

CLASS 8

Churches in the Civil War

- Abolitionists and Apologists
- Church Divisions
- Lincoln's Reflections on God's Providence



Abolitionists & Apologists

- Despite all of the 2nd Great Awakening's evangelical fervor, denominational growth, theological advancement and societal impact, the major unresolved issue of American culture in the early 19th century was the institution of slavery.
- Unfortunately, rather than a speaking in unified voice against slavery, Christians and Churches became deeply divided over its propriety and even its morality.
- In part because Christians in the North and South were so passionately split on the issue, it came to be resolved not with reform, but in America's Civil War.



Abolitionists & Apologists

- Apologists of Slavery were mostly found in the southern United States. Economic dependency upon slavery made it a crucial element of the culture which many churches defended for the rights of their members.
 - Pro-Slavery Christians often defended the institution with a social conservatism that saw abolition of slavery as the first step to a declining morality of the nation
 - Key to this was the (mostly disingenuous) claim that slavery provided opportunities to evangelize to black slaves who would otherwise remain heathen.
 - Affected by the highly-charged activities and speech of Abolitionists, many Southern leaders who had early on equivocated on the issue, came to defend it as vital to the Southern way of life.



Abolitionists & Apologists

- The movement to abolish slavery was most prominent in the northern states, and many of its proponents were the Protestant converts of the revivals of the early 1800s.
 - Theodore Weld was a direct convert of Charles Finney, and evangelist in the 1830s-40s to preach to sinners and free slaves.
 - Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of Lyman Beecher, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, which expounded on the evils of slavery as well as its incompatibility with Christianity.
 - In 1858, Presbyterian minister George Duffield, inspired by the pleas for Abolition, combined spiritual truths with a call to rise to temporal challenges in the hymn *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*.



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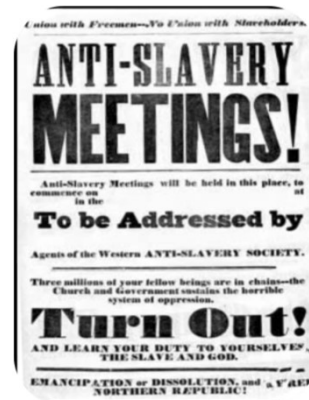
Stand up, stand up for Jesus! The trumpet call obey:
Forth to the mighty conflict, in this His glorious day;
Ye that are men now serve Him against unnumbered foes;
Let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose.
– *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*



Abolitionists & Apologists

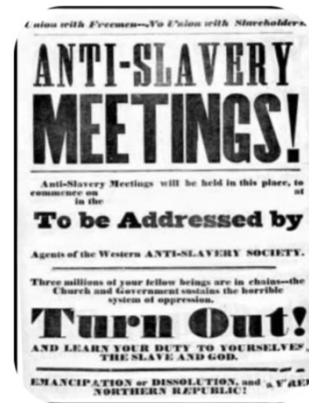
- The defining element of the controversy between the two sides was in their use of the Bible to defend their positions.
- Frequent justifications for slavery included:
 - Argumentation from the book of Genesis that the African Negro was the descendent of Noah's disgraced son Ham after the division of peoples and languages (Gen. 9:18-27)
 - Citation of numerous Old Testament texts which allowed for, and possibly commanded, slavery (Lev. 25:44-46)

"...every Southern planter is not more truly a slave-holder than Abraham. And the Southern master, by divine authority, may today consider his slaves part of his social and religious family, just as Abraham did." – Frederick Ross



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 - The lack (or 'silence') of direction from Jesus, or any of his followers on the morality of slavery as an institution. In addition, Paul's supposed support by instructing slaves to be obedient to masters (Eph. 6:5-7)



Abolitionists & Apologists

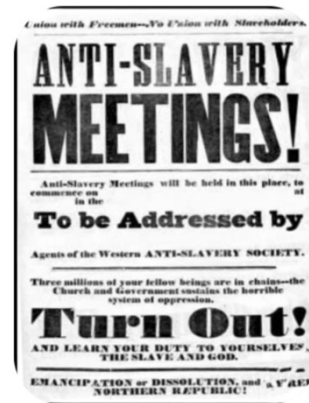
- The defining element of the controversy between the two sides was in their use of the Bible to defend their positions.
- Frequent justifications for abolition included:
 - Argumentation that Old Testament slavery was of a different character than that of American slavery, being more concerned with protection of the slave than as property of the slave-owner. (Lev. 25:39-43)
 - Citations of New Testament texts which imply a higher station of slave life than was offered to African-Americans (Phlm 16, Gal 3:28)
 - Appeals to slavery as contrary to the nature of the Gospel with its insistence on the impartiality of God, and the fair treatment of all people before God. (Acts 10:34, Matt. 7:12)



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“...the principles laid down by the Saviour and his Apostles are such as are opposed to Slavery, and if carried out would secure its universal abolition.” – Albert Barnes



Abolitionists & Apologists

- The abundant writing and speeches on both sides of the slavery issue was mostly insulated, with Abolitionists being read and heard by Northerners and Apologist by Southerners.
- In that context, the Bible was used sometimes as a weapon to ‘defeat’ the arguments of the ‘enemy,’ and other times as an inspiration for people that felt threatened of their way of life.
- Some historians have speculated that post-War decline in biblical reading and interest was a direct result of its saturated use and perceived cause of Union-Secessionist hostilities.



Church Divisions

- At the outset of the War, the battles over Scripture transformed into rhetorical battles for the ‘soul’ of the nation, expressed in sermon and song:

A Southern Presbyterian minister, alluding to Abraham Lincoln as Pharaoh: “...eleven tribes sought to go forth in peace from the house of political bondage, but the heart of our modern Pharaoh is hardened, that he will not let Israel Go.”

A Northern Presbyterian minister, allegorizing Lincoln’s assassination with the death of David’s son Absalom: “no one...will be able to separate in thought the murder of the president from Jefferson Davis’ persistent effort to murder the Union.”



Church Divisions

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And what if, mad with wrongs themselves have wrought,
 In their own treachery caught,
 By their own fears made bold,
 And leagued with him of old,
 Who long since in the limits of the North
 Set up his evil throne, and warred with God –
 What if, both mad and blinded in their rage,
 Our foes should fling us down their mortal gage,
 And with a hostile step profane our sod!
 We shall not shrink, my brothers, but go forth
 To meet them, marshalled by the Lord of Hosts...
 - “Ethnogenesis” (1861)



Church Divisions

- At the outset of the War, these battles over Scripture transformed into rhetorical battles for the ‘soul’ of the nation, expressed in sermon and song:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea
 With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
 As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!
 While God is marching on.
 Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
 - “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862)



- For members of churches both North and South, the war for slavery was a religious war to determine the will of God, and the righteousness of their cause.

Lincoln's Reflections on God's Providence

- Born in Kentucky and raised in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln was born and grew up during the era of religious fervor in the west. His father was a Baptist, and Lincoln read the Bible even as a child.
- Lincoln continued to read Scripture through his adult life and presidency. His speeches were often replete with biblical allusions and references to divine favor.
- In matters of personal faith however, Lincoln was admittedly private, conceding only that on most matters of standard Christian doctrine, he held views opposed to those taught in most churches. While he attended a Presbyterian church often during his Presidency, did not formally join any church.



Lincoln's Reflections on God's Providence

- The idea of the justice and irrevocability of God's will became a major theme of Lincoln's thought regarding the political situation he faced in trying to keep the Union together through the Civil War.

"The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power on the minds of the now contestants, he could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun, he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."

– Abraham Lincoln, *Meditation on the Divine Will*, 1862



Lincoln's Reflections on God's Providence

- In 1865, with the Confederate armies on the verge of surrender, Lincoln delivered his 2nd Inaugural Address before his supporters in Washington. His speech on that occasion publicly suggests that God stands on the side neither the North or the South, but as the cause of the War itself, as a means of punishment against the nation.

"Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!'"



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“If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?”



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“Fondly do we hope—ferverly do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

- Abraham Lincoln, 2nd Inaugural Address (1865)



Lincoln's Reflections on God's Providence

- Within 6 weeks of the Inaugural Address, Lincoln would be assassinated. He was killed on April 14th, Good Friday. The following Easter Sunday, ministers across the Union, both in churches of whites and blacks, eulogized the President as a religious martyr, a Messiah figure, and the 'father' of a people devoted to the liberation of the bond-servant.



Review Questions

A) How would you assess the pro-slavery arguments of many believers during the era? Why are they wrong in their interpretation of the Bible on that issue? Why are the abolitionist arguments right?

B) Why did the slavery issue become so pervasive across denominations and within denominations? Were the different interpretations of Scripture the cause or result of those divisions?

C) What is so surprising about Lincoln's position on God's 'side' in the Civil War considering the present religious culture? How might that position still be relevant today?

