

A Solemn Trust:

The Church and Slavery
in the Mind of a Southern Old School
Proslavery Minister

By

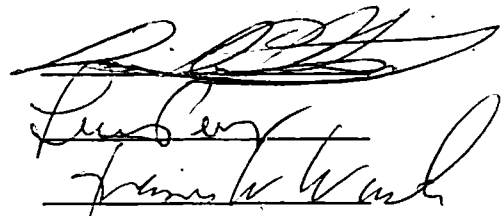
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Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors
in
History

May, 1994

On the basis of this thesis and of
the written and oral examinations
taken by the candidate on
4/15/94 and on 4/28/94
we, the undersigned, recommend
that the candidate be awarded

Honors in History:



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INTRODUCTION

The Christian church has often wrestled with its place in society. Since the early persecution of the church during the Roman empire, Christians have struggled to understand the relationship of the "church militant" to the world in which it resides.¹ The biblical call to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world -- "to keep oneself unspotted from the world"² -- has spawned many interpretations, ranging from Anabaptistic dichotomies between church and society to medieval Roman Catholic notions of church over state. American Protestant Christianity, resting on the shoulders of the Reformers, has not been oblivious to these questions. The American religious experience, complex and diverse, has provided a unique environment from which distinctly American perceptions of the relation of the church to the world have emerged.

The slavery controversy of the nineteenth century was one aspect of this American experience shaping American Protestantism. The nature of the slavery debate caused many to scrutinize their Christianity in its light. Abolitionist and proslavery Christians alike considered new interpretations of

¹ The term "church militant" in Christian literature refers to the members of the church residing here on the earth as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, as differentiated from the "church triumphant," who live in heaven.

² From James 1:27 (NKJV)

scripture and new applications of scriptural principles.³ The slavery debate, which caused internal conflict in many denominations,⁴ forced into question American religious attitudes about the relationship between the things of the world and the church.

Those Christians in the nineteenth century who devoted time and energy to the defense of slavery have long been under the scrutiny of the historian. Numerous historical volumes, written in an attempt to answer the elusive *why*, have explored the American phenomenon of "proslavery religion."⁵ Theological and polemical defenses of slavery in the south have been attributed to everything from guilt to greed.⁶ Jack P. Maddex, a professor

³ Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro -- A History*, (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 102.

⁴ There are many secondary sources which explore the strife which took place in different nineteenth century churches over the slavery question. A few include the following: C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Macon Ga, 1985); E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. I & II (Richmond, 1963-74); and Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery*, (New York, 1960) chap. 6, "Schisms and Debates."

⁵ Some include Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1964); John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolition and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, 1984) -- an examination of the antislavery attack against proslavery; Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Proslavery Argument as an Antislavery Argument," *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore, 1985); Jack P. Maddex, Jr. "'The Southern Apostasy' Revisited: The Significance of Proslavery Christianity," *Religion and Slavery*, Paul Finkelman, ed. (New York, 1989).

⁶ See Andrew Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro*, (Philadelphia, 1966) pg. 87; Jack P. Maddex, "'The Southern Apostasy' Revisited: The Significance of Proslavery Christianity," (1979) in Finkelman, ed. *Religion and Slavery*. (New York, 1989) pg.

at the University of Oregon, has noted that

the proslavery social Christianity of the antebellum South has been a stumbling block to historians of religion in the United States. The interpretive synthesis that has held sway for five generations has afforded no room to accommodate a serious proslavery school of Christian social ethics.⁷

The following pages examine the idea of a proslavery social ethic not as an aberration from true Christianity, but instead as a natural outworking of a southern Christian worldview.

To do so, this work explores a southern Old School Presbyterian voice in the slavery debate. It examines the mind of a distinguished theologian in proslavery American Protestantism -- James Henley Thornwell. Investigating the mind of Thornwell, a slaveowner himself, provides further insight into the theological aspects of the proslavery argument in southern American Protestantism. This work traces Thornwell's understanding of the church, slavery, and the social relationship between the two. Thornwell's theological views of the church and slavery undergirded a proactive understanding of the church's duty to both slave and master. In Thornwell's mind, the moral duty of the church toward masters and servants naturally flowed from his theological positions on the church and slavery. His "proslavery religion" was not merely an attempt to suppress guilt

462-471.

⁷ Maddex also has written that "the prevalent consensus has held that a Christianity partial to slavery must be abnormal," pg. 462. See also Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago, 1977), pp. 136-184.

or bolster economic advantages; rather, it evolved naturally as a reaction against an attack endangering the theological and cultural foundations which Thornwell and his colleagues cherished.

Although his views were fundamentally his own, Thornwell's writings and sermons impacted and molded the ideas of many of his proslavery colleagues.⁸ Thornwell's influence in theological circles has been likened to the influence of John C. Calhoun in southern political thought -- Thornwell has even been named the "Calhoun of the Church."⁹ His position at the forefront of the theological proslavery argument gives the twentieth-century reader a window through which to examine the worldview of many southern Old School Presbyterian defenders of slavery.

James Henley Thornwell -- A Brief Biography

James H. Thornwell was a South Carolinian born on December

⁸ H. Shelton Smith mentions that "it is not too much to say that his theological thought has dominated most of the history of Southern Presbyterianism. His conception of the relation of the church to society still controls the thinking of a large proportion of southern churchmen of all denominations," H. Shelton Smith, "The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James G. Thornwell" (1938), *Religion and Slavery*, Finkelman, ed., (New York, 1989), pg. 658. Thornwell's influence is also noted in James Farmer's *The Metaphysical Confederacy* (Macon GA, 1986) pg. 41, L. G. VanderVelde's *The Presbyterian Church in the Federal Union, 1860-1869* (Cambridge MA, 1932) pg. 30, Andrew Murray's *Presbyterians and the Negro -- a History* (Philadelphia, 1966) pp. 70-71, Michael O'Brien, ed. *All Clever Men, Who Make Their Way: Critical Discourse in the Old South* (Univ. of Arkansas, 1982) pg. 420, and Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D* (Richmond, 1875) pg. 123 and throughout.

⁹ Farmer, pg. 41; VanderVelde, pg. 30; Douglas Kelly, *Preachers With Power* (Banner of Truth, 1992), pp. 64-68.

9, 1812.¹⁰ Reared by his mother and tutors after his father's death in 1820, he possessed an insatiable desire to learn. Early in his life his education was supported by two prominent South Carolinians, a planter and a lawyer, who encouraged him to pursue a career in law. Instead he decided early to "adopt theology as [his] profession."¹¹ At the age of eighteen, he was accepted into the junior class of South Carolina College. Described by a fellow classmate as "the most unpromising specimen of humanity that ever entered such an institution," Thornwell was "short in stature, ...very lean in flesh, with a skin the color of old parchment."¹² Although his personal appearance may have lacked finesse, Thornwell impressed many with his sharp intellect and searing logic. One of his classmates wrote that his

mental pre-eminence was apparent, not only in the classroom, but in debates in the College Society....His powerful intellect worked with the steadiness of machinery; and its superiority was displayed in the higher reach and wider grasp of thought.¹³

He spent almost fourteen hours a day studying intensely, and

¹⁰ One of the most thorough biographies of Thornwell was written by his lifetime friend and colleague, Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D* (1875), (Edinburgh, 1974). The information in this section was found in Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, (Macon, 1986), pp. 41-49 and John Miller Wells, *Southern Presbyterian Worthies*, (Richmond, 1936), pp. 11-49.

¹¹ Wells, *Southern Presbyterian Worthies*, pg. 14.

¹² Ibid, pg. 11.

¹³ Ibid, pg. 15.

relaxed on Saturdays by reading history.¹⁴ His passion for learning led him to graduate with highest honors from the university in December of 1831.

From here Thornwell became one of the guiding forces in the Old School Presbyterian church. As a preacher, theologian, slaveowner,¹⁵ and scholar, Thornwell's influence was significant in the Presbyterian church and beyond. He held numerous scholarly and pastoral positions of note, including Professor of Logic and Belles Lettres and Professor of Sacred Literature and Evidences of Christianity at South Carolina College, President of South Carolina College,¹⁶ Moderator of the General Assembly of the Old School Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (at the age of thirty-four), and Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. He wrote and preached extensively. Admired and respected by all his colleagues, Thornwell exercised much influence in the Old School Presbyterian church. Even those who vehemently differed with him acknowledged his gifts -- Henry W. Beecher, a liberal minister, called Thornwell "the most brilliant minister in the Old School

¹⁴ Farmer, pg. 44.

¹⁵ Thornwell inherited several slaves from his father-in-law, and, according to James Farmer, "practiced what he preached" in ministering to their spiritual needs. (Farmer, pg. 229)

¹⁶ This position, according to Hollis' *University of South Carolina*, was "one of the most prominent and sought-after positions in the State. In prestige it ranked just behind the United States Senatorships and the governorship." Kelly, pg. 66.

Presbyterian church."¹⁷ A study of Thornwell's views provides insight into the worldviews of many of his southern Old School companions.¹⁸

The task set before us now is to probe the mind of this southern Old School proslavery minister in the light of his distinctive views on the church, slavery, and the relation between the two. Did the slavery debate solidify his ecclesiology? How did his belief in a particular jurisdiction of the church impact a proslavery position? Did his interpretation of the church and slavery *undergird* a moral admonition to masters and servants? Randall Balmer and John Fitzmier, in their narrative work *The Presbyterians*, have suggested that the debate surrounding southern Old School ecclesiology (especially the idea that the church was an institution of a specifically spiritual nature) was tied to "what became the most explosive controversy of the era -- the problem of slavery."¹⁹ In Thornwell's mind the church and slavery were somehow interconnected; the link between them remains to be seen.

¹⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, as quoted from Kelly, pg. 67.

¹⁸ Farmer, pg. 5. Farmer examines Thornwell's views as "in microcosm the religious perspective of the Old South." Although his views surely did not represent exactly the minds of all proslavery southern Old School Presbyterians, his influence was wide enough to suggest that many agreed with him in the slavery debate and espoused similar philosophical positions on the church and the institution of slavery as his own.

¹⁹ Randall Balmer and John Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians*, (Westport, 1993), pg. 69.

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The first chapter of this text draws primarily from Thornwell's sermons and writings to characterize the role of the church in society in his mind. His numerous writings included several polemical works which defended a southern understanding of the church's role in the slavery question. Particularly, his sermons entitled "Relation of the Church to Slavery" (1851), "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery" (1850), and "Address to All the Churches of Christ" (1861), integrated his Old School approach to slavery and his understanding of the church in the world. These writings, as polemical defenses against the barrages of "Christian Abolitionists,"²⁰ illustrate the connection between Thornwell's discussion of the role of the church and his position on slavery. An investigation of these sermons as well as a glimpse into the historical context to which they contributed will help clarify the relationship between the southern Old School church and the philosophical foundations of slavery in Thornwell's mind. Thornwell believed that "the relation of the Church to Slavery cannot be definitely settled without an adequate apprehension of the nature and office of the Church itself."²¹

After the explanation of his doctrine of the church in chapter one, chapter two surveys Thornwell's philosophical

²⁰ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery" (1851), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 391.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 382.

characterization of slavery. Slavery, deeply ingrained into southern culture, affected social, political, and ecclesiastical spheres. Thornwell himself claimed that "slavery is implicated in every fibre of Southern society; it is with us a vital question."²² To comprehend the moral obligation of the church toward slavery in Thornwell's mind, a thorough grasp of slavery as understood by that mind is necessary.

Chapter three then develops the social connection between the church and the institution of slavery in Thornwell's mind. The church, whose power according to Thornwell was "only ministerial and declarative,"²³ interacted with slavery on a moral level. The doctrine of the church, accordingly, provided southern Old School Presbyterians with a specific goal for the slave system. A scriptural link would lead "Thornwellian" southern Presbyterians to promote a sanctification of the institution. Unlike their abolitionist counterparts, who viewed slavery as essentially intolerable and "evil;...contrary to the spirit of the Bible,"²⁴ southern Old School Presbyterians following the thoughts of Thornwell could emphasize the spiritual duties and temporal responsibilities of both master and slave. Their view of the church and their characterization of slavery fit together to bolster a proslavery social ethic. The beliefs

²² Ibid, pg. 396.

²³ Ibid, pg. 383.

²⁴ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (1857), (New York, 1969), pg. 377.

which Thornwell revered compelled an emphasis of the spiritual duties involved in slavery. The existence of slavery in the South necessitated in his mind a "solemn trust" between church, slaveowner, and slave.

ONE

The Body Spiritual

The Church is a supernatural institution, founded on the facts of redemption, and is designed to realize the idea of grace. It is the society of the redeemed.¹

Thornwell's ecclesiology -- his interpretation of the role of the "society of the redeemed" -- is encapsulated in the quote above. The church was to him a supernatural and "very peculiar" institution -- set apart by God from every other social establishment.² An intimate connection existed in Thornwell's mind between this moral institution and slavery. One historian has claimed that "Thornwell's conception of the relation of the church to the social order defined itself *most sharply* in reference to the controversial subject of slavery."³ The slavery question provided a context for southern proslavery Christians like Thornwell to apply and "flesh out" doctrine. Ecclesiology - one such doctrine -- became more concrete in Thornwell's mind as antislavery agitators attacked slavery and Thornwell defended it.

These attacks were often direct. Albert Barnes, a prominent

¹ Thornwell, "Address to All Churches of Christ" (1861), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, (Edinburgh, 1986), pg. 449.

² Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery" (1851), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV. (Edinburgh, 1986), pg. 383.

³ H. Shelton Smith, "The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James H. Thornwell" (1938), *Religion and Slavery*, Finkelman, ed., (New York, 1989), pg. 657. (Emphasis mine)

New School Presbyterian, was one assailant. He argued that because slavery was essentially immoral, every Christian was obligated forcefully to condemn it. The church, in his mind, was "under no less obligation to lift up [its] voice on this subject, and to do whatever [it] can, that truth and justice may prevail."⁴ Barnes maintained that the church should cease all apology for the institution, removing slaveowners from its ranks and proclaiming slavery's evil to the world.⁵ David Rice, an antislavery Presbyterian who eventually emigrated from the South, felt that the church should move against slavery immediately -- without waiting for political action.⁶ For many opponents of slavery, the slavery debate thus established the church as a force for social change.⁷

The debate affected proslavery ecclesiology as well. Thornwell and other proslavery southern Presbyterians reacted to these attacks by reemphasizing the church's duties to community, to individuals, and to God. To them, slavery was not essentially evil. Their proslavery ethic flowed from their ecclesiology coupled with a view of slavery as moral. To Thornwell and his

⁴ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (1857), (New York, 1969), pp. 5-6.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 382.

⁶ Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro: A History*, (Philadelphia, 1966), pg. 16.

⁷ Murray, pg. 63; Larry Gara, "Who was an Abolitionist?" in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, (Princeton, 1965), pg. 32-51; Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery*, (New York, 1960).

compatriots, the church, a *spiritual* institution, was not called to eradicate slavery. God exhorted instead for it to maintain a crucial relationship with the southern institution of slavery.

What was the basis of this relationship? The jurisdiction of the church was to Thornwell very specific and well-defined. He believed that "the Church was God's creation and both its doctrine and its policy were prescribed in Scripture."⁸ Certain God-ordained regulative principles acted as the "body spiritual's" foundation. He stressed that the church's only guide was the Word of God -- as "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, ...the Bible, and the Bible alone, is her rule of faith and practice."⁹ Thornwell and most of his colleagues, like the authors of their Presbyterian standards, affirmed that the Word of God was the sole foundation for the church.¹⁰

The Word of God morally bound the church, as the kingdom of God, to fulfill the duties prescribed in it. The church and the word were thus *inseparable* in Thornwell's mind. The church, obligated to obey the word, "[had] no right to utter a single syllable upon any subject, except as the Lord [put] words in her

⁸ James O. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, (Macon, 1986), pg. 188.

⁹ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 383-4.

¹⁰ Question three of *The Larger Catechism*, one of the essential standards of the Presbyterian denomination and the southern church (see Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 446).

mouth. She [was] founded, in other words, upon express revelation."¹¹ Thornwell, by placing the church under the direct authority of scripture, restricted its purpose to only what scripture decreed.

What then did scripture decree for the church proper? Thornwell described fundamental goals of the church in his writings. Its *primary* duties entailed "proclaim[ing] God's truth as a witness to the nations;...gather[ing] his elect from the four corners of the earth, and through the Word, Ministers and Ordinances,...train[ing] them for eternal life."¹² The church therefore operated within a God-ordained jurisdiction. It was not to overstep its scriptural bounds and speak where scripture did not. Thornwell emphasized that

[The Church] 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....We are far from admitting either that it is the purpose of God, that, under the present dispensation of religion, all ill shall be banished from this sublunary state, and earth be converted into a paradise; *or, that the proper end of the Church is the direct promotion of universal good.*¹³

Thornwell's church could not radically rearrange society or perfect certain political institutions. Its primary intent in

¹¹ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 456.

¹² *Ibid*, pg. 463.

¹³ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 382-3. (Emphasis mine)

Thornwell's mind was not to promote egalitarian social justice, but rather to preach the gospel and call the earth to "Repent, and be saved!" To Thornwell, if the church operated outside this set boundary, as Barnes, Rice, and other antislavery ministers had proposed, it rebelled against its Creator.

Thornwell believed in a fallen world, but maintained that God did not require the church to recreate paradise. He stressed that the church "has no commission to construct society afresh, ...the problems, which the anomalies of our fallen state are continually forcing, ...the Church has no right to solve."¹⁴ In other words, Thornwell accepted certain aspects of the fallen world as intrinsic conditions of that world. Poverty, sickness, and death he attributed to mankind's fallen state, and noted that the church could not eliminate these conditions entirely -- to Thornwell they emanated from "the nature of man as sinful, and the nature of society as disordered."¹⁵ These problems, so long as they remained outside the moral pronouncement of scripture, remained outside the jurisdiction of the church proper.

This view appears to connote that the church to Thornwell was a strange, ethereal institution which shunned philanthropy. Religion to Thornwell and other southern Old Schoolers, however, was not otherworldly. Its truths did not function in a vacuum -- inapplicable to society. *Wherever scripture spoke on issues of*

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 383.

¹⁵ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," (1850) *Collected Writings*, vol. IV. pg. 420.

philanthropy, the church was obliged to speak as well. It could "announce what [scripture] teaches, enjoin what it commands, prohibit what it condemns, and enforce [its] testimonies by *spiritual* sanctions."¹⁶ One of Thornwell's colleagues, Benjamin M. Palmer, the pastor of the New Orleans First Presbyterian Church and one of the founders of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*,¹⁷ declared that religion "does not *exclude*, but rather...*embraces*, all the social relations of man."¹⁸ Thornwell himself recognized that many philanthropic endeavors had "been quickened into life by the spirit of Christianity."¹⁹ Scripture outlined for the church a specific approach to the world. The church proper, in Thornwell's mind, could speak on issues which transcended political and cultural arenas if they crossed into its moral jurisdiction. The church, however, had no right to speak authoritatively on issues which remained *solely* political.

Although the church and state were "planets moving in different orbits" to Thornwell and his colleagues, these planets

¹⁶ Thornwell, "The Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 384. (emphasis mine)

¹⁷ A brief biographical sketch of Benjamin M. Palmer's life can be found in Balmer and Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians*, (Westport, 1993), pp. 201-202. Palmer was elected the moderator of the new southern Presbyterian church in 1861.

¹⁸ Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, (Richmond, 1906), pg. 668.

¹⁹ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 383.

revolved around the same sun -- duty required by the word of God.²⁰ Consequently, when the state acted in direct moral contradiction to the duties outlined for it in scripture, the church was compelled to speak. Thornwell stated that "when the State makes wicked laws, contradicting the eternal principles of rectitude, the Church is at liberty to testify against them and humbly to petition that they may be repealed."²¹ James A. Lyon, a Mississippi minister, admonished the church to condemn evil in "all the actions of all men, ...in church and state."²² The southern Old School church therefore called men and women in all realms to obedience to God's word.

The jurisdiction of the church differed sharply from that of the state in the mind of Thornwell. He wrote that "the power of the Church is exclusively spiritual; that of the State includes the exercise of force....The Church has no right to construct or modify a government for the State, and the State has no right to frame a creed or polity for the Church."²³ The church, a supernatural institution founded on supernatural principles, was distinct in *function* from its cousin, the state. Thornwell stressed that "there can be no collision, unless one or the other

²⁰ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 449.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 450.

²² Jack P. Maddex, Jr. "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (Winter 1976), pg. 439.

²³ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 449.

blunders as to the things that are materially right."²⁴ Both church and state, therefore, under the absolute authority of God, possessed characteristic duties. The church was to carry the spiritual keys of the kingdom of God -- enforcing spiritual morality; the state was to carry the sword -- enforcing the principles of the law of God.

Put simply, the church was tied inextricably to scripture. Its jurisdiction was the moral boundary outlined in scripture. Thornwell underscored the notion of the church as a purely spiritual body -- although *its members* were free to speak in political spheres at will, the church proper had no sanction to do so. It was not at liberty to meddle in a political arena without scriptural justification.

The importance of these ecclesiastical views came to the forefront in a rift between southern and northern Old School churches in 1861. This rift strengthened Thornwell's ecclesiastical beliefs and played a role in fleshing out his proslavery social ethic.

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The Ecclesiastical Rift

When the Old School General Assembly convened for its annual meeting on May 16, 1861 in Philadelphia, it met for the last time as a united body. The next months would witness the separation

²⁴ Ibid, pg. 450.

of the Old School into southern and northern camps.²⁵ Occurring just five weeks after the fall of Fort Sumter and in the midst of a tense and nervous political atmosphere, it is not surprising to note that thirty-three southern presbyteries were not represented in the meeting.²⁶ Noticeably absent were the South's most prominent clergymen -- James H. Thornwell and Benjamin M. Palmer. Tension and anxiety crackled in the air as the representatives of the Old School church met to discuss the business before them.

One item soon to be addressed was the stance of the church proper on the political situation. Several members protested any discussion of "the temporal affairs of any section," but by the third day of the session a discussion of the political condition of the country in relation to the church became inevitable.²⁷ Dr. Gardiner Spring, the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, instigated the split between southern and northern Old Schoolers.²⁸ On the third day of the meeting, Dr. Spring proposed establishing a committee to "inquire into the expediency of making some expression of...devotion to the Union

²⁵ For a thorough account of the split, see Lewis G. VanderVelde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union: 1861-1869*, (London, 1932), Chapter II; or E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. I, (Richmond, 1973), Chapter XXXV.

²⁶ VanderVelde, pg. 43.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 46.

²⁸ Balmer and Fitzmier, pg. 216. VanderVelde, pg. 47. Dr. Spring, a northerner, was regarded as "no friend of abolition" by his colleagues.

of these States, and their loyalty to the Government."²⁹ These resolutions, if ratified, would claim

that in the judgment of this Assembly, it is the duty of the ministry and churches under its care to do all in their power to promote and perpetuate the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal Government.³⁰

The Gardiner Spring Resolutions explicitly endorsed the federal government. To some, they breached the jurisdiction of the church by speaking ecclesiastically on a divisive political issue. To Thornwell and others, the resolutions' blatant support of the federal union seemed an improper application of ecclesiastical authority. The commissioners from the southern states voted almost unanimously for silence on the issue by promoting a tabling of Dr. Spring's resolutions.³¹

A vote of 156 to 66 ensured the adoption of the resolutions after five days of heated debate.³² The next few days of the assembly were marked by an air of protest. The dissenters, among them the very influential Dr. Charles Hodge, declared that the adoption of the resolutions made political allegiance to the union a prerequisite to membership in the church. This position contradicted the ecclesiology of most of the Old School

²⁹ *Minutes of the General Assembly, vol. XVI, (1861), pg. 303.*

³⁰ The second resolution of Dr. Spring's proposal, as quoted from VanderVelde, pg. 50.

³¹ VanderVelde, pg. 62.

³² Balmer and Fitzmier, pg. 216.

protestors. According to Hodge and the fifty-seven undersigners to his Hodge Protest, "The General Assembly ha[d] always acted on the principle that the Church has no right to make anything a condition of Christian or ministerial fellowship, which is not enjoined or required in the Scriptures and Standards of the Church."³³ The avowed issue of contention to the 66 was not necessarily the political legitimacy of the federal government, but rather the authority of the church to make allegiance to the government an essential part of its ecclesiology. Loyalty to the federal union did not constitute a condition enjoined or required by scripture or the church standards to these dissenters, and therefore they perceived the resolutions as unconstitutional and unbiblical. In the minds of many southern commissioners and clergymen, the disregard of Hodge's protest lay a foundation for a division in the Old School church.³⁴

Announcing that "ecclesiastical connections conform to civil and political," southern members of the Old School Presbyterian church in 1861 separated from their northern brethren.³⁵ The founding of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America allowed southern Old Schoolers to start afresh. The new church unanimously adopted Thornwell's "Address to All the Churches" which spelled out the new church's position on the

³³ *Minutes of the General Assembly, vol. XVI, (1861), pg. 339.*

³⁴ Thornwell, "Reasons for Separate Organization," *Collected Writings, vol. IV, pg. 439.*

³⁵ Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, as quoted from Maddex, pg. 442.

issues which had divided the nation.³⁶ In a report submitted to the Synod of South Carolina in November, 1861, Thornwell declared that "the old Assembly has transcended its jurisdiction by authoritatively settling a political question....It has assumed the right to adjudicate betwixt the claims of rival Caesars, and to say which is entitled to allegiance."³⁷ The northern Assembly, according to Thornwell, had forced its constituents to pledge faithfulness to the federal union and breached the jurisdiction outlined for it in scripture. To his southern mind, the Spring Resolutions resulted in an unbiblical politicization of the church -- an unwarranted intermingling of the spheres of church and state. Echoing Hodge, Thornwell agreed that the church had no business politicizing membership. The "separate spheres" ecclesiastical argument articulated by Thornwell in his "Address to All the Churches" identified and clarified the southern Old School conviction on the function and place of the church. The split between southern and northern churches bolstered Thornwell's notion of the church as a spiritual institution whose charter and jurisdiction were the Word of God alone.

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The Old School southerners, adopting Thornwell's "Address to

³⁶ E. T. Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, (Richmond, 1961), pg. 29.

³⁷ Thornwell, "Reasons for Separate Organization," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pp. 439-40.

All the Churches," heartily approved of his explanation of the function of the church. These men believed that the church should not breach its spiritual jurisdiction. They agreed with Thornwell that the church had no authority to demand political loyalty as a mandatory term of church involvement. While their ecclesiology did not categorically isolate church from state, it did spell out the separate duties of each under the rule of scripture.

The rift between the southern and northern Old School churches upheld in Thornwell's mind a specific ecclesiology. The southern Old School church, a spiritual institution, was bound by scripture. "Beyond the Bible she [could] never go, and apart from the Bible she [could] never speak....Where the Scriptures [were] silent, she must be silent too."³⁸

The implications of this doctrine in the slavery debate for Thornwell and the southern Old School church were immense. If the institution of slavery was inherently contradictory to God's law, the church would be obliged to speak against it. If slavery were not immoral, then the church would be obliged to examine it and determine what aspects of the institution lay inside the jurisdiction of the body spiritual.

³⁸ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pp. 384-385.

TWO

The Peculiar Institution

Opposition to Slavery has never been the offspring of the Bible....It has sprung from the misguided reason of man; it comes as natural, not as revealed truth; and when it is seen that the Word of God stands in the way of it, then the lively Oracles are stripped of their authority, and reduced to the level of mere human utterances.

In itself considered, [slavery] is not inconsistent with the will of God -- it is not sinful.¹

Slavery, a fundamental southern institution, was "implicated in every fibre of Southern society."² Either directly or indirectly, the slavery question contributed to strife and division in nineteenth century American Protestantism. It affected almost every major religious sect in the United States. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, severed ties with its northern sister in 1844; the southern Baptists separated from the northern branch in 1845; the southern New School Presbyterian churches broke from their General Assembly in 1857 -- schisms all directly due to controversy over slavery.³

As we have seen, the schism between the southern and

¹ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," (1851) *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pp. 393, 386.

² Ibid, pg. 396.

³ Howard, Victor B. *Religion and the Radical Republican Movement: 1860-1870*, (Lexington, 1990), pg. 1-2. For a detailed account of the relationship between the rifts in the major denominations and the political separation of the nation, see C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Macon Ga, 1985).

northern Old School church helped solidify Thornwell's particular ecclesiastical worldview. But this rift stemmed from more than just ecclesiastical differences. It also had roots in the slavery debate. Lewis VanderVelde has written that "one fundamental difference between North and South accentuated this desirability of separation along national lines: the antagonism of sentiment on the subject of slavery."⁴ Thornwell himself believed that the disparity over the slavery issue compelled a schism between the northern and southern churches. He posited that the "religious, as well as the secular, interests of both [sections of the country would] be more effectually promoted by a complete and lasting separation."⁵ Ecclesiology and slavery were thus connected in Thornwell's mind.

The slavery debate outlined both antislavery and proslavery understandings of the church's duty to the institution. Proslavery southern Presbyterians viewed slavery as morally justified -- a diametric position from their antislavery counterparts. Opposing starting points on the morality of slavery resulted in contending beliefs about the role of the church toward slavery. An analysis of this institution as perceived by Thornwell and his proslavery colleagues is essential to understanding the connection in their minds between their church and their "peculiar institution."

⁴ Lewis G. VanderVelde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union: 1861-1869*, (Cambridge, 1932), pg. 103.

⁵ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches" (1861), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 454.

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In a sermon taken from Colossians 4:1⁶ entitled "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," Thornwell expressed his views. After announcing the plight of the proslavery southern minister ("plead[ing] our cause at the bar of the world"⁷), Thornwell set forth his understanding of the special relationship between master and slave. He addressed in this sermon the underlying philosophy behind slavery -- depicting the essential characteristics of the institution as he understood it. Denying racial and scientific arguments which divorced the Negro from the human race, Thornwell affirmed that "the Negro is of one blood with ourselves."⁸ Under the same curse of sin, the black slave needed the atoning blood of a Savior -- just like his master. Professing this spiritual connection, Thornwell could cry, "We are not ashamed to call him our *brother*."⁹

Benjamin M. Palmer, in a sermon addressed to the southern Old School denomination in 1861, referred to the institution as the South's "Divine Trust;" and called the church to uphold it for the good of "the slaves themselves." One scholar has noted that other members of the southern Old School assembly were

⁶ "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in Heaven." (KJV)

⁷ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery" (1850), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 402.

⁸ Ibid, pg. 403.

⁹ Ibid.

generally in accord with Palmer.¹⁰

Like Palmer and most proslavery ministers in the southern church, Thornwell believed that slavery was God-ordained. The creedal Westminster Confession of Faith, in its chapter "On Providence," declared that "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence."¹¹ In Thornwell's mind, God providentially permitted the spread of slavery in the southern states. With this mindset, Palmer's description of slavery as a "Divine Trust" made sense. Southern proslavery Old Schoolers could view slavery as an "ordinance of God...whose development and completion must be sought in the still more unfathomable depths of the future."¹²

As an ordinance of God, slavery had both civil and moral aspects. The southern church, in Thornwell's mind, took interest in slavery as it fell under the umbrella of scripture. Benjamin Palmer declared that the institution was "in its origin a question of morals and religions."¹³ Southern Old Schoolers thus appealed to scripture to strengthen their proslavery claims. In his "Address to All the Churches," Thornwell maintained that

¹⁰ Palmer, as quoted in Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, (Macon Ga, 1986), pp. 263-264.

¹¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter V.

¹² Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 406.

¹³ Palmer, as quoted in Jack P. Maddex "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (Winter 1976), pg. 440.

slavery had existed for ages -- "under every dispensation of the covenant of grace in the Church of God."¹⁴ The Word of God settled the question of the morality of the slave system. The Bible, said Thornwell, sanctioned and legitimated the institution of slavery throughout -- the Word never overtly condemned it. Thornwell pointed to both Old and New Testaments -- considering the attitude of Moses and the Apostles toward slavery during their times. He wrote that "Moses surely made [slavery] the subject of express and positive legislation, and the Apostles [were] equally explicit in inculcating the duties which spring from both sides of the relation."¹⁵

Antislavery arguments which were grounded on the "spirit of Christianity" or the Golden Rule were absurd to Thornwell. Albert Barnes, an influential northern New School minister, relied heavily upon this type of reasoning. In his *Inquiry into the Spiritual Views of Slavery* (1857), Barnes noted that "the Saviour and his apostles inculcated such views of man as amount to a prohibition of slavery, or as if acted on would abolish it."¹⁶ Barnes argued that the basic truth that "all men are equally beloved by the same Father of all; that Christ died equally for all" relegated the Gospel against slavery.¹⁷ Because

¹⁴ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 457.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (1857), (New York, 1969), pg. 341.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 343.

slavery to Barnes inherently contradicted the Gospel's doctrine of the essential equality of the human race, he believed that Christianity should "sooner or later emancipate every human being from bondage."¹⁸

Thornwell thoroughly disagreed with Barnes' interpretation. He declared that explanations of the "law of love" which forced Christianity to "repudiate Slavery, would make it equally repudiate all social, civil [sic] and political inequalities."¹⁹ In Thornwell's mind, the precept "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" did not level all hierarchical arrangements. Barnes' interpretation, however, did. To Thornwell, Barnes' interpretation of the law of love would abolish authoritative distinctions between parent and child, employee and employer, master and slave. Thornwell's interpretation of the rule implied that those in positions of authority should treat lessers as they themselves would wish to be treated *in the lower position*. Thus the master, in Thornwell's mind, was not obligated to free a slave just because the master was a free man; he was, however, to handle the slave as he himself would wish to be treated *as a slave*.

To Thornwell, the abolitionist interpretation of the Golden Rule not only philosophically threatened every hierarchical relationship among mankind, but also marked the slave system as

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 346.

¹⁹ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 458.

fundamentally evil. This interpretation was ridiculous to his mind. Slavery, at its core, was not sinful, immoral, or iniquitous.

Because slavery at the philosophical and theological level was not sinful, Thornwell could emphasize its *relational* characteristics. The basic association between master and slave was understood by Thornwell as a social relationship. This relationship, as Thornwell was quick to clarify, did not exist between men and brutes, as some were inclined to say.²⁰ It rather existed as a bond between men.²¹ The apostle Paul's exhortation for servants to "be obedient to...your masters" inherently implied to Thornwell that servants were moral, rational, and accountable agents.²² If the apostle had spoken of the servant as a mere brute, said Thornwell, then he would have contradicted himself.²³ Only mankind possessed that moral and rational faculty indicative of servants. Thornwell contended that the apostle Paul "considered Slavery as a social and political economy, in which relations subsisted betwixt moral, intelligent, responsible beings, involving reciprocal rights and

²⁰ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 409. Here Thornwell quotes from Professor Whewell's *Elements of Morality*, vol. I. This antislavery writer claimed that slavery essentially lowered the status of the slave to "the level of the brutes."

²¹ Ibid, pg. 410.

²² Ephesians 6:5 (KJV)

²³ An impossibility to Thornwell, who believed in an inerrant scripture.

reciprocal obligations."²⁴

What did these rights and obligations entail? Thornwell underscored the right of the master to command the slave and the obligation of the slave to obey the master. According to many antislavery advocates, this relationship automatically subsumed the moral conscience and responsibility of the slave into the psyche of the master. Reverend Albert Barnes charged that the slave "is not at liberty to claim a property in his own time, person, family, bodily vigour, talent, or skill....He has no independent volition in the case."²⁵ A rudimental aspect of slavery, according to the antislavery writer Dr. Channing, was "to make another's will [the slave's] habitual law, however adverse to his own."²⁶ But Thornwell denied these accusations. He rejected the philosophical claim that the moral conscience could be stolen from its owner -- "conscience may be bound or may be slaughtered, but cannot be transferred to another's keeping."²⁷ Defining slavery as the "property of man in man" at the expense of the slave's soul was a misperception of the institution to Thornwell. As his southern Old School mind

²⁴ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 411-12.

²⁵ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (1857), (New York, 1969), pp. 50-51.

²⁶ Channing's *Works*, vol. II, pg. 17. As quoted from Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 408.

²⁷ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 413.

characterized it, the philosophy of slavery did not revolve around one person's ownership of another person.

Benjamin M. Palmer, a staunch defender of the South's peculiar institution, heartily agreed with Thornwell's assessment of slavery as a relationship between master and slave. He maintained that many southern pastors "reckoned the Negroes as their parishioners, and preached to them in a style adapted to their capacities."²⁸ Fundamental characteristics of slavery, to Palmer and Thornwell, included obligation and responsibility. Thornwell adeptly described his philosophy of slavery -- "What is it that makes a man a Slave? We answer, The obligation to labour for another, determined by the Providence of God, independently of the provisions of a contract."²⁹ The labor and service of the servant, according to this definition, belonged to the master. The rights of the master were not rooted in the ownership of the slave as a *person*, but rather in the possession of the slave's effort. The absence of a contract differentiated slave labor from free labor in Thornwell's mind. The worker earning wages supplied services under the arrangement of contractual agreement; the slave rendered services under the arrangement of covenantal obligation. With this outlook on the system, both the worker and the master were subservient to divine providence.

²⁸ Palmer, in a prefatory note to Thornwell's "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery" in *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 380. Palmer was the editor of this four volume set of Thornwell's works.

²⁹ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 414.

Divine providence, as the foundation for this relationship between master and slave, levied certain conditions upon each. These conditions emanated from the will of God as revealed in scripture. Understanding the institution in this way, Thornwell could write, "The Providence of God marks out for the slave the precise services, in the lawful commands of the master, which it is the Divine will that he should render."³⁰ Note that Thornwell emphasized *precise* services and *lawful* commands, indicating that both services and commands could fall outside the moral law delineated in scripture. The master was under moral obligation not to transcend bounds of righteousness in dealing with his slaves -- "pain unrighteously inflicted is cruelty....It is no part of the essence of Slavery."³¹ The master was admonished to protect the slave from "want, cruelty, and unlawful domination."³² Although to Barnes and other antislavery Christians the *essence* of slavery was "unlawful domination," to Thornwell this was not true. The southern Old School General Assembly of 1864 echoed these sentiments as it declared, "it is the peculiar mission of the Southern Church to conserve the institution of slavery, and to make it a blessing both to master and slave."³³

Most southern Old Schoolers, following the leadership of

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, pg. 415.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Minutes of the General Assembly, PCCSA, 1864, pg. 293.*

such men as Thornwell and Palmer, argued that slavery was not a "perfect institution." In a perfect world, untouched by sin, slavery would not exist. Thornwell wrote, "If Adam had never sinned and brought death into the world, with all our woe, the bondage of man to man would never have been instituted."³⁴ The inauguration of the "new heavens and new earth" would effectively destroy the institution of slavery because slavery could only occur as a relationship between fallen beings. The slave system, along with poverty, sickness, disease, and death, would be eradicated at the last judgment.

The gospel and slavery coexisted peacefully in Thornwell's mind even though slavery resulted from the nature of mankind as sinful. In fact, the mutual existence of slavery and the church could bring benefits to both. Thornwell believed that the gospel trained individuals "by virtue of the discipline of temptation, hardship, and evil, for a state of perfection and glory."³⁵ The gospel, therefore, accentuated the idea of duty and responsibility, but did not undermine the concept of social hierarchy. With Romans 8:28 as one support,³⁶ Thornwell could emphasize that "slavery may be a good, or, to speak more accurately, a condition, from which, though founded in a curse,

³⁴ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 419-20.

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 422.

³⁶ "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (NKJV)

the Providence of God extracts a blessing."³⁷

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To Thornwell, the philosophy of the South's "peculiar institution" was not threatened by the gospel or the church. The institution of slavery was not merely *justified* in Thornwell's mind, it was viewed as *providential* and linked to the direct ordination of God. Slavery fit under the umbrella of scripture. Accordingly, the church and slavery, philosophically, resided harmoniously together. Certain truths could be extracted from the institution as it related to the gospel -- slavery could school the person enslaved in the truths of the gospel. And consequently, "in the school of bondage [the slave could] be trained for the glorification and enjoyment of God."³⁸ With slavery philosophically within the jurisdiction of the church, the church could therefore examine its constituents in the moral light of scripture.

³⁷ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 421.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 426.

THREE

A Solemn Trust

In the first place, we would have it distinctly understood that, in our ecclesiastical capacity, ...our business is with the duties which spring from the relation -- the duties of the masters on the one hand, and of their slaves on the other.¹

Proslavery southern Old Schoolers approached the institution of slavery in a unique manner. During a time when many denominations were indicting and separating themselves from any part of slavery, the southern church advocated certain God-ordained duties of the church towards masters and servants. Instead of promoting slavery's abolition, the southern Old School church, following the leadership of Thornwell and others, took a proactive stance and upheld scriptural obligations of masters, slaves, and the church.

To Thornwell, these duties flowed naturally from a proslavery worldview. His ecclesiology and his understanding of slavery worked together in his mind to mandate a custodial understanding of the peculiar institution -- a proslavery social ethic.

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Contrary to antislavery advocates, proslavery southern ministers had no problem with slavery as it existed philosophically -- it was a moral institution sanctioned and

¹ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 455.

legitimated by the Word of God. When George Bourne, a northern Presbyterian abolitionist, rebuked every slaveowner as "a THIEF, ... [and declared that] every man who holds slaves, and who pretends to be a Christian, ... is either an incurable idiot, who cannot distinguish good from evil, or an obdurate sinner, who resolutely defies every social, moral, and divine requisition," Thornwell vehemently disagreed.² Slavery, in his mind, breached no moral standards of God's Word. As a relationship among men, it operated within the confines of scripture according to the providence of God -- potentially for the good of both master and servant.

Slavery, under scriptural approval, possessed an essentially moral characteristic to Thornwell. In essence, the moral facet of the institution resided well within the jurisdiction of the church. Although the institution did have a civil aspect,³ the church's constitution restricted its dealing with slavery within an ecclesiastical arena. The church was therefore authorized to speak on the subject of slavery only in moral terms. The relationships birthed out of the slave system thus occurred under the jurisdiction of the church.

As we have seen, the church to Thornwell operated in a

² George Bourne, *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, as quoted from Andrew Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro: A History*, (Philadelphia, 1966), pg. 98-99.

³ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery" (1851) *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 387. He wrote that "slavery may...be contemplated...as a civil relation, involving rights and obligations." Thornwell believed that the establishment of slavery was relegated to the secular authorities.

jurisdiction distinct and separate from other God-ordained institutions. Thornwell ardently distinguished church and state -- "The State looks to the visible and outward; the Church is concerned for the invisible and inward."⁴ Both church and state, however, shared the obligation to act in accordance with the Word of God. Thornwell wrote "that all just government is the ordinance of God, and that magistrates are His ministers who must answer to Him for the execution of their trust."⁵ Of the church he wrote, "the Constitution of the Church is a Divine revelation."⁶ Both church and state were called to uphold scripture.

This scriptural prerogative lay a foundation for Thornwell's proslavery social ethic. Existing according to this principle, the church could cry, "We have four main objects of Christian effort -- the raising up of Ministers, the publication of the printed word, and the sending of Ministers with this word to all people, both at home and abroad."⁷ The Word of God was the creed of the church -- and that Word compelled "Christian effort" in society.

This ecclesiastical position promoted Christian effort in regards to slavery. In his "Address to All the Churches,"

⁴ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches" (1861), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 449.

⁵ Thornwell, "Relation of the State to Christ" (1861), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 550.

⁶ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *ibid*, pg. 449.

⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly, 1861* (PCCSA), pg. 25.

Thornwell explained that the *establishment* of the slave system lay outside the jurisdiction of the church -- "The *policy* of its existence or non-existence is a question which exclusively belongs to the State."⁸ The church, accordingly, absorbed in an ecclesiastical realm, had no say on the *fact* of the political organization of the slave system. The state, according to Thornwell, determined whether or not slavery would exist in its political boundaries. Where slavery did not exist, the church had no ecclesiastical right to promote its creation politically or socially; where it did exist, the church had no ecclesiastical right to promote its extinction.

The political establishment of slavery rested outside ecclesiology to Thornwell and others because, as an institution, slavery was *not immoral*. Robert L. Dabney, a "leading theological guide of the Southern Presbyterian Church,"⁹ proclaimed, "Had her Lord declared [slavery] to be intrinsically sinful, then it would have been her duty to prohibit it to her members, and to enforce this prohibition by her spiritual discipline, in spite of the commonwealth's allowance, or even positive injunction."¹⁰ But the God of scripture had not condemned slavery according to these men's interpretation.

⁸ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches" (1861), *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 455. (Emphasis mine)

⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. III, (Edinburgh, 1982), back cover.

¹⁰ Robert L. Dabney, "Anti-Biblical Theories of Rights" (1888), *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. III. (Edinburgh, 1982), pg. 37.

Because scripture actually sanctioned slavery, the concern of the new southern church did not require condemning it. To Thornwell, scripture called the church instead to recognize slavery's ordination of God and to bring scripture to bear upon its constituents.

The interpretation of scripture defined this proslavery social ethic. As we have seen, Thornwell wrote that "the Scriptures not only fail to condemn Slavery, they as distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man."¹¹ But scripture did not stop there. The Bible, as interpreted by Thornwell and other southern Old School proslavery ministers, encouraged a moral fulfillment of duties required by the positions of master and servant. The church was urged by scripture to teach to its members the "duties growing out of this relation -- duties of the master and duties of the slave."¹²

The duties of the slave system as taught in the Bible were proof in Thornwell's mind that his antislavery brethren were misled. If slavery were immoral, Thornwell asked, why did scripture sanction the responsibilities of both master and servants? Thornwell wrote that "those who have been conversant with works against Slavery cannot have failed to be struck with the awkward and incongruous appearance, which in these works the

¹¹ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 385.

¹² Ibid, pg. 386.

commands of the Scriptures to masters and servants assume."¹³ The Bible, as the ultimate authority in moral matters, admonished masters to treat their slaves responsibly -- "Masters, give your servants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in Heaven."¹⁴ The Bible, speaking also to slaves, encouraged obedience "in all things [to their] masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God."¹⁵ The master, under scriptural authority, was obliged not only to care for the physical provisions of his slaves, but also to foster their spiritual knowledge and growth.¹⁶ The servant, also accountable to God, was compelled to labor for the master "with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men."¹⁷ An overbearing master beating his slaves for no reason and working them to their deaths with no compassion acted in direct contradiction to the Word of God in Thornwell's mind. Similarly, a riotous slave who rebelled against the commands of a master broke as well the commandment of a heavenly Master.

The new church thus favored ecclesiastical legislation on

¹³ Ibid, pg. 391.

¹⁴ Colossians 4:1 (NKJV).

¹⁵ Colossians 3:22 (NKJV).

¹⁶ Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 433.

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:7 (NKJV)

the relationships among the constituents of slavery. Several southern Old School proslavery ministers followed Thornwell's lead by maintaining that the church should teach a proslavery social ethic -- stressing the duties which accompanied the institution.

The commissioners of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America recognized the evangelical duty of the church toward southern slaves. During the detailing of the approach of the new church toward foreign and home missions, a report placed "the great field of missionary operations among our colored population" under a committee on Domestic Missions.¹⁸

Dr. James A. Lyon of Mississippi wrote in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* of the hope that secession from the northern Old School gave him in regards to slavery:

Now, severed by the manifest interposition of the Almighty's holy and wise providence, there is nothing to hinder us from elevating negro slavery up to the Bible standard, which, when done, we can defend against the argument, the sophistry, and the railing accusation of the whole world!¹⁹

It is interesting to note that Dr. Lyon implied that the "Bible standard" for slavery was a goal that the South had not yet achieved. He anticipated that the southern Old School church, free from the debate within the northern Assembly, could approach

¹⁸ E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, vol. II: 1860-1890*, (Richmond, 1973), pg. 24.

¹⁹ *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, vol. XIV, No. 4. (January 1862), pg. 656. As quoted from *Ibid*, pg. 26.

this moral problem unobstructed. Thornwell agreed. He maintained that the "southern section of the Church, while even partially under the control of those who are hostile to Slavery, can never have free and unimpeded access to the slave population."²⁰ The continued marriage of those who decried slavery's existence and those who saw no evil in the institution had resulted, to Thornwell and his supporters, in frustration and limited action.

Although slavery was *philosophically* justified to Thornwell and his colleagues, the institution could be and, in fact, was abused. Dr. Lyon specified these abuses. He acknowledged the prevalence of neglect of the spiritual and physical well-being of slaves, and indicted a lack of sufficient legal protection and some masters' practice of "taking the law into their own hands, ...without [using] the forms of law."²¹ Other indictments included lack of religious cultivation of the slaves, looseness in dealings with slave marriages, severing ties among slave families, and treating slaves as mere items of profit.²²

A Report to Harmony Presbytery on the Instruction of the Colored People in 1862 recommended several approaches to

²⁰ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 455.

²¹ James Lyon, "Slavery and the Duties Growing out of the Relation," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. XVI, (July, 1863), pg. 17. As quoted from Thompson, *Presbyterians and the South*, vol II, (Richmond, 1973), pg. 57.

²² *Ibid*; also C. C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, (Philadelphia, 1847), pg. 31.

practically eliminating these problems. It suggested, among other things, the following:

1. That it should be the aim of every Christian master to have his Negroes attend the same place of religious [sic] worship as he did.
2. That a small chapel be erected on every plantation...
3. That the Negroes on the plantation be assembled in the chapel once a day for prayers.
4. That the domestic servants be required to attend morning and evening prayers with the white family.²³

Many ministers noted that the slavery of the South needed the sanctifying power of the church. Dr. Charles Colcock Jones, an evangelist to Negro slaves for over thirty years, spoke with experiential authority to the first General Assembly of the southern Old School. He reminded them of their specific duties to their Negro brethren. In this "high-water mark of the Assembly,"²⁴ Dr. Jones eloquently urged more efforts in the attempt to evangelize the slaves. Echoing Thornwell, Dr. Jones called the slaves, "friends...not foreigners, but our nearest neighbors" who were providentially brought to the country for the purpose of their salvation.²⁵ In his *Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, Jones praised the southern denomination for not only recognizing its responsibilities and duties, but also openly

²³ Thompson, pg. 52.

²⁴ Ibid, pg. 25.

²⁵ Jones, An address to the first Assembly of the southern Old School church, 1861. *Central Presbyterian*, (March 13, 1862). As quoted in Thompson, pg. 25.

pledging to support religious instruction of slaves.²⁶ In his mind, as southern Old School churches broadened their vision to include more masters and slaves,

the result will be action -- action on the part of Christian owners:...action on the part of churches,...action on the part of ministers,...until it may be said, the negroes 'have the gospel preached unto them.' "²⁷

Several ministers followed suit. Samuel K. Talmage, president of Oglethorpe College, petitioned the Georgia legislature to repeal a law prohibiting teaching slaves to read. He was supported overwhelmingly by the Georgia Presbytery.²⁸ Benjamin M. Palmer, John B. Adger, John L. Girardeau, T. S. Clay, and many other southern Old School ministers also followed the lead of Jones and Thornwell in encouraging masters and servants to relate biblically. The pronouncements of the southern Old School church proper, as well as the individual work of such men as these, fleshed out a proslavery social ethic.

Slavery, sanctioned by the Word of God and established by the state, was thus brought under the jurisdiction of the southern Old School church in the minds of Thornwell and other

²⁶ Jones, pg. 10.

²⁷ Ibid, pg. 11.

²⁸ Thompson, pg. 59.

proslavery ministers. Admonished to advance "the civilization and salvation of the Negroes through the gospel,"²⁹ the southern church could embrace the topic of slavery as "a pulpit theme."³⁰ The men in these southern pulpits perceived a necessary relationship between slavery and their churches. Thornwell and his compatriots identified the abuses of the slave system, and urged its sanctification. In Thornwell's mind, this urging naturally flowed from his ecclesiology and his understanding of slavery. With these foundations, Thornwell could affirm his belief "that the souls of our slaves are a solemn trust, and we shall strive to present them faultless and complete before the presence of God."³¹

²⁹ Jones, as quoted in Thompson, pg. 25.

³⁰ James A. Lyon, as quoted in Jack P. Maddex, "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54, (Winter, 1976), pg. 440.

³¹ Thornwell, "Address to All the Churches," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 460.

EPILOGUE

A proslavery ethic? These words almost sound contradictory to our twentieth century ears. In the mind of James H. Thornwell, however, these words naturally followed each other. Hidden within them lay a worldview which connected, under scripture, the duties of the church and the institution of slavery.

A defense? Of course. The institution of slavery was "implicated in every fibre of Southern society;" it was to Thornwell a "vital question."¹ The *particularity* of the defense is what is striking. Thornwell's worldview fit ecclesiology and slavery together, not to abolish slavery, but rather to urge a proslavery social ethic. The relation between master and slave, slave and slave, master and master, and master and church all fell under a relationship with a heavenly Master. Accordingly, the church could speak to these relationships, encouraging biblical interaction. To Thornwell, the defense of slavery was also a defense of ecclesiology. They were interconnected.

This connection permeated Thornwell's dealings with the slave question. His writings on slavery included replete references to the duty of the church. In his mind, the moral aspects of the relationships birthed from the institution could not be seen in any other light. He wrote that it was his earnest hope

¹ Thornwell, "Relation of the Church to Slavery," *Collected Writings*, vol. IV, pg. 396.

that the time is not too far distant when every Christian master will feel, that he is somewhat in the same sense responsible for the religious education of his slaves as for the religious education of his children. The Church, too, as an organized society, should give special attention to the subject.²

The role of the church (a spiritual institution with a moral jurisdiction) and the philosophy of slavery (a relationship from man to man) interacted in the mind of Thornwell and his colleagues to produce a proslavery social ethic. The two worked together to mandate a solemn trust between church, Christian slaveowner, and slave.

² Ibid.

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