Title - Denominational Divisions and the Road to Civil War

Program of Study – History

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Abstract: This study explores theological divisions which emerged between the North and South during the Antebellum period. Though Northerners and Southerners were both religious, a widening divide emerged between the two regions over the nature of orthodox Christianity. Higher criticism, Unitarianism, scientific racism, and various social reform movements in the North were rejected in the antebellum South. Underscoring this rejection was a commitment to a literal hermeneutic, two kingdom theology, traditionalism, and a hierarchal society. Eventually, the issue of immediate abolition became the primary debate leading to the fracturing of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. The contribution these divisions made to the reasons for which the War Between the States occurred has not been studied enough. Ten years before South Carolina seceded John C. Calhoun declared that “The cords that bind the States . . . are [in large part] spiritual or ecclesiastical.” During the adoption of South Carolina’s secession declaration, Henry Timrod, the poet laureate of the Confederacy, portrayed the North as holding to “creeds that dare to teach, what Christ and Paul refrained to preach.” During the conflict, General Thomas R.R. Cobb stated, “This revolution has been accomplished mainly by the churches.” After the South’s defeat, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, in writing Jefferson Davis’s legal defense, accused Northern clergymen of straying from biblical exegesis. Understanding the
theological conflict is vital for understanding the political one. More work needs to be done in this area, specifically in regard to Southern reaction to higher criticism and scientific racism.