

## **The Catholic and Protestant Roots of Anglicanism**

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### **Class #12: The Slavery Crisis and Scripture's Interpretation**

1. In his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln lamented the spiritual dimension of the North's and South's warring faction: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." In addition to the palpable controversy of slavery, 19<sup>th</sup> century Christians also battled over progressive versus conservative methods to interpret Scripture. The interplay between the growing slave crisis and a concurrent Protestant rift over biblical interpretation created a reactive proslavery theology at a time when church attendance and the preacher's influence arguably were at their highest in American history.
2. Proslavery theologians tapped into a natural law argument going back to Aristotle. Anywhere you look, Aristotle argued, you find hierarchy and not equality in a world in which some parts of nature serve other parts. Empirical observation confirms dominance and subservience as the way things are. Slavery therefore is not a human convention but a reality from nature itself. Nature also follows predatory laws of the wilderness in which some animals feed on others. Virtue reigns when you fulfill the station for which you were created. Subservient slaves therefore may have virtue but do not possess the ability to reason, exercise authority or govern. Stoics later amended this argument by positing that what makes you free is not your physical condition but your spiritual condition—slaves may be free in heart.
3. For 2000 years, Christian theologians debated the nuance of Aristotle's natural law but stayed largely within its paradigm. Paul knew that the law could become an instrument of evil, but even good can become an instrument of evil. Augustine argued that slavery was not part of nature but, rather, a result of Adam's Fall. Gregory of Nyssa was the rare theologian arguing that slavery was in and of itself sinful. In the world of Paul, Augustine and the Early Church, slavery resulted either from poverty or conquest of war in which the conquered lives were spared in exchange for servitude. This slavery was arguably quite different from that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From Moses until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, virtually every statesman, philosopher and theologian accepted slavery

as an intrinsic part of the natural order. Slavery often was invoked as metaphor, such as enslavement to passions, along with Paul's and Augustine's theology of the slave of Christ and bondage of the soul.

4. Proslavery theologians typically used these biblical arguments to justify slavery
  - a. Genesis 9:18-27 regarding Noah and the curse of Ham
  - b. The just treatment of slaves articulated in Leviticus 25:44-46
  - c. Citations from Epistles that sanction slavery
  - d. Argument that nothing in the Old or New Testaments opposes slavery
  
5. In addition to selectively chosen scriptural citations, proslavery preachers shifted the focus from slavery's necessary evil to its providential good. Regarding the necessary evil position, Thomas Jefferson (who owned 202 slaves) decried slavery's moral abomination but feared that emancipation would create more suffering and social unrest. Providential good relied on the Almighty's desire for social stability and benevolent protection by owners toward their slaves. The Episcopal Church typically articulated an ameliorant position of eliminating slavery's worst abuses.
  
6. Starting in the European Enlightenment and gaining steam in American progressive Protestant circles, theologians increasingly invoked historical-critical methods to engage Scripture, arguing that the Bible can withstand critical analysis, emerging archeology's scientific insights, and new linguistic skills like any other text. They celebrated the Enlightenment's embrace of human agency and rational insight to navigate Scripture's inconsistencies, possible linguistic errors in transmission, dubious authorship of various texts, and the critique of superstitious passages to make religion more relevant and palatable to an urbane and scientific culture.
  
7. Conservatives became horrified by what they perceived as progressives' denuding of Scripture and embrace of scientific method. Charles Hodge (1797-1878) embodied and led the Old School Presbyterian movement during his 50+ years at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he mentored some 3000 students. From his classroom and more than 140 published articles (including "Slavery" in 1836), Hodge argued for Scripture's common-sense realism—its perspicuity—from which one can deduce the clear meaning of God's word. For Hodge, the Bible did not prohibit slavery, so declaring slavery as sin was unbiblical. He lambasted progressive attempts to tear Scripture apart by new analysis. Being a slave did not diminish one's humanity, he argued, and slave owners should treat their slaves justly and compassionately. Slavery was not a

sin in itself but depended on detailed circumstances. Ecclesiastically, Hodge attempted moral suasion to hold southern and northern Presbyterians together, maintaining that abolitionists were sincere but impractical. Hodge hoped that Christian slaveholders might educate their slaves, improve their intelligence, virtue and wealth to a point in which the chains of bondage might naturally fall off. He pursued a naïve view of Scripture's inerrancy and plain sense even as the simple reading of Scripture yielded violently different results.

8. To conservative eyes, Abolitionists were terrorists who embodied the worst of the French Revolution, where the impulses of the servile class went unrestrained. Immediate emancipation would upset the natural world order and bore all the marks of a well-organized international conspiracy. Progressive preachers like famed Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) (and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe) spread sloppy agape instead of careful citation of Scripture, his critics argued, forsaking theological rigor for popular fame. Abolitionists were denounced both in the North and South as agents of subversion, social anarchy, irreligion and egalitarian mob rule.
9. In *The Black Christ*, Episcopal priest and theologian Kelly Brown Douglas addresses Christological reflection in ante-bellum America. Specifically, she argues that white slaveholders tended to play down the Synoptic depictions of Jesus's earthly teaching in favor of the Pauline epistles. With Paul's epistles, slaveholding preachers could proof-text selections about master-slave relations. According to Douglas, slaveholding evangelists downplayed Christology to avoid confronting the radical implications of Jesus's earthly teaching and its inevitable critique of human bondage. The slaveholders trivialized Jesus's earthly ministry in favor of conservative Pauline preaching. Slave spirituality, on the other hand, focused extensively on a Jesus who was born in the feedbox of donkeys and died on the hard wood of the cross. Connecting Jesus with Moses and the Exodus of Israel, liberation serves as the hope amid severe oppression. In slaves' Christological reflection, Jesus embodied the companion who understands their pain, suffering and tragic circumstance.
10. In contrast to proslavery theologians, contemporary Black theologians James Cone and David Goatley echo Douglas's insights to bypass the slave owner's soul in favor of slave spirituality. In *The Spirituals and the Blues* and *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, Cone and Goatley (respectively) articulate the Christian counter-narrative to proslavery. Cone sees Jesus as a historic presence whose life, death and resurrection embodied strides toward liberation for slaves and for emancipated slaves during Jim Crow racism in the

North and South. Beyond the existential connection with the suffering and redemption of Jesus, the spirituals provide a context in which to celebrate the faithfulness of community in a world of trouble. They demonstrate to the downtrodden that God sees them as somebody when the world sees them as nobody. Goatley engages the slave spirituals as a testament to Stoic endurance in the face of overwhelming evil. Goatley focuses on the diversity of themes with reflection on divine absence/presence as the common motif that holds together the slaves' identification with Jesus in his suffering and triumph. For Goatley, even as slaves experience overwhelming oppression, the abiding presence of God during Jesus's suffering enables slaves to transcend their own bleak condition.

11. In addition economic, legal and cultural forces, Christian invocations of Jesus played a central role on both sides of the slavery debate in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America
12. Antebellum Christian clergy played a key role in this debate: by one estimation ministers wrote almost half of all defenses of slavery published in America
  - a. Main categories of argument to defend slavery included:
    - i. The Bible sanctions the institution of slavery as God's will (Lev 25:44-46)
    - ii. The natural order is not equalitarian but everywhere shows some people in higher and lower relation to each other (Aristotle). Natural rights exist according to one's station in life. Thus, slavery is consistent with the law of nature.
    - iii. Civilization is nowhere without a servile class. Even if slavery is said to be "evil" the demands of civil society show that it is a necessary evil
    - iv. Slaves in America may in fact be said to be better off than they were in their formal condition. In this respect slavery is actually a "positive good."
    - v. If the impulses of servile classes are not restrained, social order itself will be threatened, as recently happened in the French Revolution of 1789.
  - b. "In their use of Scripture to defend slavery, proslavery writers could follow one of several courses. The most positive and racist approach looked upon the curse of Ham as a divine decree that set the Negro race apart as an inferior and servile people. The second most positive approach discovered a divine sanction for slavery (irrespective of the enslaved people) in the Old Testament, a negative approval in the Gospels, and the

sanction of the Apostles in the Epistles. And the third least positive approach found no condemnation of slavery in Scripture. The bulk of writers selected the median position.” (p. 118)<sup>1</sup>

- c. “American writers, in particular, drew upon theological affirmations. Christian theologians believed that certain institutions—family, government, and the church—had been ordained by God as permanent features of society....Proslavery writers in America often included the relation of master and slave. Many saw slavery as a part of God’s historic scheme for bringing all men to salvation and argued negatively that is slavery were indeed evil God would not have given it sanction in Scripture.” (118)
- d. “No other schools, not even South Carolina College, exerted the national influence of either Yale or Princeton in the shaping of what would become America’s proslavery ideology.” (143)

”Abolitionism...appeared to conservative eyes very much like the reincarnation of the French Revolution. Not only did abolitionism propose the immediate unleashing of America’s black population, it also bore all of the marks of a well-organized international conspiracy with huge reserves of men, money, and unblinking audacity....The hallmark of anti-abolition and the conservative proslavery center was an abiding concern for social authority and order.” (249)

- e. “Abolitionism changed everything....In the face of supposed legions of radicals who seemed to care not a whit for the union of the states, for orthodoxy in religion, or for peace and order in society, Americans changed their minds about the future of slavery almost overnight. From the Revolutionary doctrine that slavery had no place in republican society, they leaped to a diametrically opposed notion that slavery had been and indeed could be an essential ingredient of a republic.” (348)

American theological arguments against slavery yielded fewer biblical proof texts and more global concepts of love, justice and liberating norms of Scripture

- a. Most abolition internal arguments struggled with immediate v gradual solutions

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840*, (University of Georgia Press, 1987)

- b. Pietism's imagination and rhetoric invoked Scripture's spirit as a wall of fire around the rights of the poor and downtrodden
- c. Romantic humanism—personified in the likes of Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet's brother—challenged and drastically modified Scriptural interpretation in America
- d. New cultural hermeneutics merged with biblical hermeneutics in fundamental ways
  - i. Battle between evangelical and liberal positions
- e. Common-sense reading of Scripture now yielded diametrically opposed positions with no means, short of war, to reconcile
- f. Invoking Scripture in the 1850s created (or was created by) two opposite cultural visions for America: abolitionist invoked Jesus as angry judge of any person who sinned by tolerating slavery while proslavery advocates pictured Jesus as a preacher of hierarchical order and social peace
- g. The antebellum Bible was remarkably unconstrained by ecclesiastical authority
- h. The biblical battle between evangelical/literal hermeneutics and liberal interpretation was played out on Civil War battlefields
- i. In his assessment of theological battles surrounding slavery, theologian Mark Noll concludes: "Here it is important to conclude that the civil war over Scripture did as much to damage the American theology that had taken shape since the early days of the republic as the shooting war did to the body politic." (p. 401)<sup>2</sup>
- j. On the American frontier, spiritual entrepreneurs—largely unencumbered by ecclesiastical structures—invoked Scripture as their only rule and guide for moral reasoning, allowing their own instincts and polemic spins to run wild
- k. This resulted in dueling Scriptures, with one party invoking the Old Testament to defend slavery and another invoking the spirit of the Gospels to condemn it
  - a. Anti-slave advocates invoked Jesus as a combination of Enlightenment ideals—Jesus as universal embodiment of reason and human rights—and Pietism's passion—meek and lowly Jesus who dies for others' bleeding humanity and the overthrow of oppression
  - a. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* embodied this trend
  - b. Stowe connected republican political quest for freedom from oppression to the evangelical religious quest for freedom from sin as heart of abolitionist spirituality
  - c. The transformed heart (Pietism's subjectivity) serves as the key to social justice, yet without much need for ecclesiastical structures or oversight

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<sup>2</sup> Mark A Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

## **AI Overview**

Proslavery theology in the 19th-century U.S. primarily utilized biblical passages depicting servitude as ordained or regulated by God to justify slavery. Key citations included the Curse of Ham ([Genesis 9](#)), Old Testament laws allowing bondmen ([Leviticus 25](#)), and New Testament injunctions for slaves to obey masters ([Ephesians 6](#), [Colossians 3](#), [1 Timothy 6](#)).

### Key Old Testament Citations:

- Genesis 9:25–27 (Curse of Canaan/Ham): Used to argue that black people were descendants of Ham (via Canaan) and destined for perpetual servitude.
- Leviticus 25:44–46: Specifically cited as divine permission to buy bondmen and bondmaids from surrounding nations, passing them down as inheritance.
- [Exodus 20:17](#) (Ten Commandments): Pro-slavery arguments often noted that the Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting a neighbor's "servant," implying ownership was legitimate.

### Key New Testament Citations:

- Ephesians 6:5–9: Paul instructs slaves to "obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling".
- 1 Timothy 6:1–2: Stated that those under the yoke of slavery should treat masters with respect to avoid slandering God's name.
- Colossians 3:22–25: Reinforces that servants (slaves) should obey masters in all things.
- [Titus 2:9-10](#): Encourages slaves to be "subject to their masters" and to make the teaching about God attractive.
- Philemon: The story of Paul returning the runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon was interpreted as a direct endorsement of returning runaway slaves.

### Theological Argument Structure:

Proslavery theologians argued that slavery was not sinful per se, as it was regulated in the Old Testament and not explicitly forbidden in the New Testament. They argued that Paul's instructions to slaves were a broader endorsement of the institution itself, focusing on preserving social order rather than abolishing the institution.