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"Servants, Obey Your Masters": Southern Representations of the Religious Lives of Slaves

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Abstract
This paper focuses on how representations of the religious lives of slaves, specifically their abilities to comprehend the Bible and flourish spiritually, became an issue that not only propelled the North and South toward the Civil War, but also perpetuated the conflict. Using original documents from the collections housed at Chicago’s Newberry Library, predominantly sermons written by proslavery ministers as well as documents published by missionary organizations, this paper explores the fierce defense of the institution of slavery mounted by proslavery Christians. Specifically, this paper’s interest is in how the representation of slaves by proslavery evangelical Christians as incapable of achieving spiritual flourishing without the aid of white Christians was the lynch pin that held their defense of slavery together. This defense took the form of a slaveholding ethic which claimed that slaveholders were accountable for the spiritual salvation of their slaves. Upon close examination of the writings of proslavery Christians, it becomes apparent that the slaveholding ethic was only able to stand because it denied some of the fundamental beliefs of evangelical Christianity, such as the free accessibility of Christ’s salvation. Though proslavery Christians fought fiercely to defend the institution of slavery, their defense was always built on a foundation of contradictions.

Keywords
Slaves, Slavery, Slaveholder, Slaveholding Ethic, Evangelical Christianity, Proslavery Christians, Antislavery Christians

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Lindsey K. Wedow

In 1841 white members of the First Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia constructed a new church building. The old church building, which had previously housed a multiracial congregation, was purchased by the congregation's black members and effectively became known as the First African Baptist Church. White members of the First Baptist Church in Richmond had been uncomfortable for some time with the fact that white Christians were a minority at the church. It was therefore determined that the white and black members of the congregation would disjoin and worship in separate buildings.[1] Robert Ryland, minister thereafter of the First African Baptist Church in Richmond described this split, explaining that

> Some very fastidious people did not like to resort to a church where so many colored folks congregated, and this was thought to operate against the growth of the white portion of the audience. The discipline and culture of the colored people, too, were felt by the pastor to be a heavy burden to his mind, requiring more time and attention than he could give them, and yet satisfy the expectations of the whites. After long and mature consultation, it was decided to build a new and more tasteful edifice for the whites,

[1] Rev. Robert Ryland, *Reminiscences of the First African Church in Richmond (*VA: American Baptist Memorial, 1855), 262.

> and to dispose of the old one to the blacks, for their exclusive accommodation.[2]

This split of a community of worshippers into two on the basis of race reveals much about the relationship between white and black Christians in the years leading up to and during the American Civil War. Following Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831 it was determined by the majority of slaveholders and proslavery individuals that allowing slaves to hold religious gatherings without the supervision of white persons was too dangerous. Specifically, the fear was that slaves would use religious meetings as a cover for planning further rebellion. Yet still feeling it a duty to provide slaves with religious instruction, it became common practice for Southern churches to allow multiracial congregations.

Thus, on the one hand, the founding of the First African Baptist Church in Richmond looks like an excellent opportunity for black Christians to gain their own church building and some religious independence. Yet what this instance also reveals is the strained paternalism that was the foundation of proslavery Christianity. By analyzing proslavery evangelical representations of the religious instruction of slaves we begin to understand how proslavery evangelicals truly believed themselves to be doing the work of God. When the institution of slavery came under attack from antislavery evangelicals and abolitionists, proslavery evangelicals constructed an elaborate defense based on their perception of themselves as God's chosen actors. This defense, and the strong religious zeal that informed it, helped to bring about the American Civil War and to perpetuate the conflict. Each

[2] Ryland, *Reminiscences of the First African Church*, 262-263.

side felt that they were justified by God almighty and that they had a duty to fight to the bitter end.

This paper examines sources ranging from sermons by proslavery evangelicals and articles in proslavery religious periodicals, to books published by proslavery evangelicals and the public records of societies devoted to the religious education of slaves. Though many of these sources have been examined by scholars before, they have not necessarily been examined with an eye to depictions of slave's religious education and what those depictions have to say about the motives and beliefs of proslavery Christians. This paper contends that when read through a critical lens, sermons offer insight into how proslavery Christians used representations of the religious lives of slaves to construct a justification for the institution of slavery. When viewed in the specifically evangelical context of the American South, this justification reveals some important contradictions. First, in order to maintain a defense of slavery, proslavery Christians were forced to contradict their own belief in, and celebration of, the free accessibility of Christ's salvation. Proslavery Christians, though they were evangelicals, represented slaves as in need of the mediation of white Christians in order to achieve salvation. This insistence on the permanent need for white mediation resulted in a depiction of the spiritual condition of slaves as constantly in a state of disrepair. Thus while the aid of white Christians was supposed to bring about the salvation of slaves, and missionaries always seemed to report positive spiritual improvement among their slave congregations, proslavery Christians also had to maintain a permanent position for themselves as spiritual instructors in order to justify slaveholding to the rest of the world. Therefore we find then in documents from the period contradictory representations of the religious lives of

slaves which are strategically crafted to serve the purposes of proslavery Christians.

As famously described by David Bebbington, evangelicalism is marked by four distinctive elements. First, evangelicals practice conversionism, in which new believers are expected to depart with their former habits and completely change their lives; this is commonly called being "born again."[3] Secondly, evangelicals employ biblicism, meaning that they take the Bible as highly authoritative and often identify directly with the biblical text.[4] Next, evangelicals exercise what Bebbington calls "crucicentrism," which places emphasis on the saving grace of Christ's death and resurrection; the salvation offered by Jesus is central to Protestantism in general, but is even more paramount for evangelicalism.[5] Lastly, evangelicals are said to engage in activism, meaning that they choose to express their faith in a strikingly passionate manner. For this reason a great deal of emphasis is placed upon zealous preaching and proselytizing.[6] These doctrines of evangelical Christianity shaped the culture of the Southern United States, giving rise to strict codes of honor and duty and a vision of the South as a place of Christian tradition.

Proslavery Southerners believed that God had given them the South and all of its prosperity as a blessing. This blessing included the institution of slavery. Rev. Robert Wightman expressed these sentiments in an 1861 sermon that he delivered to the congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Yorkville, S.C. saying,

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[3] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Routledge, 2003), 8.
[4] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 10.
[5] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 13.
[6] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 15.

> They are the gifts of God. The pillar of cloud dropped fertilizing dew on our soil, and the pillar of fire brought across the ocean the only tillers who could survive pestilence, and wring from the sod the bloom of silver and harvests of gold. God blessed our land, and gave to Ham the privilege of mitigating his "curse" by spreading Christianity with the labor of his hands.[7]

Here, Wightman demonstrates the opinion held by many proslavery Christians that they were the chosen people of God and as such had a right and a duty to defend what had been entrusted to them. The quote also exposes how proslavery Christians used established beliefs about the inferiority and wretchedness of African peoples to justify their own actions. Wightman draws on the well-established idea that African peoples were descendants of Ham, the son whom Noah cursed in the book of Genesis. This served to take the responsibility for slavery off of proslavery Christians and place it on the will of God as mediated through the actions of Noah. This also allowed Proslavery Christians to claim that the argument that slavery defied Christianity was blasphemous since the enslavement of African peoples was clearly intended by God.

Thus we see what Bebbington refers to as *biblicism* at work. The insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible became perhaps the key element of the debate between antislavery and proslavery evangelical Christians. Proslavery Christians saw themselves as the chosen heirs of a rich, fertile promised land, much like the Israelites of the Old Testament. Meanwhile their Northern brethren had to

[7] Rev. John T. Wightman, "The Glory of God: The Defense of the South: A Discourse Delivered in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South" (ME, 1871), 8.

etch out a living in the cold, harsh climates of the North. This fed into an established Southern Christian conceptualization of Southerners as the keepers of the true Christianity.[8] Northerners, with their abolitionist and capitalist ideas, had strayed away from the true religion and subsequently had not received the same abundant blessings. These ideas were later shattered by the outcome of the Civil War, but they were central to the way in which proslavery evangelicals understood themselves as opposed to antislavery evangelicals. Proslavery Christians also attempted to deflect the responsibility for slavery from themselves by accusing Northerners of making slavery necessary with their money hungry capitalist economy. [9]

Because evangelicals understood the Bible to be completely authoritative it became imperative to both antislavery and proslavery Christians that they were able to prove that the Bible either did or did not sanction slavery. This explains the staggering volume of writing from both sides attempting to demonstrate how Biblical scripture could be used to justify their cause.[10] Proslavery evangelicals insisted that because the Bible contains examples of the great men of God, such as Noah and Moses, holding slaves it must have meant that it was permissible for Southern planters to hold slaves as well. Proslavery evangelicals also seized on the Epistle of Philemon in which the apostle Paul wrote to a Christian man named Philemon in order to return his runaway slave, Onesimus. Proslavery evangelicals selectively highlighted that Paul was proposing to return Onesimus to Philemon

[8] Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 52.
[9] Noll. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 53.
[10] Albert J. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995), 81-82.

and paid little attention to the rest of the epistle in which Paul implored Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Proslavery Christians also frequently drew on verses like 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 that focused on the importance of being content with one's station in life.[11]

The response from antislavery evangelicals could not be as directly literal in its interpretation. The actual words printed in the Bible do in fact reveal that the patriarchs owned slaves, and do affirm without any reproach that slaveholding was common practice in the Roman society that both Christ and later Paul inhabited. Because of this, some radical abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison rejected the Bible out of hand as a proslavery book. However, moderate antislavery evangelicals strove to cultivate a more nuanced biblical interpretation which relied on Christian humanitarianism for its strength.[12] Thus antislavery Christians such as James G. Birney tried to refute proslavery evangelicals with logical explanations for the Bible's lack of antislavery text. Birney wrote,

> The Savior himself said nothing in condemnation of slavery, although it existed in great aggravation while he was on earth. He said nothing about it, and to my apprehension, for this very good reason, that he did not preach to the Romans, or to the people of any other country where slavery prevailed, but to the Jews, among whom the abolition principles of Moses'

[11] *The New American Bible* (NY, 2011). 1 Corinthians 7:20 reads "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called."
[12] Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 35.

> laws had already very nearly, if not entirely extinguished it.[13]

Birney went on to argue that just because the Bible describes the patriarchs holding slaves it did not mean that God ever intended for white Southerners to become slaveholders.

Birney's letter also pointed to another enormous contention between proslavery and antislavery evangelicals. In the worldview of evangelicals every person was responsible for repenting and seeking reconciliation with Christ. Thus denying slaves the opportunity to read the Bible or to gain any religious instruction was as good as condemning them to hell. This, antislavery evangelicals said, was the true horror of slavery.

But slaves were not the only ones in danger of losing their souls according to antislavery Christians. Slaveholders were also corrupted by slavery. Being in a constant position of power and possessing the liberty to inflict punishment and pain on another human being inevitably caused a person to become apathetic to human suffering.[14] Slavery also presented strong temptation toward vice for slaveholders, as evidenced by the immense number of masters who had illegitimate children with their female slaves. Antislavery Christians argued that slavery could not possibly be consistent with the gospel because God would never approve of an institution that bred such cruelty and corruption.

Thus the argument over slavery and the condemnations of the moral condition of both slaves and

[13] James G. Birney, "Letter to Ministers and Elders, on the Sin of Holding Slaves, and the Duty of Immediate Emancipation", (NY: S.W. Benedict and Co., 1834), 3.
[14] Birney, "Letter to Ministers and Elders", 2.

slaveholders by antislavery Christians brought about the formation of the paternalistic slaveholding ethic. This debate also provided a strong impetus for the proslavery church to advance missionary work to slaves. If proslavery Christians wanted to have any ground to stand on, they had to prove that those who participated in the institution of slavery could maintain a high standard of moral conduct. In order to combat the accusation that slavery was detrimental to the souls of both slaves and slaveholders, proslavery Christians used the Bible to construct a paternalistic system in which it was taught that slaves and slaveholders each had duties unto one another. The basis for this system was the all-too-familiar idea that white Christians had a God-given responsibility to spread their religion and culture amongst the "heathen" peoples of the world.

As Presbyterian Reverend John C. Young stated in his sermon entitled "The Duty of Masters", "The moralist and the Christian defend the practice of holding human beings in bondage, only on the ground that they are incompetent to govern themselves and manage their own interests successfully."[15] Therefore proslavery Christians could comfort themselves with the idea that their slaves were better off in the United States where they could learn about Christianity and how to live respectably. This sentiment had been expressed by Rev. William Meade of Virginia in 1834. His "Pastoral Letter" was reprinted and circulated widely in the years leading up to and during the Civil War. Rev. Meade wrote,

[15] Rev. John C. Young, "The Duty of Masters: A Sermon Preached in Danville, Kentucky in 1846, and then PublishedAt the Unanimous Request of the Presbyterian Church, Danville (NY: John A. Gray, 1858), 45.

> When we remember how their captive fathers were brought from a land of Pagan darkness and cruelty to one of Christian light, and compare the religious advantages which their descendants may have, with the horrible superstitions which yet prevail in Africa, there is a pleasing consolation in the thought that, notwithstanding much of evil in their present condition, great spiritual good may result to their unhappy race through the knowledge of a Redeemer. But this must be done through the instrumentality of man; and it becomes us as Christians to inquire how far we are concurring with the designs of Providence and seeking to promote this most desirable object.[16]

This quote from Rev. Meade reveals that the underlying principal of the slaveholding ethic was that slavery was ultimately redemptive to the souls of slaves. Proslavery Christians drew their support for this claim from "biblical stories of the curse of Ham and the punishment of Cain."[17] The majority of white Christians understood little to nothing of African cultures, but as Rev. Meade demonstrates they assumed that African religions were nothing but evil superstition and that practicing them was a sign of ignorance. Previously white discomfort with African religions had been a large problem. By the time the Civil War took place the majority of slaves in the United States had been born and raised in the United States. Though a large number of slaves were members of an

[16] William Meade, "Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend William Meade" (VA: Convocation of Central Virginia 1853), 13.
[17] David B. Chesebrough, ed. "*God Ordained This War": Sermons on the Sectional Crisis* (SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 147.

evangelical church, white Christians still characterized their slaves as practitioners of traditional African religions or at least as being heavily influenced by them.[18] This made it easier to claim that slaves were naturally given to a heathenish nature and thus required the guidance of white Christians. Importantly, it also provided white Christians with a constant source of work yet to be done.

Many slaveholders claimed that anyone who had spent time around slaves knew that they were an enormous burden to their masters. Lack of work ethic from slaves was a popular complaint among slaveholders. Not only did this perceived laziness offend their idea of the Protestant work ethic, but it also caused slaveholders to feel that they were investing more in their slaves than they were getting back. In his sermon "The Duty of Masters", Kentucky Presbyterian minister Rev. John C. Young describes how he believes the Bible is capable of improving the naturally inferior characters of slaves. Rev. Young writes,

> "The main precept to the servant meets this evil by enjoining upon him *faithfulness and energy* in all that he does: 'Whatever ye do, do it heartily.' And mark the peculiarity of the motive by which this precept is enforced, and its adaptation to counteract the force of their temptation – 'knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance.' *Here* is what is needed by the servant – a reward held out to quicken his sluggish spirit."[19]

As he describes later in the quote the "evil" that Young is referring to is the sluggish spirit that many slaveholders

[18] Chesebrough, ed. "God Ordained This War, 148.
[19] Young, "The Duty of Masters", 40.

reported as prominent amongst their slaves. Young explains how the lessons of the Bible can help to improve the laziness of slaves. Thus men like Young and Meade firmly believed that slavery was the means through which the souls of slaves would be saved.

By creating this picture of slaves as in need of ethical reform proslavery Christians gave themselves a basis on which to build the rest of their slaveholding ethic. They also created a way to undermine the accusations of antislavery evangelicals. In order to combat antislavery Christian arguments that slaves ought to be freed, proslavery Christians pointed to what they saw as the degraded lives of freepersons living in the North. In his popular work *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, Charles C. Jones, a minister, missionary, and slaveholding planter in Liberty County, Georgia, discussed what he sees as the debased existence of freepersons in the Northern states. Jones wrote,

> Their physical condition in the *slave states*, on the whole, *is decidedly in advance* of what it is in the *free states*. There are more free colored *families* in the slave than in the free states: in the latter the young cannot marry, the support of a family, especially through the rigors of winter being difficult; and consequently numbers of youth, abandon themselves to profligacy.[20]

According to proslavery Christians like Rev. Robert Ryland, "the altruism and recklessness of the North on this subject" was responsible for the deplorable living

[20] Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (GA: Thomas Purse, 1842), 121.

conditions of blacks in the free states. [21] They believed that the antislavery emphasis on the equality of all persons was wholly misguided. Freeing slaves, they believed, would put responsibilities on them that they could not handle. This of course would eventually lead to freepersons falling into a life of vice and moral degeneracy. Therefore antislavery Christians, in insisting that slaves should be freed, were in fact doing slaves a disservice by facilitating the damnation of their souls. Slaves were better off in the care of their masters who could see to it that they did not go astray and could afford them the opportunity to correct their tendencies toward immorality. Rev. Ryland describes the effect that he believed religious instruction was having on his black congregation at the First African Baptist Church, "They have less superstition, less reliance on dreams and visions, they talk less of the palpable guidings of the spirit as independent of or opposed to the word of God."[22] Thus Rev. Ryland draws once again on the proslavery Christian depiction of slaves as practitioners of "heathenish" superstition. Ryland is claiming that the tendency toward superstition is diminishing within his congregation. Yet by the very act of invoking a representing of slaves as "heathenish", Ryland is bringing to mind that there are other slaves yet to be saved and much more work for proslavery Christians to do.

The notion that slaves were better off under the care of a master hinged on the assumption that all masters were kind and fatherly toward their slaves, always promoting their well-being. The real crux of the slaveholding ethic was its demand that slave owners hold themselves to a high level of morality and always strive to behave benevolently

[21] Ryland, *Reminiscences of the First African Church*, 292.
[22] Ryland, *Reminiscences of the First African Church*, 265.

toward their slaves. Slave owners were to give to their slaves what was due to them according to God. [23] This gave proslavery Christians the ability to argue that slaveholders, though they received financial gain from their slaves, were actually taking on a Christian burden by being slaveholders. Proslavery publications and sermons of the period typically started out with the sentiment that slavery was an enormous burden on the South, one that she would likely be better off without, but that since Southerners were now responsible for the slave population it was their Christian duty to care for them as well as was possible.[24] A group of ministers from Columbia, South Carolina described well the idea that slaveholders had a responsibility to their slaves when they offered a definition of slavery in an article in *The Southern Presbyterian Review*. The ministers wrote,

> In return for this service, he is to exercise over them a just and equal authority, restraining them, by appropriate rewards and disciplinary inflictions, from idleness, vice, and immorality. He is to protect them from wrong and outrage on the part of others; to nourish them in helpless infancy and feeble old age; to treat them with kindness, and to feel towards them the regard to which they are entitled as servants of his house and the subjects of his family-government.[25]

[23] Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 173.
[24] Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 178.
[25] "An Association of Ministers" in Columbia, SC, *The Southern Presbyterian Review* Vol. 14 (SC: C.P. Pelham, 1861), 33-34.

While antislavery opposition remained strong, the church teachings about the duties of masters were quite effective in persuading many that slavery, though distasteful, did not defy God and was therefore not evil.[26] Frederick Law Olmsted was a famous American landscape architect, journalist, and social critic from Connecticut.[27] Olmsted travelled around the Southern United states in order to gain a first-hand view of slavery and wrote his observation in a work entitled *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States.* In this work Olmsted describes the demeanor of a Southern planter with whom he was lodging toward his slaves. Olmsted writes, "In his own case, at least, I did not doubt; his manner toward them was paternal – familiar and kind; and they came to him like children who have been given some task, and constantly are wanting to be encouraged and guided, simply and confidently."[28] Proslavery representations of slaves as child-like contented beings living under the care of a kind father figure were effective in combating antislavery representations of slaves as brutalized, dejected creatures living under the harsh dictatorship of a Simon Legree.

The years leading up to and during the Civil War saw a great deal of concern among proslavery Christians that slaves receive religious instruction.[29] Evangelizing

[26] Mark Noll, *America's God* (Ney York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 388.
[27] Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (NY: Mason Brothers, 1861), 1.
[28] Frederick Law Olmsted. *The Cotton Kingdom*, 54.
[29] John B. Boles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 109.

slaves and instructing them in the teachings of God was one way to give legitimacy to the entire institution of slavery which was under heavy attack by abolitionists. Proslavery ministers, many of them slaveholders themselves, thundered from the pulpit that though slavery was not evil or fundamentally wrong, there was one significant problem with the system: every single proslavery Christian could be doing more to foster the religious education of slaves.

Though the mission to the slaves was encouraged by virtually all proslavery Christians, it was perhaps implemented most zealously in Liberty County, Georgia. Charles C. Jones, a Presbyterian minister and planter in Liberty County became the leader of the missionary effort there. Jones was born to a wealthy planter in Liberty County and spent some time in the North while attending Andover seminary in Massachusetts.[30] While at Andover, Jones experienced some serious doubts about the righteousness of slavery. Jones was bothered by a system which held human beings in bondage. He wrote to his fiancée of his confusion,

> I am moreover undecided whether I ought to hold slaves. As to the principle of slavery, it is wrong! It is unjust and contrary to nature and religion to hold men enslaved. But the question is, in my present circumstances, with the evil of my hands entailed from my father, would the general interest of the slaves and community at large, with reference to the slaves themselves, be promoted best, by emancipation? Could I do more for the ultimate good of the slave

[30] Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 10-11.

> population by holding or emancipating what I own? [31]

Despite his reservations about slavery, after graduating from Andover Jones returned to Liberty County and became a slaveholding planter like his father. Jones was always unsure about slavery, and so in an attempt to both distinguish himself from abolitionists and still take action that he believed would improve the lives of slaves, he threw himself into missionary work among the slave population.[32] Jones was responsible for founding the "Liberty County Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes" and for persuading other planters and ministers from Liberty County to join.[33]

Jones was surely not the only proslavery evangelical to hold reservations about the institution of slavery, but his case does offer an alternative view of the slaveholding ethic. Other proslavery evangelicals like Virginia's Thornton Stringfellow viewed slavery as an evil in the South which had to be mitigated through a missionary effort.[34] The institution of slavery was a deeply engrained part of Southern culture, one that allowed the Southern aristocracy to maintain their life of leisure and wealth. Men like Jones and Stringfellow had been indoctrinated into the institution of slavery since their births, but nonetheless held a distaste for the institution.[35]

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[31] "Charles Jones to Mary Jones" (1830, JCTU), Erskine Clarke. *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 14.
[32] Erskine Clarke. *Wrestlin' Jacob*, 15.
[33] Erskine Clarke. *Wrestlin' Jacob*, 28.
[34] Irons, *The Origins of Prosalvery Christianity*, 215. Stringfellow was a Baptist minister in Virginia who wrote and preached in favor of preserving slavery in spite of his distaste for the institution.
[35] Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 217.

Many ministers, whether as admissions of personal opinion or as rhetorical strategy, admitted that slavery was an evil. Thus slavery existed in an oddly contradictory position: it was an evil, but one that proslavery Christians nonetheless fought fiercely to defend.

In his book *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* Jones set out to explore the religious and moral condition of slaves. He claimed that the vast majority of slaves live in a state of moral ignorance and degradation and were therefore in desperate need of corrective teaching from ministers and missionaries.[36] He stressed the importance of the mission to the slaves by putting forth a representation of them as a class of helpless persons. Jones insisted, "It is not too much, therefore to say that the Negroes are in a state of almost absolute dependence on their owners for the words of eternal life. They are the most *needy* of any people in our country." [37] The idea that slaves needed white Christians in order to acquire salvation was at the very heart of the slaveholding ethic.

Even if proslavery Christians could prove that slavery was being used to accomplish righteous work, they still had a big problem to get around. Specifically, the concept that white mediation was necessary for black salvation contradicted the evangelical belief that salvation is given freely to anyone who asks for it. Evangelicals celebrated the liberating nature of their religion because it moved away from the need for any sort of intercessor in order to gain forgiveness and salvation. Yet in the slaveholding ethic that they created they set themselves up as necessary intercessors for their slaves. Without the built-

[36] Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, 125.
[37] Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, 158

in need for white involvement the entire slaveholding ethic would have come tumbling down. Because proslavery Christians believed that slaves were more like children than adults, they created a role for themselves as necessary guardians and caregivers.

At the heart of the slaveholding ethic was a belief that people of color were fundamentally different from white people in a way that rendered them closer to children than adults. George W. Freeman, a minister in North Carolina expressed in one of two discourses entitled "The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders" the belief that slaves could be thought of as perpetual children. In discussing slaveholders' duties to care for the immortal souls of their slaves Freeman wrote,

> Our children, we all feel and acknowledge, have decided claims of this sort upon us. And in what respect, brethren, does the relation which we bear in this matter to our children, differ from that in which we stand to our slaves? They are both providentially placed under our protection. They are equally dependent upon us – especially subject to our authority – and they alike stand in need of our help and guidance in the all-important concern of working out their salvation. [38]

This comparison between children and slaves was extremely popular and well-versed for explaining why slavery was beneficial to slaves.

Yet as Freeman goes on to discuss, slaveholders did recognize some differences between their slaves and their children. Children eventually grow up, become independent

[38] George W. Freeman, "The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders: Two Discourses" (SC: A.E. Miller, 1937), 30.

adults, and leave home. Yet for slaves, "their state of pupilage never ceases; they are always with us; they are always members of our families; they are always subject to our authority and control."[39] Slaves were to be handled as children with love and compassion, but it was also necessary to recognize that they were different from white children. While the slaveholding ethic insisted on the importance of maintaining the physical comfort of slaves by providing adequate food, shelter, and clothing, the linchpin that held the entire argument together was the accountability of slaveholders for the religious instruction and education of their slaves. It was the mission to the slaves that proslavery Christians believed gave slaveholding its true value and justifiability.

It was widely claimed that slaves were slow learners and could only handle simple material. Ministers and teachers, much like slaveholders, were to exercise patience and restraint when working with slaves. In his collection of sermons intended for slaves, Presbyterian minister Rev. A.F. Dickson offered specific instructions to teachers for how lessons should be conducted. Dickson wrote,

> They are sensitive to cold, to constrained attitudes, and to distracting influences of every kind; On the other hand, the subjects to be dwelt upon are more or less abstract, and therefore arduous to their awkward minds; and your language, simple and familiar as it seems to you, is yet somewhat removed from their colloquial dialect, and so far forth foreign to them. Then you need to make the whole business as inviting

[39] Freeman, "The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders," 31.

> to them as possible. A sullen, discontented listener is already lost to any hope of benefit.[40]

Passages like this one from Rev. Dickson illustrate how deeply white Christians believed they were needed by their slaves. This idea was essential both to combating antislavery arguments that slaves ought to be emancipated as well as to the proslavery understanding of themselves as performing merciful work.

But this system of special instruction did not come with expectations solely for teachers and ministers. Slaves were expected to take the lessons to heart and to implement them in order to become better, more obedient servants. This is apparent in the incredible number of sermons preached by proslavery ministers to black congregations that emphasized the importance and virtue of obedience. One such minister, Alexander Glennie, a native of Scotland, originally came to the United States in order to tutor a wealthy planter's son. Though Glennie himself was a minister in the Protestant Episcopal Church, his books of plantation sermons were used widely by evangelicals in their efforts to teach slaves about Christianity. In sermon four of his *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes*, Glennie gave a well-worn lesson about the duty of slaves to be obedient. The passage offered as justification was a favorite among proslavery Christians, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ."[41] Slaves became extremely familiar with this verse, as nearly all sermons preached to them by white ministers had something to do

[40] Rev. A.F. Dickson, *Lessons About Salvation* (PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1860), 6.
[41] *The New American Bible.* Ephesians 6:5.

with the theme of obedience. Glennie went on to say in this sermon,

> You are here directed to be obedient to your master 'with fear and trembling.' That is, you ought to feel so anxious to discharge your duty faithfully, as to feel afraid of giving offence by any conduct that looks like disobedience; for, by disobedience, you not only offend your earthly master, but you sin against God, and of this every Christian servant will be afraid. A bad servant will be afraid only of the punishment he will receive, if his disobedience should be found out. But a Christian servant must look up always to his heavenly master.[42]

This passage, and the frequency with which Ephesians 6:5 was used in sermons preached to black congregations, is telling of the motives of proslavery Christians. The focus of slave instruction became molding slaves into better workers. It is easy to see the selfish motivation in this, yet nonetheless proslavery Christians insisted that by making slaves into better workers they were helping them fulfill God's purpose for their lives.

Advocates of missionary work to slaves mostly maintained an attitude of extreme optimism toward the progress of the cause. One such organization that displayed this attitude was Charles Jones' Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia. The Association published yearly reports about their activities and progress for the year and always had good news to report. The Association said of the religious

[42] Alexander Glennie, *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes* (SC: Miller, 1844), 23.

meetings that they encouraged masters to hold for their slaves "A kind providence has specially smiled upon these meetings."[43] The report goes on to provide a section in which slaveholders in Liberty County wrote in and responded to a series of questions about the religious instruction of slaves. Slaveholders were asked if they had any objection whatsoever to the religious instruction of slaves, to which every responder replied no.[44] They were also asked if they had any suggestions for improvement to which everyone replied that they either had no suggestions or only suggested that more teachers and missionaries be provided.[45] Lastly, slaveholders were asked if they had noticed any change in their slaves, to which every responder replied that their slaves had become more obedient, more trustworthy, and all around better servants.[46] This document demonstrates how careful and guarded proslavery Christians were in their justifications of slavery. Organizations like the Association were under a great deal of pressure to demonstrate success, therefore they made sure that the picture looked good.

In the years leading up to and during the American Civil War, evangelical proslavery Christians were aware that they were under heavy attack from antislavery Christians. In response proslavery Christians crafted a deeply paternalistic ethic in which slaveholding was not only acceptable, but righteous. In a country as steeped in evangelical Christianity as the United States, the upper hand would go to whomever could adequately prove that their cause was supported by the Bible and therefore by

[43] *8th Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia* (GA: Thomas Purse, 1843), 4.
[44] *8th Annual Report*, 33.
[45] *8th Annual Report*, 33.
[46] *8th Annual Report*, 34.

God. The trouble was that both sides were able to provide evidence that the Bible supported their cause. Therefore even though most proslavery Christians genuinely believed in their paternalistic defense of slavery, that paternalism was always strained because the Bible, the ultimate source of guidance, could not definitively say one way or another whether slavery was acceptable. This strain perhaps arose from the fact that the paternalistic slaveholding ethic, though proslavery Christians tried desperately to prove otherwise, contradicted the evangelical belief in free salvation for every person. Yes, salvation was still available to slaves, but according to proslavery Christians, the moral condition of slaves was so degraded that they would never attain salvation without white mediation. All of this depended on carefully crafted representations of slaves as ignorant, incapable, and dependent. Thus it becomes readily apparent that slaveholding religion, though it professed to be for the betterment of slaves, was truly for the benefit of slaveholders. This strain weighed heavily on men such as Charles Jones and Thornton Stringfellow and undoubtedly on countless others. In the rhetoric of proslavery ministers slaves existed in a perpetual childhood that needed to be directed toward salvation by white Christians. The fighting on the battlefield was thus being fueled by another brutal fight taking place in pulpits across the nation.

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