

The Southern Apostacy

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Religion in all cultures and for many people provides a guide for morality. It provides a framework for proper social behavior in the context of an overall culture and society. If religion affects an individual's ideas about morality and the function of the individual on Earth and if politics is the negotiation of power among individuals, groups and states, then inevitably religion will affect politics, as the political actions of people are influenced by their morality in addition to their practical self-interests. In many cases, religion is interpreted and presented by its proponents in such a way as to sanctify the prevailing social order of a society.¹ Different cultures can follow the same beliefs or the same tenants of a religion and have different interpretations of how those beliefs should guide social behavior.

In the early nineteenth century American South, as in most of America, evangelical, Protestant Christianity was a major force in the daily lives and political temperaments of citizens. The religious movement now called the Great Awakenings influenced Protestants in both the northern and southern regions of America. A great clash between the two occurred over the issue of slavery. While clergy from both regions shared basic religious tenants and common ideas about God's role in human affairs, their reaction over the issue of slavery was in complete opposition and a result of the conflicting regional cultures in which they lived. Events around the 1830's joined with evangelical religiosity to produce a religious battle over the morality of slavery. That battle became the issue of sectional conflict and internal division within the Church. This denominational schism, the rise of a strong abolition movement in the North and the reactionary defense of the morality of slavery in the South were in symbiosis with the political sectionalism that was occurring at the time in the South. In the end, the conflict led to secession and war.²

Several events precipitated the sectional conflict in both the political and religious arenas. The Missouri Compromise of 1820-1821 allowed Missouri, settled mainly by southerners, to be admitted to the Union as a slave state while prohibiting slavery in any new territories. Anti-slavery sentiment was expressed during the debate over this issue,

¹ Cauthien, K. (2003) I Don't Care What the Bible Says, An Interpretation of the South, Macon: Mercer University Press, pg.49.

² Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion, New York: Cambridge University Press, Introduction pg. 1-15 and Part II, Religion and sectional politics.

which sparked a subsequent debate over states' rights.³ Additionally, the prohibition of slave holding in new territories was seen as an insult to the southern institution of slavery and an inference that the South was inferior and immoral. The South's reaction was to claim that the issue was constitutional. This stand would eventually be supported by southern clergy, giving it a religious dimension.⁴

The invention of the Cotton Gin and its practical use in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century made cotton a tremendously profitable crop. New plantations sprung up throughout the south and the demand and market value of slaves increased tremendously.⁵

Slave revolts and insurrections in the 1830's such as the one led by Nat Turner caused great controversy of the issue of slavery. Nat Turner, who believed himself to be following the voice of God, turned on his master with a group of other slaves, brutally killing 55 men, women and children. A violent reaction by the white slave owners ensued and 55 slaves were executed. In the hysteria that followed an estimated 200 slaves were killed by white mobs.⁶ Incidences such as these caused empathy for the conditions of white owners by other whites in both the North and South. For others it was illustrative of the need to repress and control the slave population as well as their inherent debased moral nature. For others it confirmed the inherent evils of slavery. Insurrections, an understandable reaction to enslavement, were followed by bloody reprisals and *"from that time forth the slave laws have but one quality, that of ferocity engendered by fear."*⁷

More than any other factor, the rise of a strong, active and determined abolition movement led by the clergy of northern, Protestant evangelicals in reaction to the fervent revivalism of the Great Awakenings brought the issue of slavery and the separate identities of the northern and southern regions of the Union to the forefront of political and religious discourse. The call for immediate emancipation of slaves by the abolitionist

³ Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company pg. 270-271.

⁴ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge University Press pg. 213

⁵ Africans in America (1999). [online]. www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home. Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation., enter, Part 3, Brotherly Love 1791-1831, Resource Bank, Part VI, Growth and Entrenchment of Slavery, C. Modern Voices, Margaret Washington on the impact of the cotton gin. and Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company pg. 279

⁶ *ibid.*, enter, Part 3, Brotherly Love 1791-1831, Resource Bank, V., Conspiracy and Rebellion, A. People and Events, Nat Turner's Rebellion.

⁷ Lodge, H. C. English Colonies pg. 67, reprinted in: Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company

was aggressive and uncompromising. In the 1830's a massive campaign of speeches, articles, newsletters and pamphlets was mounted, including a massive mail out of abolitionists' literature to southern politicians, slave-owners and clergy. The reaction they received was surprising and equally fervent.⁸

Some historians suggest that prior to the attack of abolitionists and the subsequent reaction by southern clergy there was near unanimity among the country's clergy on the issue of slavery, that it was immoral and against the tenants of Christianity. There is evidence that such views were held and expressed by southern clergy members. However, by the 1860's and the culmination of the secession crisis, southern clergy members were nearly unanimous in their defense of slavery and their support of secession from the union. In many ways southern clergy members were southerners first and Christians second. Their defense of slavery was a product of both the pressures of northern abolitionists and the pressures of the hegemonic patriarchal, white supremacist society of the South.⁹

Protestant evangelicalism, the prevailing form that religion took in early, nineteenth century America, through the revivalist Great Awakenings promoted the idea of a Christian life in which the repentance of sins and the conversion to a life of holiness,¹⁰ as laid out in the Bible were called for. In addition, evangelicals shared the heritage of America's founding religious communities, such as the Puritans, who believed that God held America in special favor, that this country was founded under the providence of God and was a new Israel given by God to his chosen people. The virtue of American society, then was a cause for concern and management. Nineteenth-century evangelicals also believed that God was involved in the rise and fall of civilizations and states. For them world history and the Bible were illustrative that the virtue and sinfulness of states was directly related to their success or failure.¹¹ Both the northern and southern factions of Protestant denominations shared these beliefs. However it was their interpretation of the meaning of contemporary events and conditions that were

⁸ Loveland, A. C. (1980) Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860., Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press pg 193-194.

⁹ Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company, pg. 277-278.

¹⁰ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge University Press, pg. 3

¹¹ *ibid.*, pg. 165

diametrically opposed. The sectional crisis of 1860-1861 was seen as the impending punishment of America by God for its sins. This crisis was in part the culmination of America's post-revolution, antebellum search for an American identity. That identity would have different meanings for the North and the South.

For the abolitionists who were organizing and gaining strength in the 1830's it was painfully clear what the sin of American was. Slavery was declared America's great sin and its immediate end was demanded by the abolitionists of the time.¹² For them, the ideals of republicanism and liberty fought for in the American Revolution were in immediate contrast to the owning of humans as chattel slaves. It was obviously the duty of evangelicals to speak out and work to bring an immediate end to an institution so obviously in opposition to Christian principles.¹³ They referred to the golden rule found in the New Testament that calls on Christians to do unto others as they would have done unto them, as basic Biblical evidence that slavery was immoral. (see Appendix A, pg. 15) These were men arguing from a religious perspective, not a secular one. A natural rights or civil rights argument was not enough, though the obvious natural rights argument against slavery was presented by many. In 1818 the Presbyterian General Assembly published an expression of sentiments on the subject of slavery. It included the following:

"We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves; and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ, which enjoin that 'all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'

...The evils to which the slave is always exposed often take place in fact, and in their worst degree and form; and where all of them do not take place,...still the slave is deprived of his natural right, degraded as a human being and exposed to the danger of passing into the hands of a master who may inflict upon him all the hardships and injuries which inhumanity and avarice may suggest."¹⁴

¹² Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge University Press pg. 29

¹³ *ibid.* pg. 55

¹⁴ Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company, pg. 268-269

These sentiments were those shared by most clergy of most denominations until the issue came to a head in the 1830's and a defensive, aggressive stand defending slavery and attacking abolitionism emerged.

The natural rights argument over slavery is illustrated by two opposing definitions of slavery presented by theologians of the time. William E. Channing wrote a book called, *Slavery* (1835), which gave respectability and an intellectual argument to the growing abolition movement. In it he offered a definition of slavery:

“The very idea of a slave, is that he belongs to another, that he is bound to live and labour for another, to be another’s instrument, and to make another’s will his habitual law, however adverse to his own.”

Channing’s colleague, William Whewell added that human bondage was,

“contrary to the fundamental principles of morality. 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.”

In response to these arguments that slavery divested humans of their humanity, James H. Thornhill, a well known and respected theologian, responded with his own definition of the slave. He claimed a slave,

“in his moral, religious and intellectual nature, [enjoyed] the same humanity in which we glory as the image of God”

He declared that slaves retained a conscience that *“can never be owned by another; not an article of barter or exchange.”* Slavery, he contended was the

“obligation to labour for another, determined by the Providence of God, independently of the provisions of a contract. The right which the master has is a right, not to the man, but to his labour; the duty which the slave owes is the service which, in conformity with this right, the master exacts.”¹⁵

Thornhill’s response to what was a basic human rights argument against slavery illustrates the heavy investment of religious tenants in the defense of slavery by southern clergy. Without the premise that slavery itself is sanctified by God, that divine

¹⁵ The debate between Thornhill, Channing and Whewell can found in detail in: Snay, M. (1993) *Gospel of Disunion.*, New York: Cambridge Universtiy Press, pg. 81-87.

providence places people on the Earth to be slaves, the argument falls apart as it denies some humans the ability to negotiate contractual obligations.

Northern clergy called on all to denounce not only the institution of slavery but also members of the church who participated in it. Over this uncompromising policy rose an increasingly apologetic stance of southern evangelicals over the issue of slavery. For instance, the Baptist church was one of the first denominations to condemn slavery. Yet having a majority membership in the south, the church found it increasingly difficult to apply its anti-slavery principles to the region. Their rhetoric during the early days of the anti-slavery movement included phrases such as, “*immediate emancipation*,” “*no fellowship with slave-holders*,” and “*slave holding always and everywhere, a sin*.” These principals were in practical conflict with the ideology of the southern slave culture. Southern clergy increasingly apologized for good Christians who “*found themselves*” with authority over and responsible for the well-being and care of fellow human beings, “*through no fault of their own*.” What could they practically do? Free them and give them up to the cruel realities of a white supremacist society where not all slaveholders were moral Christians? The northern churches promoted the excommunication of members in such situations. However the southern factions changed their declarations from “*slave holding always and everywhere, a sin*.” to “*slaveholding with evil purpose or wrong treatment, a sin*.” Christian southerners who held slaves for their own advantage and who granted slaves “*that which is just and equal*” were allowed to remain in the Church where they found support. Of course, what is “*just and equal*” was determined by those holding the power, the slave owners. This gradual apologist approach to slavery was a step toward a total defense of slavery, and what the northern clergy called the apostasy of the southern church.¹⁶

Southern clergy reacted to the assault from northern abolitionist on many levels. The first being what they saw as the improper use of the pulpit by northern clergy in matters that were not religious. Evangelical Protestants, in general believed in the separation of church and civic or secular matters. However, both northern and southern clergy acknowledged the responsibility of church leaders to speak out when political

¹⁶ Information from the preceding paragraph, including all quotes is from: Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company, pg. 274-275

matters took on a moral significance. The abolitionists were the first to declare slavery a moral issue requiring voice and action by the church. The southern clergy, at first denied the moral component of the slavery question, claiming it a matter of economics, politics and civic law. As the debate raged and southern clergy began to defend slavery with more fervor, they too claimed jurisdiction over the issue as one of moral and therefore religious significance. For northern clergy slavery was attacked as a great immoral sin. For the southern clergy its morality was defended.¹⁷

Using the Bible as a source of morality on this issue, southern clergy discovered a source of legitimacy and vindication. The Biblical defense of slavery became an important aspect of the south's defense of slavery in general and what became known as the slave holding ethic. In the Bible there is in fact more scripture to validate the owning of slaves than there is to denounce it. The Bible does not denounce slavery as a sin or a wrong. In fact, it regulates the buying, selling and owning of slaves and the mutual obligations of master and slave. Using the Bible alone as guidance provided southern clergy more rhetorical ammunition than it did to abolitionists.¹⁸ (see Appendix A, pg. 15) The abolitionists counter to the Biblical defense of slavery was to assert that the *spirit* of the Old and New Testaments were to be a guide, not merely the literal letter of the text. Clearly, to abolitionist, the overall *spirit* of the Bible was against oppression of any kind and therefore condemned slavery.¹⁹ For southern clergy this claim to follow the *spirit* of the Bible led to more ammunition against abolitionists and a new form of sectional identity for the South. The argument over slavery became one over orthodoxy and a fundamental view of Scripture. Southern clergy accused abolitionists of countering the divine law of God by not adhering to the literal text of Biblical scripture. If the abolitionists claimed to be following their human conscience and sense of morality then they were usurping the morality and authority of God, by going against what was so clearly laid out in the Bible, the source of his divine guidance and law. Northern clergy

¹⁷ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge University Press, pg. 10

¹⁸ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge University Press pg. 55-56.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pg. 64.

were called infidels, their infidelity being to the unquestionable fundamental morality of God. To speak against slavery, then was to speak against God and a sacrilege.²⁰

These arguments taken with the northern clergy's insistence that slave owners be denied membership in the church, a direct insult to the morality of slave-owners and an implication that they were inferior, led to the denominational schism of Protestant churches. Many southern factions abandoned national membership with their churches and formed separate, distinctively southern churches allowing them to embrace and promote southern distinctiveness revolving around the issue of slavery. This church schism was both influenced by and influenced the political sectional movement. The schism of the church validated and sanctified the political schism that came later. Political leaders found guidance, inspiration, validation and respectability in the sectionalism of the southern church. In many ways, the denominational schism of the 1830's paved the way for the secession of the southern states from the union.²¹

A vital part of the Biblical defense of slavery was the development of the slaveholding ethic. The Bible is clear in its writings about the proper treatment of slaves. (see Appendix A, pg. 15) As part of the Christian defense, Southern clergy urged slave-owners to behave as proper Christians and treat their slaves humanely, avoiding overworking them or punishing them with violence. Many clergy spoke out against the separation of slave families and called on slave owners to respect the marriages of slaves. Southern clergy claimed that the harsh treatment of slaves was the sin, not slavery itself. If a slaveholder were a good Christian then slavery was not wrong. In fact, many clergy admitted that absent the humane treatment of slaves, the Biblical defense was invalid.²²

Part of this argument was the Southern clergy's response to the abolitionist use of the golden rule as evidence that slavery is a sin. Slave owners claimed that the golden rule expected men to treat others as they would be treated, within reason, under the same circumstances.²³ For the slave owner, the owning of slaves was not a sin, as long as they

²⁰ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge Universtiy Press, Chapter 2, Slavery Defended, part I. Pg. 54-59.

²¹ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion., New York: Cambridge Universtiy Press Part 3, Religion and Separatism, Chapter 4, Harbingers of disunion: The denominational schisms. pg. 113

²² *ibid.*, pg. 81.

²³ *ibid.*, pg. 70.

were treated with the same respect that the slave owner could expect if he were born a slave.

Here lie a few of the many flaws of the southern clergy defense of slavery. The ideal of the master-slave relationship of mutual obligation promoted by southern clergy was far from the reality of slavery in the South. As many anti-slavery clergy recognized, the very nature of slavery itself requires force. Humans do not voluntarily give themselves up as slaves, no matter what the Bible says. Slavery requires violence for its maintenance. The reality made the justification of the ideal invalid.

“Perhaps the greatest horror of slavery was that you were denied your own children. You were denied indeed your own birthright. You were born into the world, but the self that you were, descended from your family,...was taken from you. You were suspended in time. You were in limbo. You could not even have your self under slavery. Your selfhood was denied.”²⁴

The conditions of slaves varied. Even in the most *benevolent* of situations, the status of servitude was maintained by coercion and both the threat and use of force. Inadequate food and housing, whippings, beatings, mutilations, sexual exploitation, rape, murder and the constant prospect of being sold and separated from family were among the conditions existent and the methods used within the system of slavery.²⁵

The ideal of a benevolent, natural, mutual relationship between master and slave denied the reality that slavery denied slaves the very basic rights of humanity, the right of self-determination. The Christian-slave-holding-ethic ideal also ignored the violent and criminal origin of Africans in America. American slavery of Africans began with kidnapping and removing of individuals from their culture, heritage and familial ties.²⁶ White, southern clergy declared that slavery was part of the natural order of society ordained and established by God,²⁷ when in truth the institution was economically motivated and the result of a cruel and criminal slave trade.

Part of the slaveholder-ethic philosophy was the need to Christianize the slaves. For the southern evangelical it was not contradictory to see the slave as both a soul loved

²⁴ Historian, Catherine Clinton, from: *Africans in America* (1999). [online]. www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home. Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation., Enter, Part 4, 1831-1865, Narrative, Antebellum Slavery.

²⁵ Historian, Catherine Clinton, from: *Africans in America* (1999). [online]. www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home. Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation., Enter, Part 4, 1831-1865, Narrative, Antebellum Slavery.

²⁶ Snay, M. (1993) *Gospel of Disunion*., New York: Cambridge University Press.,pg. 57

²⁷ *ibid.*, pg. 71

by God, to acknowledge the slaves' intellect, humanity and morality and yet to sanctify a practice which held them to be chattel property, as evidenced by Thornhill's argument. As part of this justification, southern missionaries insisted on the teaching of Christianity to the slaves, a selective Christianity in which the obligation of slave to master in parallel to the relation of man to God was promoted. This was a vital part of the southern church's contribution to the justification of slavery.²⁸

The Christianizing of the slaves however, was always a source of conflicting opinions on the part of slave owners. When slavery was introduced slaves were denied the right and ability to practice their native religions but were kept from Christianity as well. It was believed that Christianity would empower slaves, encouraging them to see themselves as equal to whites and thus result in rebellion. The slave rebellions of the 1830's, instigated by church-attending slaves, was seen as evidence to this fact. Alternatively, some slave-owners used the mutual obligation theory promoted by scripture to reinforce the idea that slaves were duty-bound to obey their masters as part of the natural and divine order of the universe and used Biblical teachings as a sort of propaganda toward maintaining order by promoting resignation to one's fate as a slave as ordained by God.²⁹

The denial of Christianity to slaves was one of the charges made against slave-owners by abolitionists. In the post-1830's promotion of the slaveholder's ethic as a rebuttal to abolitionists, southern clergy began to insist on the duty of Christian slaveholders to teach the Bible to their slaves. Because this practice promoted the sanctification and defense of slavery, many slave owners followed the prescription of southern clergy.

It is somewhat ironic that the black church had its seeds in this evangelical missionary work. Christianity offered the slaves hope and the promise that what was unjust and unequal on Earth would be just and equal in heaven. It undoubtedly offered aid to the psychological coping mechanisms necessary to survive their tragic, inhumane and often horrific circumstances.³⁰ The black church of the south would become a great

²⁸ *ibid.*, pg. 91-92

²⁹ Snay, M. (1993) *Gospel of Disunion.*, New York: Cambridge University Press. pg. 90-91

³⁰ *Africans in America* (1999). [online]. www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home. Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation.

source of political power for blacks in their continuing struggle for civil rights in this country.

The ideology of the sanctification of slavery contained within it the seeds of its own destruction and invalidity. If slaves had souls, consciences and were moral beings loved by God, then how could it be right for fellow Christian, moral beings to enslave them and force their labor, absent any real possibility of changing the relationship? The slave-holding ethic itself invited southern clergy to judge the actions of the slaveholders and the reality of the conditions of the slaves. In this reality, fault and sin could no doubt be found. If the very nature of slavery requires force then how can the ideal of the slave-holding ethic ever be realized? With these defenses of slavery southern clergy were attempting to create an ideology within the elite, socio-economic world in which they belonged and functioned and in which slavery was seen as normal.

The defense of slavery must be understood, as far as any defense of such an institution can be understood, in the context of the prevalent, national and southern, patriarchal, white supremacist ideology. America of the nineteenth century was a country ruled by white men. The hierarchical structure was evident. White men had rights over all others. The belief that black people were inherently inferior must be seen in the context of an ideology that promoted that women, too were intellectually inferior and were relegated by the providence of God to a separate sphere in life. To suggest that women be given equal civil rights and self-determination would have been ludicrous to the controlling political society. Women were viewed as lacking the ability and intelligence to rule their own lives or to participate in any sphere outside the home.³¹ They, like children required protection and the guidance of their fathers and husbands. Blacks were seen as naturally inferior and incapable, too of self-determination. It was providential and natural law that placed the Negro race below the white one. In this southern view of a benevolent paternal society, it was seen as the white man's duty as an honorable citizen and Christian to protect, care for and govern, using force when

³¹ Stansell, C. (1987). *City of Women, Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press chapter 2, The Problem of Dependency: Men and Women, Rich and Poor

necessary, those who are naturally below him, including his wife, his children and his slaves.³²

To even those who recognized the inherent evils of slavery, the idea that the two races could co-exist without slavery, that black people could live in America alongside whites in peace and freedom was outside the realm of imagination. For southerners who were against slavery, their prescriptions did not include emancipation and equality in political participation and civic life. Alternatives, such as the re-colonization of slaves in Africa were presented. While some former slave owners achieved this and some slaves were returned to West Africa, most slaves were against this solution as it meant the abandonment of family members, owned by other slave owners.³³

In the context of this southern ideology, the aggressive attack of the abolitionists caused a vehement reaction in southerners. Southern clergy accused abolitionists of dealing in abstract, not practical terms.³⁴ The idea that slaves could be immediately emancipated was seen as a drastic and dangerous proposition that would be “ruinous”³⁵ to both black and white populations. White southerners claimed that the black population would be left unprotected, without means of shelter, food and means to make a living. The other fear of course was for the safety of the white population, if emancipation were achieved. This fear was reinforced by the violent slave insurrections in the 1820’s and 1830’s.

In addition, southern clergy pointed out that the argument was not over the introduction of slavery, which would be a very different discussion but over what to do about the existence of slavery as it was in the South. The clergy in the South believed that the best way to deal with slavery in the South, which they viewed as both moral and natural if not ideal, was to regulate it, sanctify it and Christianize it. Southern clergy believed that only southerners, who knew the character of the Negro best, were qualified to debate and

³² Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion, New York: Cambridge University Press, pg. 70 and Loveland, A. C. (1980) Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press pg 70-71.

³³ Snay, M. (1993) Gospel of Disunion, New York: Cambridge University Press, pg. 23 and Loveland, A. C. (1980) Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press pg 186-187.

³⁴ Loveland, A. C. (1980) Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press pg 198.

³⁵ *ibid.*, pg 193.

decide the fate of the south's peculiar institution and resented the northern clergy's interference in what they did not understand.³⁶

Part of this argument was a critique of the free-labor society of the industrializing north. As any student of nineteenth century history knows, a working person in the industrialized north faced many hardships and abuses in the unregulated capitalism of the North. Class struggles were evident and the hierarchy of owner over worker, man over woman and white over black or non-white was evident. Conditions were harsh and unfair. Southern clergy used this evidence to argue that the alternatives to southern, slave-based economies were no better and indeed worse than the benevolent, paternal system of the South.³⁷

While there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the southern clergy's defense of slavery, the unanimity of the defense and the silence of critiques of slavery are further explained by the force of the hegemonic, white, supremacist, male society. When the abolitionists first mounted their mail campaign in the south, the reaction of the slave holding planter class and white male elite was one of extreme anger and repression. Southern clergy members immediately came under suspicion as being harbingers of dissent and abolitionists' sentiment. Accusations abounded and southern clergy were quick to defend themselves as, at the very least, against slavery but also against the interference of abolitionists and at the most, staunch defenders of the right and morality of slave owning. In addition to the climate of witch-hunt like hysteria that followed the slave revolts of the 1830's, this reaction by the controlling white elite produced a climate in which it was paramount to treason or blasphemy to criticize even in the mildest way the southern institution of slavery and could result in death as it did for Rev. James Phelan of Macon, Mississippi, an opponent of secession.³⁸

The free speech of the clergy was controlled with intimidation by slave owners. Through this intimidation, slave owners demanded that the southern clergy tow the pro-slavery line and reject abolitionists as fanatics. And so they did. The failure of the southern clergy to remain true to the anti-slavery stance of the national church and their

³⁶ Loveland, A. C. (1980) *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860.*, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press pg 198.

³⁷ Snay, M. (1993) *Gospel of Disunion.*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pg. 177

³⁸ *ibid.*, pg. 200.

subsequent apologies for and defense of slave owning was considered to be the apex of the southern apostasy.³⁹ Anti-slavery in the south was extinguished and silenced by the powerful influence of the hegemonic, white, male power elite. The power of this influence and its role in the southern clergy's defense of slavery should not be underestimated.

*"Slavery showed all southerners the significance of physical force in human relations."*⁴⁰ The ideology of white supremacy and the use of force to uphold it did not die with slavery. In the decades after the Civil War and Reconstruction, the struggle for civil rights and peaceful relations between the races would prove to be tumultuous and violent. The role of religion in southern politics would prove to be far from over. The black church, an institution whose birth began as part of the sanctification of slavery would play a huge role in the civil rights movement of African Americans. The Christian conservative right that once vehemently defended the white Christian's right to hold slaves did not die either. It would transform into a force of oppression that attempted to maintain the white supremacy so ingrained in its ideology. Even into the 1980's and the twenty first century religion would remain an influential force in southern politics with issues of race still existent under the surface.

Kenneth Cauthen, a southern theologian and philosopher, wrote an essay he titled, *I Don't Care What The Bible Says, An Interpretation of the South*,⁴¹ in which he attempts to put in philosophical terms the often strange mystery of southern identity and ways of thinking as evidenced by its tumultuous history. Cauthen writes, *"We cannot fundamentally alter what we are in a moment by merely deciding to do so. We cannot choose to hate what we love or love what we hate just by doing it."* Cauthen writes that the power of people to do otherwise than they do is limited by their social institutions, historical backgrounds, economic circumstances and cultural upbringing. The American South in the 1830's was entrenched in both an economic system and an ideology that dictated the social condition of slavery. This essay illustrates that the owning of slaves could not be changed quickly or easily. The political activism of those outside the system,

³⁹ Bacon, L. W. (1897) *A History of American Christianity*., New York: Christian Literature Company, pg. 280-283

⁴⁰ Ownby, T. (1990) *Subduing Satan, Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920*., Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, pg. 16

⁴¹ All quotes and information attributed to Cauthen is found in: Cauthen, K. (2003) *I Don't Care What the Bible Says, An Interpretation of the South*., Macon: Mercer University Press, pg.4-9.

despite the validity of their ethical and human rights arguments was certainly not enough to force a change. The ideology of the patriarchic, white supremacist, male dominated society of the south was given moral and religious sanctification by the debate of the southern clergy and their defense of the institution of slavery. Cauthen writes, “As exhibited in dominant denominations, religion has usually sanctioned the prevailing social order.” This is certainly true in the case presented here. Given the commonalities between the northern and southern clergy, their dedication to Christian principles, their belief in God’s role in the birth and success of the United States and their dedication to a life of holiness, the split between the two factions over the issue of slavery suggests, that where religion influences political behavior, it may not do so through it’s tenants or its morality but only as a tool for moral justification for political goals of self-preservation and maintenance of the prevailing social order.

*“Conflicts in values such that something good cannot be achieved without introducing evil along with it, is part of the tragic nature of historical existence.”*⁴² Some southern clergy who recognized the evils of slavery, yet rejected the North’s interference in it suggested that only God could solve the issue. If it is true that God has a hand in the fates of men, then perhaps in the end he did, through the Civil War.

⁴² Cauthien, K. (2003) I Don’t Care What the Bible Says. An Interpretation of the South., Macon: Mercer University Press, pg.13.

Appendix A

From: Lockman Foundation, (1987) Amplified Edition of the Bible., Michigan:
Zondervan Publishing

Mathew 7:12

So, then whatever you desire that others would do to and for you, even so do also to and for them for this is the law of the prophets.

Genesis 9:25

25 He exclaimed, Cursed be Canaan. He shall be the servant of servants to his brethen:

26 He also said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem and Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem and let Canaan be his servant...

(the descendants of Canaan were interpreted to be black Africans by some using this verse as a defense of the enslavement of Africans)⁴³

Deuteronomy 27:16

cursed is he who dishonors his father and mother

(relates to the significance of Genesis 9:25)

Leviticus 25:44-6

42 The Israelites shall not serve as bondsmen

43 You shall not rule over him with harshness but you should fear your God

44 You may buy bondsmen and bondmaids from nations around you

46 you may hold them as possessions and leave them to your children

Letter of Paul to the Ephesians

5 servants be obedient to your masters, respect them and please them, as service to Christ

6 doing the will of God heartily and with your whole soul

7 rendering service readily with goodwill as to the Lord

8 Rewards in heaven will come to both slave and free

⁴³ Bacon, L. W. (1897) A History of American Christianity., New York: Christian Literature Company, pg. 56

*9 Masters do not be violent to servants as God respects
both slave and master*

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