in the American South helped widen the disagreement. Common misconceptions over the racial inferiority of blacks evidenced an intellectual blind-spot that led both sides to equate race slavery with biblical slavery. These misconceptions caused many to claim the Bible sanctioned slavery even as they dismissed any possible scriptural distinction between servitude regulated by the Almighty and the brutal, demeaning brand of race slavery practiced primarily by southerners. Thinkers on both sides commonly considered biblical references, Enlightenment concepts of the natural rights of man, and pragmatic economic and social arguments to construct a formidable polemic. The early arguments informed the later debate, and a common thread wound its way through the dialogue, from colonial days through the national challenge of Reconstruction. While Christians disagreed regarding what Scripture proscribed, they chose to contextualize the Bible and define slavery in a manner best suited to their argument. The debate simmered for over a century. Ironically, it was agreement regarding the racial inferiority of the black that enabled some men to accept slavery while it prevented others from drawing a clear distinction between biblical servitude and race

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exhaustive research and logical conclusions shed light on the assumption of a late invention of the “positive good” argument.

slavery. The volatile combination of misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and ignorance could only remain dormant for so long. The emotionally charged atmosphere of the mid-nineteenth century became the incubator that released the contagion of disunion upon the nation. Many lamented the coming of that dreaded day; others wondered how the nation had maintained a semblance of unity for so long.

By the mid-nineteenth century the political and social atmosphere in the South was decidedly proslavery. It was no longer acceptable to live in the South and espouse antislavery views. By this time, most of the antislavery clergy in the South had either modified their public position on slavery or fled north where their views were more readily accepted.

Ironically, southern pulpits had once rung with antislavery rhetoric similar to that espoused by their northern brethren. The passion and defiance of most proslavery southern evangelical clergy in the 1830s contrasted with the opposition to slavery evident among many clerics in the eighteenth-century South. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the denominational majority in the South primarily included Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians—many of whom challenged the slave system.<sup>2</sup> Historian James Farmer notes that some claim the nascent abolitionist movement in the South was as strong as its northern counterpart.<sup>3</sup> Donald Matthews describes the Virginia Methodist Conference of the early nineteenth century where one could occasionally find a ministerial candidate promising to emancipate his slaves, a deacon suspended for purchasing slaves, or an aspiring minister refused ordination simply for owning slaves.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David B Cheesebrough, *God Ordained This War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 143.

<sup>3</sup> James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 195-96.

<sup>4</sup> Donald G. Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality 1780-1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 38. The purpose here is not to argue that southern clerics opposed slavery as passionately, or even as long as their northern counterparts. Nor is it to assert that all antislavery clerics hailed from

For the historian, and for the Christian, there must be a logical explanation for the apparent hypocrisy evident in the divergent positions regarding chattel slavery. How could two clergymen read the same Bible and come to completely different conclusions regarding the issue of slavery? Why would Bible-believing men resist the abolition of a system that permitted one human being to own another human being? The temptation to dismiss every proslavery defender as a disingenuous charlatan who did not really believe what he preached cannot long endure when one carefully examines the depth and breadth of his arguments. The position that eventually led to ecclesiastical and political disunion was not limited to a few fire-breathing preachers who led an entire region astray. The issue cannot be resolved with a cursory glance at the historical record and a corresponding dismissal of the proslavery argument as the creation of a few bigoted religious zealots. Christians on both sides of the argument genuinely believed they were defending a position grounded in holy writ.

Many of the central themes in the antebellum slavery debate existed during the colonial period and gradually developed into the detailed conversation that eventually led to a national fight over emancipation. The discussion often involved a mission to the slaves that promised to produce a civilized and obedient servant who had successfully emerged from the trappings of his heathen past. A number of concepts directly related to the African race emerged including the curse of Canaan, an assumption of African inferiority, and an understanding of the black's place

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the North and all proslavery clerics from the South. In fact, chapter three of this work will examine the position of John Henry Hopkins, a noted Episcopal priest from Vermont who supported slavery. In keeping with a major theme that will be developed later, the point is to establish that arguments for and against chattel slavery existed before the widespread and heated rhetoric of the mid-1800s. The proslavery viewpoint stiffened due to fear of slave insurrection and a direct reaction to radical abolitionism's insistence on immediate emancipation, but many of the arguments they used can be traced back over 100 years before the Civil War. From colonial times through the early national period most citizens could be characterized as proslavery. While many were uncomfortable with the particulars of the system, they agreed slavery was a necessary part of social order, or they begrudgingly accepted biblical sanction. Those who did oppose chattel slavery often did so privately, or were shouted down when they dared to challenge the *status quo*. The later debate widened and intensified. In terms of the logic behind the rhetoric, it rarely changed.

in an ordered society. Men in both camps argued over the biblical sanction of slavery as it related to the patriarchs and Old Testament law, or to the apostles' directives for masters and slaves. Many pointedly asserted that Christ chose not to condemn slavery while others noted that he never sanctioned it. While both sides conveniently appropriated proof texts and general principles to support their positions, proslavery men often cited texts specifically mentioning slavery to counter antislavery arguments for the general principles of Christianity evident in the Golden Rule of Christ. Southerners often claimed northern churches were headed towards liberalism. Northerners argued the Bible clearly stated that the entire human race had descended from one blood line, a concept roughly congruent with Jefferson's declaration that "all men are created equal." The individual's personal understanding of the nature of slavery often determined his ultimate conclusions regarding any acceptance of human bondage. If they viewed slavery in terms of a familial relationship benefitting slave, master, and society, they were more willing to accept its legitimacy. If they saw it as a degrading and barbaric institution, they would aggressively oppose it. These themes characterized the antebellum defense of slavery as a positive good.

In an effort to identify the origins of the debate and to assess the depth of commitment on both sides of the issue, this paper will begin with an examination of the colonial period viewed primarily through the eyes of two giants of the Great Awakening. It will follow the thread of argument through the American Revolution and the radical assertion of human equality, and conclude with a thorough discussion of the particulars of the argument as defined by several prominent antebellum preachers. The story begins with ideas forged in the fires of evangelical revival.

## Chapter One

### Awakening A Social Conscience: George Whitefield, John Wesley and the Colonial Debate Over Slavery

In the years leading to the American Civil War, a debate raged among the clergy over the legitimacy of chattel slavery. Ministers on both sides of the issue condemned the institution as contrary to the spirit of the gospel or defended it as consistent with Old and New Testament teaching. While the Quakers stood consistently in opposition to slavery, other personalities would arise in the evangelical world to rally an awakened populace.<sup>1</sup> Long before this debate attracted the attention of a divided nation, two well known Great Awakening ministers made their positions a matter of public record. Several of those arguments informed the antebellum debate long after both men passed. These men made their mark on history through their gospel preaching; they also contributed to the early slavery debate.

George Whitefield and John Wesley had much in common. From their early years in the Holy Club to their efforts in evangelizing the British Empire, they worked tirelessly to advance the gospel. Wesley visited Georgia early in his ministry while Whitefield made several

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<sup>1</sup> In 1688 a group of Quakers signed an antislavery document in Germantown, Pennsylvania. While Quakers were initially slaveholders, the Society of Friends was probably the first organized religion to oppose slavery in the colonies. The Germantown statement did not immediately signal a sea change in the collective Quaker position, but it represented an important first step. Later leaders like John Woolman and Anthony Benezet helped popularize antislavery sentiment among Quakers. In 1754, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued an open statement opposing slavery. In 1776, the Meeting banned slave ownership for Quakers in its jurisdiction. Jean Soderlund notes, "Many Friends then helped to foster the growth of abolitionism in American society at large." Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 4. It is important to note that Quakers moved slowly toward their antislavery position. It happened at different times in different regions. Soderlund also explains that, until the 1750s, most Quakers either owned slaves or tolerated the practice as long as slaves were treated fairly. Like most other citizens, they rarely thought of slavery. They did consistently oppose the slave trade because it so frequently resulted in violence (4). Soderlund states, "Though Pennsylvania and New Jersey Friends agreed to discourage slave importation as early as 1696, they could not reach a sense of the meeting to prohibit slaveholding until eighty years later, primarily because a considerable number of leading members owned slaves until that time" (173). Rufus Jones asserts, "There was little or no moral sentiment in the colonies against slavery in the seventeenth century, and Friends fell in with the custom, as others did, with few apparent scruples. They were, however, from the first awake to the fact that black people were human, and deserved proper treatment as human beings, though they evidently did not see, before the middle of the eighteenth century, that slavery *per se* must go." Rufus M. Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1911), 156. It took some time for the Quakers to reach consensus. Once they agreed, they stood consistently against slavery earlier and longer than most American Christians.

pilgrimages to the American colonies. Although they shared a common purpose, their methodology differed. Whitefield's silver-tongued oratory made him one of the greatest speakers of his day. Wesley's ordinary style still managed to stir the hearts of his listeners.<sup>2</sup> Whitefield arrived in a community, preached fervently and quickly moved on with no inclination to organize his converts and followers. Conversely, Wesley was a master organizer who founded many religious societies in England.<sup>3</sup> Whitefield had an evangelical flair seasoned with a gift for self-promotion. He used the media to prepare a community for his arrival thereby increasing the size of the crowds and preparing the way for his message of the new birth. The revivals of the 1760s showcased Whitefield's celebrity and marketing acumen. The media, primarily newspapers, focused on the revival meetings he led.<sup>4</sup> Their personalities and preaching styles were as different as their views on slavery.

Wesley and Whitefield eventually drifted apart over their celebrated views regarding the theological polarities of Calvinism and Arminianism. Another disagreement, perhaps less publicized, involved their views on chattel slavery. While both men shared a concern for the well being of slaves, and a common desire to evangelize them, Whitefield's views moderated to a point where he was willing to defend the legitimacy of slavery and eventually purchase slaves himself.<sup>5</sup> Wesley, however, consistently condemned slavery.

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Gallay, "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South," *The Journal of Southern History* 53, no.3 [August, 1987]: 375.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 376-77.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 268. Whitefield spent his early years in the theater and was, perhaps, the premier communicator of his day. Judging by his success in propagating his message, Wesley was probably not a poor speaker. He was simply being compared to an exceptional one. For a thorough discussion of Whitefield's communication skills and public impact see Jerome Dean Mahaffey's *Preaching Politics: The Religious Rhetoric of George Whitefield and the Founding of a New Nation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 91-93.

## GEORGE WHITEFIELD

On George Whitefield's first trip to America, he witnessed the brutality and cruelty of slavery, and what he saw in Maryland moved him to action. In 1740, he entered the slavery debate with a letter written to the inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, castigating slave owners for their mistreatment of slaves. Benjamin Franklin published the letter in pamphlet form, and it quickly spread in newspapers across the colonies. While Whitefield was not the first to condemn the brutality of the institution, by the time of his letter the colonies had grown in population and communication capabilities to a point where this letter attracted public attention to the issue as nothing before had done.<sup>6</sup> Whitefield's effort was a bold and courageous step, as he opened himself to scathing criticism from slave holders who naturally felt threatened by his rebuke.<sup>7</sup>

In his letter, Whitefield did not mince words. He began in a spirit of humility, even admitting he was not addressing the legality of slavery, but quickly moved to open condemnation. He argued that it was sinful to treat slaves as brutes and work them harder than a horse.<sup>8</sup> Slaves worked doggedly to provide comforts for slave owners while they were not personally provisioned. Whitefield wrote, "my blood has almost run cold within me, when I have considered how many of your slaves have neither convenient food to eat, not proper raiment to put on, notwithstanding most of the comforts you enjoy were solely owing to their

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Revival* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1970), 496-97.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 495-97.; Gallay, "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism," 380. See also Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St Martins's, 2008), 112.

<sup>8</sup> George Whitefield, "Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield (Philadelphia: Franklin, 1740), 13. Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800. See also John Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 126.

indefatigable labours.”<sup>9</sup> The slaveholders’ refusal to treat their slaves with even a modicum of care further enraged Whitefield. “Your dogs are caressed and fondled at your Tables: But your Slaves, who are frequently styled Dogs or Beasts, have not an equal privilege. They are scarce permitted to pick up the Crumbs which fall from their Master’s Tables.”<sup>10</sup> Given the brutality and inhumanity to which slaves were consistently subjected, Whitefield was amazed that suicide or slave rebellion was not more common among the slave population.<sup>11</sup>

Foreshadowing one of his primary justifications for owning slaves later in his life, Whitefield addressed the soul of the slave. As bad as the physical and psychological abuse was, the greater crime was against the soul. “Enslaving or misusing their Bodies would, comparatively speaking, be an inconsiderable Evil, was proper Care taken of their Souls. But I have great reason to believe, that most of you, on Purpose, keep your Negroes ignorant of Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, during his preaching tours through America, Whitefield claimed it was not uncommon for slaves to ask him if they even had a soul.<sup>13</sup> Whitefield’s letter castigated the slave establishment, warning them of eternal retribution if they did not mend their ways.

Whitefield’s ideas concerning the conversion of blacks present a challenge for the historian. In some ways, he was ahead of his time. Many in the colonial period viewed the black as not quite an animal but possibly not fully human. This idea practically prevented the slave from considering the gospel, and many refused to allow a slave to be exposed to the message of

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<sup>9</sup> Whitefield, “Three Letters,” 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14; Galloway, “The Origins of Slaveholders’ Paternalism,” 381.

<sup>12</sup> Whitefield, “Three Letters,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 499.

the new birth.<sup>14</sup> Whitefield asserted in his letter, “Blacks are just as much, and no more, conceived and born in Sin as White Men are. Both, if born and bred up here, I am persuaded, are naturally capable of the same Improvement.”<sup>15</sup> Whitefield had spoken with blacks in the North and South and was convinced that a simple presentation of the gospel would yield genuine fruit. In his *Journals* Whitefield confidently noted that “negro children, if early brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, would make as great proficiency as any white people’s children.”<sup>16</sup> Slaves would gladly serve their heavenly master with a passion and devotion not shown to their cruel earthly masters.<sup>17</sup> Whitefield warned planters that continued neglect of their Christian duty toward their slaves would bring divine punishment; he even asserted that a willingness to permit or participate in ministry to slaves was an evidence of genuine conversion.<sup>18</sup> He linked concern for slaves with his evangelistic efforts toward spiritual revival in the southern colonies.<sup>19</sup>

Many slaveholders resisted the evangelistic efforts of the Grand Itinerant for obvious reasons that were later a part of the discussion regarding the mission to the slaves. They feared spiritual equality with the slave could lead to social and political equality in everyday life. Further threatened by a fear of slave insurrection, many planters feared the effects of religious conversion among slaves. The enthusiastic, emotional atmosphere accompanying conversion experiences disconcerted the elites when it occurred among whites; it was positively terrifying

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>15</sup> Whitefield, “Three Letters,” 15.

<sup>16</sup> George Whitefield, *Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 379.

<sup>17</sup> Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, 127.

<sup>18</sup> Silvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 34.

when it happened in the slave quarters.<sup>20</sup> In many colonies the black population was substantial enough to threaten white hegemony if they gained spiritual and political independence.

Others believed the civilizing and calming effects of Christianity could moderate the slave work ethic. If they became heavenly minded they may also become no earthly good. In his *Journals* Whitefield answered these concerns. “I believe masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their negroes worse slaves.”<sup>21</sup> A moderate group began to insist that Christianizing the slaves would actually make them more obedient, conscientious workers.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1727 Edmund Gibson, the Bishop of London and the church authority over his parishioners in America, issued a pastoral letter directed at masters of English plantations. He asserted, “so far is Christianity from discharging Men from the Duties of the Station and Condition in which it found them, that it lays them under stronger Obligations to perform those Duties with the greatest Diligence and Fidelity, not only from the Fear of Man, but from a Sense of Duty to God.”<sup>23</sup> Early in the discussion a minister had provided moral cover and religious justification for any reticent master.

Thirty years after Gibson penned his letter, Presbyterian cleric Samuel Davies would implore the slave masters in Virginia to preach Christianity to the heathen. Davies claimed Christianity would produce servants who were “faithful, honest, diligent, and laborious” and

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<sup>20</sup> Galloway, “The Origins of Slaveholders’ Paternalism,” 387. See also Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, 127 and Edward J. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda: A History of George Whitefield’s Home for Boys, 1740-2000* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>21</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 422.

<sup>22</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 324. For another contemporary primary source addressing the mission to the slaves, see Samuel Davies’ sermon, *The Duty of Christians to propagate their Religion among Heathens, Earnestly recommended to the Masters of Negroe slaves in Virginia. A sermon preached in Hanover, January 8, 1757*. (London: J. Oliver, 1758).

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Dalcho, *An Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina from the First Settlement of the Province to the War of the Revolution* (Charleston, SC: E. Thayer, Arch’d E. Miller, Printer, 1820), 109.

reminded masters that “the Precepts of Christianity, are a compleat [sic] Directory of the Behavior of Servants.” He asserted, “There never was a good Christian yet, who was a bad Servant” and maintained that “To be a Christian, as it refers to Man, is to be obedient to Superiors, kind and benevolent to all, faithful in every Trust, diligent in every Calling.”<sup>24</sup> One hundred years before apologists promised that a good Christian would also be a good slave, Davies laid the foundation for the argument. If Christianity could produce the kind of servants Davies described, what master in his right mind would attempt to prevent his slaves from becoming Christians?<sup>25</sup> This line of thinking would reappear during the later discussions on slavery.

The Great Awakening not only awakened parishioners to their own spiritual needs, it often exposed them to the spiritual needs of slaves. As they began to value the African soul they often questioned the wisdom of enslaving the body that housed that soul.<sup>26</sup> John Wesley’s Methodist church initially banned slaveholders from membership.<sup>27</sup> Francis Asbury, another Methodist minister, actively opposed slavery after the Revolution.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Whitefield trumpeted the African’s exposure to the gospel as a benefit of slavery. This desire to evangelize slaves began long before the Revolution and was a major aspect of the defense of slavery through the Civil War. As many in the South realized they could no longer openly oppose slavery, they turned to the task of improving the slaves’ spiritual and temporal conditions as a substitute for emancipation.

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Davies, *The Duty of Christians to Propagate their Religion among Heathens*, 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St Martins, 2003), 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 232.

Awakening preachers recognized the potential for African conversion to Christianity on a large scale. Consistent with their Calvinist traditions, perhaps their consciences were also soothed as they convinced themselves that God may have ordained slavery to bring the African prodigal into the fold. Even though their dark-skinned brother may have to endure the oppression and degradation inherent in the slave system in this fallen world, in comparison to eternity, their affliction would be relatively short-lived and would result in eternal freedom after they passed from this broken life. They hoped that, looking back from the portals of heaven and eternal bliss, slaves may actually be grateful for the affliction that brought them to such paradise.

Paul Finkelman argues that the 1667 statute passed by the Virginia legislature helped encourage slave owners to expose their slaves to Christianity. The act stated that, although a slave could be converted and baptized, his conversion or baptism did not obligate the slave owner to free him. The act was intended to “more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity” by making the Christian sacrament of baptism available to those in bondage. This argument enabled masters everywhere to own their slaves and defend their actions by pointing to the noble purpose of Christianizing a heathen race. Whether their motives were pure, self-serving, or a mixture of the two, the end result was a formidable argument in favor of slavery that could not be easily dismissed. After all, who would oppose the spread of the gospel of Christ to needy sinners? While proslavery Christians would return to this argument in the decades leading to the Civil War, its origins were clearly rooted in colonial and revolutionary times.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 11. Finkelman comments on the statute. “This law led to the first defense of slavery in the Anglo-American world. Masters and slave traders alike quickly began to justify the capture and enslavement of Africans on the grounds that they could then be converted to the true faith.”

In his early colonial experience, George Whitefield spoke for the slaves. He advocated for better treatment, education, and inclusion in the Christian community.<sup>30</sup> Whitefield often related stories of slaves befriending and thanking him for his efforts to share Christ with them and better their condition. Whitefield's recognition of a measure of intellectual equality departed from the old Anglican concept of African souls and bodies being separate, with little value given to their cognitive capacity. His contribution to the slave's temporal and spiritual condition was significant and long lasting.<sup>31</sup>

Herein lies the contradiction in the life of George Whitefield. Just as men like James Henley Thornwell would later advocate for fair treatment of slaves and their introduction to the gospel, Whitefield cared for the soul of the black person. On the issue of slavery, he is an enigma. Many view him as a humanitarian; others see him as slavery's defender. Many who know of Whitefield's work in the great revivals would be surprised to learn he owned slaves. He desired to establish schools for blacks yet advocated for the legalization of slavery in Georgia.<sup>32</sup> What was behind this apparent hypocrisy?

Whitefield's desire to help the downtrodden did not end on the slave plantation. His Bethesda Orphanage exemplified his efforts to live out his faith in tangible ways. The orphanage eventually exerted substantial influence in Georgia and became one of the colony's largest employers in the early 1740s.<sup>33</sup> As the orphanage grew, Whitefield realized he could not maintain it without slave labor. This economic logic contributed to the proslavery polemic

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<sup>30</sup> Gallay, "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism," 380.

<sup>31</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 422. See also Silvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 92-93 and Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Revival*, 509.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen J. Stein, "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence." *Church History* 42, no.2 (June, 1973): 243.

<sup>33</sup> Gallay, "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism," 379.

prevalent in the antebellum South as slavery's advocates feared a catastrophic impact on the nation's economy if it disappeared. In keeping with his crusade to convert slaves, Whitefield began to argue that many slaves benefitted from the experience because they were exposed to Christianity.<sup>34</sup> He unashamedly stated, "I should think myself highly favored if I could purchase a good number of them in order to make their lives comfortable and lay the foundation for bringing up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of God."<sup>35</sup> With this mindset he could advocate for slavery, believing he was spreading the gospel.

In fairness to Whitefield, all accounts of his slaves at Bethesda indicate they were treated humanely and were afforded religious instruction. In many aspects, they received equal treatment with whites, and Whitefield consistently defended the human dignity of blacks. He may have been a benevolent master, but his slaves were still deprived of their freedom.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps more importantly, he provided moral cover for less benevolent slave holders. If a preacher of Whitefield's stature defended the institution, could the common man legitimately oppose it?

Slave conversion was not the only argument Whitefield used to justify his position. In keeping with many of his contemporaries, he alleged that slaves were better suited for the

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<sup>34</sup> Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, 224.

<sup>35</sup> George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A. Late of Pembroke-College, Oxford, And Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntingdon Containing All his Sermons and Tracts*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, in the Poultry; and Messrs. Kincaid and Bell, at Edinburg. 1771), 405; See also Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 75. James Henley Thornwell, an antebellum apologist for slavery, preached an 1850 sermon with sentiments similar to Whitefield's. Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 153. Chesebrough summarizes Thornwell's conception of slavery, "Thornwell viewed slavery as a temporary institution in a fallen world. In the meantime, masters had an obligation to care for their slaves, who were moral human beings, and to preach the Gospel to their slaves in order to prepare them for heaven, where distinctions would cease."

<sup>36</sup> Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 75.; Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Revival*, 509.

sweltering southern climate and were uniquely designed for the task at hand.<sup>37</sup> Referring to the maintenance of Bethesda, Whitefield related, “As for manuring more land than the hired Servants and great Boys can manage, I think it is impracticable without a few negroes.”<sup>38</sup> When advocating for the legalization of slavery in Georgia he claimed “Georgia never can be a flourishing province, unless negroes are employed.”<sup>39</sup> Competing in the Atlantic market required a commitment to slave labor. Bethesda could support itself and turn a profit selling timber and rice to buyers in the West Indies.<sup>40</sup> Partly for economic reasons, including his desire to support Bethesda, Whitefield supported the proslavery effort in Georgia.<sup>41</sup> He moved from excoriating masters for abusing and overworking their slaves to alleging that blacks were better fitted for hard work in a southern climate. He certainly moderated his controversial stand on slavery; his apparent change of heart was sobering.<sup>42</sup>

Whitefield also resorted to Scripture in his support of slavery by citing the example of Abraham, just as those who came later would do. “As to the lawfulness of keeping slaves, I have no doubt, since I hear of some that were bought with Abraham’s money, and some that were born in his house.”<sup>43</sup> Because he found biblical justification for slavery, and was comforted by the knowledge that he was bringing slaves into the Kingdom of God, he saw no contradiction

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<sup>37</sup> Whitefield, *The Works*, vol.2, 404.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>39</sup> Stein, “New Evidence,” 245.

<sup>40</sup> Lambert, *Peddler in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals 1737-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 204.

<sup>41</sup> Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, 222. See also Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 217.

<sup>42</sup> Stein, “New Evidence,” 245.

<sup>43</sup> Whitefield, *The Works*, vol. 2, 404.

between his admonition to treat slaves kindly and his personal decision to own them. Indeed, his slaves were apparently well treated and as happy as possible under the circumstances.<sup>44</sup> In a stark indication of his apparent lack of guilt he said, “Blessed be God! the purchase is made...one negro has been given to me. Some more I propose to purchase this week.”<sup>45</sup> Whitefield would not be the last to praise God and slavery in the same breath.

A couple of Whitefield’s statements may indicate he was not as comfortable with slave ownership as some of his public pronouncements may have inferred. In referencing his efforts to help bring slavery to Georgia he stated, “I had no hand in bringing them into Georgia; though my judgment was for it.”<sup>46</sup> While speaking of slavery in general he called it “a trade not to be approved of, yet...it will be carried on whether we will or not.... Now this is done...let us reason no more about it.”<sup>47</sup> Whitefield had made his decision and the matter was closed. Perhaps he chose not to reason more about it because he was not completely comfortable with the decision. Whitefield was a man of his times.<sup>48</sup> He certainly was not the only preacher who owned slaves. Jonathan Edwards, another great prophet of the new birth, also owned them. As long as they were kindly treated and exposed to the Christian faith, many in the era saw no hypocrisy in their position.

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<sup>44</sup> Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, 224.

<sup>45</sup> Stein, “New Evidence,” 245.

<sup>46</sup> Whitefield, *The Works* Vol. 2, 405.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>48</sup> Warren Thomas Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 54.

## JOHN WESLEY

Conversely, John Wesley “was a man far ahead of his time.” He, like Whitefield at Bethesda, demonstrated a social conscience, but Wesley extended that social conscience to his view on slavery.<sup>49</sup> His *Thoughts Upon Slavery* offered arguments that later antislavery thinkers would repeat in antebellum America.

George Whitefield valued John Wesley’s early work in Georgia noting that “the good, Mr. John Wesley had done in America, under God, is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid such a foundation, that I hope neither men nor devils will be able to shake.”<sup>50</sup> Whitefield was referencing Wesley’s evangelistic efforts, but one could argue that Wesley’s consistent, determined opposition to slavery also laid a foundation for the future abolitionist movement in the North. William Thomas Smith claims that Wesley’s role in the eventual eradication of slavery has been undervalued and underappreciated. Most people, including Wesley himself, failed to realize the value of his contribution to the antislavery movement.<sup>51</sup>

Wesley ventured to Georgia in 1736 where he and his brother Charles witnessed the brutality of slavery shortly thereafter in Charleston, South Carolina. It made such an impression on him that he wrote fifty years later, “Ever since I heard of it first I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid Slave Trade.”<sup>52</sup> The theme of the cruelty of slavery permeated much of Wesley’s writing through the years. He was continually haunted by the abject brutality of the slave trader, merchant, and plantation owner. He lamented, “Hence the lives of the poor slaves are in every

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 38, 41, 52.

respect, in a very precarious situation, subject to the passion and rage of those who have the rule over them, and the spilling of their blood unnoticed by those who ought to protect them.”<sup>53</sup> He relayed stories of whippings, beatings, and murder and the “heart rending cries of ‘mercy, master mercy.’”<sup>54</sup>

Wesley began his argument against slavery as ministers Albert Barnes and Joseph P. Thompson would do later during the antebellum debate. He defined domestic slavery as a servant to a master. “It generally gives the master an arbitrary power of any correction not affecting life or limb.... It creates an incapacity of acquiring anything, except for the Master’s benefit. It allows the master to alienate the slave, in the same manner as his cows and horses. Lastly it descends in its full extent from parent to child, even to the latest generation.”<sup>55</sup> From early times through the Civil War the definition of slavery was critical to the debate. If the antislavery forces could establish a biblical distinction between a servant and a slave, the argument became much more formidable. Conversely, if slavery’s defenders could demonstrate no appreciable difference between the two, slavery simply became a different degree of servitude and could not be condemned from Scripture.

With the overarching theme of cruelty and brutality ever present, Wesley embarked on a refutation of the arguments offered in defense of the slave system. Where Whitefield claimed blacks were best suited for the climate of the South, Wesley believed whites were quite capable of laboring in the heat if they were properly provisioned with food and drink. Wesley spoke from personal experience, insisting he and his fellow travelers in Georgia felled trees and cleared

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<sup>53</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (United Kingdom: Dodo Press), 41. For a scan of Wesley’s original work published in 1774 see Warren Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 121-48.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

land as efficiently as any black, as long as they were allowed to acclimate themselves to the climate. He even noted that the idle around them were the ones who suffered from sickness while those who worked diligently seemed to maintain their health. He adamantly insisted white labor was viable in Georgia. Even if it was not, it would be better for the land to be left untilled than for throngs of blacks to be dragged into slavery or murdered.<sup>56</sup>

Many claimed blacks were brutish and stupid, and therefore suited for nothing higher than servitude. This claim was also common in the antebellum debates.<sup>57</sup> Wesley argued that the preconceptions regarding the African homeland were unfounded.<sup>58</sup> He knew he had to dispel this misconception so that others may have a proper understanding of the nature of the African. Being a preacher committed to the propagation of the gospel, Wesley asserted that blacks were desperately in need of the grace of God. The fact that the African was spiritually deprived did not necessarily mean that his society was devoid of any sense of morality or social order. He claimed those from the coast of Africa were far from the “stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce cruel, perfidious savages they have been described.” Wesley insisted that, if one considered the few natural advantages slaves had, he would conclude that they were capable of improvement and no more uncivilized than many Europeans. In fact, where they did fall short of a reasonable standard of honesty and kindness towards their fellow man, one could logically argue they had learned these unseemly behaviors from the white men who often

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<sup>56</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 23.; Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 68.

<sup>57</sup> In 1852, Josiah Priest explained, “The horrid and heart-appalling practice of *cannibalism*, has, in all ages, attached more to the African race than to any other people of the earth.” Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: and Origin Fortunes, and History of the Negro Race* (Glasgow: KY: Rev. W. S. Brown, 1852.), 229. Priest’s work contains graphic descriptions of cannibalism and all manner of degraded activity that were supposedly performed by Africans. Priest went out of his way to paint the African in the worst possible light as he attempted to support his notions of African inferiority (203-49).

<sup>58</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 4.

exploited and mistreated them.<sup>59</sup> If this description of African behavior had been true, which Wesley seriously challenged, he blamed the slave owner for their condition. “Certainly the African is in no respect inferior to the European—Their stupidity therefore in our plantations is not natural; otherwise than it is the natural effect of their condition.—consequently it is not their fault, but yours....”<sup>60</sup>

Wesley consistently laid responsibility for the slave’s intellectual and spiritual shortcomings at the feet of white men. Accusing slave owners of circular reasoning, he challenged the idea that slaves needed to be treated harshly because they were savages. First, slave owners treated their slaves like savages, offering them no opportunity for improvement. Then, because slaves acted in what was perceived as an uncivilized manner, they treated them harshly in order to control them. It was a never-ending cycle. Wesley asserted the slaveholder deserved any earthly retribution he received, “if they should cut your throat?...whom could you thank for it, but yourself? You first acted the villain in making them slaves.... You kept them stupid and wicked, by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue: And now you assign their want of wisdom and goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts!”<sup>61</sup> Wesley effectively challenged the uncivilized brute argument in the proslavery polemic of his day, but he did not destroy it.

In an argument related to the view of the slave as a godless savage, Wesley also attacked the perception of Africa as a primitive land where living conditions were miserable. By changing the perception of the slaves’ homeland, he hoped to undercut the idea that the slave

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27-28, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

trade benefitted them. Wesley spoke of Guinea as a fruitful and pleasant place, not the “horrid, dreary, barren country” often portrayed.<sup>62</sup> He denied the claim that debauched Africans freely sold friends and family into slavery. Young children were stolen away, not sold by their parents. Again attacking a circular argument, he blamed the white man for first teaching Africans “drunkenness and avarice” and then hiring them to sell one another.<sup>63</sup> He presented a glowing characterization of the African, “as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding: -- as very industrious...as fair, just and honest in their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise.”<sup>64</sup> Wesley was clear and unequivocal. Africans were not savages. Africa was not a barren wasteland, and whites did not resort to man-stealing for altruistic reasons. Something more sinister was driving this crime against humanity.

Wesley believed economics was the primary force behind slavery. He claimed, “They well know, to get money, not to save lives, was the whole and sole spring of their motions.”<sup>65</sup> He claimed that much of the defense of slavery for altruistic reasons was manufactured after man-stealing had occurred. The motive was purely greed; no attempt to rewrite history would change that. In answer to those who claimed the colonial economy would collapse with the eradication of slavery, he cited others who agreed that business might briefly stagnate but would quickly recover. Any great change would occasion a disruption, but the benefits would outweigh

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<sup>62</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 3-4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7. Benjamin Rush argued similarly that slaves had the intellectual capacity for virtue and happiness although some considered them inferior to Europeans. He described their “ingenuity, humanity, and strong attachment to their parents, relations, friends and country” and claimed this showed they were “equal to Europeans, when we allow for the diversity of temper and genius which is occasioned by climate.” *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British settlements in America, upon SlaveKeeping* (Philadelphia and Boston: John Boyles, 1773), 2.

<sup>65</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 8-9, 22.

the risks.<sup>66</sup> To those who claimed slavery was essential to the wealth and glory of the nation, he cautioned that wealth was not necessary to the glory of a nation, “but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country. These are necessary to the real glory of a nation.”<sup>67</sup> Wesley insisted it was better to be poor as a nation than to prosper “at the expense of virtue.”<sup>68</sup>

Wesley was genuinely concerned about the impact of slavery on society. He believed its practice hardened hearts and forced otherwise reasonable people into the use of cruel and extreme behavior to obtain a desired result.<sup>69</sup> This argument dovetailed into his assertion that the practice of the Golden Rule was not practical in a slave system.<sup>70</sup> Antebellum opponents of slavery echoed this same sentiment as they insisted the foundation of the peculiar institution would crumble if men simply chose to treat others as they wished to be treated. The spirit of the Scriptures would certainly supersede any individual passage that may, at first glance, seem to legitimize slavery. Whitefield’s reference to the arming of Abraham’s slaves would fall into this category. As those who came after Wesley would explain, Abraham’s slavery was not the same as that present in the South. No slave owner in his right mind would consider arming his slaves.

As early as 1700, members of the Massachusetts judiciary considered the idea that God designed people with different abilities for different responsibilities in society. Long before the colonists considered independence, Massachusetts provincial court justices John Saffin and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 22, 24, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 26, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 32-33. As early as 1688 the following question was asked at a Quaker meeting in Germantown, PA: “There is a saying, that we should do to all men as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent, or colour they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them are they not all alike?” Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 13.

Samuel Sewall debated the degree to which every man is equal. Answering Sewall's 1700 publication, *The Selling of Joseph*, Saffin argued that God intentionally ordered society with "Degrees of Men in the World" and an assertion of equality would "invert the Order that God had set." Saffin further stated God had ordained "some to be High and Honourable, some to be Low and Despicable" because some were to lead while others were "to be commanded." He believed some were "to be born slaves, and so to remain during their lives." He further asserted that, while mankind was clearly created by God, men were not required to "love and respect all men alike.... I may love my servant well, but my son better."<sup>71</sup>

Wesley also rejected the argument that slavery was legal, so no one should challenge it on moral grounds. He maintained that human law could not change the nature of things. Something that was morally wrong could not be made right simply because it was legal. Decades later the debate over the moral responsibility for returning runaway slaves would turn on the same logic. Wesley believed slaveholding was inconsistent with mercy and therefore, contrary to God's law.<sup>72</sup> The whole concept of human liberty, especially in light of colonial concerns over protecting that liberty, exposed the hypocrisy of those who would seek to deny other's freedom.<sup>73</sup>

The debate over slavery did not begin with George Whitefield and John Wesley. The Quakers paved the way for many who would oppose slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The value of Whitefield and Wesley lay in their notoriety in the emerging evangelical movement. Their opinions gave the subject added importance. The promise of spiritual freedom

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<sup>71</sup> John Saffin, "A Brief and Candid Answer to a late Printed Sheet, Entitled the Selling of Joseph" (Boston, 1701). Excerpted in "Is Slavery Christian? A Pamphlet Debate in Boston, 1700-1706," 1-5, National Humanities Center, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 20-21.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 38.

through the new birth did not necessarily translate to freedom in this world. As Thomas Kidd notes, “Black evangelicals, and a few white evangelicals, would accept that contradiction only for so long.”<sup>74</sup> This early American evangelicalism fed the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century. Many southern whites began to accept proslavery theology as ministers and denominations split over whether the Bible sanctioned slavery.<sup>75</sup> Long before these divisions occurred, the voices of two noted Awakening preachers could be heard preparing the way for the coming debate. On February 24, 1791 as John Wesley lay dying, he penned one final letter to William Wilberforce, the great English statesman and friend of slaves. He warned Wilberforce that the battle for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself would require his complete commitment to the cause. He advised, “Unless God raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you?.... Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish before it.”<sup>76</sup>

Wesley did not live to see the day when his desire would come to fruition. The principles he espoused in the name of God and decency lived on to inform and energize the coming debate as he played a part in the eventual destruction of the institution he so tirelessly and passionately opposed. Whitefield, on the other hand, died believing slaves benefitted from a caring master willing to preach the gospel to them. While they may have been inferior in the eyes of most slave holders, they could take comfort in knowing the ground was level at the foot of the cross.

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<sup>74</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 214, 233, 322-23. For a selection of sermons demonstrating the intensity of the debate see David B. Chesebrough’s *God Ordained This War*.

<sup>76</sup> John Wesley, “Letter to William Wilberforce.” Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/wilberforce/> (accessed November 28, 2010). This brief document is a poignant illustration of Wesley’s passing the baton to the next generation.

Ministers who followed Wesley and Whitefield would further their arguments and take up their mantles.

Awakening principles of individual value, responsibility, and self-determination before God were consistent with Jefferson's coming characterization of equality by creation. This concept became a rallying cry for those seeking independence from Great Britain. They struggled to square their desire for freedom from an oppressive British Empire with the assertion that one race had the right to enslave another. Enlightenment thinking and republican ideals melded with long-established biblical arguments to further the debate. The discussion broadened as the tenets in both camps fed directly from positions that had long since been established.

## Chapter Two

### Created Equal?: The Interplay Between Revolutionary Ideology and Biblical Thought During the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Debate Over Slavery

The American Revolution energized a debate over the extent to which the statement “all men are created equal” actually applied to all men. Clergy and laymen in the North and South struggled with questions regarding the biblical sanction of slavery and the revolutionary principles inherent in the notion of the equality of men. Before the war for American independence, a significant majority of Englishmen accepted, or at least tolerated African slavery as long as it remained in the colonies. While there were early rumblings, few aggressively defended slavery because fewer aggressively opposed it.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the South, colonial America accepted slavery. Indeed, at the very time Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, he was personally responsible for denying almost two hundred people any right to liberty.<sup>2</sup> The arguments advanced by men defending or opposing chattel slavery during the revolutionary era bore a striking resemblance to those cited later in the antebellum period. Their arguments hearkened back to the colonial period and informed the thinking of the new nation as it eventually experienced the tragedy of Civil War. The continuity of thought through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries culminated in the great debate over slavery in antebellum times.

Jefferson’s provocative claim regarding the equality of man encouraged men to consider the validity of his assertion as they examined the issue of slavery from different perspectives. They could not agree on biblical sanction or the relationship between slave conversion and emancipation. They argued over the notion of a redeemed slave being a better servant. One

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<sup>1</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 15. Finkelman claimed, “The Revolution set the stage for formidable attacks on slavery and in turn necessitated a strong defense of slavery.”

<sup>2</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 4.

viewed slavery as a natural part of God-ordained order while another saw it as a brutal and degrading aberration of God's plan for society. From Canaan's curse and the Ten Commandments to the Golden Rule and the apostles' directives to servants, men who often stood theologically united could not come to agreement regarding the biblical sanction of human bondage. They would not even agree to characterize it as human bondage. Seasoned with a near universal assumption of African inferiority, the debate simmered quietly during colonial times before Jefferson's revolutionary claim raised the temperature and tenor of the discussion. By the 1850s the national argument had reached a boiling point and the debate forced men everywhere to choose sides in the coming conflict. What began as a quiet discussion primarily among Christians continued through the American Civil War. While the defeat of the Confederate army and the collapse of the southern government eventually settled the question of whether slavery would continue in America, the debate continued on in hearts and minds. Americans today generally accept and often appreciate the concept of the equality of man, but aspects of the old debate are still relevant. This is the account of the ebb and flow of the slavery debate during the revolutionary era and of contrasting viewpoints in a world turned upside down.

Thomas Jefferson was an enlightened thinker who struggled with the question of chattel slavery. He called the institution a "blot" and a "stain" and yet failed to manumit most of his slaves even after his death.<sup>3</sup> In his *Notes on Virginia* Jefferson lamented, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just...that his justice cannot sleep forever."<sup>4</sup> Although he apparently feared the judgment of God, his more immediate concern was the potential for a

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<sup>3</sup> John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1991), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), 156.

bloody clash between the oppressed and their oppressors.<sup>5</sup> Later in life he summarized his internal conflict by explaining, “We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”<sup>6</sup>

After noting Jefferson’s inconsistencies regarding slavery, historian Edmund Morgan called him “the greatest champion of liberty this country has ever had.”<sup>7</sup> The fact that a slaveholder popularized the idea of equality by creation foreshadowed the great national schizophrenia evident in the nineteenth century. In a letter written in 1773, Patrick Henry was amazed that “at a time, when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision” in a nation so enamored with liberty “we find men professing religion the most humane, mild, gentle, and generous” and yet they adopted an institution “as repugnant to humanity, as it is inconsistent with the Bible, and destruction of liberty.”<sup>8</sup> In spite of his disdain for human bondage, Patrick Henry never freed his slaves.<sup>9</sup>

## REVOLUTION AND RELIGION

Although they arrived at their conclusions regarding individual equality and liberty from very different perspectives, Enlightenment thinkers and evangelical Christians shared similar views on the Revolution. Many Christians were quite comfortable with John Locke’s writings

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 155-56.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, cover page. Jefferson penned this quote in 1820, long after the initial fervor of the Revolution had waned.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 376.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Henry, In a letter written January 13, 1773 from the Auburn Union, published July 9, 1860. New York Times Archive, [www.nytimes.com/1860/07/09/news/the-slave-trade-an-original-letter-from-patrick-henry.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1860/07/09/news/the-slave-trade-an-original-letter-from-patrick-henry.html). (Accessed 3/17/12).

<sup>9</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 147. Finkelman notes, “During the Revolution the British intellectual Samuel Johnson asked, ‘How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?’” Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 19.

regarding equality inherent in creation and appropriated them to support their conviction of an individual right of personal religious conscience.<sup>10</sup> They accepted Locke's concept of natural rights that every person possessed as a benefit of creation. These rights could not be taken away by government because they were not granted by any earthly authority. They saw no contradiction between their passion for liberty and their willingness to tolerate, and later defend, an institution so contrary to revolutionary principles.

In the 1770s, Samuel Hopkins, a student of legendary revivalist Jonathan Edwards, freely blended biblical thought with revolutionary ideology. Ministering in Newport, Rhode Island, Hopkins witnessed first-hand the horrors and brutality of slavery and the slave trade. He loudly protested, passionately asserting that slaveholders in the American colonies should emancipate their slaves. Hopkins called slavery "a most abominable wickedness; and equally against the law of nature and the law of Christ." He reminded his followers that the Continental Congress had declared all men equal and their Creator had endowed them with unalienable rights.<sup>11</sup> In many ways the Revolution was the first crisis significant enough to challenge a slave society on both social and moral grounds.<sup>12</sup> The Revolution questioned conventional wisdom and orthodox thinking. For the first time on a national scale, people had to confront the notion that "If people were truly 'equal'; then slavery might be truly illegitimate."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>12</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 16.

On the eve of the attempt to break the shackles of British tyranny, a handful of small religious groups opposed slavery in the colonies.<sup>14</sup> The shock waves the Revolution sent through society broadened the scope of antislavery thought. Evangelicals in significant numbers implicitly supported the struggle for independence. Their religious convictions added credibility to what was essentially a political, ideological, and economic struggle.

On the margins, there were Christians who hoped the war would lead to significant social reforms. Many championed religious disestablishment or the emancipation of slaves.<sup>15</sup> Already believing slavery was inconsistent with the Scriptures, they began to question the legitimacy of an institution contrary to the Declaration of Independence and the natural rights of man. While Enlightenment thinking certainly bolstered antislavery thought among Americans, most of the early activists were Christians.<sup>16</sup> Revolutionary ideology added secular corroboration to biblical authority as the nation welcomed thousands of new voices into the conversation.

The dialogue that began primarily in churches among Christians continued to a broader audience and was often unpleasant and distasteful to slaveholders. While most Americans admitted slavery was legal, and perhaps socially necessary, the question of its morality dogged them. The Revolution compelled recognition of slavery's evil even if men were unwilling or unable to stand firmly against it.<sup>17</sup> Many Americans still accepted the notion of the inequality of the races, but the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence weakened the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15. Thomas Kidd notes that, even before the Revolution, some Christians had already begun to act on the logical conclusion inherent in the notion of equality by creation. Even earlier, in seventeenth century England and America, the Quakers stood against slavery long before there was widespread opposition to it. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 299.

<sup>16</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 36.

ideological underpinnings of slavery.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Rush reminded Americans that the tender plant of liberty was vulnerable. The eyes of Europe were watching the American experiment.<sup>19</sup> The national sin of slavery undermined the spread of liberty.

The immediate purpose of Jefferson's Declaration was most certainly to establish free Americans on equal footing with free Englishmen under the umbrella of liberty, but it inadvertently uncovered a much greater crime against liberty and humanity, one perpetuated by slaveholders.<sup>20</sup> Samuel Hopkins insinuated the slave owner was a much harsher taskmaster than the King or Parliament. He reminded his fellow colonists of their hypocrisy in complaining about British tyranny which was "lighter than a feather" when compared to the "heavy doom" and "inutterable [sic] wretchedness" of chattel slavery.<sup>21</sup> Richard Wells of Philadelphia asserted the only legitimate claim "Americans had over the Africans is the claim of 'force and power'" and that the land and sea superiority of the British military could be used to assert the British right to rule the colonies.<sup>22</sup> In 1778 New Jersey governor William Livingston argued that slavery

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<sup>18</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 133. Those who attacked slavery often cited the concept of the Golden Rule. Benjamin Rush cited it in his 1773 work *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British settlements in America, upon SlaveKeeping*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British settlements*, 28. See also Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 239. Finkelman identifies a southern defense of slavery earlier than many other historians. "In the years immediately following the Revolution, slaveowners began to offer defenses of slavery. For the first time, a defense of slavery seemed necessary. Before the Revolution, there was no need to defend slavery *per se*." Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue, Concerning the Slavery of the Africans* (Norwich, CT: Judah P. Spooner, 1776), 30. For further discussion of the apparent hypocrisy of America's champions of freedom see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 244.

<sup>22</sup> Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 240.

did not square with the principles of humanity or Christianity, and its defense was particularly distasteful coming from Americans who nearly idolized liberty.<sup>23</sup>

Enlightenment thinkers and evangelical Christians were singing from the same antislavery hymnal but were not necessarily on the same page. Enlightened men used the language of revivalist Christianity to add energy and urgency to their message. Evangelicals borrowed from the Enlightenment's emphasis on equality by creation and mixed it with the biblical message of individual Christian liberty and freedom of conscience. Benjamin Rush asserted, "But there are some who have gone so far as to say that Slavery is not repugnant to the Genius of Christianity, and that it is not forbidden in any part of the Scriptures. Natural and Revealed Religion always speak the same things, although the latter delivers its precepts with a louder, and more distinct voice than the former." Illustrating just how convinced he was that natural and revealed religion agreed, Rush continued, "If it could be proved that no testimony was to be found in the Bible against the practice so pregnant with evils of the most destructive tendency to society, it would be sufficient to overthrow its divine Original."<sup>24</sup> Men tended to choose those passages that best suited their argument and ignore or dismiss inconvenient information that might contradict their assertions. Those involved in the colonial, early national, and antebellum debates were no different.

The result of the convergence of secular and sacred was the first significant effort to end the slave trade and limit the scope of slavery. Antislavery arguments had existed as early as the seventeenth century in the colonies, but they failed to gain a strong voice until Jefferson and his cohorts challenged traditional thinking and placed the national spotlight on the equality of man.

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slavekeeping*, 9.

Christian liberty became the rallying cry of patriots, and blacks soon added their voices to the growing condemnation of chattel slavery.<sup>25</sup> They hoped the energy of the Revolution would manifest itself in a new wave of freedom for the slave. At the very least they thought their own situation might improve in tangible ways. Benjamin Quarles notes, “sympathy for the Negro was enlivened by the moving prose of the Declaration of Independence” as evidenced by the eventual curtailing of the slave trade and a nascent push for manumission, especially in the North.<sup>26</sup> A handful of national leaders began to publically question the wisdom of slavery. State and local governments debated the issue, and the seeds of the inchoate abolitionist movement began to grow, but the nation was not yet ready for a second war for independence.<sup>27</sup> Slavery continued, but a significantly larger *cadre* of detractors questioned its legitimacy. As powerful as the tide of liberty was, it was not yet a wave that could immediately cleanse America’s national sin. The slave poet Jupiter Hammon wrote, “that liberty is a great thing we know from our own feelings... How much money has been spent and how many lives have been lost to defend their liberty! I must say that I have hoped that God would open their eyes, when they were so much engaged for liberty, to think of the state of the poor blacks, and to pity us.”<sup>28</sup> There was movement in the national consciousness, but not enough to bring needed change.

## POSITIVE BEGINNING

While the movement was still small compared to its antebellum descendent, the biblical proslavery polemic came to life earlier than many realize as defenders of the peculiar institution

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<sup>25</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

were already pointing to the positive aspects of slavery. Far from being the social and moral evil often portrayed by antislavery zealots, proslavery men argued it was a biblically sanctioned institution that God proscribed for the benefit of an orderly society.

Many of the arguments offered were at least loosely grounded in the debater's knowledge and interpretation of the Bible. Because the church and the Scriptures were central to eighteenth century life, an appeal to holy authority wielded enormous influence. Preachers led the fight, and their stand emboldened many laypersons with the confidence that a man of God agreed with them on this critical moral issue. Some ministers supported the antislavery crusader; others provided moral cover for the slave holder. Historian Robert Olwell claims the church in colonial South Carolina "reflected and sanctified the social order as the slaveholders perceived it." The Anglican influence in South Carolina legitimized the slaveholder's behavior.<sup>29</sup> It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

Ministers in the South, especially Anglican clerics, were obliged to defend, or at least accept slavery as a normal part of their daily life. Charles Boschi, a South Carolina Anglican minister related the following as early as October, 1745: "as soon [as] I arrived in the Parish several Parishioners persuaded me to buy Negroes. [After protesting]... I consented...not knowing full well the ways and management of country affair[s]. Therefore I bought a Negroe man with his wife and daughter." Most glebes or parsonages came with slaves, so the average minister quickly joined the ranks of the slave holders.<sup>30</sup> Those intimately familiar with the Scriptures and church tradition tolerated slavery, especially in rural communities where agriculture occupied a prominent place.

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country 1740-1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 115.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

In language similar to that used later to argue slavery was a positive good, Henry E. Holder, a minister in Barbados, contended in 1788 that the slave's removal from Africa was "a species of dispensation of Providence in their favour, to bring them to a better state of civilization than they could attain to in the domestic residence; and such it must undoubtedly prove in a very high degree, when it is their fortune to fall into the hands of rational and benevolent owners."<sup>31</sup> Any African "fortunate" enough to be "rescued" from his pagan homeland and whisked away to a Christian society should be grateful for his blessing from Providence.

On the eve of American independence Samuel Hopkins aggressively questioned the authenticity and effectiveness of the mission to the slaves. Hopkins denounced the slave trade and rejected the notion that those Africans who survived the rigors of sea travel would ultimately benefit from their exposure to Christianity. Hopkins believed the brutal slave system would turn the African away from his master's religion. He wondered "that any of them should think favorably of Christianity and cordially embrace it."<sup>32</sup> Where slavery's defenders argued that the institution was a divine trust resulting in the spiritual emancipation of thousands hopelessly bound by sin, Christians from Hopkins' viewpoint countered that the possibility of Christianizing the African did not justify the corruption and degradation visited on him by slavery.<sup>33</sup> A moral wrong, no matter how loudly asserted, could not justify the reality of chattel slavery. The ends could never justify the means.

From the beginning of the discussion over slavery, the argument for a mission to the slaves fed off the basic assumption that Africa was a dark, godless, barren land plagued by

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Tise, *Proslavery*, 101-2.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue, Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 113.

disease and inhabited by savages willingly worshipping pagan gods. A people so ignorant and pitiful could certainly benefit from the civilizing and enlightening effects of Christianity. Most scholarship to date relies on the presentation of African religious practices as they were described by Christian missionaries. In *Come Shouting to Zion*, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood argue some missionaries denied the existence of African religion while others viewed African spirituality as inferior to Christianity. Missionaries believed the God of the Bible was clearly superior to any African deity.<sup>34</sup>

The revivalist fervor of the Great Awakening brought many blacks into the fold, and in the revolutionary period Christians sought ways to inculcate these believers into the Christian community while supporting the white superiority necessary to maintain the *status quo*. Blacks were present in the ranks of the evangelicals. A number of energetic black preachers stepped forward to evangelize the slave population. As the body of African converts grew, it became more difficult to argue that most slaves were Godless heathens and most whites were civilized Christians. This dynamic greatly challenged the Christian community after the embers of the Great Awakening cooled.<sup>35</sup>

Now that many of the “savages” had been Christianized, church leaders had to decide what to do with a slave who could legitimately claim spiritual equality with the Christian white man. Despite all the shortcomings and missteps of missions to slaves, many rested in the hope of freedom found in Christ even if their faith did not translate to freedom in this life.<sup>36</sup> Often slaveholders sought to control the growth of the Christian slave population by limiting the

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<sup>34</sup> Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, 233.

numbers of slaves who could be baptized. They hoped to use the Christian mission in their efforts to enhance their control over slaves and make them more responsible workers.<sup>37</sup> Olwell asserts that in South Carolina slaves hoped baptism would lead to membership in a community that might eventually “loosen the chains of their servitude.”<sup>38</sup> Many slaves believed, and many masters feared the slave could use the church to claim equality with a believing master or even superiority over an unregenerate one.<sup>39</sup> In the revolutionary era these were legitimate and pressing concerns. If the principles of political freedom were to prevail in the colonies, the notion of spiritual freedom might threaten the social order.

The belief that Christianity civilized the slave allayed the fears of many slave holders. Yet, while many were willing to admit there was no real harm in exposing the slave to the gospel, some feared the effects of any education that gave the slave a sense of his own value and potential. If he learned to read the Bible, he may also read the voluminous pamphlets celebrating human equality. Rhys Isaac explains that “If the white Virginians were getting a heady draught of the rhetoric of liberty, then so were all the slave quarters in Tidewater Virginia and beyond.”<sup>40</sup> The social leveling qualities of the Revolution, coupled with the evangelical teaching of spiritual equality before God, might give the slave population the idea that the time had come for them to declare their own independence. The fear of slave insurrection, so prevalent in the antebellum South, was also present at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thomas Kidd identifies a nascent antislavery movement in the revolutionary era South but concludes that any momentum it may have possessed in Virginia was quickly squelched by the Gabriel Prosser rebellion of

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<sup>37</sup> Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

1800.<sup>41</sup> Later uprisings by Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831 only crystallized the southern fear of violence and destruction unleashed by a massive slave uprising. To Chesapeake slave holders, for example, any evangelist who failed to respect fundamental boundaries of race or servitude could be inviting social chaos and disorder.<sup>42</sup>

## ORDERED BUT UNEQUAL

The concept of equality by creation so prevalent in the revolutionary era, did not necessarily translate to social equality. Before the war, most Christians accepted all manner of social inequality as God-ordained.<sup>43</sup> Landon Carter, a Virginia planter and statesman during the Revolution claimed, “God, the Protector, who gave the master the duty of humane care, gave him also the right of command and enforcement.”<sup>44</sup> In his diaries Carter consistently mentioned various modes of disciplining his slaves. Rhys Isaacs asserts Carter was less cognizant of social status based on race as he was aware of a social hierarchy based on birth. Race was certainly a part of the southern social ranking but good breeding often entailed far more than simply being the acceptable race.<sup>45</sup> As John Saffin had argued in 1701 and many would assert in antebellum times, order was absolutely essential to civilization.

Most men accepted the notion that people naturally encountered some limits to their freedom, and those limits were necessary for societal stability. In 1772, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel missionary Thomas Thompson argued that no person or race had

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<sup>41</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>43</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 134-35.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

“Absolute freedom” as constitutions and laws limit all people “for the public weal.” Some were destined to serve and some were to be served; not all were equally free.<sup>46</sup> If no freedom was absolute, and every man accepted some limitation on personal liberty, slavery could simply be a question of the degree of limitation. Answering noted antislavery leader Thomas Clarkson’s assertions, Gilbert Francklyn wrote in 1789, “Slavery has been, and, from the nature of man, must ever be, a very common and general situation of life.... It is certain that, in civil society, every man is restrained of some part of his natural liberty, and is consequently in some degree deprived of his freedom. Every deprivation of freedom is a species of servitude or slavery.”<sup>47</sup>

Statements from men like Thompson and Francklyn further illustrated positions similar to those of Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies. In his 1757 sermon *The Duties of Masters to Their Servants* he identified slavery as a hierarchical relation ordered by God. He asserted, “the appointment of Providence, and the order of the world, not only admit, but require, that there should be civil distinctions among mankind; that some should rule, and some be subject; that some should be Masters, and some Servants.” He further noted that “Christianity does not blend or destroy these distinctions, but establishes and regulates them, and enjoines every man to conduct himself according to them.”<sup>48</sup> Proslavery advocates in the nineteenth century would speak of the relation of citizen to government, child to parent, or husband to wife, in language

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Tise, *Proslavery*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Gilbert Francklyn, *An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Clarkson’s Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London: Geographic Press, 1789), 11,14.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 43. During the Civil War era New York pastor Joseph P. Thompson argued slavery was not a relation of master to servant but the blatant ownership of a human. Joseph P. Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation or the Teachings and the Influence of the Bible Against Slavery* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1863), 13. Albert Barnes refused to equate slavery to apprenticeship, a parent-child relationship, or a feudal system of serfs and lords. It was “property in a human being.” *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1857), 47. James H. Thornwell viewed slavery as a social and political relation between moral, intelligent, reasonable people. *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, Edited by John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 385, 411-12.

similar to Davies. James Henley Thornwell would later argue exhaustively for the concept of the slave relation as he envisioned the slave taking his God-ordained place in a fallen world. As the debate matured, the proper definition or characterization of slavery would be critical to both sides.

As an extension of the British Empire, colonists were well acquainted with the concepts of class and hierarchy. They understood that some were born to lead while others were born to obediently follow. King, serfs, peasants, the poor living in the squalor of England's cities, the hated Irish and their economic dependency; all were part of a British subject's understanding of the reality, if not the necessity, of social stratification. Americans added layers of indentured servants, Indians, free blacks, and slaves, but the logic remained consistent. A challenge to slavery was an affront to the established social order.<sup>49</sup> In 1810 conservative Philadelphia politician Charles J. Ingersoll channeled Edmund Burke as he wrote that the people of the southern colonies were more strongly "attached to liberty than those of the northern" and "were it not for the slaves of the South, there would be but one rank [free men in America]."<sup>50</sup> Although republican inclinations tended to level American society, the British traditions of social order and distinction still influenced the social structure of the young nation. The elimination of one layer of that order could result in the eventual collapse of the whole. The characterization of slavery as necessary to the improvement of blacks and essential to societal order empowered proslavery forces, colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum.<sup>51</sup> The names would change, their voices would grow more numerous and their rhetoric more strident, but the debate that began

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<sup>49</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Tise, *Proslavery*, 99-100.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

before the Revolutionary War would employ many of the same arguments to attack or defend slavery.

Americans appreciated the God-ordained order they saw in the British Empire. Because of the lawlessness, paganism, and poverty they believed they saw in Africa, they assured themselves that some limits to personal liberty were necessary. After all, the African barely resembled the European or American, and the differences were not merely physical. Africans were perceived to be intellectually and socially inferior. This conclusion conveniently dovetailed with the need to maintain an ordered society very different from what existed in Africa. If God had created some to be servants, He surely would have equipped them differently for the task. They would have little ability or desire to lead. In spite of the protestations of those on the religious margins, bondage would actually be good for the slave. Many assumed it was part of the natural order of things and beneficial to slave and society alike.

Thomas Jefferson believed an emancipated slave would become part of a permanent underclass of serfs and peasants. He feared this class could undermine American society and recommended exiling these former slaves to Africa, the Caribbean, or a far flung region of the American continent. He stated, “This unfortunate difference in color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.”<sup>52</sup> In 1775 Bernard Romans wrote *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* cautioning that emancipation would “procure

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<sup>52</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 132-133, 138-39. Finkelman summarizes Jefferson’s views on slavery using four major themes: 1) Slavery was accepted in the great nations of the world; 2) Emancipation would lead to chaos and the collapse of society; 3) The southern economy depended on slavery; 4) Blacks were genetically inferior and predisposed to sexual immorality. Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 22. Jefferson also said “Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort (because Roman slaves were not necessarily a different race). The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of the master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.” Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 139. This statement clearly illustrates how conjoined slavery and black slavery were in the American mind.

a greater number of vagabonds than we are already pestered with.”<sup>53</sup> Landon Carter proclaimed, “Indeed, slaves are devils—and to make them otherwise than slaves will be to set devils free.”<sup>54</sup>

From the colonial period to the Civil War, proslavery advocates defended slavery by arguing that slaves were biologically inferior and specially fitted for a life of servitude. This fundamental assumption permeated both camps. Thomas Jefferson analyzed the black man’s intellectual capabilities concluding, “in memory they are equal to whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid, and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.” Offering a backhanded compliment, Jefferson continued, “They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present.” Regarding artistic ability, he related, “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.” Jefferson even evaluated their ability to appreciate romance. “They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.” Just as Whitefield had argued the African was better suited for the climate of the deep South, Jefferson viewed the African as “more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold than whites.”<sup>55</sup>

Antislavery whites also questioned the intellectual abilities of the African, but they were unwilling to accept the contention that inferiority justified bondage.<sup>56</sup> Edmund Morgan claims

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<sup>53</sup> Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West-Florida* (New York: R. Aitken Bookseller, 1775), 105.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom*, 330.

<sup>55</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 133-135.

<sup>56</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 5.

that in Virginia, there had always been “a rough congruity of Christianity, whiteness, and freedom and of heathenism, non-whiteness, and slavery.”<sup>57</sup> In the estimation of most, to be black was to be inferior. If he was inferior, it logically followed that he might not function properly without restraint and supervision. According to defenders of slavery, in a world tainted by the curse of sin, slavery was best for the slave and society.

Generations of proslavery partisans viewed the American brand of slavery as more benevolent and mutually beneficial than the slavery practiced in antiquity. They apparently failed to see the obvious racial distinctiveness of the slavery practiced on southern plantations as compared to earlier times. While slavery existed long before the American colonies were settled, it was not generally based on race before the sixteenth century. In pre-colonial societies one could be enslaved, at any time, for a number of reasons.<sup>58</sup> Southerners liked to compare their slavery to Roman slavery because they believed they benefitted from the comparison, but they failed to see the glaring contrast between Roman slavery and African race slavery. Roman slaves were not exclusively one race; American slaves were almost exclusively black.<sup>59</sup> The proslavery argument was not solely a race argument, but notions of racial inferiority influenced the thinking of its defenders.<sup>60</sup>

Consistent with the mid-nineteenth century characterization of slavery, the strength of the proslavery argument turned on the nature of slavery, especially as it related to racial inferiority and biblical servitude. Clerics generally held a familial view of the institution consistent with the Apostle Paul’s characterization of slavery, in part because they tended to practice a more

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<sup>57</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 331.

<sup>58</sup> Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 122.

benevolent brand of slavery they believed comported well with biblical guidelines. Their brand of slavery was much easier to defend. Perhaps this familial notion led them to defend the institution as they thought it should be, because they lacked the moral courage to oppose slavery as it existed for most slaves and masters in the antebellum South.

The proslavery contingent proceeded with the assumption that Africans were not just different, they were inferior. Armed with this assessment of the backwardness of Africans and African culture, they could comfort their consciences with the knowledge that their strain of slavery was a positive good for all concerned and in line with God's ordained plan for social stability. In 1773 Harvard senior Theodore Parsons claimed that bringing Africans to the colonies "from the state of brutality, wretchedness, and misery...to this land of light, humanity and Christian knowledge, is to them so great a blessing."<sup>61</sup> Parsons was not alone. Whether the argument involved the mission to the slaves or the blessing of being brought to a more civilized and bountiful land, clergy and laymen chose to look at the "bright side" of a very dark institution long before antebellum advocates suddenly discovered the "positive good" in the often maligned practice.

Decades before the colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, they accepted the idea that the black was not just fitted for service by God, he was condemned to servitude by God's curse. Moses records a curse on Noah's grandson Canaan,

And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japeth; and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Gen. 9:25-27)

The theory assumed the descendents of Ham (Noah's son and Canaan's father) were Africans and thus, Noah's curse on Canaan evidenced God's determination to enslave the African race.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Quoted in Tise, *Proslavery*, 32. Parsons made this assertion nearly sixty years before the positive good argument was allegedly first formulated.

The racial version of Noah's curse arrived in America early in the colonial period.<sup>62</sup> By the 1670s men used this interpretation as justification for enslaving blacks. In 1798, John Lawrence of South Quay, Virginia claimed that blackness was a mark of the curse.<sup>63</sup> Historian Stephen Haynes claims that by the coming of the Civil War, an understanding of Genesis 9-11 in a racial context became an accepted practice that required no defense.<sup>64</sup>

The curse of Canaan seems like an obscure, tortured interpretation of a biblical text by men who had an obvious agenda, but throughout history it has been a compelling argument for those looking for a racial component to slavery in the Bible. The tendency to equate race slavery with biblical servitude primarily sprang from this one dubious passage. It had circulated among Christians before the Revolution, but became a central tenet in the formative years of the nation.<sup>65</sup> It was often appropriated by apologists seeking to bolster their proslavery arguments. In light of a near universal assumption of African inferiority, many Christians thought it was a reasonable interpretation. Virginia Baptist David Barrow was not one of them. In 1808 he mocked the idea of an alleged curse, accusing partisans of finding "a saddle for every horse" that they would ride over any challenge to slavery.<sup>66</sup> Anyone seeking to justify a position through Scripture could find a number of verses to defend or condemn American slavery; the curse of Canaan argument was one of the favorites.

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>63</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 162.

<sup>64</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 162.

<sup>66</sup> David Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery Examined on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture* (Lexington: D&C Bradford, 1808), 29.

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The claim of scriptural support added a valuable arrow to the proslavery quiver. Biblical authorization was critical to the proslavery cause and no argument was more useful for establishing a moral justification for slavery.<sup>67</sup> By Landon Carter's time, scriptural sanction was established well enough for Carter to state, with no apparent moral concern, "two [slaves] I will sell, God willing."<sup>68</sup> He, like Whitefield before him, was apparently comfortable enough with slavery to enlist the Almighty's aid in a sale of human property. The assumption of biblical approval emboldened men like Whitefield and Carter to claim divine approbation for the institution.

The theory of a newly-developed proslavery polemic in the mid 1800s is usually coupled with the twin fears of slave insurrection and immediate emancipation championed by abolitionists. The theory becomes suspect when one "discovers" statements like the one written by Raymond Harris in 1788. His *Scriptural Researches on the Licitness of the Slave-Trade* claimed that God's Word "has positively declared that the Slave-Trade is intrinsically good and licit" and that slaveholding "is positively consonant to the principles of the Law of Nature, the Mosaic Dispensation, and the Christian Law." He insisted that slavery had "the positive sanction of God in its support."<sup>69</sup>

Most of the colonial population tacitly or wholeheartedly approved of slavery. However, there were antislavery voices shining enough light to lead the nation in a different direction. Many believed the general principles of Christianity and natural rights stood diametrically

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<sup>67</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 115-18.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, 212.

<sup>69</sup> Raymond Harris, *Scriptural Researches on the Licitness of the Slavetrade, Shewing Its Conformity with the Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion, Delineated in the Sacred Writings of the Word of God* (London: John Stockdale, 1788), 20, 50, 75.

opposed to the specific practice of chattel slavery. Jefferson's declaration of equality through creation in 1776 dovetailed with Samuel Sewall's 1700 quotation of the Apostle Paul proclaiming God "had made of one blood all nations of men"<sup>70</sup> and Albert Barnes citation of the same verse in 1846.<sup>71</sup> Revolutionary thinking added secular corroboration to the Bible, but the argument had not changed in over 150 years. Baptist preacher David Barrow freed his slaves in 1784. In the deed of manumission he claimed to be "sensible and fully persuaded that freedom is the natural and unalienable right of all mankind; and also having a simple eye to that Golden Rule prescribed in sacred writ, 'do to all men as you would they should do to you.'"<sup>72</sup>

To counter scriptural citations specifically mentioning slavery, antislavery men consistently argued that Christ's New Testament teaching regarding the Golden Rule seriously undermined the proslavery argument. Before the colonies became a nation, John Wesley stated in his antislavery polemic, "Be gentle towards men. And see that you invariably do unto every one, as you would he should do unto you."<sup>73</sup> In 1784, Methodists meeting in Baltimore said slavery was "contrary to the golden law of God..., and the unalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution."<sup>74</sup> Many defenders of slavery cited specific verses they claimed clearly placed God in their camp. While antislavery crusaders also cited proof texts, they often attempted to employ a holistic argument including notions of human freedom and revolutionary principles interwoven with scriptural teaching. When they cited Scripture, they employed a broader view loosely gathered under the Golden Rule umbrella. No matter how

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<sup>70</sup> Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 312.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 33.

<sup>74</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty* 158-59.

many specific passages the proslavery men could cite, the general principle of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you was a powerfully unifying concept for antislavery Christians.

Slavery's opponents rarely missed an opportunity to chronicle the evils of human bondage.<sup>75</sup> In his diary written in the late eighteenth century, Landon Carter recorded several instances of whippings and an occasional mock execution. Apparently on Carter's plantation slavery was not the familial institution often described where slaves honored their masters and

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<sup>75</sup> John Wesley, Samuel Hopkins, and Benjamin Rush were careful to chronicle the brutality and evil of slavery in contrast to Raymond Harris's characterization of it as "licit." Many of the clergy who chose to defend slavery defined it in a more familial light. The fact that preachers often treated their slaves in a more humane manner than the average slaveholder may partially explain why they were apparently genuine in their conviction that slavery could be a positive good for society as a whole and the slave in particular. They were defending slavery as it should be, not necessarily as it was. Most preachers who defended such an inhumane practice never viewed it as barbaric. Later, men like Thornwell willingly admitted it was essentially only tolerated by the Bible and was an imperfect institution for a fallen world. In volume four of his *Collected Writings* he cites a more sinister characterization of slavery offered by a critic. "It neglects the great primary distinction of persons and things—converting a person into a thing, an object merely passive, without any recognized attributes of human nature... He is reduced to the least of brutes... And as there are for him no wrongs because there are no rights, so there is for him nothing morally right... He is thus divested of his moral nature" Recoiling at such a degrading description of what many considered to be the South's God-ordained prescription for societal order, Thornwell proclaimed, "If this be a just description of Slavery, the wonder is, not that the civilized world is now indignant of its outrages and wrongs, but that it has been so slow in detecting its enormities; that mankind, for so many centuries, acquiesced in a system which contradicted every impulse of nature, every whisper of conscience, every dictate of religion." Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, 409-10. Thornwell was probably one of the more benevolent slave masters. Other preachers such as Thornton Stringfellow were not willing to cede the high ground to the Abolitionists. Stringfellow stated, "God established the relation by law, and bestowed the highest manifestations of his favor upon slaveholders; and has caused it to be written as with a sunbeam in the Scriptures"(40). He refused to shy away from the claim that slavery shattered families. "Again, the divine Lawgiver in guarding the property rights in slaves among his chosen people, sanctions principles which may work the separation of man and wife, father and children"(17). He even rejected the assumption that aggressive discipline might border on brutality. "God passes with the right to buy and possess, the right to govern, by a severity which knows no bounds but the master's discretion" (15). Stringfellow was unapologetic, asserting that slavery was a God-ordained good, "it is quite possible that his favor may now be found with one class of men, who are holding another class in bondage. Be this as it may, God decreed slavery—and shows in that decree, tokens of good-will to the master" (3). Thornton Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (Dodo Press: [www.dodopress.co.uk](http://www.dodopress.co.uk), 1841). While Thornwell was probably more representative of the proslavery clergy's belief that the institution was a necessary evil that would cease to exist in eternity, there were men like Stringfellow who apparently felt no guilt or regret for the lot of the slave. Indeed, he rejoiced in the favor God had shown to masters. Ironically, had slavery been as genteel as it appeared to be under Thornwell, it probably would not have survived as an institution because it would not be as profitable without the slave being intimidated and forced to labor.

masters cared for their slaves as their own children.<sup>76</sup> Former slaves often recounted the horrors of being sold “down South” as a slave could be ripped from his family and shipped to a deep-South plantation condemned to toil until he perished.<sup>77</sup> One-half century after Carter penned his diaries, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional classic, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, captured the emotions of this type of family destruction through her account of the Christ-like Tom being sold to the godless Simon Legree.<sup>78</sup>

Even as the proslavery thinker argued for the necessity and efficacy of slavery, he often had to admit it was, at least in certain aspects, evil. From the early colonial period, through the birth of the nation, and to the founding of the southern Confederacy slavery and evil were often related.<sup>79</sup> Slavery in America was nearly two centuries older than the nation; for the majority of that time it was commonly accepted though not always morally sanctioned. For most it was a necessary evil they were not comfortable discussing on a regular basis.

Proslavery men believed their position could be strengthened by comparing the squalid conditions in British factories or the chaos in Africa with the orderliness of the slave system. They concluded their system was superior. Robert Walsh, a Maryland historian wrote in 1819, “The physical condition of the American negro is on the whole, not comparatively alone, but positively good, and he is exempt from those racking anxieties—the exacerbations of despair, to which the English manufacturer and peasant are subject to in the pursuit of their pittance.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom*, 72-76, 211, 330.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>78</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 349-494.

<sup>79</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 36.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Walsh, *An Appeal from the Judgments of Great Britain-Respecting the United States of America. Part First, containing An Historical Outline on their Merits and Wrongs as Colonies; and Strictures Upon the Calumnies of the British Writers. Second Edition* (Philadelphia: Mitchell, Ames, & White, 1819), 409-10.

Answering Benjamin Rush, Richard Nisbet wrote from Philadelphia in 1773, “A Negro may be said to have fewer cares, and less reason to be anxious about tomorrow, than any other individual of our species.... They may be pronounced happier than the common people of many of the arbitrary governments of Europe....”<sup>81</sup> Decades later John Henry Hopkins would trumpet the benefits of slavery in strikingly similar language. These arguments challenged the notion of the comparative evils of slavery. While it may not have been a positive good in all circumstances, many believed it was better than the British or urban alternative.<sup>82</sup>

Proslavery writers of every era offered a variety of biblical citations to add weight to their case. They argued for divine sanction in the Old Testament, from Abraham arming his slaves to God’s proscription over coveting another’s manservant. The New Testament apostles outlined the responsibilities of both slaves and masters. In the book of Philemon, purportedly written to a slaveholder, Paul never directly asked Philemon to free his slave Onesimus. New Testament writers consistently encouraged Christians to obey the law and pray for those who had the rule over them. Slavery’s supporters arrived at what they believed was a logically and biblically consistent conclusion. God never condemned slavery, it was regulated as a relation in the Epistles, and Jesus Christ never insisted that a slaveholder free his slaves. They believed slavery was consistent with Scripture and could not be considered a moral or spiritual evil.<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, antislavery thinkers of each era found their justification partly in the Scriptures, often citing the same passages their opponents had referenced. The fact that Abraham armed his

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Nisbet, “Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture or a Defence of the West-India Planters, From the Aspersions thrown out Against Them, By the Author of a Pamphlet Entitled, ‘An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping.’ By a West Indian.” Philadelphia: 1773.), 27, 29. n.p..

<sup>82</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

slaves indicated a significant difference between Old Testament slavery and that practiced primarily in the South. The apostles expected slaves to obey their masters, but that did not justify slavery any more than their admonition to obey the Roman rulers justified the brutality and debauchery of the Roman Empire. In fact, if the slave holder practiced the principles encapsulated in Christ's New Testament teaching of the Golden Rule, the underpinnings of the institution would be shaken to the point of eventual collapse.

Proslavery arguments remained consistent from the colonial period through the revolutionary era.<sup>84</sup> Antislavery argumentation, while not as overt or widely expressed in the colonial and early national period, also remained relatively constant in terms of the logic employed. The fear of slave insurrection and the backlash against radical abolitionism may have motivated many to a more aggressive defense of slavery, but they were not the first to use these arguments. They viewed the Scriptures with many of the same preconceived notions of African inferiority espoused by their colonial forefathers. Those with enough courage to challenge the societal and religious norms also echoed arguments already articulated long before they were born. The debate intensified during the mid-nineteenth century, but it broke little fresh ground.<sup>85</sup>

During the revolutionary era, awakening principles of individual responsibility and personal freedom were more broadly applied than in the colonial period. Jefferson's celebrated words renewed and intensified the debate over human bondage. The nation became a laboratory for the development of human freedom, and yet she still struggled with the disconnect between universal freedom and African slavery.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 122. Finkelman notes, "Thus as early as the Revolution, Southerners began to offer defenses of slavery. After the debates leading to the Missouri Compromise, these defenses intensified." Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Tise, *Proslavery*, 102.

## Chapter Three

### God's Family Divided

#### The Antebellum Debate among Proslavery and Antislavery Clerics

William Wilberforce believed he was doing the Lord's work in his battle against the slave trade in Great Britain, claiming he was not worthy of the honor bestowed upon him to "pity these children of affliction" and hoping to "terminate their unequal wrongs."<sup>1</sup> George Whitefield wrote a letter to slaveholding American colonies excoriating them for poor treatment of their slaves warning, "I think God has a quarrel with you," yet later he owned slaves in South Carolina and encouraged Georgia to permit slavery.<sup>2</sup> Christians debated the slavery question in America and Europe long before the issue spawned a divisive debate in antebellum America. During the formative years of the fledgling American nation, leading clergymen held very different views regarding the morality and legitimacy of chattel slavery. Just as citizens, politicians, laymen, and preachers had done for over a century, nineteenth century Christian leaders employed a series of arguments designed to support their viewpoint regarding the South's peculiar institution. The controversy simmered for decades and gradually heated to a boiling point by the 1850s and 1860s. The conflagration that followed testified to the increasingly passionate and divisive rhetoric of the antebellum period. By the time of the Civil War, Christians on both sides of the divide had perfected comprehensive and sophisticated arguments. These men stood on the

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 60. William Wilberforce left a legacy that is still honored today. Christian philosopher and scholar Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer said of the member of Parliament, "We should sound the names of some of our Christian predecessors with a cry of pride and thankfulness to God:.... William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who was the greatest single personal force in changing England from a slave-owning country to a country that turned away legally and totally from slavery long before the United States did." A *Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 53, 54. Samuel C. Smith, "'Through the Eye of a Needle': The Role of pietistic and Mystical Thought Among the Anglican Elite in the Eighteenth Century Lowcountry South" (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 1999), 227-29. See John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield*, (Hartford: E. Hunt, 1851), 626-42 for a letter from George Whitefield to John Wesley written Dec. 24, 1740. See Warren Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 121-48 for a scan of John Wesley's original *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (London: R. Hawes, 1774).

shoulders of those who had gone before them and appropriated many of their ideas. They fleshed out the arguments and packaged them in a compelling polemic anchored in the pages of Scripture.

Evangelical ministers, committed to the same Bible, searched the Scriptures and came to completely different conclusions concerning the sanction of slavery. Leading clergy of the day defended or condemned slavery based on differing applications of Scripture and disparate views regarding the nature of slavery in the South. The disagreement among them eventually divided the major denominations. The failure of the Christian community to come to consensus regarding slavery foreshadowed an impending national crisis. Three primary factors fueled the debate between proslavery and antislavery ministers: the contrasting definitions of slavery, a difference of opinion regarding the weight, interpretation, and use of specific scriptural proof texts, and the acceptance of the notion of racial inequality.

## EVANGELICAL INFLUENCE

Antebellum Americans were a church-going people. In 1850, one of every seven or eight citizens was a church member. Two to three times that number attended services regularly.<sup>3</sup> Evangelical Protestantism was the overwhelming choice of the average parishioner; it served as a unifying force in the young nation.<sup>4</sup> By mid-century the Methodists and Baptists represented over two-thirds of all who attended church in America.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical Protestantism dominated

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<sup>3</sup> John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>4</sup> C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 12-13, 55.

<sup>5</sup> McKivigan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 17.

southern religion where ninety-four percent of all churches were Methodist (45%), Baptist (37%), or Presbyterian (12%).<sup>6</sup>

The clergy bore primary responsibility for the religious education of the youth in all social classes. Their preaching and teaching molded the minds of the young, and their books and essays expanded on their sermons.<sup>7</sup> The congregant respected and valued the opinion of the local pastor, and the local pastor looked to leading theologians for answers when dealing with difficult or questionable biblical passages. For example, Presbyterian theologians James Henley Thornwell from South Carolina and Albert Barnes of Philadelphia provided valuable guidance to the shepherds of individual flocks. Each held clearly defined positions regarding human bondage. Called “the Calhoun of the southern church”<sup>8</sup> and “the most formidable voice of southern Presbyterianism,”<sup>9</sup> Thornwell presented an uncompromising, unapologetic defense of slavery. Labeling slavery a sin as it existed in the South, Albert Barnes authored two influential works, *The Church and Slavery* and *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*.

Many of their contemporaries echoed their views. Anglican Bishop John Henry Hopkins hailed from Vermont and wrote a spirited defense of slavery. His writings are a reminder that the debate was not always regional. Hopkins was one of several prominent theologians in the North who defended the institution. Others included Nathan Lord, President of Dartmouth College and Moses Stuart, a professor at Andover Seminary.<sup>10</sup> Joseph P. Thompson was the pastor of New York’s Broadway Tabernacle Church from 1845 to 1871. His church provided a

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<sup>6</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History of Faith in the Southern Slaveholder’s Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>10</sup> McKivigan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 8.

platform for abolitionists, and he wrote prolifically on a variety of religious topics during his tenure.

The antebellum theologian wielded enormous influence in the public arena. Thornwell boasted in 1858, “Our Theological Professors are preachers upon a large scale—Preachers not only to preachers, but to all the congregations of the land. In their studies they are putting forth an influence which, like the atmosphere, penetrates to every part of the country.”<sup>11</sup> Barnes echoed a similar sentiment. “In our country there is no class of men who exert more influence than ministers of the gospel; and there is, perhaps, no portion of the land where ministers of the gospel in fact exert more influence than they do in slave-holding communities.”<sup>12</sup> Organized religion played a major role in American politics during the twenty years leading to the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> The church and the minister touched the life of the citizen in many ways. Even one who neither read nor heeded the Bible afforded it a reverential deference. America respected religion and listened when the leaders of the major denominations spoke.<sup>14</sup>

Religious leaders used their pens and voices to spread the message. At the outset of the Civil War the public had at their disposal nearly three hundred religious newspapers.<sup>15</sup> Some had circulations that rivaled any secular newspaper in the world. Contrary to modern

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<sup>11</sup> Fox-Genovese, Quoted in *The Mind of the Master Class*, 494.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1857), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and Willaim N. Still, Jr., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45. Finkelman claims “the largest single body of proslavery literature is based on religious defenses of slavery.” Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 26. Kenneth Cleaver asserts, “The fact that the Bible, as the Word of God, was considered to be an acknowledged standard of morals in nineteenth-century America, and the fact that the Bible addressed issues related to slavery, meant that it was altogether fitting to consult the Bible as a primary source of moral authority to solve the problems related to slavery.” Kenneth G. Cleaver, “An Examination of Albert Barnes’ Handling of the Bible in the Debate on Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002), 196.

<sup>15</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 37.

perceptions of antebellum America, much of the populace was literate. The market for printed material was strong, as evidenced by the large number of books, tracts, and periodicals produced during the period.<sup>16</sup> The masses consumed these publications and integrated the ideas into their collective thinking. The rhetoric and the writing concerning slavery espoused increasingly radical ideas, and the public debate grew more acrimonious.<sup>17</sup>

The dispute had not always been so strident. While differences of opinion existed from the colonial period, the churches of the South had not always sided with slavery. In the eighteenth century many southern evangelical clerics, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians opposed slavery. Around the turn of the century, southern religious viewpoints moved from opposition to a position of silence on the subject. Slavery became a civil matter, and many believed the church should only involve itself in spiritual matters.<sup>18</sup> The ambivalent attitude characteristic of southern Christians at the time began to change in the 1830s when the concept of immediate abolition began to gain ground.<sup>19</sup> Emotionalism, serious concern over the societal role of the southern church, and a want of proper perspective turned much of the southern Methodist Church decidedly proslavery by the 1830s.<sup>20</sup>

The slave population in the South had grown from less than seven hundred thousand in 1790 to two million in 1830.<sup>21</sup> Slavery was engrained in southern society, and its condemnation

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<sup>16</sup> Beringer, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 38. For more on the influence of the church and its publications see pages 38, 63, and 114 of Goen.

<sup>18</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> McKivigan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 177. See also Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6-7 for comment on slavery as a positive good.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 29.

and subsequent removal would shake the foundations of the economic and social order. Thornwell cautioned, “We are not alarmists, but Slavery is implicated in every fibre [sic] of Southern society; it is with us a vital question, and it is because we *know* that interference with it cannot and will not be much longer endured we raise our warning voice. We would save the country if we could.”<sup>22</sup>

At the time these changes occurred, preachers began to claim that the Bible addressed the civil institution of slavery, and God had ordained it. Because slavery was legal in the South, Christians had an obligation to obey the authorities and the laws that protected slavery. As the theological arguments developed, leaders on both sides of the issue accused the other of being anti-God and anti-Bible. The generally accepted idea of racial inequality also served to strengthen their argument.<sup>23</sup> In a few decades, many southern clerics moved from anti-slavery, to ambivalence, to proslavery and became influential apologists for the institution. Preachers in the 1830s and beyond sanctified human bondage and provided a firm moral foundation for slavery.<sup>24</sup> Prominent southern clergymen presented a detailed defense of slavery from what they considered to be a biblical perspective, hearkening back to arguments from days gone by. They repeated the polemic in meetings and publications throughout the South and gave the slaveholding class religious legitimacy and a platform to defend their institution. Pulpits in the South rang with proslavery oratory as many of the faithful followed the preacher’s lead.

During the same period in the North, ministers began to abandon the concept of slavery as a political issue and embrace it as a moral issue. They spoke of a higher law that superseded

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<sup>22</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* vol. 4, 396.

<sup>23</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 145-49.

<sup>24</sup> McKivigan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 16.

civil law and guaranteed freedom to all men.<sup>25</sup> As his predecessors had done during revolutionary times, Barnes cited the immortal truth embodied in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and, their inalienable rights included life and liberty.<sup>26</sup> While the overwhelming emphasis of his argument came from his reading of Scripture, he valued the influence of the Declaration of Independence on the discussion of equality by creation. Northern clerics still maintained their loyalty to the authority of Scripture, but viewed man's right to be free as consistent with the spirit of the Bible and the principles of the great revivals.

Divisive rhetoric led to increased alienation among the flock and many parishioners began to accept the idea of a sectional church. Differing theological viewpoints between the ministers of the North and the South contributed to further distortion and misunderstanding.<sup>27</sup> The northerner typically saw society in need of change and the church as an instrument to improve conditions by supporting worthy social causes. The southerner, on the other hand, appreciated the orderliness of society and hoped it would remain stable while he worked out his own salvation. Many in the North deemed the southern culture backward, inferior, and unenlightened. Frederick Olmstead's *The Cotton Kingdom* illustrated this view. Writing for the New York Times, he travelled through the South chronicling the shortcomings of a backwards, almost primitive South when compared to northern society.<sup>28</sup> The southerner saw modernism

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<sup>25</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Barnes, *The Church and Slavery*, 36-37.

<sup>27</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 126-27.

<sup>28</sup> Beringer, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, 93.; Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (NY: Mason Brothers, 1862). Olmstead's work argues that slavery actually retarded southern economic growth because it prevented market forces from pushing the southern economy forward. A virtually unlimited supply of slave labor covered for the inefficiencies inherent in the system.

creeping into northern society and the culture moving away from biblical orthodoxy, placing an inordinate faith in the Declaration of Independence and the concept of the rights of man. From the southern perspective, mob rule, as evidenced by vice and crime, plagued northern cities as they suffered from a want of law and order.<sup>29</sup> Churches helped create and sustain distorted images and attitudes toward parishioners from other regions. The failure of the major denominations to unite in the face of growing sectional strife, coupled with persistent disagreement over the slavery question, portended a coming ecclesiastical schism.

Following a series of internal theological quarrels, some involving slavery, the Presbyterians split in 1837. The divisions in the Methodist and Baptist denominations related more directly to slavery. In 1844, Methodists divided when the parent church barred Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia from the episcopacy because he owned slaves. The Methodist Episcopal Church formed in 1845. The Baptist disagreement involved missions. In 1845, the Foreign Mission Board and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society refused to sanction slaveholders for mission work, and the southern delegation promptly formed the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>30</sup> The major denominations divided, abandoning any hope of fellowshiping and communing openly. When parishioners from the North and South stopped talking, they found it much easier to demonize each other.

Fifteen years prior to the division of the American nation, the churches set the example by dividing without resorting to bloodshed. When the question arose regarding national division, some looked to the church as the example of how the separation could be bloodless. Evangelical Protestantism, a powerful cultural force, divided largely because sincere theologians examined

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<sup>29</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 193. See also Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 67.; McKivigan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 17, 211.

the Scriptures and came to contradictory conclusions regarding the signature aspect of southern culture. The faith that unified the nation at the dawn of the nineteenth century now helped divide it. Denominational schisms laid the groundwork for national disunion. Coupled with distorted images of each other and exaggerated moral outrage, ecclesiastical disunity presaged national division.<sup>31</sup>

## THE NATURE OF SLAVERY

A significant part of the disagreement and distortion involved the nature of slavery. Proslavery clergy often viewed southern slavery differently than their antislavery counterparts. They stressed the familial aspect of the relationship and noted that the master supplied the food, clothing, and housing necessary for the slave to live. Slavery inculcated people into Christian communities where white people were parents more than they were masters.<sup>32</sup> Northern cleric John Henry Hopkins accepted his southern brethren's assertion that they provided well for their slaves. He noted that slaves were "the happiest laborers in the world" because the master provided all their needs and their families had a home. He described their work as "light," their holidays "numerous" and their religious privileges "generously accorded." Hopkins claimed the master provisioned his slaves temporally and spiritually better than the working classes in England or the free blacks living in the United States. More love existed in the master-slave relationship than between the employer and hireling because the master and slave relation was

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<sup>31</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 13, 116, 134. For more on understanding why churches divided over slavery and how the sundering of denominations eventually affected the nation see Goen 6, 9, 71, 133, 156-57. See also Beringer, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, 86 and Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 60, 193.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, Stout, and Wilson, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 22. See also McKivigan, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 307.

for life.<sup>33</sup> This characterization of slavery closely resembled the positions of those who had earlier argued for the beneficial aspects of the system compared to labor conditions in northern cities or in England.

Thornwell understood that a person's viewpoint regarding the nature of slavery would color his ability to rationally assess the moral or biblical foundation of the institution. He began by addressing the spiritual aspects of slavery, claiming anyone would reconsider "If it can be shown that Slavery contravenes the spirit of the gospel, that as a social relation it is essentially unfavourable to the cultivation and growth of the graces of the Spirit, that it is unfriendly to the development of piety and to communion with God, or, that it retards the onward progress of man, that it hinders the march of society to its destined goal, and contradicts that supremacy of justice which is the soul of the State and the life-blood of freedom." Having assembled a daunting number of qualifying "ifs" he concluded that slavery, under these assumptions, would be "self-condemned," that "religion and philanthropy alike require us to labour for its destruction, and every good man amongst us would feel bound to contribute to its removal." To drive home his point, he proclaimed, "even the voice of patriotism would demand that we should wipe from our country the foul reproach of standing in the way of the destined improvement of mankind."<sup>34</sup> Thornwell did not believe the slavery he witnessed could be characterized by any of these negative attributes, and he was confident that the relation could positively impact master and slave alike. It would take the abolitionist movement and the publication of writings such as

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<sup>33</sup> John Henry Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery From the Days of the Patriarch Abraham to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) 13, 30, 84, 327. For a provocative discussion of the connection of wage slavery to southern slavery see George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Slaves without Masters*, (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966). Originally published in 1857.

<sup>34</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, 408.

Frederick Douglass' autobiography (1845) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to bring slavery's inequity and barbarity to the nation's consciousness.

Thornwell argued that the slaveholder owned the slave's labor but could not own the person. He rejected the abolitionist portrayal of the slave being absorbed completely by the slaveholder so that he had no conscience, will, or personality of his own. He accused his detractors of trying to prejudice the legitimate discussion of slavery with this unimaginable concept because their argument was weak. Slavery did not even involve involuntary servitude if the slave had the proper attitude. He viewed the relation no differently than a wage laborer working out of obligation or compulsion who had no desire to perform the labor. Thornwell defended the relation between the Christian slaveholder and the Christian slave. His viewpoints did not necessarily apply when the discussion involved unbelieving slaveholders and unregenerate slaves. The institution shared common characteristics with marriage, parenthood, and other human relations. The condition of the slave, although not ideal, still permitted him to fulfill the obligations specified in Scripture. The Christian slaveholder could not view his slave as a tool, a chattel, or a brute, but as a person with an immortal soul who had been providentially assigned a particular position for a particular purpose.<sup>35</sup>

Thornwell did not concern himself with the origin of slavery and dismissed the man stealing claim. Even if the slave's ancestors had been enslaved for indefensible reasons, generations later the only legitimate consideration involved how the slaveholders treated slaves and how those in bondage conducted themselves under difficult circumstances.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Hopkins argued that if the original act condemned the current behavior, Americans would need

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<sup>35</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, 412-14, 416, 422-423, 430.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

to return their land to Native Americans because it had been taken under nefarious circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

Thornwell's plantation provided essentials for his slaves but never produced a substantial profit. He apparently practiced what he preached and attended to the spiritual needs of his slaves while ruling in a more benevolent manner.<sup>38</sup> His personal experience with slavery involved the genteel relation that he defended in his writings. Many southern ministers admitted that the slavery practiced in the South did not measure up to biblical standards, but the fault lay with the abuse of slavery in a fallen world and not with slavery itself. Problems existed in marriage, but God had sanctioned the institution and did not call it evil. If they were going to craft a defense of the institution, many realized they would have to defend a different type of slavery than the one most common in the South.

Near the end of the Civil War, many preachers theorized that God judged the southern effort because slaves had been treated poorly. Even as southern society crumbled, they could not admit that slavery itself could be the problem. God's judgment of the Confederacy could not have been caused by the South's embrace of the institution; it was simply an indication of divine displeasure over the treatment of slaves.

The antislavery minister typically held a more sinister view of human bondage. Joseph P. Thompson, pastor of Broadway Tabernacle Church in New York City, echoed the approach of John Wesley when he clarified that the debate was over the slavery that was established by law in the southern United States. It was not an abstract relation of master and servant, or a theory of ownership of labor without ownership of the person. It was "ownership of the slave vested in the

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<sup>37</sup> Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery*, 237-38.

<sup>38</sup> Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 229.

master by law.”<sup>39</sup> He focused on the ownership of a human being not unlike the ownership of a piece of furniture or cattle. Similarly, Albert Barnes argued that the only question of real importance involved the legitimacy of slavery as it existed at the time, not as it could theoretically exist. The United States in the mid-nineteenth century followed the rule of law and purportedly practiced democracy better than any other nation. The environment for slavery would never be better than it was at the time. If abuses abounded at that time, a discussion of slavery in its ideal form would be pointless.<sup>40</sup>

Barnes noted that the southern brand of slavery had already dehumanized the slave. He had no liberty, no right of citizenship, no right to the fruits of his labor and no right to plan and provide for his family. He was a piece of property. What value existed in discussing the “abuse” of slavery? The system in its finest form epitomized abuse. Barnes further asserted that slavery did not equate to an apprenticeship, did not compare to the parent-child relationship, and did not resemble a feudal system of serfs and lords. It was “PROPERTY IN A HUMAN BEING.”<sup>41</sup> The master owned his slave and had the right to use him or sell him as he saw fit. When the master died, he could dispose of him in his estate as he did a house, land, or horse. In a sobering clarification of what the law actually permitted, Barnes stated,

The law of South Carolina says, ‘Slaves shall be claimed, held, taken, reputed, and adjudged in law, to be CHATTELS PERSONAL in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executors, administrators, and assigns TO ALL INTENTS, CONSTRUCTIONS, AND PURPOSES WHATSOEVER.’ The Louisiana code says, ‘A slave is one who is in the

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<sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 13. Thompson’s church was central to the antebellum abolitionist movement, hosting many noted speakers. Any in-depth inquiry into the abolitionist movement should include an examination of Broadway Tabernacle Church in New York City.

<sup>40</sup> Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 12-16, 38-57. This work is a comprehensive argument against the biblical justification of slavery and is invaluable for further research on the topic.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

power of the master to whom he belongs; the master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labour; he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor require any thing but what must belong to his master.<sup>42</sup>

Slavery engendered different images in individual minds. When Barnes defined slavery in these terms he left little room for compromise. This type of servitude evoked emotional opposition among Christians in the North and energized an abolitionist cause that sought to compel the nation to rise up against this injustice.<sup>43</sup>

Men like Barnes and Thompson understood that God did not always accomplish His purposes by miraculous intervention.<sup>44</sup> He used men to do His work. Barnes believed the issue demanded action from the church and the Christian. A fully committed church or Christian would do God's will by unambiguously opposing slavery. He challenged all men to take an uncompromising stand. Slavery was the only real peril to the existence of the American Union. "In language, in customs, in laws, in religion" Americans were united.<sup>45</sup> They shared a common history and origin. According to Barnes, slavery caused ill-will among Americans and especially American Christians. It was the source of reproach from nations abroad. Southerners could frame the institution in any fashion they chose, but that did not change reality. The antislavery clergy could not tolerate a system that robbed men of individual liberty and reduced them to the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 54-55. Thornwell stressed that the master simply owned the labor of the slave and could not possess his soul. He was more than just a possession. Thornton Stringfellow held a much bolder position regarding ownership. "This state, condition, or relation, is that which one human being is held without his consent by another, as property; to be bought, sold, and transferred, together with the increase, as property, forever" (2). Stringfellow consistently argued throughout the work that the master had absolute authority over the slave, including the right to severely discipline him physically and divide families when necessary. Thornton Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (Dodo Press, [www.dodopress.co.uk](http://www.dodopress.co.uk), 1841), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 16, 40-41, 47. For first-hand interviews with ex-slaves in Virginia see Charles L. Perdue, Jr. *Weevils in the Wheat* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976).

<sup>44</sup> C. S. Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860* (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing Corp., 1967), 48.

<sup>45</sup> Barnes, *The Church and Slavery*, 7.

same level as livestock. If they could frame the debate in their terms, they could more readily prove that the Scriptures condemned slavery. If they permitted slavery to be defined in the genteel, familial manner the proslavery clergy employed, their crusade was destined to fail.

When Henry Ward Beecher preached his sermon “Against a Compromise of Principle” on Thanksgiving Day, 1860 he ridiculed the southern attempt to characterize slavery as a mission to the heathen. He accused southerners of sanitizing slavery. It was no longer an evil. It was a virtue and true religion as “slave-ships bring heathen to plantation-Christianity.”<sup>46</sup> Almost one century earlier (1773) Benjamin Rush said the assertion that importing slaves permitted them to “become acquainted with the principles of the religion of our country” was like “justifying a highway robbery because part of the money acquired in this manner was appropriated to some religious use.”<sup>47</sup> In 1776 Samuel Hopkins argued that a more compassionate way to win the Africans would be to send missionaries to their homeland. He related, “If the Europeans and Americans had been as much engaged to Christianize the Africans, as they have been to enslave them; and had been at half the cost and pains to introduce the gospel among them, that they have to captivate and destroy them; we have all the reason in the world to conclude that extensive country...would have been full of gospel light.”<sup>48</sup> The battle to gain the moral high ground in

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *Patriotic Addresses in America and England, From 1850 to 1885, On Slavery, The Civil War, and the Development of Civil Liberty in the United States* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1887), 237. Stringfellow exclaimed, “In their bondage here on earth, they have been much better provided for, and great multitudes of them have been made the freeman of the Lord Jesus Christ, and left this world rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.” *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*. 32. Stringfellow rarely evidenced any doubt regarding slavery; he was more aggressive and less apologetic in his assertions than most clerics, but even he argued that slavery would yield spiritual benefits for the slave. Chesebroughs reports, “In May of 1861 the Southern Baptists declared that slaves had been ‘elevated...far above the condition of their race in the motherland.’ E. T. Winkler sermonized that the slaves had been ‘civilized and Christianized out of the depths. Of barbarism.’ A Baptist association in Georgia affirmed: ‘God has placed them [the slaves] here for their good and his glory.’” Believing that slavery was good for master and slave alike was quite a balm to the proslavery conscience. Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 148-49.

<sup>47</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, 13.

the struggle continued through generations. Slavery was the wedge that divided the nation, the churches, and the family of God. Now was the time for an unambiguous stand. The proslavery preacher defended an institution he believed was sanctioned by God; the antislavery preacher battled a system he feared was devised by the devil himself.<sup>49</sup>

## THUS SAITH THE LORD

Proslavery and antislavery clergy pointedly disagreed regarding the nature of the peculiar institution. Neither could they agree upon a proper approach to the alleged proof texts in the Bible. Instead, they disputed the meaning and intent of Scripture with greater fervor. In his Second Inaugural Address, President Abraham Lincoln reflected,

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.<sup>50</sup>

The issue that divided the nation ignited an exegetical battle in the church. A simple reading of the Bible yielded radically different understandings of what God had said. In his essay entitled “The Bible and Slavery” Mark A. Noll argues for a “hermeneutical crisis” fought on two plains during the Civil War. The most obvious problem involved a “simple reading of the Bible” that produced “incommensurate understandings of Scripture with no means, short of warfare, to adjudicate the differences.” The more subtle issue “concerned the fate of biblical

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<sup>49</sup> Barnes, *The Church and Slavery*, 6-8.

<sup>50</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address.” For a scan of the Address written in Lincoln’s own hand see (The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress), <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal3/436/4361300/malpage.db&recNum=2>. See also Diane Ravitch, ed., *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 152.

authority itself.” For some in the Christian community, the disagreement led to disillusionment and opened the door to an assault on the Holy Scriptures.<sup>51</sup> Proponents of slavery believed they had a decided advantage if the Bible was interpreted literally. The Old and New Testaments mentioned servitude. To accept the Bible as the literal Word of God meant to admit it sanctioned slavery. Thornwell claimed many were forced to admit the letter of the Scripture supported the slaveholder, so the antislavery zealot needed to cloud the literal meaning of the Word to accomplish his purpose. He explained, “The conviction grows upon us, that those who most violently denounce this relation have formed their opinions in the first instance independently of the Bible, and then by special pleading have attempted to pervert its teachings to the patronage of their assumptions.”<sup>52</sup>

The nation’s common Christian heritage permitted most Christians to assume northern and southern believers held the same moral standards on matters of conscience.<sup>53</sup> In reality, protagonists on both sides would bend their interpretations of essential Christian doctrines to fit their position. Thornwell claimed his adversaries believed the Bible condemned slavery as a sin, and thus set out to “work to make out the case that the Bible has covertly and indirectly done what they feel it ought to have done.”<sup>54</sup> Noll asserts that in 1861 “The political standoff that led to war was matched by an interpretive standoff. No common meaning could be discovered in the

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<sup>51</sup> Miller, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 230, 392.

<sup>53</sup> Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class*, 565.

<sup>54</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 392.

Bible....”<sup>55</sup> Thornwell and his cohorts staked out an unassailable position anchored on the Word of God, or so they thought.

The antislavery forces promoted a different viewpoint with equal passion. They appealed to a higher spirit of the gospel while chipping away at the exegetical advantage allegedly possessed by the defenders of human bondage. They stressed the principles of Christianity. The South refused to allow those principles to permeate society because the application of the Golden Rule would produce a new birth of freedom in their own back yard. The southern cleric’s literal interpretation of a few texts clearly contradicted the spirit of the whole council of God. The religions of the two regions were on divergent courses with respect to the institution of slavery.<sup>56</sup> Barnes wrote a comprehensive refutation of the claim to scriptural sanction, but he also defended the concept of the spirit of the law in contrast to the letter of the law. He noted the difference between the historical facts of Scripture and the moral principles it espoused. He argued the facts had to be considered in context with the time they were written. They should be interpreted in light of timeless moral principles revealed in the Scriptures. The church could impact society, improve the human condition and remain true to the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

The proslavery contingent accused their antislavery brothers of changing the gospel of Christ into a social gospel. Thornwell insisted that the church was not commissioned to remedy social ills. It could not be held responsible for remaking society, addressing class inequality, or getting involved in any number of socially altruistic causes. Philanthropic organizations and individuals should step in to meet the need or correct the wrong. He asked,

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<sup>55</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 127-28.

<sup>57</sup> Miller, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 44.

What, then, is the Church? It is not, as we fear too many are disposed to regard it, a moral institute of universal good, whose business it is to wage war upon every form of human ill, whether social, civil, political or moral, and to patronize every expedient which a romantic benevolence may suggest as likely to contribute to human comfort, or to mitigate the inconveniences of life.<sup>58</sup>

He believed the antislavery movement was not borne of honest interpretation of the Bible but of “visionary theories of human nature and society” and “had sprung from the misguided reason of man.” The source of antislavery assertions was natural truth, not revealed truth. Thornwell expected the slavery debate to end eventually, but feared the real casualty of the debate would be the authority of the Scriptures. He warned, “and when it is seen that the Word of God stands in the way of it (human reason), the lively Oracles are stripped of their authority, and reduced to the level of mere human utterances.” He cautioned that his brethren were “not only striking at Slavery” but “at the foundation of our common faith. They are helping the cause of Rationalism.”<sup>59</sup> Believing the debate was much broader than a struggle over slavery in America, he claimed the parties in this debate were “not merely Abolitionists and Slaveholders” but “Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins.” They were pitted against the “friends of order and regulated freedom” and the world was the “battleground, Christianity and Atheism the combatants, and the progress of humanity the stake.” The abolition of slavery was one thing; the destruction of a free society and the abrogation of biblical authority was something altogether different.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*. vol. 4, 382.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 393. In an 1857 letter to Albert Barnes, F.A. Ross shared Thornwell’s concerns. “You find it difficult to persuade men that Moses and Paul were moved by the Holy Ghost to sanction the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson.” F. A. Ross, “Position of the Southern Church in Relation to Slavery: As Illustrated in a Letter of Dr. F. A. Ross to Rev. Albert Barnes: With an Introduction by a Constitutional Presbyterian” (New York: John A. Gray, 1857), 11.

<sup>60</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4., 383, 393, 405-6. Thornwell expressed concern for a societal transformation he deemed detrimental. He could not have understood the terms

## PROSLAVERY

Having framed the debate in these terms, slavery apologists embarked upon a robust biblical defense. Their methodical march through the Scriptures began in the Old Testament with the patriarchs. They quoted specific passages that mentioned servants and challenged their detractors to explain away these references to slavery. The Old Testament specifically mentioned Abraham and Isaac in passages that referenced servitude. Genesis 14:14 stated, “And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained *servants*, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.” Speaking of Isaac, Genesis 26:14 recorded, “For he had *possession* of flocks, and *possession* of herds, and great store of *servants*, and the Philistines envied him.” God covenanted with Abram in Genesis 17:12, “And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.” And to further codify the concept, Exodus 20:17 commanded, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor’s.” A letter from the Mississippi Presbytery of Tombecbee addressed to the General Conference in Maine reported that Abram was a friend of God and had slaves born in his house and bought with money. The letter also noted that Jacob owned slaves and never suffered remorse or a reproof from God for the practice.<sup>61</sup> The Harmony Presbytery of South Carolina boasted that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were good

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“socialist” and “communists” to have exactly the same meaning as they later possessed in relation to the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc of the twentieth century.

<sup>61</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 32-33.

slaveholders and had a place in heaven.<sup>62</sup> The slavery apologists noted that God mentioned servants, born in the house of the patriarchs, and bought with money. In wording similar to southern legal code, the Scriptures grouped Isaac's livestock with his stores of servants. The Ten Commandments referred to manservants and maidservants in the possessive tense. They believed the patriarchs were slaveholders.

With the blessing of the patriarchs secured, the ministers moved to the Mosaic system of slavery. An appropriate text was Leviticus 25:44-46,

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 forever; but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.

Slavery's defenders claimed Mosaic regulations plainly demonstrated slavery was lawful, and very few critics would refute this fact. Since God permitted and prescribed the method of purchase and the mode of treatment, it could not have been a sin. God commanded the Israelites to purchase slaves from the heathen around them. He even tolerated the ownership of children who were born to slaves and made provision for slaves to be passed to the next generation through probate.<sup>63</sup> Having firmly grounded the peculiar institution in the Old Testament, they attempted to prove that the New Testament permitted slavery, or at the very least, did not condemn it.

Proslavery clergy cited several Old Testament passages to support their contention that God ordained slavery before the time of Christ. They employed a different strategy, an argument

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 105.

from silence, when they examined the teachings of Christ in the New Testament. They argued that Christ's unwillingness to condemn slavery, or even specifically mention it, indicated He had no interest in contradicting or overturning Old Testament teaching. Because the more radical abolitionists argued that slavery was clearly one of the most egregious sins in the history of mankind, proslavery thinkers could readily claim that Jesus certainly would have opposed any sin so clearly contradictory to God's law. Bishop Hopkins asserted in his writings that Christ had never been reluctant to stand for righteousness and oppose sin. He proved by his denunciation of Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees that he would confront any faction that did not embrace his teachings. He called Herod "that fox" and his enemies the "children of the devil." He opposed Jewish divorce, drove merchants from the temple, and railed against sin wherever he found it. He demonstrated complete willingness to confront the culture when necessary, and yet, he did not condemn slavery or rebuke slaveholders. He even claimed to be a friend of the poor, but never deemed it necessary to defend the poorest of society, the slaves.<sup>64</sup> Hopkins claimed that sixty million slaves inhabited the Roman Empire at the time of Christ. Jesus must have encountered slavery on a regular basis and would have denounced it. His silence on the subject indicated he saw no evil in it. To Christ, it was not a sin. Hopkins mused, "how prosperous and united would our glorious republic be at this hour, if the eloquent and pertinacious declaimers against slavery had been willing to follow their Saviour's example!"<sup>65</sup>

Proslavery clergy readily quoted New Testament passages they believed supported their viewpoint. Matthew 5:17 proved that Christ did not come to destroy Old Testament law, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." The Old Testament sanction of slavery continued into the New Testament. Ephesians 6:5-9

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<sup>64</sup> Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

provided guidelines for the relation of master to slave. “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling.... And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven....” The Bible required the slave to obey. Colossians 3:22 stated, “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.” Slaves were reminded that they should obey their masters because it was their duty to God. In Colossians 4:1 the Apostle Paul admonished the slaveholders, “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.” Again in 1 Timothy 6:1-2 Paul commanded slaves to honor their masters,

Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved....

Later in the passage, he stressed that the world is temporal and that Christians should be content with what they have. The proslavery clergy confidently cited these passages as clear evidence that the apostles shared their views on the subject.

Thornwell claimed the apostles viewed slavery as a social and political relation between moral, intelligent, reasonable people. Both parties took responsibility for their behavior and for their misbehavior. The master could be overbearing and abusive; the servant could be rebellious and lazy. The true arbiter of right and wrong was God. The fear of eternal retribution or the desire for eternal reward should keep both parties in line.<sup>66</sup> Thornwell stressed the brevity of life in comparison to eternity and reminded master and slave alike that their present arrangement would one day cease. He compared the relationship of master and slave to that of parent and

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<sup>66</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 411-12.

child. The Scriptures sanctioned slavery as readily as they did any other social relation among men.<sup>67</sup> Slavery's defenders often compared the relation of master and slave to that of husband and wife, parent and child, or employer and employee.

In a final appeal to New Testament authority, the advocates of slavery cited the book of Philemon as further evidence. Onesimus, said to be a runaway slave, was acquainted with the Apostle Paul and was a Christian convert. Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, the purported master of Onesimus, asking him to receive his slave as he would receive Paul himself. The fact that Paul sent this slave back to his master became further evidence to defend slavery and condemn those who would assist a fugitive slave. Paul could have rebuked Philemon for the sin of slavery and demanded that he immediately free Onesimus. Hopkins reasoned that Paul offered no rebuke because he understood the will of Jesus and chose to obey the law of God. Hopkins rejected any sentiment, no matter how lofty, that failed to align with the teachings of Christ and his apostles.<sup>68</sup>

To the proslavery cleric, the Old Testament sanctioned slavery. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ refused to condemn the institution, and the apostles offered instructions to master and slave. No critic could cite a single legitimate passage where God specifically forbade or condemned slavery. No honest student of Scripture could conclude that it was a sin. To find a condemnation in the Bible, one needed to distort God's Word beyond recognition and undermine biblical authority. Such an effort required the invention of a higher law and a descent into rationalism and humanism. The battle was not simply a defense of slavery but a defense of biblical orthodoxy.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>68</sup> Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery*, 16. See also Charles Colcock Jones sermon in Chesebrough's *God Ordained This War*, 171.

## ANTISLAVERY

Those who viewed slavery as an abomination believed just as strongly that their southern counterparts had misjudged the spirit of the Scriptures. A few carefully selected and dubiously cited proof texts could not countermand the clear teachings of the whole council of the Word of God.<sup>69</sup> Barnes, Thompson and other clerics refuted the proslavery argument point by point. The defenders of slavery pointed to specific verses that addressed slavery without condemning it; opponents noted that many of those same verses did not implicitly sanction it.

The average citizen would cringe when he was exposed to the brutality and abuse present in the southern system. If antislavery clerics could foster enough doubt regarding what the Bible actually said on the subject, the nominal supporter might abandon his support and consider the institution a detriment to society and a hindrance to the Christian religion. In an 1837 sermon entitled “Doubtful Actions are Sinful,” evangelist Charles G. Finney referenced Romans 14:23 as proof that the Christian could not continue a practice if he had serious doubts regarding its lawfulness. He warned that holding another human being in bondage, while doubting the propriety of the action, would lead to God’s condemnation.<sup>70</sup> This notion aided many antislavery clerics in their effort to undermine the proslavery argument.

Slavery’s detractors began the campaign by questioning the meaning of the word “servant” in the passages referencing the patriarchs. While admitting that the word could refer to a slave, the antislavery crusader reminded his audience that the term did not have one specific

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<sup>69</sup> Regarding the use of proof texts, Kenneth Cleaver notes, “Both during the discussion and after, it was well recognized that both sides of the debate had been abusing the scriptures by misapplying proof-texts.” “An Examination of Albert Barnes’ Handling of the Bible,” 195.

<sup>70</sup> Chesebrough, Quoted in *God Ordained This War*, 34-35.

meaning. Thompson explained that the Old Testament term described someone in a state or condition of service. Commonly used to identify a subordinate, it did not carry the degrading connotation associated with the words “slave” or “bondman.” The word was mild in nature and more closely resembled a servant than a chattel.

Opponents argued slavery in the South was a much more brutal and base form of servitude than that associated with Abraham. Abraham entrusted his servants with his household and even armed them when he needed to rescue his relative Lot. He asked a servant to find a bride for his son Isaac and sent the servant into a distant land with a valuable dowry.<sup>71</sup> Barnes pointed to the arming of Abraham’s servants as evidence that they could not have been slaves in the same manner as southern slaves. A master in the South constantly feared a slave uprising and would never consider arming his slaves *en masse* for the defense of the master or his family. He would not normally permit a slave to gain any sense of his own strength that could one day be used against the master. Barnes asserted that Abraham’s servants were not slaves, and the patriarchal system did not closely resemble the institution present in the South. An Abrahamic defense of slavery relied on a false analogy and could not stand up to serious scrutiny.<sup>72</sup>

Barnes and Thompson questioned the meaning of the terms “buy” or “bought.” The terms could refer to indentured servitude or salary for hire and did not necessarily connote ownership as it was defined in southern legal code. Money could be paid in advance for control

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<sup>71</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 18, 19, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 77-78. Samuel Davies ministered to the slaves while he refused to advocate for their emancipation. In his sermon “The Duties of Masters to their Servants” he used Abraham’s arming of his slaves as a lesson to masters. “By instilling good Principles into them, and by humane Treatment, this numerous Crowd of Slaves were become so faithful to their Master, that he could safely confide in them, without Fear of their deserting him in the Engagement, and going over to the Enemy, in Hopes to recover their liberty” (11). Thornton Stringfellow had a uniquely proslavery viewpoint on the subject. The fact that Abraham could arm 318 slaves caused Stringfellow to exclaim, “How great must have been the entire slave family, to produce at this period of Abraham’s life, such a number of young slaves able to bear arms.” *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*, 4.

of a servant and his labor. A father in Palestine received money for his daughter's hand in marriage. In neither case did the term "bought with money" signify the transfer of legal property. Barnes challenged his opponents to show him where Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob ever sold a slave or even considered one liable for sale. There was also no evidence that they willed them to the next generation.<sup>73</sup> Barnes demanded a high degree of certainty. "It is necessarily supposed, therefore, in this appeal to the patriarchs, that the idea of *property in a human being* existed in those cases, or the argument has no force or pertinency."<sup>74</sup>

While slavery's defenders pointed to the shining example of the patriarchs, Barnes cautioned that the patriarchs did not always follow a biblical standard. They had concubines and practiced polygamy and deception. Noah was drunk on one occasion. In all these cases the Bible recorded no disapproval. They were fallible men who had little light regarding morals and religion. The fact that the patriarchs acted did not make the act acceptable to God. The absence of disapproval did not signal approval. An argument from silence was a weak standard regardless of which side used it. The Bible often recorded human behavior as fact without approving or commending the act. If the proslavery clergy used the example of the patriarchs to defend slavery, they would need to develop a defense for polygamy.<sup>75</sup>

In an American Tract Society publication entitled "Slavery and the Bible," Enoch Pond compared slavery to polygamy and divorce. "Shall we be referred to some of the laws of Moses, which were designed to regulate and restrict servitude among the Hebrews? We might prove this

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<sup>73</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 76. See also Thompson's *Christianity and Emancipation*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 60.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 61, 78-79. Stringfellow argued that polygamy, divorce, and slavery were sanctioned by Mosaic law, "But under the Gospel, slavery has been sanctioned in the church, while polygamy and divorce have been excluded from the church. It is manifest, therefore, that under the Gospel, polygamy and divorce have been made sins, by prohibition, while slavery remains lawful because sanctioned and continued" (59).

way, just as well, that polygamy and divorce are Divine institutions; since there are laws in the Hebrew code designed to regulate and restrict these great and acknowledged evils, until their removal could be peacefully effected.” Pond challenged his opponents to offer a higher standard of proof. “Until the advocates of slavery can point us to the chapter and verse in which their favorite institution is divinely established, we are safe in saying that there is no such chapter or verse in the Bible.... The sacred writers nowhere approve of slavery, or give it their sanction.” Pond noted that Moses did not immediately abolish polygamy, but “as in the case of slavery” he established principles contrary to polygamy that would eventually destroy it. These principles needed time to work so Moses regulated and restrained it until polygamy eventually ceased.<sup>76</sup> This tract illustrated the advantages and disadvantages of relying solely on proof texts in an attempt to support a point. One side saw divine sanction through Moses; another thought the references to polygamy and divorce precluded any notion of divine approval.

Those seeking to undermine slavery argued the Mosaic servitude practiced in the Old Testament was mild compared to the harsh reality of southern slavery. Slaves in Palestine had privileges that the southern bondman could only hope to obtain. According to the Mosaic code, the servant had legal recourse for wrongs. He could offer legal testimony or own property. He had access to education, and his rights were generally protected. A fugitive slave was not to be returned to his master. The law protected family relationships and respected the mother and child. The Year of Jubilee offered hope for eventual freedom. Thompson challenged his opponents to stop using the Mosaic system as justification for their perverse system. They should follow its example by treating slaves humanely. Barnes added that Mosaic Law granted the servant plenty of time for religious practice, permitted him to own property, and provided for

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<sup>76</sup> Enoch Pond, “Slavery and the Bible” (Boston: American Tract Society, n.d.), 3-5. The Cornell University Library Digital Collections.

the possibility that he could even become his master's heir. If he were granted freedom, he would not be sent away penniless. Servants attended national and family festivals under God's covenant. Once purchased, a servant could not be sold again. The family could not be sundered.<sup>77</sup> Total emancipation occurred every seventh year for the Hebrew slave, and every fiftieth year for all slaves. Runaway slaves from border regions could not be returned to their masters. This provision hinted that Hebrew servitude was milder than slavery in the surrounding nations.<sup>78</sup>

Proslavery advocates who argued from the Mosaic system had their argument turned against them when their foes demonstrated the vast difference between southern slavery and Mosaic servitude. Slavery's critics stressed the barbarity and brutality of a southern brand of slavery that dehumanized an entire race of people. Servants were persons, not chattel.<sup>79</sup> In biblical times those in bondage often had the hope of Jubilee in their lifetime. This provision gave people, regardless of race or class, a fresh opportunity for a better life. The southern slave's promise of freedom usually existed only in the hereafter.<sup>80</sup> The slave in Palestine possessed religious and legal rights that were not granted to those in the South. Barnes and his fellow laborers argued that a fair application of Mosaic Law in the South would strike a death blow to chattel slavery and sweep the evil from the land. Thompson contended,

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<sup>77</sup> According to Exodus 21:4 a slave freed at Jubilee could not take his wife and children with him if he had received them from his master. The slave could choose to stay with his family in bondage. While he did not gain his freedom, he could not be forced to leave his family. Families in America were sundered regardless of the slave's desire.

<sup>78</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 31.; Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 129-144.; For additional information on Mosaic laws see William Jay. *An Examination of the Mosaic Laws of Servitude* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1854), 5-56.

<sup>79</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 154, 229.

Under the Mosaic code, the relation of master and servant was so hedged round by laws in the interest of the servant, and was so often broken up by the periodical manumission of the bondman, that chattel slavery, or the permanent and unmitigated ownership of a man in man, was clearly impossible.<sup>81</sup>

Hopkins and Thornwell argued that Christ lived in a society where slavery was common. He was always willing to denounce any sin he encountered, but chose not to condemn slavery. This was a tacit admission of support. Barnes countered that, by the time of Christ, slavery was no longer common in Hebrew society. He primarily directed his ministry to the Jews, who were no longer a slave-holding people. Thompson and Barnes believed the New Testament recorded no specific incident where Christ came into contact with slavery. The absence of condemnation could not be construed as sanction. Christ did not condemn the brutal sports or the gladiatorial shows in Rome. He did not explicitly oppose the modes of worship in the Acropolis of Corinth. The claim that Jesus sanctioned slavery because he did not speak directly against it was illogical.<sup>82</sup>

Though He did not specifically condemn slavery, Christ taught principles that would eventually undermine the institution. In Matthew 7:12 Christ commanded, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” As so many had done in the colonial and revolutionary periods, slavery’s most ardent antebellum opponents looked to this “Golden Rule” as proof that Christ would encourage emancipation. Thornwell countered that in fact “it would be harder to defend from the Scriptures the righteousness of great possessions than the righteousness of Slavery.”<sup>83</sup> He argued that a

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<sup>81</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 22-23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 17.; Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 242, 244-46.

<sup>83</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 429, 391.

proper application of the Golden Rule would no more cause a slaveholder to free all his slaves than it would force a rich man to give his money to the poor to the point that all were financially equal. In his response to Samuel Sewall 150 years earlier, John Saffin essentially agreed with Thornwell.<sup>84</sup> Conversely, Thompson defied any honest disciple of Christ to follow His teachings and still defend slavery.

Do you believe that his teachings, or those of his apostles, sanctioned this system of human chattelism? Where do you find that sanction? Is it in Christ's announcement of his mission—"I am come to preach the Gospel to the poor; to preach deliverance to the captives; to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year [the Jubilee] of the Lord?" Do you find the sanction of slavery in Christ's exposition of the law—"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Do you find it in his own heavenly rule of life—"Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them?" I defy the most unfeeling to go, immediately after hearing these words, to the slave-market to buy slaves; and I defy the most resolute critic to maintain, after having read them, that the gospel does not condemn slavery.<sup>85</sup>

To the ardent opponent of slavery, the conclusion was obvious. A man could not be a committed disciple of Christ and own another human.

Slavery's opponents generally believed the principles of Christianity would eventually end southern slavery, just as it did Roman slavery. Enoch Pond argued that "the mild and humanizing truths of Christianity" would lead the charge. "By the prevalence of Christianity through the Roman Empire, the condition of the slaves was first meliorated; and after a few centuries the cruel system was overthrown.... There was no royal edict which crushed slavery at once; but its contrariety to the New Testament was gradually seen and acknowledged." Pond explained that biblical writers aimed at slavery's ultimate extinction through "apostolic example

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<sup>84</sup> Saffin, "A Brief and Candid Answer," 5. During the antebellum debate, Enoch Pond countered, "If no one, in his senses, would wish to be made a slave himself, he has no right to enslave others: For we are to do to others, under all circumstances, as we would that they should do to us." Pond, "Slavery and the Bible," 4.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 10, 11.

and influence, and by the evolving genius of the Christian faith; so that little violence was done to existing prejudices; and established customs were not rudely broken up.” He further asserted that biblical writers found slavery already in existence and deeply rooted in the culture, but they did not institute, approve, or sanction it. They advocated principles that contradicted it, knowing these truths would eventually undermine it. “We find them suffering, regulating, restraining it; yet with clear intimations lying on the very face of the regulating precepts, and of other scriptures, that slavery was a disallowed institution,—one having no claim to the Divine sanction and favor.”<sup>86</sup>

This logic informed much of the antislavery thinking. Slavery would not be destroyed with one crushing blow. It would suffer death from a thousand cuts. Every positive principle in the Word of God would chip away at its foundation until it eventually collapsed under the weight of its own inhumanity. In his dissertation on Albert Barnes, Kenneth Cleaver states, “At best it ought to be said that slavery was temporarily tolerated until the basic principles of Christianity so constrained those enslaving others that the slave-holders would voluntarily abandon the practice as inconsistent with God’s will.” Men like Thompson and Barnes mastered this method of viewing proof texts through the prism of primary principles. Their technique helped turn the debate in their favor.<sup>87</sup>

As the debate turned to the apostolic writings, advocates of emancipation conceded that the apostles issued guidelines for the conduct of masters and slaves. They would not, however, agree that the issuance of guidelines constituted approval of the relation or that the relation of marriage or parenthood was comparable. The apostles did not formally permit slavery in the church or make laws respecting it. They simply defined the duties of master and slave in a

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<sup>86</sup> Pond, “Slavery and the Bible,” 6-11.

<sup>87</sup> Cleaver, “An Examination of Albert Barnes’ Handling of the Bible,” 244.

system that had existed in society before the time of Christ. They did not describe the slave's condition as desirable or good. Slaves were encouraged to endure their difficult life as if they were suffering an injustice. They emphasized a gentle spirit under the realization that they were suffering wrongly. There was no equivalent comparison in the marriage or parent-child relationship. The apostles never intimated that a spouse or child should view their relation in the context of patience while suffering affliction or a great injustice. The guidelines for slave and master were intended to regulate a carnal institution with the hope of one day contributing to its demise.<sup>88</sup> Albert Barnes asserted, "Christianity was not designed to extend and perpetuate slavery, but that the spirit of the Christian religion is against it; and that the fair application of the Christian religion would remove it from the world, because it is an evil, and is displeasing to God."<sup>89</sup>

The Apostles encouraged the early church to obey governmental authorities even though the Roman authorities were hostile to believers and brutal in their treatment of many citizens. Barnes noted that no preacher would defend the government of Nero. None would claim that the Apostles approved of the persecution of the church or the debauchery of the Roman Empire simply because they commanded obedience to authority. They understood how people suffered and told them to be patient, humble, and obedient under challenging circumstances. They possessed no political power and realized the only way they could right this wrong was by

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<sup>88</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 273, 277-78, 337.

<sup>89</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 375. Ken Cleaver assesses Barnes' value to the debate. "It may be that Barnes' key contribution to the nineteenth-century American slavery discussion was to bring the discussion beyond the texts that most directly addressed slavery to a principle-driven approach as a necessary supplement to proof-text ethics." Cleaver, "An Examination of Albert Barnes' Handling of the Bible," 206. James Henley Thornwell argued an unqualified application of the golden rule would compel any wealthy person to share his wealth with his indigent neighbors until they were financially equal with him. The Golden Rule properly applied would only enjoin a slaveholder to treat his slaves in the same manner he would wish to be treated if he were a slave, but would not require him to set slaves free. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, 429.

outlining principles that would prevail over time. “The general principle is, that they adopted the best method of ultimately removing the evil under the influence of Christianity, without lending to it any such sanction as to leave the impression that they regarded it as a good and desirable institution.”<sup>90</sup> In truth, the apostles did not sanction slavery. They simply made the best of the situation as they found it and espoused ideas that would eventually result in its destruction.<sup>91</sup> Thompson explained, “In political affairs, the Christian in Nero’s time had no voice nor influence; nor right of suffrage, nor legislative power. He could not therefore do anything politically for the abolition of slavery.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 283. Pond stated, “the Bible lays down truths and principles...which are directly opposed to all slavery; and which when they shall come to have their full scope and development, will banish slavery from the earth.... All men have a common origin, and constitute but one family...each is to love his neighbor as himself, and do to others as he would that they should do to him.” Pond, “Slavery and the Bible,” 3. Writing in 2001, Paul Copan summarized the case against slavery in terms similar to those used by Pond or Barnes. “Even though slaves were considered property during biblical times, slavery was different from what it was in the antebellum South. Because of the universality of slavery in the ancient near East and the great difficulty in overhauling the system, the Bible offered humanizing and legal measures to control and limit the practice of slavery. The law of Moses addressed abuses of slavery since masters did not have absolute rights over their slaves. The Bible affirms that slaves had full personhood, dignity, and rights alongside their masters, a revolutionary departure from and moral advance beyond the surrounding ancient cultures (cp. Job 31:13-15). New Testament writers did not speak directly against slavery for the same reason that Jesus did not speak directly against the rule of Rome: Social reform was secondary to certain internal, attitudinal transformations. Biblical writers offer, in seed form, the basis for societal transformation—especially by affirming that slaves are equal to their masters before God and, if believers, are in the same spiritual family.” Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation”: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 177-178. Harold Willmington states, “Though Paul didn’t directly challenge the institution of slavery here or elsewhere (1 Cor. 7:20-24), the kind of relationship he envisioned between Philemon and Onesimus would have greatly improved the lot of any Roman slave with a Christian master.” Harold L. Willmington, *Willmington’s Bible Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1997), 749. Ron Rhodes explains, “Further, in the New Testament, Paul declared that in Christianity ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galations 3:28 NASB). All social classes are broken down in Christ; we are all equal before God.” Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Book of Bible Answers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1973), 302. Henry Halley asserts, “Christianity abolished slavery, not by denouncing it, but by teaching the doctrine of human brotherhood.” Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook: An Abbreviated Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1927), 634.

<sup>91</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 275. See Horace James Love *A Review of Rev. Dr. Lord’s Thanksgiving Sermon, in Favor of Domestic Slavery, Entitles the Higher Law in its Application to the Fugitive Slave Bill* (Buffalo: A. M. Clapp & Co., 1851), 5-55.

<sup>92</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 39. Regarding the differences between southern slavery and Roman slavery Finkelman states, “in no American state could they (slaves) legally marry, enforce a contract (even for their own freedom), or have any legal authority over their own children. Unlike Roman-law societies, the American South discouraged freedom, and by the 1850s, most of the slave states prohibited manumission.”

Barnes also disputed the claim that the book of Philemon supported slavery. He questioned the assumption that Onesimus was a slave and argued that he could have been an indentured servant or an apprentice. The New Testament word did not always mean “slave.” There was no evidence that Paul compelled or advised Onesimus to return to Philemon as a slave. His request that Onesimus be received as Paul would be received hinted of a relationship other than that of master and slave. Barnes asserted that the principles espoused in the epistle would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery. If slavery existed in the book of Philemon, it was not the slavery present in the South.<sup>93</sup>

To every biblical reference, antislavery theologians offered a viable explanation that questioned the interpretation of their proslavery counterparts. As Thompson stated,

To sum up the argument from the New Testament, ‘the Holy Scriptures lay down as absolute principles, the equality of men before God, the lawfulness of wages, the unity and brotherhood of the human race, the duty of loving one another, and of loving the smallest most of any, the obligation to do to our neighbor as we would have him do by us... But they preach at the same time submission, the voluntary acceptance of the conditions inflicted on each one in this transient exile on earth... They do not detach the slave from being a slave, they detach the master from being

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Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 10. Pond states, “All contemporary and subsequent history conspires to attribute the gradual abolition of this oppressive system to the effectual aid of Christianity.” Pond, “Slavery and the Bible,” 10.

<sup>93</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 321-30.; Robert Frew, ed., *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory And Practical by Albert Barnes, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1949), 312-314. For additional discussion of Barnes’ treatment of Philemon see Cleaver, “An Examination of Albert Barnes’ Handling of the Bible,” 162-64. Modern theologian Frank Thielman accepts the characterization of Onesimus as a slave but argues that Paul’s treatment of him indicates a radically different perspective on Roman slavery. “Paul believes the gospel transforms this social relationship so that slave and master are ‘beloved’ brothers ‘both in the flesh and in the Lord’ (v.16). He also believes that brothers in the Lord should be responsible for one another’s spiritual welfare (Gal. 6:1), should be slaves of one another (5:13), and should bear one another’s burdens (6:2). Such a radical redefinition of the relationship between master and slave removes the brutality and dehumanizing aspects of Roman chattel slavery, and with these aspects removed, the institution’s demise, at least in Christian circles, awaits only the consistent application of Paul’s radical social vision to be complete.” Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 392. Thielman’s modern interpretation is consistent with Barnes’ characterization of slaves and masters under the spirit of the gospel. With the principles espoused in the New Testament, and so many restrictions on slavery in the Old Testament, Barnes could essentially argue that biblical slavery was little more than a form of employment. In no way did it resemble the slavery present in the antebellum South.

a master... To those who suffer, they say, *Wait!* to those who inflict suffering, *Tremble!*<sup>94</sup>

Devout men on both sides of the argument cited the same Scriptures but came to radically different conclusions, in part because they approached the Bible from different personal perspectives and viewed slavery in different lights. There remained one more crucial element in the debate, and on this one they agreed.

## RACIAL INFERIORITY

Many ministers who could not agree regarding slavery found common ground when they shared the opinion that the African race was inferior to the white race. This assumption of inferiority and inequality impacted the debate. While many defenders of slavery were sympathetic to the concept of natural law and the rights of man, they were not necessarily willing to cede to these ideals the same authority they granted the Scriptures. No matter how altruistic the cause, no matter how logical the argument, only the Bible carried the irrefutable sanction of the Almighty. Human experience and opinion could always be questioned. They supported slavery because they believed it was consistent with God's Word. However, when they considered the legitimacy of slavery, many thought in terms of the African race. Their experiences and prejudices overshadowed any consideration that race slavery and biblical slavery may not be the same thing. Mark Noll explains,

Confusion existed between commonsense Biblicism and commonsense racism in almost every one of the period's significant writings on the subject. Lay southern intellectuals, for example, were pleased to repeat the biblical arguments of theologians in defense of slavery, but when they pinpointed Africans as the proper subjects of biblically sanctioned slavery,

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 39-40.

they were as likely to cite Herodotus, Josephus, or other ancient historians as the Scriptures.<sup>95</sup>

While some argued the concept of natural rights did not carry the same weight as divine sanction, they were willing to characterize man's personal experience, opinion, and prejudice regarding the black as being consistent with God's Word.

Many proslavery preachers claimed the Old Testament sanctioned race slavery through the curse on Canaan. Thornton Stringfellow used the curse on Canaan to argue that God had actually "decreed this institution before it existed; and has he not connected its existence, with prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters?"<sup>96</sup>

Stringfellow was bold enough to claim the curse established slavery before it actually came into being; he was also willing to make the leap all the way to implying God's special blessing on slaveholders. In an attempt to spiritualize African slavery further, he claimed "it has brought within the range of the gospel influence, millions of Ham's descendants among ourselves."<sup>97</sup>

Misconceptions regarding the curse on Canaan had existed for generations, eliciting opinions from men in both camps. In 1776, Samuel Hopkins asserted "they (Africans) are not the posterity of Canaan, who was the only son of Ham that was doomed to be a servant of servants. The other sons of Ham, and their posterity, are no more affected with this curse, than the other sons of Noah, and their posterity.... The truth is, it gives not the least shadow of a right

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<sup>95</sup> Miller, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 63.

<sup>96</sup> Thornton Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 32. In one of the more bizarre uses of Scripture, Stringfellow argued New Testament writers battled Abolitionism. At Ephesus Paul "the Apostle left Timothy for the purpose of watching against false teachers, and particularly against the abolitionists" (26). "He (Paul) then says, if any man teach otherwise, (as all Abolitionists then did, and now do) and consent not to wholesome words, 'even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ'" (29). "The Abolitionists, at Ephesus, in attempting to interfere with the relations of slavery, and to unsettle the rights of property, acted upon a principle, which statesmen must see, would, in the end, subject the whole framework of government to the supervision of the church, and terminate in the man of sin, or a pretended successor of Christ, sitting in the temple of God, and claiming a right to reign over, and control the civil government of the world" (47).

to any one of the children of Noah to make slaves of any of their brethren.”<sup>98</sup> Almost a century later Joseph Thompson agreed with Hopkins, “As to the ‘seed of Ham,’ our Sabbath schools have made this generation sufficiently familiar with the Bible to know that Noah’s curse was definitely pronounced upon Canaan, Ham’s youngest son, and was accomplished when the Israelites subdued the Canaanites.” Thompson also asserted that any who chose to link the curse to every descendent of Ham would be forced to admit that the “grand old empires of Egypt, Chaldea, and Assyria” were direct descendents of Ham, and these empires actually enslaved the descendents of Shem (Israelites). In essence the curse, as defined by proponents of slavery, had been reversed. Thompson questioned the basic assumption of the curse, “I must remind such, also, that the descent of the negro race from Ham has never been satisfactorily established, upon ground either of physiology, of history, or of philology. Indeed, the evidence rather preponderates in the opposite scale.”<sup>99</sup> Thompson essentially said modern research dismissed the curse on Canaan theory relating to blacks, and any nominal student of the Word should be able to recognize that fact. From the Revolution to the Civil War the debate over the curse on Canaan continued and proslavery minds understood its value as the primary link between Bible slavery and race slavery.

A proper understanding of the curse on Canaan could have assisted antislavery forces by allowing them to break the proslavery link between race and slavery. Unfortunately, many antislavery men were just as likely to associate slavery and race as were men like John Henry Hopkins and Stringfellow. The antislavery forces simply did not believe blacks were fitted for slavery due to an Old Testament curse. When a critic asked Hopkins how he would feel if he

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<sup>98</sup> Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, 20.

<sup>99</sup> Thompson, *Christianity and Emancipation*, 19.

had been a slave, he answered that God would have equipped him for it, and he would have been “born of the negro race.”<sup>100</sup> One had to be black to be a slave. He apparently saw no difference between slavery and African race slavery. Indeed, he said, “The slavery of the negro race, as maintained in the Southern States, appears to me fully authorized, both in the Old and the New Testament....”<sup>101</sup> He claimed that southern slavery raised blacks higher than any other posterity of Ham.

Slavery, to an individual of the Anglo-Saxon race, which occupies so high a rank in human estimation, would be a debasement not to be thought of with patience for a moment. And yet, to the Guinea negro, sunk in heathen barbarism, it would be a happy change to place him in the hands of a Southern master....were it not for this very institution of slavery, they would be existing in the darkest idolatry and licentiousness among the savages of Africa....<sup>102</sup>

Defenders of slavery asserted that the black race was inferior and that slavery elevated the African. Stringfellow stated, “So long as States let masters alone on this subject (emancipation), good men among them, both in the church and out of it, will struggle on, as experience may dictate and justify, for the benefit of the slave race.”<sup>103</sup> Like many in his day, he equated slavery with the African race.

Hopkins compiled a hierarchy of races, listing Anglo-Saxons at the top of a descending scale that ended with Africans at the bottom. He questioned, “and how is it possible that God had made them all equal?”<sup>104</sup> Hopkins dubbed the Anglo-Saxon race king and the African race fitted for subjection. He cautioned that emancipation would be a calamity for the slave as

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<sup>100</sup> Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery*, 245.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>103</sup> Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*, 65.

<sup>104</sup> Hopkins, *Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery*, 21.

evidenced by so many freedmen who could not function well in a free society. He failed to see that society prevented the free black from acclimating to his new situation.<sup>105</sup> In “Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery” Methodist William A. Smith argued in 1856, “The crushing weight of ages of barbarism still presses heavily on the intellect of the African.... He is a slave in fact; and without the restraints of the domestic system, the tendencies of his barbarous nature are left, in a good degree, to take their downward way.”<sup>106</sup> Charles Colcock Jones stated in 1842, “Whatever is idle, dissolute, criminal, and worthless, attaches to them.”<sup>107</sup> He did, however, lay much of the blame for their shortcomings at the feet of white masters.<sup>108</sup> Chesebrough relates, “Jones argued that ‘having reduced them [the slaves] to ignorance, and by our neglect of duty confirmed them in vice, we now quarrel with their stupidity and obduracy.’”<sup>109</sup>

On November 9, 1867 Reverend R. L. Dabney addressed the Presbyterian Synod of Virginia cautioning against the ordination of newly emancipated black preachers. He claimed the African race was untrustworthy, naturally subservient, and unfit to lead. The race was inferior and hostile, deficient in temperament and social relation, and could not be trusted with

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 245, 32.; Thomas H. O’Connor, *The Disunited States: The Era of Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 29-30.

<sup>106</sup> William A. Smith, *Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery as Exhibited in the Institution of Domestic Slavery in the United States with the Duties of Masters to Slaves* (Nashville: Stevenson and Owen, 1857), 196-197. Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 217. F. A. Ross stated, “while slavery will remain so long as God sees it best, as a controlling power over the ignorant, the more degraded and helpless; and that when He sees it for the good of the country, he will cause it to pass away....” Ross, “Position of the Southern Church in Relation to Slavery,” 13.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes. In the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 104.

<sup>108</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 154-55n.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 151.

power.<sup>110</sup> Thornwell admitted that the black was his brother in the eyes of God, but he spoke of his propensity to superstition and extravagance as reasons for not commending him to lead the church.<sup>111</sup> Dabney and Thornwell argued for the exclusion of blacks from church leadership based on their assumption of inferiority just as they argued for the biblical sanction of slavery believing a slave and a black were essentially the same thing. Noll explains the logic of these notions. “A hidden hand had to function in the exegetical process if the Bible were to justify the racial slavery that existed.... That hidden hand was the widespread, deeply engrained, thoroughly American—though hardly biblical—conviction that among the peoples of the earth only Africans were uniquely set apart for chattel bondage.”<sup>112</sup> Misconceptions regarding racial inequality were widespread in the South, but not exclusive to it.

Northern Christians were often just as willing to accept the doctrine of racial inequality and just as unwilling to grant free blacks equal status. Charles Hodge was a leading Presbyterian theologian from Philadelphia who suffered from the same culturally generated blind-spot as southern clergy. Noll calls Hodge “the most perceptive Old School Presbyterian in the North” who was convinced that the Christian life must be directed exclusively by the Bible. Noll claims racism was so engrained in Hodge’s “guileless soul” that he could not separate biblical teaching from his own opinions regarding the nature of Africans. The Bible spoke more clearly regarding slavery than it did the enslavement of a particular race, “but Hodge could not tell the

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<sup>110</sup> C.R. Vaughan, Ed., *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D.* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), 202-205.; Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2005), 145-48.

<sup>111</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 403, 397.

<sup>112</sup> Miller, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 66. Finkelman asserts, “slavery in the United States was always racial slavery.... From the Revolution to the Civil War, Southerners grounded their defense of slavery on notions of race.” Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 4, 5.

difference.”<sup>113</sup> Henry Ward Beecher asserted in October, 1865 that the freedman was not the social equal of the white man. “Declaring the colored man’s right to citizenship in this country does not make him your equal socially.... I have never seen the time when I desired black people and white people to intermarry.”<sup>114</sup>

Many believed that slavery was a stain on the nation’s fabric. The notion of racial inequality was so intertwined in that fabric that they saw no inconsistency in wanting to free the slaves but having no desire to mix with them socially. After the Civil War ended, many who advocated emancipation were silent regarding the freedman’s right to equal freedoms in society or the church. Barnes claimed the “idea of essential inferiority contributes much, even among good men, though often unconsciously to themselves, to perpetuate the system.”<sup>115</sup> Even many antislavery clergy mixed personal experience and prejudice with their view of Scripture and concluded that slavery and African slavery were synonymous.<sup>116</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the antebellum discussion is how, aside from encouraging masters to expose their slaves to religion, many southern preachers infrequently challenged the behavior of the master. In the antebellum South the slaveholder possessed broad authority over his slaves. Such power would inevitably lead to abuse and corruption even among the most well-intentioned masters. The doctrine of racial inequality supported the notion that blacks were destined to be slaves. C. S. Lewis reflected on Aristotle’s assertion that “some people were only fit to be slaves.” He countered, “I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery

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<sup>113</sup> Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” Miller, *Religion and the American Civil War*, 64.

<sup>114</sup> Beecher, *Public Addresses in America and England*, 723-24. Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 127.

<sup>115</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 312.

<sup>116</sup> Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, 184.; McKivigan, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 14.; Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 52, 64, 73.

because I see no men fit to be masters.”<sup>117</sup> As the Civil War began to tilt in favor of the Union, many southerners lamented the judgment of God they believed had come because of the mistreatment of slaves. Before that time the inhumanity inherent in slavery and the hegemony of the master were seldom considered. Theologians, politicians, and laymen held strong opinions regarding the duties of slaves. Many apparently were not equally concerned about the behavior of the master or his responsibilities under civil or religious authority.

The master in the American South was a powerful individual in his own kingdom. He did not often concern himself with the temporal or eternal consequences of abusing or neglecting his slaves. Thornton Stringfellow, addressing a passage in 1 Peter 2, noted that Peter “says nothing to masters in the whole letter. It would seem from this, that danger to the cause of Christ was on the side of insubordination among the servants, and a want of humility with inferiors, rather than haughtiness among superiors in the church.”<sup>118</sup> Stringfellow and others may have held this position because they realized they would be in great peril if the authority of the master was compromised, especially with so many slaves in their midst. As early as 1768 William Knox had already concluded that the master in the American South wielded more power than his British counterpart. Knox noted that when a slave was mistreated in other British colonies “the slave has a remedy similar to that of apprentices in England.” But in the South, “though for the ignorance of the Negroe, and the partiality of the magistrates, who are too frequently *Socil Criminis*, the tyranny of the planter is much seldomer punished in America, than the rigour of a master in England.”<sup>119</sup> Practically speaking, the master rarely needed to fear temporal retribution

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<sup>117</sup> Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class*, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*, 24.

<sup>119</sup> William Knox, *Three Tracts Respecting the Conversion and Instruction of The Free Indians And Negro Slaves In The Colonies 1768* (London: J. Debrett, 1789), 30.

for mistreating his slaves and he could be quite comfortable sitting among his fellow parishioners in church on Sunday.

Slavery divided the church before it divided the nation. Devout men searched the Scriptures for the answer to this perplexing question and came to radically different conclusions. Proslavery clergy focused primarily on what the Bible literally said about slavery in selected proof texts, tending to make general principles fit around any specific proscription from God. Their antislavery counterparts, hoping to cast doubt on some of their opponents' interpretations, not only battled them on every point from the text, they also introduced the spirit of the gospel to the discussion. Both groups defined slavery in a manner that best fit their argument. The doctrine of racial inequality prevented many from focusing on the distinction between biblical slavery and African slavery.

Albert Barnes foresaw a time when the absurdity of defending slavery from a biblical perspective would be obvious.

The defence of slavery from the Bible is to be, and will soon be abandoned, and men will wonder that any defence of such a system could have been attempted from the Word of God.... Future generations will look upon the defences of slavery drawn from the Bible, as among the most remarkable instances of mistaken interpretation and unfounded reasoning furnished by the perversities of the human mind.<sup>120</sup>

James Henley Thornwell left the judgment to posterity.

If our principles are true, the world will come to them;.... It is not the narrow question of Abolitionism or Slavery—not simply whether we shall emancipate our negroes or not; the real question is the relations of man to society, of states to the individual, and of the individual to states—a question as broad as the interest of the human race.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural View of Slavery*, 380-81.

<sup>121</sup> Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 405.

Thornwell believed that biblical principles could govern an institution that respected the rights of the slave and protected the interests of the slaveholder. If people were in a right relationship with God, the institution could be properly managed in a fallen world.

Thornwell may have been as close to a truly Christian master as anyone could be in his time, but even he would not be viewed as fit to be a master today. Ironically both Barnes and Thornwell were correct in their predictions. A defense of slavery from a biblical perspective no longer seems logical, and perhaps even Thornwell himself would conclude that the world did not come to his principles.

By the 1850s and 1860s proslavery and antislavery arguments had fully developed. What began in colonial times as a nascent discussion among a comparatively small number evolved into sophisticated, starkly contrasting polemics. Thinkers on both sides articulated their viewpoints with passion and conviction. The determination of which standard would eventually triumph would be left to posterity.

## Conclusion

The debate over slavery in the American South raged during the antebellum period. Many of the leading clergy of the day willingly joined the struggle on both sides. By the time of the Civil War the combatants had defined their arguments, polished them for public consumption, and issued detailed and articulate polemics to advance their cause. Proslavery preachers walked point in the battle for the moral high ground. They provided public cover for those who ardently advocated for chattel slavery, and they helped soothe the consciences of those who doubted or sought clarity on the matter. On the other hand, as early as 1773 men like Benjamin Rush warned, “however plausible the excuse may be that you form to reconcile it to your consciences, yet be assured that your crime stands in the court of Heaven as a breach of the eighth commandment.”<sup>1</sup>

While the primary players in the drama obviously changed over the generations, the script remained remarkably consistent. The basic arguments strayed little from the dialogue of ages past. When antebellum apologists cited the mission to the slaves and the blessing of civilizing the Africans, they were merely parroting the words of men like George Whitefield or Samuel Davies decades earlier. When they argued the Christian slave would make a better servant, they echoed the 1727 letter of Bishop Edmund Gibson, seconded thirty years later by Samuel Davies. At the dawn of the eighteenth century Samuel Sewall and John Saffin debated the necessity of societal order and the place of slaves in that society. The words they used were similar to the assertions of James Henley Thornwell or John Henry Hopkins. As Hopkins argued that immediate emancipation would be problematic for the slave and society alike, he could have been speaking for Thomas Jefferson, Bernard Romans, or Landon Carter nearly a century before.

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<sup>1</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America*, 21.

The perception of the inferiority of the African was common in all eras as men asserted that blacks were fitted by their maker for a life of servitude. Even in the midst of this nearly universal assumption, Benjamin Rush argued blacks were “equal to the Europeans, when we allow for the diversity of temper and genius which is occasioned by climate.”<sup>2</sup> Samuel Hopkins claimed slavery had a mighty tendency “to sink and contract the minds of men, and prevent their making improvements in useful knowledge of every kind.” Considering their degrading and brutal environment, he was not surprised that so many blacks were “given to vice.” He countered “it is rather a wonder there are so many instances of virtue, prudence, knowledge and industry among them.”<sup>3</sup> Decades before nineteenth-century southerners argued the slave was especially fitted for the oppressive southern climate, Rush challenged that thinking.<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hopkins refuted the curse on Canaan during the revolutionary era as did David Barrow in the early national period. Thornton Stringfellow resurrected it in 1841, only to have Joseph Thompson dismiss it again in 1863.

The battle to define slavery and characterize it as good or evil did not begin in the 1830s. Samuel Hopkins challenged the behavior of masters in 1776. “There are but few masters of slaves, I believe, who do not use them in a hard, unreasonable manner, in some instances at least; and most do so in a constant way; so that an impartial, attentive by-stander will be shocked with it, while the master is wholly insensible of any wrong.” Citing Aristotle, Hopkins asks, “How few are fit to be masters?”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue*, 40, 42.

The biblical arguments employed through the generations were especially compelling. In 1700 Samuel Sewall cited the Scripture in his claim that God had made all nations from one blood. Albert Barnes' readers witnessed his quotation of the same verse in 1846. Jefferson's claim that all men are created equal is the practical equivalent of the verse. Benjamin Rush was as likely to consider the spirit of the Christian religion in the matter of slavery as Barnes would in his day, and both men openly asserted that the principles of the Golden Rule opposed slavery.<sup>6</sup> Long before Thornwell or Stringfellow argued that the Patriarchs were good slave holders and worthy of emulation, Rush pointed out that most were polygamists.<sup>7</sup>

Stringfellow asserted in the mid-nineteenth century that *doulos* meant slave. In 1776 Samuel Hopkins emphasized the servant.<sup>8</sup> Albert Barnes claimed the term was not definitive.

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<sup>6</sup> Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue*, 23. Bible scholar John MacArthur concludes that *doulos* should be translated "slave." He explains, "Though the word slave (*doulos* in Greek) appears 124 times in the original text, it is correctly translated only once in the King James.... Instead of translating *doulos* as 'slave,' these translations consistently substitute the word *servant* in its place. Ironically, the Greek language has at least half a dozen words that can mean *servant*. The word *doulos* is not one of them. Whenever it is used, both in the New Testament and in secular Greek literature, it always and only means *slave*." MacArthur surmises that the translators used a mild form of the word because they did not want to associate biblical teaching with the slavery of Great Britain or the American colonies. "The term *slave* in sixteenth-century England generally depicted someone in physical chains or prison. Since this was quite different from the Greco-Roman idea of slavery, the translators of early English versions (like the Geneva bible and the King James) opted for a word they felt better represented Greco-Roman slavery in their culture. That word was servant." MacArthur does not attempt to equate African slavery with Bible slavery. Instead, he uses the slave analogy to demonstrate absolute surrender to Jesus Christ. He asserts, "The gospel is not simply an invitation to become Christ's associate; it is a mandate to become His slave." He illustrates the obvious difference between race slavery and Greco-Roman slavery referenced in the Bible. "From a glance on the street, it would have been difficult to distinguish between slaves and non-slaves. There was essentially no difference in dress; neither were there significant differences in responsibilities. Any line of work a free person might do, a slave might do also." This slavery was different, although MacArthur is careful to remind his readers that the slave was still completely at the mercy of his master. "One's experience as a slave, then, ultimately depended on the demands and goodness of the master.... Everything rested in the hands of the master." MacArthur argues that the Hebrew (Old Testament) word for slave (*ebed*) was also often mistranslated. In a further distinction between MacArthur's characterization of slavery to Christ and the slavery found in the antebellum South, he explains, "When we survey the New Testament, we quickly find that the term 'slave of Christ' was not reserved for low-level believers or spiritual neophytes. The apostles eagerly embraced the title for themselves and also used it to refer to others in the ministry." Finally, MacArthur summarizes Jesus' involvement in any discussion of slavery. "Our Lord neither advocated nor denounced the institution of slavery as it existed in His day. But he found it an apt analogy to illustrate certain truths about the gospel and the kingdom of God." John MacArthur, *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 16, 18-19, 26, 28-30, 37, 41.

Thornwell reminded his readers that the Apostles encouraged slaves to obey their masters and citizens to obey their civil leaders; Hopkins told his contemporaries that the Apostles surely did not intend to infer that the Roman government was just and benevolent.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, many of the same preachers who argued that a slave should obey his master or a citizen his government were eventually willing, sometimes reluctantly, to rise up against the civil authority in the days leading to the Civil War.

David Chesebrough was not alone in his claim that “Throughout the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s, and Civil War years, the preachers developed several themes in their defense of slavery and the Southern way of life.”<sup>10</sup> The perception of a rather sudden discovery of slavery as a positive good is common today. The positive good argument usually contained an assertion that slavery was a God-ordained plan for maintaining social order, that slavery brought the African to civilization and to an acceptance of his place in society and before God, that obedience to authority was God’s command, and that God had especially fitted the African for servitude. Slavery’s supporters characterized any person who dared to oppose these teachings as anti-God, a heretic, a modernist, or an infidel.<sup>11</sup> While the polemic certainly crystallized, intensified, and broadened, the basic tenants of the proslavery argument existed long before William Lloyd Garrison or Harriet Beecher Stowe stoked the fires of abolitionism. Southerners feared slave insurrection and the societal devastation they believed immediate emancipation would bring, but when they decided to rally around their peculiar institution *en masse*, they only needed to look to the writings of the past to find a roadmap to the future.

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-47.

Why should a Christian's views regarding a practice abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment matter over a century later? Is it possible that proslavery thinking is still present today? Stephen Haynes argues persuasively that the debate is still relevant. In fact the usefulness of the curse of Canaan in Genesis 9 was demonstrated again during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. A few Christians used the argument to justify legalized segregation. Carey Daniel, a Baptist minister preaching in the 1950s delivered a sermon entitled "God the Original Segregationist." He said, "The Bible clearly implies that the Negroes' black skin is the result of Ham's immorality at the time of his father Noah's drunkenness. For example, in Jeremiah 13:23 we read, 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.' Here the black skin of the Negro is obviously a symbol of evil." This statement is unquestionably racist today, but it would have fit comfortably into a sermon given in colonial or antebellum times. Because of the common assumption of racial inferiority, the average listener in the 1760s or 1860s would not have questioned the assumptions behind the statement. Amazingly, even in the 1950s Carey Daniel failed to see the inconsistency in his logic. If the black man's skin symbolized evil, did the spots on the leopard imply the same?<sup>12</sup> Prejudice and hatred have been part of the human condition since the beginning of time, and yet it is still shocking when it is so blatantly displayed.

Thornwell believed the authority of the Bible would be compromised if his contemporaries continued to value natural rights and the principles of the American Revolution as much as they did the Holy Scriptures. Ironically, in the twenty-first century, historians and skeptics can point to the arguments of men like Thornwell, Stringfellow, or Dabney as evidence

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<sup>12</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 86. Finkelman explains, "Ironically, long after slavery itself had been destroyed, proslavery theories of federalism and national power remained viable. So too did proslavery biblical, theological, and scientific arguments that have since been used to support race discrimination." Finkelman, *Defending Slavery*, 5.

to dispute the authority of Scripture. If they logically conclude that the Bible defends human slavery, they can dismiss the Bible as irrelevant for today. Just as the proslavery cleric gave slaveholders moral cover during the days of slavery, they now offer ammunition to any person seeking to challenge the veracity of Scripture or discredit its teachings.<sup>13</sup>

Two major questions prompted this study. Does the Bible sanction slavery? How could Christians claiming absolute confidence and reliance on the Word of God come to such divergent conclusions regarding the bondage of another human being? The search for an answer also begins with a question. What is meant by the term “slavery?” When most people question the biblical sanction of slavery today, they are referring to slavery as it existed in the antebellum South, not necessarily as it existed in biblical times. God did regulate a form of slavery practiced for a time by His people (Israelites) during Old Testament times, and the apostles did proscribe certain behaviors for slave and master in the New Testament. Were proslavery Christians in the antebellum South correct when they invoked the authority of Scripture and claimed the blessing of God rested on their peculiar institution?

While Thornton Stringfellow argued that God began the institution with the curse of Canaan, the more logical assumption is that the Old and New Testament writers found slavery already in existence and sought to regulate it in the best manner possible given the social,

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<sup>13</sup> Cleaver asserts, “While it can be argued that the same Bible has been used by opposing parties to come to opposing conclusions, it should not be argued that the Bible is therefore an unhelpful source of authority on modern social and ethical issues. Like any other source of authority, the Bible can be used imperfectly by imperfect people.” Cleaver, “An Examination of Albert Barnes’ Handling of the Bible,” 25. Two people can read the same Scripture and come to different conclusions because each individual, often unwittingly, brings prejudices and preconceived notions to the discussion. Molly Oshatz illustrates the dilemma for one seeking to draw a dogmatic conclusion from Scripture, “Under pressure from proslavery Protestants who focused the slavery debates on the question of slavery’s sinfulness in the abstract, moderate antislavery Protestants struggled to craft a biblical antislavery argument. The biblical record on slavery made their task extraordinarily difficult. It was, and actually still is, very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Bible sanctions slavery—that is slavery considered in the abstract.” Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight Against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4-5. The critical distinction here must be the definition of slavery. As discussed throughout this paper, there was a stark difference between African race slavery and the slavery described in the Bible.

cultural, and political situation on the ground at the time. More will surely be written on this “formed or found” argument, but the honest skeptic can safely conclude it was probably in existence when biblical writers first addressed it. Antislavery thinkers argued that slavery was never intended to be God’s best plan for his people. Proslavery thinkers noted that, in the Old Testament, it was actually a more compassionate way to deal with the reality of war. Enslaving the conquered was preferable to executing them.

Because the institution was so hedged about with regulations in the Old Testament, and the Greco-Roman form could be softened or weakened by simply following the apostles directives and Christ’s admonition evident in the Golden Rule, men like Albert Barnes could argue that slavery in the Bible essentially became a form of employment that barely resembled antebellum slavery. If the proslavery forces wanted to argue that the Old Testament directives regarding slavery were still relevant, they should follow them to the letter. The command in Leviticus 25:10 to free the inhabitants of the land every fifty years would have been enough to deal a death blow to chattel slavery because it would have destroyed the perpetual nature of the system.

Had there been more emphasis on the responsibilities and behavior of the master, the American brand of slavery would have also been compromised. While there were governmental regulations and religious directives regarding the master’s conduct, the slaveholder in the South was practically autonomous and rarely needed to consider the propriety of disciplining a slave or sundering a family.

The crux of the matter, the key to understanding what enabled so many to accept the assertion of biblical sanction lay in the nearly universal assumption of African inferiority and an inability to see the difference between race slavery and the slavery found in the Bible. When

somebody questions the sanction of slavery today, they are often actually asking, “Does the Bible sanction the enslavement of the black man or woman?” The blending of this question into the broader question of slavery in any form permits the skeptic to reject the Bible on the grounds that it is racist and insensitive. When the apostles counseled obedience for the slave, even under the harshest conditions, they were addressing people who may have looked much like themselves. These slaves could blend into the population if they ever gained their freedom. The teachings of the apostles are replete with notions of equality before God and calls for everyone to serve. As evidenced in the book of Philemon, the converted slave could be considered a Christian brother. The connection of slavery primarily to race was a relatively new concept conceived long after the Roman Empire collapsed.

When Jesus or the apostles called for the believer to be a slave to Christ, the commitment was absolute and complete. It was also voluntary. If a person was to be a bond slave of Jesus Christ, he would have to accept the invitation of the Master. With the exception of those who hold an extreme view of the bondage of the human will, most would admit this distinction between slavery to Christ and slavery in the antebellum South. The apostles’ admonition is to submit to a benevolent master who has the best interest of the slave in mind because He is all-knowing and all-powerful. Any New Testament reference to slavery should be seen in this light and in contrast to the slavery of the South, which relied on fear and intimidation for survival. The proper definition of “slavery” is critical.

If slavery had not already been fully entrenched in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it would be difficult to imagine a scenario where Christians would have argued for its creation. Proslavery preachers defended an institution they believed was essential to the economic health of the South and the societal structure of the nation. Most could not

envision a way out. They were not comfortable holding the wolf by the ears, but they were more fearful of letting it go.<sup>14</sup> Many preachers focused on the importance of the mission to the slaves and the ameliorating value of more benevolent treatment of slaves. Many championed gradual emancipation and repatriation of freed slaves to their former homeland in an effort to remedy the situation without throwing the nation into the chaos they feared would inevitably follow a sudden, wholesale manumission of millions of slaves. If masters had practiced the type of slavery encouraged by men like Whitefield or Thornwell, the institution may have been much less profitable and quite possibly would have slowly died.

Perhaps the apostles and the ministers in the antebellum South faced a similar dilemma, although many would agree their conclusions regarding the legitimacy of slavery were decidedly different. Antislavery preachers believed the apostles could not advocate for abolition because the culture of their day was decidedly proslavery. Instead, they laid down principles that would eventually lead to the death of the institution. Christians simply needed to live by the Golden Rule and the spirit of the gospel with the belief that all would eventually be made right. Men like Thornwell also lived in a decidedly proslavery culture, where any change would require an enormous effort from the spiritual leaders of the day. Thornwell believed slavery was a temporal relation that would eventually vanish, if not in this life, then in the hereafter. Perhaps his defense of slavery stemmed from his emphasis on the mission to the slaves and the assumption that the African could best function in society with the white man's supervision. The Apostles encouraged the slave of any race to endure with eternity in mind while the spirit of the gospel quietly undermined slavery. Many proslavery ministers chose to defend the flawed institution of African slavery as necessary and possibly "beneficial" to slave and society alike.

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<sup>14</sup> Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, cover page.

It is tempting to view history through the eyes of the present when asking, “How could a Bible believer defend a system that permitted one human being to own another human being?” These proslavery men were generally not fire-breathing, small-minded zealots who were unfamiliar with the Scriptures. Many believed they could defend, or had to defend slavery from the Word of God. Most admitted the institution was temporal and would end when men were ushered into eternity. Some viewed it as an affliction to be endured in this life, much like sickness or poverty, in the hopes that the trials would mold the slave more closely to the image of Christ.

One cannot, however, ignore the willingness with which many chose to focus only on the Scriptures that supported their preconceived notions. The great majority of men, both northerners and southerners, erred by assessing the black as their intellectual or social inferior, and many either wholeheartedly or tacitly approved of slavery. There was, however, enough light in society to point men toward a brighter path, had they possessed the foresight or moral courage to walk it. Most were blinded by notions of racial inferiority, but men like John Wesley, Samuel Hopkins, Benjamin Rush, William Wilberforce, and Albert Barnes were shining examples of a better way. In the end, it proved too difficult for many proslavery clerics to lift their heads high enough to see past the enormous road blocks in the path to emancipation, and the nation would pay an enormous price for their trepidation. It would take a violent and bloody Civil War accompanied by the loss of more than a half million lives to force the nation down the path to freedom and equality, a path that still matters today.

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