

OBEDIENT TO GOD:
CHRISTIAN JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SLAVERY IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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The Civil War was the single most defining event in United States History to date, largely because it was a crossroads of every major sphere of American culture at that time.¹ While it was not fought over a single problem, there is one issue that prevails as the catalyst for every other cause of the war: slavery. While the existence of an institution like slavery is troubling enough, what is even more troubling is the fact that most Southerners who defended slavery were Christian. This paper intends to offer an answer to the question: “How did Christians in the Antebellum South justify slaveholding?”² To do so it will highlight the most prominent justifications for the institution used by proslavery Christian advocates in the Antebellum South: biblical, moral, economic, and theological. It will also give attention to the role pastors played in promoting or excusing the institution as justifiable for Christians.

Thornton Stringfellow raised the most important question for Christians in the Antebellum South when he said, “If slavery be thus sinful, it behooves all Christians who are in the sin, to repent in dust and ashes, and wash their hands of it.”³ The entire enterprise hinged on the answer to the question, “Is slavery sinful?” This paper intends to show not only *how* Christians in the South defended their answer to this question,⁴ but that they believed by doing so and by participating in slavery they were actually obeying God.

¹ Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 13.

² Obviously there were Northerners who supported the system as well; neither was the North less racist. However, this paper intends to focus on defenses used by *Southern* Christians explicitly. I suppose that the justifications used by Northerners would be similar if not identical to those used in the South. But alas, this paper will not shed light on such an issue.

³ Thornton G. Stringfellow, “A Brief Examination of the Scripture Testimony of Slavery”, in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 138-139.

⁴ So that it is not lost on anyone, the answer generally given by Christians in the South was an ardent “No it is not.”

A Biblically Defendable Institution

The majority of the supporters of the institution of slavery in the South were indeed Christians; and because of this, the most important book on American soil, as it related to the subject of slavery, was the Bible. Indeed, the majority of the *populus* revered Scripture as the sole inspired and authoritative word of God.⁵ Therefore, for Christians who owned slaves or benefitted from the slavery, the institution had to find clear support in the Bible. The logic was inescapable: if the Bible supported slavery, then so must Christians.⁶ If proslavery advocates could show that the Bible allowed slavery, then the battle over the validity of the institution was virtually over in the minds of Christians in the South. This is why Mitchell Snay argues that the entire justification of slavery hinged on its Biblical defense.⁷ These arguments from Scripture would prove to be the most robust defense of the institution from and for Christian advocates of slavery. “Their Bible argument is really something more than an exercise in equivocation; it is strong historical exegesis, and on this plane the Southern divines had clearly the better of their Northern counterparts.”⁸ From Old Testament figures’ owning of slaves to Paul’s writings on the subject, proslavery advocates turned to the Bible to defend their beloved institution. By doing so they believed they had constructed a more compelling “Christian” argument than that of the Northern

⁵ Mark A. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44.

⁶ *ibid.*, 43.

⁷ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54.

⁸ Eric McKittrick, introduction to *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, ed. by Eric McKittrick (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), 2.

abolitionists. And by doing so, in the minds of Southern Christians, the South had largely won the battle for the Bible by the beginning of the Civil War.⁹ Many prominent Southern theologians and Christian intellectuals supported the institution and saw it as biblically defensible by following a literal hermeneutic. By doing so they argued and believed it was sanctioned by the Bible and ordained by God; and therefore, they were being faithful to him.¹⁰ Richard Fuller, a prominent minister during the antebellum period and one of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention, made a statement that represents the foundational thesis of theologians and proslavery advocates who turned to the Bible to find justification for the institution: “What God sanctioned in the Old Testament, and permitted in the New, cannot be sin.”¹¹ Thus, slavery was not only defensible for Christians, it was obedience.

A representative case study for the biblical justification of the institution is Samuel B. How’s (a doctor of divinity, as well as a pastor of the First Reformed Dutch Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey) *Slaveholding Not Sinful: Slavery, The Punishment of Man’s Sin, Its Remedy, The Gospel of Christ*.¹² This work was originally an argument given before the General Synod of the Reformed Protestant Church in October 1855. In it he gives a robust

⁹ Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 66.

¹⁰ Mark Noll, *America’s God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 390.

¹¹ Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution: In Correspondence Between the Rev. Richard Fuller, of Beaufort, S.C., and the Rev. Francis Wayland, of Providence, R.I.* (rev. ed.; New York: Lewis Colby, 1845), 170.

¹² The fact that Rev. How is from New Jersey may raise questions as to the pertinence of his work in this paper as this paper deals with *Southern* Christian justifications of slavery. While this is true, How’s biblical defense represents the majority of biblical justifications used across the South and helps one to locate them in one place. This is the main reason why How has been used here. Another is that he himself is a Christian aiming to support slavery as it was still legal in his state if New Jersey until the Civil War. Though he is not a Southerner, he does share their view on the matter. This also sheds light on the fact that the proslavery issue was a Christian issue in general, even if it did find the majority of its supporters below the Mason Dixon line.

defense of the institution by interpreting several Biblical passages to prove that God not only *allows* the institution but has *ordained* it in the Old Testament and permitted it in the New.¹³

Samuel How's Defense

Dr. How begins with an interpretation of 1 Timothy 6:3-5 by pointing out the specific word for “*servant*” in the text. He points out that “*servants*” in this passage is the Greek word *douloi*, the primary meaning of which is bondservant, slave, or servant by birth. He argues that it is entirely different from the Greek word *andrapodon* which means one enslaved during war. Therefore the word Paul uses, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the word conveying one bound to serve and property of his master.¹⁴ How then points out that Paul does not stop there but adds the phrase “under the yoke,”¹⁵ which paints the picture of being under someone else’s control and rule. Thus, Paul is unquestionably speaking of slaves who are under the rule of their masters.¹⁶

How moves on to the masters referred to in the text and points out that Paul refers to them as “brethren in Christ” and “believers”, thus affirming their actions. He ends by asking if Paul teaches the slaves he is addressing that they should be free? Or if their masters, who are Christians, are sinning against them? Does he condemn slavery or the

¹³ Samuel B. How, *Slaveholding not sinful: Slavery, the Punishment of Man's Sin, its Remedy, the Gospel of Christ* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1856).

¹⁴ While I disagree with the conclusion and implications How presents based off the Greek words *douloi* and *andrapodon*, I inform the reader that his proposed translations of the words and their differences are indeed correct. And in his work he is actually uses a lexicon to back his proposed definitions.

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 6:1.

¹⁶ This paragraph deals with arguments made in How, *Slaveholding not sinful*, 10.

slave masters at all?¹⁷ His point is that Paul never rebukes the act of slaveholding or the slaveholders; but in fact, he commends the institution and tells the servants to deal honorably with their masters. Dr. How, in essence, is arguing that if Paul had seen a problem with slavery he would have surely mentioned it here, but does not; and by commanding Christians who are in bondage to submit to the rule of their masters he gives his seal of approval.

How then turns to the Old Testament.¹⁸ He goes to Genesis 17 where God makes his covenant of circumcision with Abraham. He quotes Genesis 17:12-13 where God tells Abraham who should receive the sign of the covenant: “He that is eight days old among you, every man-child in your generations—he that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must be circumcised.” How argues that when God says “he who is bought with thy money” he is talking about a slave, and to such God commanded the sign of the covenant be given. And when he does, he does so “without expressing the slightest disapprobation of his holding of slaves, but in the fullest manner authorizing him to retain them as a portion of his family and household by taking him and them into covenant with him.”¹⁹ Surely, as How sees it, if God had any ill-feelings toward slaveholding, he would have made that known to Abraham before entering into a covenant of blessing with him, while simultaneously mentioning and blessing his slaves.

Dr. How also focuses on Abraham as a slaveholder. He cites Genesis 14:14 which informs the reader that Abram (Abraham’s birth name) armed 318 men for battle to save

¹⁷ *ibid.* 11.

¹⁸ *ibid.* 12.

¹⁹ How, *Slaveholding Not Sinful*, 13-14.

his nephew Lot. How takes all of these men to be Abram's slaves.²⁰ Therefore, Abram is a slaveholder of mass proportions. Not only this, but Abraham is one of the most esteemed and respected figures in the Bible. His character and faith are praised numerous times throughout the New Testament. He is in fact the father of the faith. And yet Abraham is not chastised even once for his slaveholding in all of scripture. If slaveholding was somehow wrong, surely somewhere in scripture we would be able to find one rebuke for his owning of slaves. But there is none.²¹

Next How looks at several other passages within the New Testament. Here he spends considerably less time on each passage. His aim is not to go into great detail like the other passages, but to overwhelm the reader with the number of passages that exist in scripture that reference slavery but do not condemn it.²² He cites texts from the gospels;²³ this is especially important because he uses the words of Jesus on the matter. He points out that Jesus spoke repeatedly about slaves and uses the story of Jesus and the centurion in Matthew 8 as his primary example of Jesus facing slavery and doing and saying nothing about it. His point here once again is that Jesus, the holy Son of God incarnate, had the chance to condemn or even speak negatively of the institution, and he does not. Jesus does not speak one unkind word about slavery, further demonstrating How's point that God

²⁰ This in itself is strange and indefensible claim for there is nothing in the text to suggest this to be true, and How doesn't even try to back up this claim that all 318 are slaves of Abram. Rather How is most likely trying to strengthen his point that not only does Abraham own slaves, he owns a mass of them.

²¹ The information in this paragraph comes from How, *Slaveholding Not Sinful*, 14.

²² Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-21

²³ Matthew 18:23-25; 25:14-30; Luke 17:7,10.

neither condemns nor convicts slaveholders in scripture, and therefore it cannot be sinful to own another human.²⁴

Philemon is the final place How goes in scripture to make his case.²⁵ How begins by giving the background of the letter as it is crucial to his argument that follows. In short, Onesimus, a runaway slave, had escaped to Rome and while there had been converted under Paul's ministry. Paul then writes to Philemon concerning his runaway slave, instructing him on what to do next. In his letter he commends Philemon, a slaveholder, for his great faith and love for Christ and all of the saints. Paul understands the situation, Philemon is the rightful owner of Onesimus, but Onesimus, while in Rome, had earned Paul's utmost respect; how will Paul instruct the two? "He was an inspired apostle, invested with authority from Christ to teach Christian doctrines and to enforce Christian duties, and therefore his conduct in this case would be a precedent to guide the Church in all future similar cases. He explicitly and fully recognized the right of Philemon, and sent back his slave."²⁶ If God disapproved of slavery, then Paul, as an inspired author, had the authority to speak out against slavery and plea for Onesimus' freedom, but he does not. He recognizes Philemon's right to have his slave returned. If Paul is inspired by God, and slaveholding is a sin, why does Paul send Onesimus back? For How, the simple and correct answer is that there is no fault in slavery in the eyes of God.²⁷

By appealing to the Bible for authoritative defenses of slavery, the proslavery advocates believed they were making a decisive statement, "The Bible supports slavery;

²⁴ This paragraph covers content in How, *Slaveholding Not Sinful*, 25-26.

²⁵ *ibid.* 27.

²⁶ How, *Slaveholding Not Sinful*, 27.

²⁷ This paragraph handles How's interpretation of Philemon in *ibid.* 27.

God has sanctioned it; if you disagree with slavery you disagree with scripture and with God.” This is why so many Southern Christians defended the institution. They wanted to be on the side of the Bible and of God, and they believed that the proslavery advocates had made it very clear which side God was on. The proslavery advocates believed they had won the exegetical and hermeneutical battle for the Bible, and with it they believed they had won the war over slavery in the hearts and minds of Christians in the Antebellum South.²⁸

The Morality of Slavery

Christians had already defended the institution of slavery on biblical grounds, but the Northern abolitionists were still attacking it on a moral basis and so Southern Christians needed to respond in kind. Therefore, another defense of the institution, albeit a less obvious one, was that slavery, as it existed in the South, was not immoral. The reason it is not considered as often as the other defenses is because for those looking back on slavery in the South it seems almost inconceivable that anyone could argue that the institution was moral. But, proslavery advocates would argue, the concept of slavery being a “moral” or “immoral” institution centers on the definition of slavery being used.

For Northerners of that time, and the majority of people today, slavery in the South was the destruction of the human and personal rights of one person by the will and power of another.²⁹ This was far and wide the main view Northerners held on chattel slavery as it existed in the Southern states. But Southerners saw slavery in radically different light. As Richard Fuller puts it, “Property in a slave is only a right to his service without his consent

²⁸ Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 45.

²⁹ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 199.

or contract. [A man might be held in bondage], and yet be treated in every respect as an immortal, intelligent, moral, fallen, ransomed being, yea and a Christian brother.”³⁰ By saying so, Fuller was arguing that since the master owned the slave’s labor and not the slave, the institution did not deprive the person in bondage of the possibility of basic human cultivation.³¹ Therefore they were not being deprived of their humanity.

Therefore, proslavery advocates argued that the institution was moral because it robbed no one of any basic human right. To the people of the South, Northerners had radically overreacted to an institution that, for the large part, they had never seen for themselves and only spoke of in the abstract.³² Therefore Southerners were the ones fit to decide whether or not slavery was a moral institution. And because they believed that what the owner owned was the labor not the slave, slavery remained moral in their eyes.

Whether one buys into such a defense today is one thing. But this was the line of thinking Southerner Christian used to defend the moral integrity of slaveholding. This allowed them to breathe easily, knowing that what was going on was not immoral. But more so, it gave them an even greater belief in the uprightness and God-ordained-ness of slavery as it existed in the South. Because God’s commands are only always moral they were even more certain that they were being obedient to God.

³⁰ Fuller and Wayland, *Domestic Slavery*, 163.

³¹ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 199.

³² *ibid.* 199.

Slavery as Economic Necessity

Another defense held by Southern Christian proslavery advocates came from a purely economic standpoint.³³ The logic goes that if slavery was abolished, then the South's economy would fail and with it the entire American economy. And they were right. Cotton exports made up the majority of the total value of American exports. This was because the South was still very much a culture shaped by agriculture and its wealth depended largely on one crop in particular, cotton. But it was not just the South which depended on cotton, the world had acquired a taste for the product, one that it could not do without. If slaves were taken away, then the South would be incapable of supplying enough cotton for the domestic and international demand it was receiving.

David Christy was not a Southerner, did not own slaves, and was not an ardent defender of slavery. However, Eric McKittrick argues that his economic defense of the institution became widely popular among Southerners who used it to defend slavery.³⁴ He claimed that the economic issue involving slavery was much larger than the South itself; that the majority of the cotton consumed in the Western world was the product of slave labor in the United States. He described the international situation this way: "slavery is not an isolated system, but is so mingled

³³ While this argument in and of itself is not necessarily a Christian argument, it was one that Christians used to defend slavery and so it merits examination. Christians who used this argument held to a strong belief in Manifest Destiny. They believed that it was the will of God that they, and their nation, should flourish. This is connected to slavery because of the role the institution played in the flourishing of their nation and themselves. Therefore, a broad review of the economic defense of slavery is justified.

³⁴ This background material to Christy's work comes from Eric L. McKittrick's introductory note to David Christy, "Cotton is King" in *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, ed. by Eric L. McKittrick (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), 111.

with the business of the world, that it derives facilities from the most innocent transactions. Capital and labor, in Europe and America, are largely employed in the manufacture of cotton.”³⁵

Therefore, when it came to economics, slavery was no longer just a United States issue, but an international one. If the system which produced the cotton was to be abolished then it would not only mean the crippling of the economy of the South, but of the global economy as well. Once these facts had been laid out, proslavery advocates could then defend the institution by claiming that for the wellbeing of their nation and the nations of the world, slavery must be kept as an institution. One need not agree with it on moral grounds to understand that the world, not just the South, would suffer without the institution.

Thus King Cotton and the economic web it upheld were the focus, not the slaves who lay at the bottom. As Christy says, “King Cotton cares not whether he employs slaves or freemen. It is the cotton, not the slaves, upon which his throne is based.”³⁶ This economic defense then, aimed to place cotton and its vital role in the South and the world center stage, stealing attention away the institution that it rested on. If cotton were still to be desired then the slave was still needed to harvest it at rates fast enough to keep up with demand. If slaves were to be freed, then King Cotton would fall; and with him the South and the economies of the world. Slavery was therefore an economic necessity.

³⁵ This quote and paragraph come from *ibid.* 113-14.

³⁶ Christy, “Cotton is King” in *Slavery Defended*, 116.

“God Segregated the Races”: A Theological Justification for Slaveholding

Slavery not only raised biblical questions, but a deeply theological one as well.³⁷ This question was debated between Southern and Northern theologians, as exhibited by Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland,³⁸ but it also existed in the everyday experience of Southern slave owners and their slaves. It was in the very fact that a certain race was slave and a certain race was master that Christians in the South found further justification for their enslavement of Africans. Theologians have referred to this theological tenant as “Noah’s Curse.” This theological defense claims that Africans are the decedents of Noah’s son Ham whose lineage had been cursed by Noah to serve his brothers’ lineage. The reasoning of this theological defense derives from Genesis 9:20-27.³⁹

For Southern advocates of slavery there is a clear principle in this text: God has segregated the races; one to serve, one to be served. Noah’s Curse was that descendants of Shem and Japheth were to dwell together while Ham and his descendants were to be servants to the descendants of the others.⁴⁰ Slavery in the South, then, was this curse playing itself out.

³⁷ Noll, *God and Race*, 34.

³⁸ Fuller and Wayland, *Domestic Slavery*, 170; Francis Wayland was a Baptist theologian from the North and was also president of Brown University. See his biography by his sons, Francis Wayland Jr. and H.L Wayland, *A memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland: Late President of Brown University*, (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1868).

³⁹ The narrative goes that one of Noah’s sons, Ham, walked in on Noah sleeping naked and made a joke of it, even running to show his brothers. These two brothers, Shem and Japheth, cover their fathers nakedness and thus restore his honor. Noah then curses Ham, and Ham’s descendants, for his immoral behavior and blesses Shem and Japheth for their honorable behavior. For further context please see Genesis 9:20-27.

⁴⁰ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 103.

At the bottom of this entire theological argument, and slavery in general, is the belief that the white race is superior to the black race.⁴¹ This biblical story provided Southern Christians with the narrative needed to support this already held belief. Christians who used this justification to defend slavery assumed that the descendants of Ham, the cursed brother, were black while the other brothers' lineage was white. Therefore, all blacks are cursed to serve their white uncursed superiors. This belief in racial inequality touches on the question of natural rights of all humans; however, the conception of natural rights was virtually absent for the many Southern Christians because it had been trampled by racist presuppositions. Most Southerners believed that one's rights depended on the status, position, and circumstances of a person. Therefore, Southern slave owners had no issue depriving slaves of natural rights because, in the first place, they did not necessarily believe blacks had them because of Noah's Curse or their current enslaved situation; nor did they think it was a sin to keep them from their slaves if in fact it did turn out that they had such rights.⁴²

The evidence and exegesis of this theological justification may be in question. But what is not in question is that this theological tenant not only informed Southerners' view of their world and the people in it, it also confirmed the way they had been looking at the world for decades if not collectively for two centuries. Southerners had viewed Africans as inferior to them since they first came into contact with them and now they believed that this scripture, and justification from

⁴¹ Chesebrough, "Slavery", 147.

⁴² The latter half of this paragraph can be found in Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 201-202.

it, proved this hierarchy to be just. God himself had segregated the races through Noah; one to serve, one to rule.

The Pulpit As Tool For Slavery

James Furman, a South Carolinian pastor, intellectual, and the son of famed Evangelical Richard Furman, declared in a letter to a fellow slaveholder that “We who own slaves honor God’s law in the exercise of our authority.”⁴³ This statement is representative of the attitudes of most Southern clergymen and serves as a window into the fact that it was not just theologians and biblical scholars who argued in favor of the institution; it was more often than not the cornerstones of Southern culture as well: pastors.⁴⁴ Arguably, no one in all of Southern society exerted more influence than the pastor and preacher of a local congregation. It was the pastor who weekly fed his sheep and pointed them to the truth of scripture. It was the pastor who spoke into the lives of the people sitting in his pews. The majority of Southerners were far more likely to interact with the writings and teachings of the clergy than the theologian or biblical scholar. And so the beliefs and views of the clergy—even more than the highly intellectual—largely dictated the beliefs and views of individual congregants, but also of entire towns and communities as well. And because of this, it was pastor’s view of slavery that large numbers of Southern citizens learned what theirs should be; or went to their pastor seeking to find justification for what they already believed.⁴⁵ This is important to understand in order to grasp the power the

⁴³ James C. Furman to W. E. Bailey, December 18, 1848, Furman Family Papers, Furman University.

⁴⁴ Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136.

⁴⁵ The second half of this paragraph comes generally from the chapter “The Ministry” and specifically pages in Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 30; 33; 63.

pulpit had in shaping the views of Southern congregants, especially those who themselves did not gain much from slavery.

In the late eighteenth century the Southern pulpit was an unfavorable place for slavery. Pastors during this time often used the pulpit to speak against, or at least unkindly about, the institution; though often these messages fell on deaf ears.⁴⁶ In the 1700s large denominations like the Baptist and Methodist churches in the South passed strict rules to try to remove slavery from their churches.⁴⁷ However, with the rise of the international demand of cotton, the creation of Eli Whitney's cotton gin, and the discovery of a scriptural defense for slavery, the institution became much more valuable to the South.. Therefore, in the early part of nineteenth century the dominant view of slavery in Southern pulpits changed from a necessary evil, to a beneficial system that just about every Southerner was willing to defend. No longer did pastors decry slavery as an evil, but preached that it was a good thing that brought prosperity to the land. Cotton was now seen as vital to the South, and with it the institution that produced it at such a high rate.⁴⁸

After this explosion of cotton in the South, the pulpit became one of the primary instruments for defending slavery as ordained by God.⁴⁹ Pastors now praised the system and defended it. Preachers began to preach that Christians, or anyone for that matter, had no right to interfere at all with the system as it existed in the South. James Henley Thornwell, a Presbyterian preacher and the leading theologian in the South,⁵⁰ declared in

⁴⁶ Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

⁴⁷ David B. Chesebrough, introduction to "Slavery" in *God Ordained this War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1861-1865*. ed. by David B. Chesebrough (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1991), 143. This section by Chesebrough serves as a backdrop and introduction to the following sermons on slavery he includes in the chapter.

⁴⁸ The latter half of this paragraph is supported by Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 186-188.

⁴⁹ Chesebrough, "Slavery," 144.

⁵⁰ Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," 45.

an 1861 address to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, that “We have no right, as a Church, to enjoin as a duty, or to condemn [slavery] as a sin...God has not entrusted to his Church the organization of society.”⁵¹

Others disagreed with Thornwell, preaching that the Church could not remain silent about the institution. Rather, they preached that the Church *must* speak in support of the system because the Bible supported it and therefore God had ordained it. I.T. Tichenor, a Baptist, summarized in a sermon the foundational biblical texts which supported slavery:

That slavery is sanctioned by the Bible seems scarcely to admit a doubt. Founded upon the divine decree that “Canaan should be a servant to servants unto his brethren,” existing in the days of the patriarchs, twice spoken in the Ten Commandments, with laws written in the New Testament for its regulation, it stands as an institution of God.⁵²

In other words, Tichenor is saying that people can state that slavery is sanctioned in the Bible without having any doubt they are correct. And therefore, because God ordained it, Christians could not be obedient to God sitting idly by while the system was attacked. Instead, if they were to be obedient Christians, they would have to speak, stand up, and if need be, fight and die for the system.

These words from Furman and Tichenor are representative of the words of the countless clergymen all across the South who used the pulpit to justify the institution biblically. In fact, “by the 1820s there were virtually no ministers in the South who might have provided an antislavery example.”⁵³ Because these men preached a proslavery rhetoric from their pulpits, and because they argued that scripture supported it, the

⁵¹ Quoted in C.C Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 165.

⁵² Quoted in Chesebrough, “Slavery,” 146.

⁵³ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 192.

average Southerner who had no stake in slavery followed suit in believing that it was a biblically justifiable institution. Not only this, but the Southerner who did benefit from the institution found justification for continuing to do so from the only men who had even the slightest possibility of changing the public's minds, their pastors. It is undeniably evident that the vast majority of Southern clergymen and churches during the antebellum period heralded the good news that "God [had] placed [the slaves] here for [our] good and His glory,"⁵⁴ and the Christians in their pews replied with a hearty "Amen."

Conclusion

Christian advocates of slaveholding formed an arsenal of stout and thorough defenses for the system of slavery which rested on religious, moral, economic, and theological reasoning. First and foremost they appealed to the inspired and authoritative Word of God for their justification. Using a common sense hermeneutic, they "proved" that not only was slavery never condemned in scripture, but that it was sanctioned in the Old Testament and permitted in the New. God then was on the side of slavery and any other position was unchristian. This meant that only those on the slaveholding side were being obedient to God. In a staunchly Christian world, this would become *the* key defense of the system

Responding to the accusations that slavery, as it was practiced in the South, was immoral, advocates of the system responded with a definition of slavery that proved otherwise. Slavery was not one man's right to ownership of another man,

⁵⁴ This quote comes from the *Minutes of the Forty-fifth Anniversary of the Cahaba Baptist Association*, Oct. 18-20, 1862 (Marion: George C. Rogers, Printers, 1862), 11, and is quoted in Chesebrough, "Slavery", 149.

but his right to the man's labor. The system then was free of any immoral stains, and thus, it was even more likely that God had sanctioned it because he is the epitome of moral perfection.

Proslavery advocates argued from an economic standpoint that cotton, and therefore slavery, was of the utmost importance to the economy of the South, but also to the economy of the world. Advocates of slavery pointed out that in the institution was necessary to the advancement of the South, but also the United States in general. If this was the case, then slavery was necessary to carry on the widely accepted Christian belief in Manifest Destiny.

Southerner pastors and preachers also supported the institution using the pulpit as their main tool. While there were a few pastors who remained silent on the issue, most preached justification for the system. While the majority of Southerners did not own slaves, they did look to their pastor to inform them on the issue. Those who were wealthy enough to own slaves looked to them to either justify or condemn them. What both groups learned from their pastors was that God had instituted and ordained the system, for the mutual good of slave and master.

Most assume, without much research, that those who defended the institution of slavery were ignorant, uneducated, and stubborn racists. While the majority of proslavery advocates, not to mention the majority of Northerners as well, were racists, few were unintelligent. Neither were they irrational or belligerent. Proslavery advocates were simple Christian people aiming to protect a system which their way of life depended on and had been taught to believe was not only beneficial to all, but sanctioned by God. They truly believed they were obeying

God by owning slaves and defending the institution. The defenses and justifications they wielded against the abolitionists were rational, moral, economic, theological and most importantly biblical. This defense of slavery was robust biblical and holistic, and therefore it provided defenders of the system with a rhetoric that would not easily be defeated. In fact, it would take a war to do so.

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