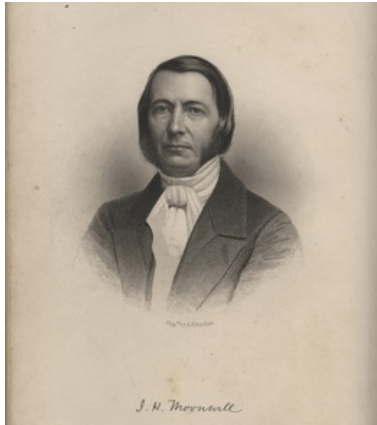


Chapter 113 - James Thornwell & Other Clergymen Offer A Biblical Defense Of Slavery

Time: 1843-1850

Reverend James Henley Thornwell Emerges As A Southern Spokesperson

Perhaps the leading defender of slavery among the Southern clergy is Presbyterian minister, James Henley Thornwell.



Reverend James Henley Thornwell
(1812-1862)

Thornwell is born to modest means in 1812 in the Pee Dee River region of Marlborough County, SC. His father dies when he is 8 years old, and his mother is too poor to support his education. But his intellectual prowess is apparent to a lawyer named William Robbins, who becomes his benefactor. He attends Charaw Academy, exhibits remarkable scholarship, and at sixteen decides to abandon a legal career to become a preacher.

A chosen vessel of the Lord, to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel;" to assert eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men.

In 1829 he enrolls at South Carolina College, described as follows by a fellow classmate:

In personal appearance he was, perhaps, the most unpromising specimen of humanity that ever entered such an institution. Very short in stature, very lean in flesh, his manners were unpolished, but his air was self-reliant. He was evidently conscious of the mental power within him, which would- make him more than a match for most men, and would throw into the shade his physical defects.

He is initially drawn to Calvinism and to the Presbyterian church when he happens to read the Westminster "Confessions of Faith."

I felt that I had met with a system which held together with the strictest logical connection; granting its premises, the conclusions were bound to follow.

After graduating at the top of his class in December 1831, he wanders for eighteen months between scholarly studies and writing essays. This uncertainty end on May 13, 1832, when he joins the Concord Presbyterian Church, a life-changing moment he recalls as follows:

O God! I have to-day made a public profession of my faith in the blessed Redeemer, and taken upon me the solemn covenant of the Church.' I would not impute to myself any merit on this account, as I have only done, and that, too, after a long delay, what was

expressly enjoined on me in Thy holy Word. But, O God! I feel myself a weak, fallen, depraved, and helpless creature, and utterly unable to do one righteous deed without Thy gracious assistance. Wilt Thou, therefore, send upon me Thy cheering Spirit, to illumine for me the path of duty; and to uphold me, when I grow weary; to refresh me, when I faint; to support me against the violence of temptation and the blandishments of vice. Let me, I beseech Thee, please Thee in thought, word and deed. Enable me to go on to perfection, support me in death, and finally save me in Thy kingdom; and to the glorious Three-in-one be ascribed all the praise. Amen. "

In 1832, at 22 years old, he is ordained as a pastor, and heads off first to Andover and then to Harvard Divinity School to continue his studies. There he aligns himself with the "Old School" Presbyterians against the "New School" Cambridge Unitarians who embrace "free will" over "determinism."

It is an open defiance of all the established laws of exegesis; and the doctrines, which need such miserable subterfuges to support them, cannot come from God. No, my friend, we are never safe in departing from the simple declarations of the Bible. The Unitarian will tell you that experimental religion is all an idle dream; but, my friend, believe not the tale. It is no such thing.

Like John Calvin in 1540, Thornwell's belief system springs from his literal reading of the Bible.

It tells him a hard and unswerving truth – that all men are depraved sinners who are assigned their places in life according to God's providential plan, and are granted or denied salvation by grace alone.

Thornwell soon returns to South Carolina, where his fame as a preacher and scholar quickly spreads.

In 1835 he marries Nancy Witherspoon, a member of one of the oldest and most prestigious families in South Carolina. Her father is Colonel James Witherspoon, ex-Lieutenant Governor of the state, and master of "Thorntree" Plantation, a 300 acre estate utilizing slave labor to grow indigo. In giving his daughter away, the Colonel overlooks Thornwell's meager finances in favor of his growing reputation as the "John C. Calhoun of the Pulpit."

Through the marriage, Thornwell acquires, for the first time, both wealth and slaves of his own.

Time: 1840's forward

Thornwell Asserts That Slavery Is Part Of God's Plan For Mankind

Thornwell's life now revolves around his plantation, his speaking engagements, and his continued scholarship at South Carolina College, where he serves as Chaplain and as Professor of Sacred Literature and Evidence of Christianity.

His sermons become famous for their pristine logic and their emotional impact. Later in his career, none other than Daniel Webster, the senate spellbinder, will call him "the greatest pulpit orator I ever heard."

As northern reformers increase their attacks on slavery, Thornwell focuses his analytical mind on formulating a foolproof defense, one that the South will employ over the decades ahead.

Slavery, he asserts, is part of God's plan for mankind.

He arrives there by "reasoning his way" from Calvinist religious principles to a belief that the institution is sanctioned by the Bible and therefore morally proper.

He argues that the unknowable will of God shapes man's destiny and that, from time immemorial, the practice of slavery has been a part of this destiny. The Old Testament verifies slavery, from Genesis 9:25 ("Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren") to the enslavement of the patriarch, Joseph, the concubine Hagar, and the entire people of Israel. The fact that Christ, living amidst Roman slavery, failed to condemn it in his preaching, further proves its historical legitimacy.

He theorizes that slavery may have originally come into the world as a punishment, perpetual in nature, with the children of slaves becoming slaves themselves. But it has always been a reality in God's plan.

Then comes a remarkable departure by Thornwell from the conventional Southern narrative!

In no way does slavery reflect on the slave's ultimate worth. Thornwell absolutely rejects the notion that Africans are biologically or morally inferior to whites. They are like everyman, searching equally for salvation. They have simply been handed their place in the social order, under a biblically approved system. Their duty is to render obedience and service to their master in exchange for needed provisions and fair treatment.

Slavery is also essential, he says, to the progress of civilization and of industry. The notion that all men play an equal role in advancing society is patently false. Some are meant to lead by the power of their minds; others to follow, lending the sweat of their brows to completion of their assigned tasks.

Slavery is a needful stimulus to industry; all enterprise would stagnate without it.

Furthermore, the duty of slave-owners is to be just. Any abuses of slaves reflects negatively on the masters and not on the system itself. Among the highest duties of the master is to facilitate religious enlightenment – and this, Thornwell says, is one of the great blessings, the positive good, of slavery in America:

Slavery is the state in which the African is most effectually trained to the moral end of his being.

Thus Thornwell admonishes masters to construct places of worship for slaves, so they can learn about salvation and commit their life to seeking it. Lacking freedom of the body in no ways inhibits the quest for freedom of the soul. Each man's fate is in the hands of God.

There you have it, according to Thornwell.

Slavery is sanctioned in the Bible and it exists as a part of God's unknowable plan for mankind, with both slave and master playing out their assigned roles, each with an equal chance at what counts, eternal salvation.

Time: 1840's

Southern Clerics Align Behind The “Biblical Defense” Of Slavery

Other Southern clergy also rally behind the Biblical defense of slavery.

The Presbyterian preacher, Robert Dabney, sums up the matter as follows:

We must go before the nation with the Bible as the text, and “thus sayeth the Lord” as the answer. We know that on the Bible argument the abolition party will be driven to unveil their true infidel tendencies. The Bible being bound to stand on our side, they have to come out and array themselves against the Bible.

Stephen Elliott, the Harvard trained Episcopalian Bishop of Georgia, asserts that “slavery is ordained by God.”

Baptist pastor and slave-owner, Dr. Richard Furman, of South Carolina, also cites scripture:

...the right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example... Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed that the inspired Apostles ... would have tolerated it for a moment in the Christian Church. In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority [Luke 12:47], its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions.

Methodist pastor Samuel Dunwoody finds textual support for the notion that “some of the most eminent of the Old Testament saints were slave holders,” including Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, and Job. Given this it cannot be evil.

Thus, God, as he is infinitely wise, just and holy, never could authorize the practice of a moral evil. But God has authorized the practice of slavery, not only by the bare permission of his Providence, but the express provision of his word. Therefore, slavery is not a moral evil.

Thornwell sums it up by asserting that there is no room for religious debate over slavery. God sanctioned the practice in the Bible, and those who question it stand on the side of Evil.

He says the parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists versus slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins, on one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. The world is the battleground—Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake.

Opponents, he says, are the same “New School” ministers – like the Unitarians and Charles Finney’s Evangelicals --who risk the salvation of their flocks by straying beyond the literal words of the Bible into their own speculations.

If the spirit of speculation on theological subjects should once become propagated among them, there is no telling where the evil would stop.”

Likewise they distort the message of the New Testament by failing to understand that Jesus Christ was not sent here to make social reforms, but to help mankind atone for its total depravity.

Thus the message from the Southern pulpit to Northern reformers becomes loud and clear:

Leave (slavery) where God has left it, and deal with it as God has dealt with it.