



A SMALL AND
ODIOUS PARTY
OLD SCHOOL PRESBYTERIAN
OPPOSITION TO ABOLITIONISM IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA



MICHAEL ALLISON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of BA (Hons) in History.
University of Sydney, 2011

A SMALL AND ODIOUS PARTY

OLD SCHOOL PRESBYTERIAN
OPPOSITION TO ABOLITIONISM IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

MICHAEL ALLISON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of BA (Hons) in History.

University of Sydney, 2011

Cover Image

From left to right: Robert J. Breckinridge, Charles Hodge, James Henley Thornwell.
All images are in the Public Domain. Design by author.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am incredibly grateful to those who have helped me over the last twelve months as I prepared this thesis. To those countless friends who listened to my incoherent ideas and poorly constructed arguments you have my thanks. To all who prayed, you gave me strength. To my fellow honours students and seminar coordinators who diligently read my previous work and provided invaluable feedback I am indebted to your kindness. I am especially grateful to those fellow sufferers who have spurred me on and consoled me through their own triumphs and trials. For Alex, Michelle, Rani, Henry, Hannah, Laura Jessica, Sarah, and anyone I have forgotten, you helped me persevere. To my close friends and family you always have my love and gratitude. To Mike McDonnell who supervised me, you pushed me hard and forced me to articulate my own ideas and for that I am very thankful. Anything found worthy of merit in this thesis speaks to your benefit; anything found wanting can be ascribed to my account.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom there is neither slave nor free.

(Galatians 3:28)

CONTENTS

Introduction

Page 1

Chapter One

Robert J. Breckinridge and Gradual Emancipation

Page 20

Chapter Two

Charles Hodge and Scripture

Page 39

Chapter Three

James Henley Thornwell and Civilization

Page 58

Conclusion

Page 80

* * *

Bibliography

Page 85

INTRODUCTION

We are solemn and earnest, not only because we deplore a schism in the body of Christ, but because we deplore a schism among the confederated states of this Union.

- James Henley Thornwell, *Report on Slavery*, 1852.¹

Trembling, Reverend John Cleaveland arose, his face flush, his hands gripping a written paper. “As the commissioners to the General Assembly of 1838, from a large number of Presbyteries had been refused their seats,” he began his voice shaking but audible, “and as we have been advised, by counsel learned in the law, that a constitutional organization of the Assembly must be secured at this time and in this place,” he continued repeatedly ignoring the Moderator’s calls to order, “[I trust] it would not be considered as an act of discourtesy, but merely as a matter of necessity, if we now proceed to organize the Assembly of 1838, in the fewest words, the shortest time, and with the least interruption practicable.”² Refusing to be silent Cleaveland had become the only speaker in the house, the acting Moderator having given up attempting to call him to order. Freed from interruption, Cleaveland proceeded to move that a Dr Beman be chosen to preside over a new ‘constitutional’ Assembly. To which a hearty “Aye!” was shouted from the back of the Church drowning out the few scattered “noes” of those sitting toward the front, most of whom appeared stubbornly committed to sitting out the affair in silence. Accepting Cleaveland’s call to the chair, Dr Beman stepped out into the aisle as the new ‘acting Moderator’ of the ‘constitutional assembly’. He was

¹ James Henley Thornwell, ‘Report on Slavery’, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (January, 1852), p. 392.

²It should be noted that John Cleaveland did not say exactly the words written here, the New School minutes only recording the ‘substance’ of what he said. The Old School polemicist Samuel J. Baird argues that the original was suppressed. He implies that this was done because Cleaveland’s speech was not favourable in the ensuing legal battle to determine which of the two assemblies constituted the legal successor of the pre-schism body. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Scatcherd & Adams, 1838), pp. 640-641. Samuel J. Baird, ‘The Disturbance of 1818’, *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxten, Remsen & Hafflefinger, 1868). pp. 550-551.

immediately met on the floor by a throng of enthusiastic supporters, while others rose, stood on seats, or precariously balanced on the back of pews so as to command a view of the new partisan Moderator. The newly formed and tumultuous ‘constitutional’ assembly now stood in the centre of the Church surrounding Dr Beman. But silent and unmoved the present assembly sat firmly rooted to the foremost pews of the Church. Tensions soared and some feared a riot. The crowd, however, began to move slowly away and after five minutes had retired from the building.³

The confusing scene was the climax of the Old and New School controversy, when ousted ‘New School’ Presbyterians made one last ditch attempt to force their enrolment in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Failing this the ousted New School Presbyterians and those sympathetic to their plight formed a ‘constitutional’ assembly, in the middle of the old one! The painful scene completed, the Presbyterian Church had become the first ecclesiastical casualty in the lead up to the American Civil War.

One of many, the antebellum church schisms shattered national unity as they severed religious ties down the Mason-Dixon Line. In 1845 both the Baptists and Methodist churches divided over slavery, and in 1857 the New School Presbyterian Church itself enacted what amounted to disciplinary measures against slave owners leading to the secession of their southern minority.⁴ The schisms spoke to the temper of nation. They revealed growing tensions between northern and southern states as denomination after denomination floundered over the issue of slavery, and they foreshadowed the eventual collapse of the nation itself into war. But the churches also represented an important cause of division in and of themselves.

³ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1838* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1838). pp. 7-8. Samuel J. Baird, ‘The Disturbance of 1818’, *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1868).

⁴ Tom Nettles, *The Baptists, Volume Two: Beginnings in America* (Ross Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), pp. 249-251. Lewis M. Purifoy, ‘The Southern Methodist and the Pro-Slavery Argument’, *The Journal of Southern History* 32, no. 3 (August, 1966), pp. 325-341. C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), p.77.

Holding otherwise disparate states together in the harmony of a common evangelical and Christian heritage, the Churches were a natural source of unity. The failure, therefore, of each denomination to address the question of slavery without precipitating disunion among themselves normalised conflict. The inability of Church leaders to express solidarity in their peculiar creed and system of belief reinforced in the minds of the many the essential irreconcilability of the issue. With the successive collapse of each evangelical church the professedly Christian nation inched closer to the same fate, for what hope was there that the people could solve in the popular assembly of the nation what they could not solve in their ecclesiastical courts? The evangelical churches served as a microcosm of the nation both displaying and aggravating the country's sectional tensions.⁵ Unique among the antebellum church schisms, however, was the Old and New School controversy of 1837 to 1838.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND THE SCHISM OF 1837 TO 1838

The Presbyterian Church was perhaps the most influential, though no longer the largest, evangelical denomination in America. Its congregations traversed the nation from New York to the Deep South and its influence extended beyond the borders of its sanctuary courtesy of the education of its clergy, the prestige of its pulpits, the extent of its publishing committees, and the benevolent array of its schools, colleges, and seminaries.⁶ Rapid expansion into new territories, especially in western New York, also assisted in stretching the Church's hand of influence. But the missionary effort to expand the Presbyterian Church would also create the conditions for controversy.

In 1801 the Church had contracted an agreement with the Congregationalist Association of Connecticut – 'the Plan of Union'. The two churches, identical in their creed but divergent in

⁵ For the role of the Churches in exacerbating sectional tension, see: Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*. Also see the shorter article: C.C. Goen, 'Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Regional Religion and North-South Alienation in Antebellum America, *Church History* 52, no. 1 (March, 1983), pp. 21-35.

⁶ For an overview of the antebellum Presbyterian Church from a contemporary observer, see: Phillip Schaff, *America* (New York: C. Scribner, 1855), pp. 118-121. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, pp. 68-69.

government, had agreed to assist each other in the mutual expansion of their churches into new territories, by allowing Presbyterian congregations to call Congregationalist ministers and vice versa. The new churches, however, needed a uniform system of governance and it was agreed that Congregationalist or mixed Congregationalist-Presbyterian churches could appoint a standing committee in lieu of a traditional Presbyterian session, which could represent their church in the successive levels of Presbyterian government: the local presbytery, the regional synod, and finally the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Over the next thirty years, however, the rapid growth of these churches meant that the mixed Congregationalist-Presbyterian churches soon constituted a little less than half of the Presbyterian Church.⁷

The growing dominance of pseudo-Presbyterianism in the Church aggravated traditional ‘Old School’ Presbyterians. They disliked the half hearted Presbyterianism of the ‘New School’ but importantly they despised the introduction of New England heterodoxies.

Congregationalist ministers, though in the main conservative, often adhered to a system of Edwardsean theology that deviated from the standards of the Presbyterian Church encapsulated in the Westminster Confession. The repeated failure of the General Assembly to repress any of these deviations frustrated conservatives. So, after a number of scuffles over theological and practical issues Old School traditionalists from the North and the South, in an impressive expression of unity, pulled together a small majority in the Assembly and abrogated the Plan of Union. They then declared the four ‘New School’ synods, created under auspices of the plan, to be no longer a part of the Presbyterian Church. On the surface, the Old and New School controversy was conflict over questions of Presbyterian identity,

⁷ After the schism the New School claimed about 100, 000 communicants, of which about 80,000 came directly from the four excised synods. The Old School claimed about 127, 000 communicants after the schism, Prior to the schism there were combined about 225,000 communicants. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, p. 69. John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 25.

practice, and theology. But under the surface it was a multifaceted debate over revivalism, slavery, and abolitionism.⁸

ANTI-SLAVERY SENTIMENT IN AMERICA AND THE RISE OF ABOLITIONISM

Prior to 1830 anti-slavery sentiment held sway throughout the country. Economically, the system of slavery had stagnated. Tobacco had exhausted the soil and no other crop had yet arisen to take its place, while in the North slavery had, relatively speaking, never been particularly profitable to begin with. Religious sentiment, therefore, combined with the humanitarian and enlightened principles of the age begun to work for the removal of the unproductive labour system⁹. Northern states like New York and New Jersey adopted legislation providing for the gradual emancipation of their bondsmen, and church bodies from across the country unanimously adopted resolutions calling for their members to prepare their slaves for freedom, while public figures financially endorsed schemes for the colonization of former slaves on the west coast of Africa.¹⁰ From the North to the South prominent individuals declared their desire to be rid of the old slave labour system.

Religious feeling did not, however, produce a revolution in society. Church bodies repeatedly acknowledged the dangers of emancipation and constantly urged caution throughout the process, advocating only those schemes that were by nature slow and progressive such as gradual emancipation, voluntary manumission, amelioration, and increasingly colonization.¹¹

Those who questioned the right of slave owners to fellowship in the Church were reminded

⁸ For an overview of the Plan of Union and the schism in the Presbyterian Church, see: Mark A. Noll, 'Calvinism: Explosion 1827-1860', *America's God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 308-311. Ernest Thrice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), pp. 350-351. For more depth, including primary sources, consult the introductions to chapters two and three.

⁹ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 323. Irving Stottard Kull, 'Presbyterian Attitudes Toward Slavery', *Church History* 7, no. 2 (June, 1838), pp. 101-103.

¹⁰ Allen C. Guelzo 'Charles Hodge's Anti-Slavery Moment', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 299-300. Charles Hodge, 'Slavery', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), p. 473. For the Presbyterians anti-slavery stance in the late revolutionary period see the notes to the introduction of Chapter One.

¹¹ McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion*, pp. 18-19.

that it was ‘the doctrine and practice of the Apostles’ to receive masters in the communion, while others who persisted in denouncing slave owners, like proto-abolitionist George Bourne, were excluded from the Church for their perceived fanaticism.¹² Prior to 1830 anti-slavery sentiment was also tempered by an innately conservative worldview.

With the Second Great Awakening came the vanguard of change. Revivalist preachers, like New School Presbyterians Lyman Beecher, Albert Barnes and Charles G. Finney, downplayed the Calvinistic influences of the first Great Awakening and began to stress instead: human freewill, benevolence, perfectionism, and post-millennialism in their preaching. In short, revivalists advocated in varying degrees, relative to their tradition, a high view of ‘humanity’s free will and moral ability’. It was expected that the sinner could choose God and, once saved, cease to sin. The believer was then free to overcome his self interest and work for the perfection of society which was to be achieved before the second return of Christ. The new found focus on perfectionism and millennialism meant that revivalist Christians often gave short shrift to those who would justify society’s social ills. There was no justification for the believer to temporarily perpetuate the evils of society or conditionally continue in sin.¹³

Influenced by the revival, a new anti-slavery position appeared in 1830 that challenged the old anti-slavery worldview, abolitionism. The old anti-slavery approach to scripture had acknowledged that slavery was an ill, unfavourable to society and possibly even an evil. But it had studiously avoided calling slavery a ‘sin’. Human bondage, however unsightly, was never considered completely incompatible with the Christian life. The modern abolitionist

¹² ‘Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1787’, *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Embracing the Minutes of the General Presbytery and General Synod 1706-1788*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), p. 540. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, pp. 328-331.

¹³ McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion*, pp.18-23. Noll, ‘Calvinism: Explosion 1827-1860’, pp. 369-293. Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 66-76.

and revivalist were not so scrupulous. Social evils, societal imperfections, and public ills, all came under the one banner of sin. Slave owning was no exception. To place one human being in subjection to another they declared to be a sin and nothing but a sin. There were no mediating circumstances and no conditions under which it was acceptable. Slavery was in all cases, at all times, everywhere, a sin.¹⁴

The inevitable upshot of the new abolitionist worldview was that gradualist programs and benevolent schemes for the amelioration of slavery were considered unacceptable. They made a compromise with the devil, allowing for the temporal perpetuation of sin. For if slave holding was a sin, and if a man who became a Christian was to cease sinning immediately, then logically: the slave owner who became a Christian must emancipate his slaves immediately. There was no room for a conservative gradualism. The ramifications of such an understanding were huge. Not only did the abolitionists consider it the bounden duty of all southerners to immediately release all their slaves, but they also believed it to be the obligation of the churches to adopt disciplinary measures against those Christians who continued in the unrepentant sin of slaveholding.¹⁵ Inevitably, the abolitionist and the revivalist drove the slave owner into reaction, but they also excited opposition from other quarters.

THE ABOLITIONIST THREAT AND THE PRESBYTERIAN SCHISM

Only twelve years before, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church had unanimously adopted, in 1818, a report that declared slavery to be ‘incompatible’ with the scriptures and a ‘blot’ on holy religion. The report, which was adopted with the complete approbation of Presbyterians North *and* South, went on to endorse the schemes of gradual emancipation and

¹⁴ Robert Breckinridge and George Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery* (Glasgow: George Callie, 1836), p. 11. McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion*, p. 20.

¹⁵ McKivigan, ‘No Christian Fellowship with Slaveholders’, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 18-35.

colonization as prospective solutions to the problem of slavery.¹⁶ But by 1835 that consensus had shattered. A new abolitionist minority developing out of the four New School Synods began to question the right of slave owning Christians to fellowship in the church. The palpable threat to their ongoing communion caused reaction and anger among Southern Presbyterians, while Northern conservatives strongly questioned the expediency of the abolitionist approach.¹⁷

With a few exceptions, Southern Presbyterians had participated in the anti-slavery sentiments of the late revolutionary and early antebellum periods. They regularly spoke of slavery as an evil, founded societies for colonization of their former slaves, and supported the anti-slavery declarations of the Church.¹⁸ Such statements were, however, essentially declarative rather than legislative. They spoke to the temper of the nation and reflected the thoughts of the southern gentry. The rise of the modern abolitionist, however, transformed the South. The abolitionist desire to use the Church as legislative vehicle for the end of slavery threatened real disciplinary action against slave owners. Southerners stumbled into reaction. It was one thing for the Church to declare their own sentiments back to them; it was another to use the machinery of the Church to threaten them into carrying such principles out. Nevertheless, not yet in the grip of fully developed pro-slavery ideology, the early Southern Presbyterian critique of abolitionism centered not on the justification of slavery but on proper jurisdiction of the Church. The abolitionists, they argued, had no right to use the Assembly to enact legislation that rightfully belonged to the state. The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia put it more emphatically: ‘the CHURCH HAS NO AUTHORITY TO LEGISLATE ON THIS

¹⁶ ‘Minutes of the General Assembly 1818’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), pp. 692-694.

¹⁷ Ernest Thrice Thompson, ‘An Aroused South’, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), pp. 377-394.

¹⁸ Ernest Thrice Thompson, ‘The South’s Peculiar Institution’, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), pp. 323-335.

SUBJECT.’¹⁹ Eventually this position would develop into a full blown pro-slavery argument, but in the meantime it was part of a wider anti-abolitionist reaction which included pro-emancipationist conservatives.

Wedded to the old anti-slavery worldview, conservative Presbyterians like Robert J. Breckinridge and Charles Hodge saw the abolitionist alternative of ‘immediate emancipation’ as a threat to their dearly held scheme of gradual emancipation and colonization. At its most basic level old style emancipationists like Breckinridge considered the abolitionist’s notion of ‘immediate emancipation’ to be patently absurd. The belief that the slave had an immediate right to be free and the immediate right to citizenship, other than smacking of revolution, ran in the face of nineteenth century racial stereotypes. Two races, it was believed, could not live together in equal harmony; one race must always loose out to the other. Such a belief was exemplified by Breckinridge who argued that the repulsion that one race felt for another was natural and in accordance with nature.²⁰ The failure of abolitionist to acknowledge this, Breckinridge opined, constituted an injustice primarily toward the slaves who, if placed on a level playing field with their former masters, would inevitably loose out. Emancipated slaves needed a place where they could develop freely without threat of oppression or cultural suppression. Colonization was, thus in Breckinridge’s eyes, a most reasonable plan. It provided freed slaves with the room to develop and ensured that they would not suffer unjustly under the ban of racial censure.²¹ More nefarious, however, Hodge and Breckinridge were convinced that abolitionism was actually reversing public opinion, North and South, and thus encouraging the prolongation of slavery. Abolitionist’s, they argued, proposed a scheme so hateful to contemporary culture, so ridiculous, that they were driving Southerners and even

¹⁹ Thompson, ‘An Aroused South’, pp. 384-386.

²⁰ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 98. Robert J. Breckinridge, ‘Hints on Colonization and Abolition with Reference to the Black Race’, *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (July, 1833), pp. 285-288.

²¹ Breckinridge, ‘Hints on Colonization’, pp. 301-305.

Northerners into the grip of pro-slavery sentiment.²² This, argued Hodge, was the direct result not only of their opinions but their behaviour. They appealed to passion over reason, denunciation over logic. The Southerner, abused and insulted by the abolitionist, understandably turned his back on such Northern fanaticism.²³ The end result of such behaviour and belief, they declared, hammered closer the shackles of slavery and made the prospect of gradual emancipation, so close only a few years ago, but a figment of a past generation.

Conservative Presbyterians also resisted the abolitionists' approach to scripture. As we have seen, the abolitionist notion of immediacy was drawn, at least in part, from revivalist understandings of perfectionism, free will, and benevolence. These theological formulations were in turn, part and parcel of a wider Edwardsean theology emanating from New England. The very theology which had been so enthusiastically adopted by New School Presbyterians and the very theology that had so excited the disdain of conservative Old School Presbyterians. It was, thus, of little surprise that what had so irked traditionalists in the revivalist theology also drew their ire in the abolitionists. Old School Presbyterians did not share the revivalist's understanding of perfectionism and, thus, saw no necessary connection between an 'evil' and a 'sin'. They did not, therefore, feel compelled to brandish slavery a crime, regardless of how much they desired to be rid of it, nor did they feel constrained to declare that the slave owner was an unrepentant sinner, though they may have viewed the perpetuation of the 'evil' as harmful to society. In fact, to make slavery a sin, they argued, was to abuse scripture, undermine morality, and justify the slave owner. Scripture, argued Charles Hodge, never condemned slavery rather it enjoined upon its adherents the proper duties of a master toward his slave.²⁴ To make the argument, then, that slave holding was a

²² Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', pp. 297-300.

²³ Hodge, 'Slavery', pp. 473-474

²⁴ Charles Hodge, 'Abolitionism', *Princeton Review* 16 (1844, Oct), pp. 579-581.

sin was to impeach the authors of scripture and array oneself against the authority of Christ, causing the abolitionist to either: ignore scripture, twist its meaning, or forsake Christianity entirely.²⁵ All of which was completely unacceptable. The abolitionists, concluded Hodge, must abandon or modify their position. If they did not, their anti-scriptural principles would rend the Church asunder and dissolve the very union of nation itself.

Indeed, throughout the lead up to the Presbyterian schism of 1837-1838 anti-abolitionist polemics always warned that the principles of the abolitionism if carried out would divide the church down the Mason-Dixon Line and destroy the nation. Debating British abolitionist George Thompson in Glasgow, Robert J. Breckinridge stressed that the United States was federation of independent republics, and that the undue meddling of one state in the affairs of another, in this case slavery, would be perceived as an act of aggression and precipitate civil war.²⁶ Charles Hodge warned of the same fate. If the abolitionist carried through their principles in the Church it would lead to ecclesiastical division resulting in the dissolution of the nation.²⁷ Southern Presbyterian William S. Plumber, however, put it most prophetically when he encouraged Old School Presbyterians not to agitate the question of slavery:

Should the Assembly... decide that slaveholding is a sin... the Southern churches would all feel themselves instructed by the Apostle Paul to “Withdraw from such.”... and soon another, and another, and yet another denomination will divide North and South. Then nothing is left... except to... rend the star-spangled banner in twain... Soon hostile forces will be marshalled against each other, and the Potomac will be dyed with blood.²⁸

²⁵ Charles Hodge, ‘West India Emancipation’, *Princeton Review* 10 (October, 1838), p. 604.

²⁶ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 84.

²⁷ Hodge, ‘Slavery’, p. 507.

²⁸ Edmund A. Moore, ‘Robert J. Breckinridge and the Slavery Aspect of the Presbyterian Schism of 1837’ *Church History* 4, no. 4 (December 1935), p. 292. Thompson, ‘An Aroused South’, pp. 393-394.

Whatever concerned Old School Presbyterians about abolitionism they always returned to this single fact. Abolitionism, they were convinced, would divide the Church destroying national unity and creating the conditions for a violent destructive civil war.

Although the question of slavery was not publicly agitated during the schism of 1837 to 1838, the support of Southern Presbyterians for the Old School was solidified by their mutual opposition to New School abolitionism. Prior to the controversy not all Southern synods were completely behind the Old School. While sympathetic, many of them were reluctant to use their vote to discipline the 'errors' of the New School, believing that a modicum of theological variation always existed in the Church.²⁹ But with the rise of the abolitionists in the ranks of the New School, recalcitrant Southern Presbyterians abandoned their moderation. Ensuring unified cooperation, Southern Presbyterians agreed to give their full support to the Old School if the northern members agreed not to raise the question of slavery, a condition to which they willing acquiesced.³⁰ Unified in their opposition to abolitionism, Old School Presbyterians on entering the Assembly found themselves in a majority and proceeded, by the strength of their vote, to purge the Church of both New School and Abolitionist alike. The Church was divided but the Old School had maintained, and would continue to maintain, a national assembly until the outbreak of the Civil War.

THE UNITY OF ANTI-ABOLITIONISM

The role of Old School Presbyterian's anti-abolitionism in the maintenance of their union cannot be overstated. In 1845 both the Baptists and Methodists churches divided over the question of slavery. In light of such foreboding events and on account of a small abolitionist minority who had survived the excision, the General Assembly of 1845 requested a new report on slavery. The new declaration resolved, firstly, that slaveholding was no bar to

²⁹ Thompson, 'An Aroused South', pp. 380-381.

³⁰ Elwyn A. Smith, 'The Role of the South in the Presbyterian Schism of 1837-1838' *Church History* 29, no. 1 (March, 1960), pp. 56-58.

Christian communion, and secondly, that abolitionism was to be deplored for encouraging the dissolution of the United States:

The tendency [of abolitionism] is evidently to separate the northern from the southern portion of the Church; a result which every good citizen must deplore as tending to the dissolution of the union of our beloved country, and which every enlightened Christian will oppose as bringing about a ruinous and unnecessary schism between brethren who maintain a common faith.³¹

The report, which effectively amounted to a condemnation of abolitionism, passed with the almost complete approval of the Assembly, carrying the day by one hundred and sixty-eight votes to thirteen.³² The overwhelming acceptance of the anti-abolitionist position by Old School Presbyterians and its continuing role in the Church has never been properly understood or fully appreciated.

Old School polemicists like Samuel J. Baird downplayed the influence of anti-abolitionism and slavery in the affairs of the Church, arguing that the Old School was unified solely in their opposition to New School errors.³³ On the other hand, prominent New School Presbyterian Lyman Beecher believed that the schism had nothing to do with the errors of the New School or their mutual opposition to abolitionism but was entirely orchestrated by southern pro-slavery politicians in an affair of almost conspiratorial proportions: ‘John C. Calhoun was at the bottom of it. I know of his doings – writing to ministers, and telling them to do this or that. The South finally took the Old School side. It was a cruel thing – it was an accursed thing, ‘twas slavery that did it.’³⁴

³¹ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1845* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1845), p. 18.

³² *Minutes of the General Assembly 1845*, p. 18.

³³ Baird, *A History of the New School*, pp. 534-536.

³⁴ Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, p. 69.

Later interpretations of the schism attempted to provide a more cohesive and less polemical account. Irving Stoddard Kull opined in an article from 1938 that, despite the Presbyterian Church's anti-slavery heritage, the leap in wealth caused by the invention of the cotton gin transformed the South's understanding of slavery and when the Old School excised the New School the southern portion of the Church gained ascendancy and the Old School was left in deference to the Cotton Kingdom.³⁵ Thus, opposition to abolitionism was, in Kull's view, the direct result of a growth in the influence of pro-slavery ideology in the Church. Such a position did not explain, however, why Northern anti-slavery conservatives like Charles Hodge were at the forefront of the Church's opposition to abolitionism both before and after the schism.

C. Bruce Staiger, in a comprehensive piece from 1949, gave anti-abolitionism a more active role in the affair. Although he noted that opposition to the New School came from a number of different sources including: a sincere concern for sound doctrine and, more simply, an innate conservatism, he gave centre stage to the Old School's anti-abolitionism as the primary cause of the schism. In Staiger's view, Old School conservatives remained united against New School abolitionists for two reasons: Firstly, they agreed that slavery was not a sin, and secondly, they feared that the issue of slavery would divide the Church and destroy the nation.³⁶ Staiger's article is notable for being the first to articulate the idea of 'anti-abolitionism' as a unifying force behind Northern and Southern Old School Presbyterians. But his understanding of the nature and role of this anti-abolitionism was unsatisfactory. To begin with, he summarised their anti-abolitionism as 'their opposition to the New School premise that slaveholding was a sin' which, other than being too simplistic, did not explain why the Old School would unite in opposition to such premise. Furthermore, as Elwyn A.

³⁵ Kull, 'Presbyterian Attitudes Toward Slavery', pp. 101-114.

³⁶ C. Bruce Staiger, 'Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837-1838', *The Mississippi Historical Review* 36, no. 3(December, 1949), pp. 391-414.

Smith noted, he overplayed the role of anti-abolitionism in the schism by making it the central cause of the excision.

In 1960 Elwyn A. Smith took Staiger's observations and nuanced his opinion. He argued that their anti-abolitionism was not the cause of the schism but that without the South and the agreement among conservatives to not agitate the question of slavery the Old School would have been unable to excise the four New School synods:

The South apart, an eventual break up of Presbyterianism was certain. The slavery-abolition issue did not cause the schism; but the South played a role of utmost significance by giving the Old School the victory and assuring the continuance of a non-sectional Presbyterian denomination until the outbreak of the Civil War.³⁷

Relatively speaking Smith's argument remains persuasive. In 1963 Ernest Thrice Thompson reaffirmed Smith's position in his seminal and widely accepted study *Presbyterians in the South*, and in 1985 this position was again reaffirmed by C.C. Goen.³⁸ But Smith, like the others, never defined the nature of the anti-abolitionism that allowed Old School Presbyterians to cooperate throughout the schism and he never explained how their anti-abolitionism ensured 'the continuance of a non-sectional Presbyterian denomination.'

The failure of modern scholarship to understand the nature of anti-abolitionism and its relation to the Presbyterian Church can be linked to a number of problems. To begin with, the anti-abolitionism of pro-emancipationist conservatives like Hodge and Breckinridge has often been misconstrued as part of the pro-slavery argument, while the anti-abolitionism of Southern pro-slavery intellectuals like James Henley Thornwell has never been rightly

³⁷ Smith, 'The Role of the South', p. 60.

³⁸ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, pp. 352, 398. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, pp. 68-78.

distinguished as an important part of their thought.³⁹ Coupled to this historians like Mark A. Noll and Allen C. Guelzo, in opposition to the mistaken belief that Hodge defended slavery, have rightly endeavoured to stress the anti-slavery slant of his writings but this has left the anti-abolitionist focus of his polemic almost completely untouched.⁴⁰ In summary, the anti-abolitionism that held the Old School Presbyterian Church together throughout the antebellum period, in spite of destructive centrifugal forces, has barely been noticed by modern scholarship much less properly understood by historians.

A PICTURE OF ANTI-ABOLITIONISM

The following pages attempt to paint a picture of the anti-abolitionism with which Old School Presbyterians held their Church together. Sketching the historical outline, the story begins with the development of the Presbyterian Church in the closing years of revolutionary era, it then moves through the rise of the abolitionist movement in the eighteen-thirties, and finally, it takes the reader to the very precipice of the American Civil War. Within this outline, the picture focuses in on the anti-abolitionism of three prominent and representative Old School Presbyterians: Robert J. Breckinridge, Charles Hodge, and James Henley Thornwell. These men, prominent American citizens in their own right, exemplified the anti-abolitionism of the Church in their writings, sermons, and speeches. More than this, however, they were men of influence, not merely exemplifying but actually shaping the thoughts of the Church. All three held distinct but related views on slavery and abolitionism, all three held teaching posts within the Church's seminaries, all three published and contributed to influential theological journals. Furthermore, all three were known for strong performances in the General

³⁹ In a brief aside Douglas A. Sweeney places Hodge in the category of those who 'defended slavery' along with James Henley Thornwell. Although Sweeney may have simply been referring to the fact that Hodge defended slavery in the abstract, without clarification it suggests he supported Southern Slavery. The truth, however, is far more subtle. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story*, p. 108. Others have made a similar mistake, Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 278.

⁴⁰ Noll, *America's God*, pp. 413-417. Guelzo 'Charles Hodge's Anti-Slavery Moment', pp. 299-325.

Assembly, and all three were duly honoured for their performances by being elected to serve as Moderator of the Assembly.

Taking each character, then, as representative of different strands of anti-abolitionist thought within the Presbyterian Church, the argument picks up on what is common and distinctive in each and highlights both their unique contribution to the debate and their debt to the larger anti-abolitionist discourse. The approach could be described as narrative and prosopographical, incorporating elements of both social and intellectual history.

Thus, each chapter begins with the broader narrative context, bringing to the attention of the reader pertinent developments in the nation and the Presbyterian Church. It then moves in closer, introducing each of the three characters via a short biography. And then, focusing in on a selection of their writings highlights the distinctive principles of their anti-abolitionism and their contribution to the broader Old School Presbyterian discourse.

Chapter one, 'Robert J. Breckinridge and Gradual Emancipation', begins the story in the waning years of the Revolutionary era and plots the growth of anti-slavery sentiment in the Presbyterian Church until it reaches its zenith in the General Assembly's declaration of 1818. It then goes on to highlight the connection between the declaration and the thought of young Presbyterian minister Robert J. Breckinridge, who argued slavery was incompatible with scripture and who advocated gradual emancipation and colonisation as the solution. The chapter goes on to argue that Breckinridge's old-style anti-slavery ideals based in the declaration helped lay the foundation for his anti-abolitionism. Breckinridge believed: that idea of immediate emancipation was absurd, worried that it would retard emancipation, and feared that abolitionist would precipitate the disunion of the country. The chapter concludes that Breckinridge's anti-abolitionism was driven by his conservative anti-slavery views.

Chapter two, 'Charles Hodge and Scripture', picks up the story of the Presbyterian Church and recounts the early stages of the Plan of Union taking note of the growing tensions in the Church and drawing attention to the role of anti-abolitionism in controversy, notably that of Old School theologian Charles Hodge. The chapter then notices how Hodge began to distance himself from the declaration of 1818 and Breckinridge's claim that slavery was incompatible with the scriptures, which he felt was too close to the abolitionist position. Providing a more nuanced position Hodge continued to maintain a belief in the expediency of gradual emancipation but stressed, on the basis of a common sense reading of scripture, that slavery was not a sin and that the Bible could not be logically construed to maintain such an interpretation. Hodge felt that those who continued to believe that slavery was a sin undermined the authority of the scriptures and, thus, the foundational moral principles of society, encouraging infidelity, the radical levelling of society, and the dissolution of America itself. The chapter concludes that Hodge's anti-abolitionism was fundamentally connected to his defence of biblical authority in which he believed the integrity of the nation was invested.

Chapter three, 'James Henley Thornwell and Civilisation', returns the reader to the fateful moment when the Presbyterian Church was torn asunder. It recounts the events of the schism, and draws especial attention to the new found influence of Southern Presbyterian, James Henley Thornwell. It notes the possible influence of Hodge on Thornwell's thought and discusses his early nonchalance towards abolitionism and the surety with which he and other Southerners discussed cursory theological questions that assumed from the outset the complete acceptability of slavery. The chapter then focuses in on Thornwell's later anti-abolitionist writings in which he argued that the tenets of abolitionism were characteristic of the beliefs of socialism, communism, and other revolutionary parties who held that society could be easily altered so as to achieve perfection on earth. In contrast to this, Thornwell

argued that civilization was complex organism that progressed over great periods of time and could not be radically altered without entailing disaster. The chapter concludes that Thornwell's anti-abolitionism was part of his conservative organic understanding of society which resisted as a matter of course any revolutionary change not prescribed by scripture as tending to the destruction of the Union and society itself.

Throughout these chapters it is hoped that we might gain a more comprehensive understanding of anti-abolitionist worldview. Highlighting how one of the foremost evangelical churches in America resisted the forces of disunion until the secession of South Carolina tore the nation apart.

CHAPTER ONE

ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE & GRADUAL EMANCIPATION

The waning years of the Revolutionary era saw the demise of slavery, or would have had it not been for Eli Whitney and the invention of the cotton gin. Southern slave labour staples were on the rocks. Rice was limited to Georgia and South Carolina while Tobacco, having exhausted the soil of the coastal states, was too expensive to transport from the back country. Poor productivity combined with religious and humanitarian sentiment encouraged men, North and South, to look forward to the eventual abolition of the faltering slave labour system.¹ Presbyterian sentiment was of one temper with the nation. In 1787 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, at that time the highest governing body of the Church, encouraged its delegates to ‘recommend it to all their people to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and the state of civil society... to procure eventually the final abolition of slavery in America.’² Pronouncements of this kind, though not avowed to any definite course of action, were common among statesmen and clergy and reflected the general attitude of society at the turn of the century. Such sentiments though could range, in

¹ Ernest Thrice Thompson, ‘The South’s Peculiar Institution’, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), pp. 323-335. See especially: p. 323.

² ‘Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1787’, *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Embracing the Minutes of the General Presbytery and General Synod 1706-1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), p. 540.

The Presbyterian Church consisted of three levels of government: the General Assembly (National), the Synods (Regional), and the Presbyteries (Local). However these successive levels of government were only added as the Church grew. Thus, the Church began with Presbytery of Philadelphia, which was superseded by the Synod of Philadelphia in 1717. A schism between New Light Presbyterians (Evangelical) and Old Light Presbyterians (Conservative) caused the creation of two Synods in 1745: the Synod of Philadelphia (Old Light) and the Synod of New York (New Light). These were, however, reunited in 1758 to form the Synod of New York and Philadelphia. This was, in turn, superseded by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1789 as the Supreme Court and governing body of the Church.

the Presbyterian Church alone, from a vague and non-committal acknowledgement of slavery as an evil to a worried fear that the Church, in extending its communion to slave owners, was giving the right hand of fellowship to unrepentant sinners. Officially, however, the Church's position was more or less clear.

The General Synod of 1787 had stated that it highly approved of the 'general principles in favour of universal liberty' and highly commended the 'interest which many of the states [had] taken in promoting the abolition of slavery', but the General Synod was also wary of the dangerous impact that a servile emancipation could have on society and therefore enjoined upon its members to give their slaves a good education, so as to prepare them for the 'better enjoyment of freedom'. Furthermore, it encouraged masters to give their slaves a 'peculium' or grant them sufficient time and means to earn their freedom.³ This declaration, though brief, set the tone of church's position on slavery for the next thirty odd years. The emphasis on education before freedom implied a gradualist approach, while the lack of condemnation and blame suggests they did not consider the act of slave owning in itself as sinful.

However, the declaration of 1787 (reiterated in 1793) was not an especially theological pronouncement.⁴ The synod merely affirmed 'the principles' that were already prevalent in American society without providing any biblical or theological basis for doing so. Indeed, the only sense in which the declaration was religious at all was that it happened to have been given by a church body. Admittedly reference was made in overture to the unity of the human race in God's creation and the importance of promoting each other's happiness, yet even this was couched more in terms of the 'rights of humanity' than scripture. It was only over the

³ 'Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1787', p. 540.

A 'peculium' was a fund administered and owned by a slave.

⁴ 'Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1793', *Extract from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1802* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803), pp. 10-11.

Note: There is a separate page count for each chapter in this digest.

coming thirty years that the church's position took on an overtly theological and condemnatory tone.

At the General Assembly of 1795 an overture was received from the Presbytery of Transylvania (which covered the state of Kentucky) detailing the circumstances of a 'conscientious' Presbyterian who viewed slavery as a 'moral evil' and yet was forced to live with those who, while agreeing with them in sentiment, still owned slaves. Should, the presbytery inquired, the 'conscientious' person hold Christian communion with the slave owners?

Whereupon, after due deliberation, it was resolved [by the General Assembly], that as the same difference of opinion with respect to slavery takes place in sundry other parts of the Presbyterian church, notwithstanding which they live in charity and peace, according to the doctrine and practice of the apostles, it is hereby recommended to all conscientious persons, and especially to those whom it immediately respects, to do the same.⁵

The Assembly then went on to assure such 'conscientious people' that it viewed slavery with the 'deepest concern' and referred them to its declaration on the subject at the assemblies of 1787 and 1793. Nevertheless, although reference was made back to the prior declaration, the assembly had given a theological nuance to their previous position. Effectively what the assembly had declared was that while slavery should be viewed as a social evil and its abolition sought, the 'doctrine and practice of the apostles' taught that the ownership of slaves was no bar to Christian communion and therefore those who objected to slavery were

⁵ 'Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1795', *Extract from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1802* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803), pp. 4-5.

not to rescind the right hand of fellowship from the slave owner. Slave owning, while viewed with the ‘deepest concern’, was still not considered a sin.

Despite the growing productivity of slave labour, anti-slavery sentiment continued to rise in the early nineteenth century as the burgeoning scheme of colonization got off the ground. The Presbyterian Church reflected these changes and, foregoing the tempered and reserved statements of the previous century, offered its most violent denunciation of slavery to date encouraging its members to support the new society for the colonization of free blacks and slaves. Leading up to this the Assembly of 1817 noticed ‘with pleasure’ the exertions throughout the country to alleviate ‘the condition of the people of colour’ especially through the foundation of ‘a society, for the colonization of free people of this description’.⁶ But it was the following year that would prove momentous.

The General Assembly of 1818 ‘unanimously’, that is, adopted with the full approbation of the Northern *and* Southern clergy, a report which declared slavery to be ‘irreconcilable’ with the ‘gospel of Christ’:

We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ, which enjoin that ‘all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.’⁷

⁶ ‘Minutes of the General Assembly 1817’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), p. 651.

⁷ ‘Minutes of the General Assembly 1818’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), pp. 692-694.

The report went on to encourage Christians to correct the sins of former times, to rejoice in the fact that the Presbyterian Church had begun this great work as early as any other, to sympathize with those in the South who had this unhappy burden forced upon them, and to not further injure the Africans by emancipating them in a manner that would be likely to destroy them and others but also not to use this as an excuse and a cover for a secret love and perpetuation of slave-owning. It then enjoined upon its members to endorse the scheme of colonisation, to instruct slaves in matters of religion, and to prevent and denounce cruelty against them, even going so far as declare that any Presbyterian who sold a slave in good standing with the church to be liable to the proper ecclesiastical judiciary. Effectively the declaration threatened to punish by, power of the Church courts, any Presbyterian who carried on his participation in the South's internal slave trade.

The Assembly's unqualified condemnation of slavery struck a discordant note with the past. While not necessarily contradicting any previous declaration, gone were the references to the 'doctrine and practice of the apostles' in receiving slave owners. Absent also, was the vague language and indeterminate resolutions of 1787. Rather, slavery was 'utterly inconsistent' with God's law, a 'blot' on holy religion that needed to be 'speedily' removed. Indeed, the declaration no longer depicted slave owning as position fully compatible with the Christian life. The slave owner was to have the hand of fellowship not because his position was acceptable but because it was unfortunate. He toiled under the evils of a past generation and could not be held responsible for their injudicious acts. The Assembly may not have specifically declared slave owning a 'sin', and this is a key point, but its denunciations were almost tantamount to such a statement, leaving the next the generation with a confusing theological heritage. Slave owning, according to the declaration of 1818, was a great evil that should be abolished, but, as was argued in 1795 the 'doctrine and practice of the apostles' was one of toleration. How, then, were Presbyterians to balance these statements not losing

one to other? Certainly, those who desired to maintain the Church, and their present understanding of morality and scripture intact, were bound to walk between Charybdis and Scylla. Here was a great evil that was yet to be tolerated.⁸

The declaration of 1818 remained the official position of the church for the next twenty-seven years. Opposition, however, was inevitable. The nascent pro-slavery advocates increasingly looked back with regret to the decision reached in 1818 and this fear was driven all the more by the growing ranks of immediate abolitionists within the church.⁹ These men, and significantly women too, deplored the old scheme of colonization and gradual emancipation that had so enamoured society at the turn of the century. Instead, looking to the sensationalism of William Lloyd Garrison and George Thompson in the *Liberator*, along with the more sage wisdom of divines Francis Wayland and William Channing in their works on morals, they came to vocally call for the immediate abolition of slavery. Human bondage, they declared, was not merely an evil but ‘a grievous sin’ to be rectified immediately, while those who participated in its perpetuation were to have withdrawn from them the hand of fellowship. Unrepentant masters were not welcome in the church of the abolitionist. Arrayed against this new force was the vehement and tenacious Presbyterian minister Robert J. Breckinridge (1800-1871). An anti-slavery proponent of the old school, he embodied the spirit and message of 1818 against the Abolitionists.

THE EARLY LIFE OF ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE

Breckinridge was a Kentuckian of illustrious heritage. His father, John Breckinridge, served in the Kentucky state legislature, the U.S. senate, and as the Attorney General of United

⁸ There is some debate over the significance of the declaration of 1818. John R. McKivigan, John W. Christie and Dwight L. Dumond hold that it was a weak and feeble instrument that posed no real threat to slavery, but this essay holds with Ernest Thrice Thompson that the ‘declaration was not regarded at this time or later as a mild indictment of slavery’. In fact, this essay goes on to argue that declaration of 1818 formed the foundation of both Breckinridge’s anti-slavery crusade and his anti-abolitionist attack. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, pp. 331-332. See the footnote at the bottom of 331. John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 25-26, 82-83.

⁹ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 393.

States under Thomas Jefferson. However, dying when the young Robert was only six, the stately John served his son more in name than in person, the role of parenthood devolving solely to his strong willed widow, Mary Hopkins Cabell Breckinridge. Devoutly religious, she had been swept up in the revivals at beginning of the century. Still, try as she might to educate her offspring in both John's philosophy and her religion, the young children did not always share their mother's sentiments. Moving through college Robert early showed a penchant for the pursuit of pleasure. Drinking, violence, games, and women ruled the years of his education. A combination that left him with a less than impressive academic record including: vast expenses, a suspension, three different colleges, and average results. But the young Breckinridge was more talented than his scholarly achievements might suggest. Foregoing a languishing career in law, Robert at twenty-five years followed his father and his, now deceased, older brother, Joseph Cabell Breckinridge, into the Kentucky legislature on his election in 1825. His position was clear: state interdependence, education, and the cessation of slavery, three principles that would continue to shape his life. Physical suffering, however, combined with the death of a daughter turned that life from politics to religion. In 1829 a public profession of faith led to a year's study at Princeton, followed by his ordination into the Presbyterian Church in 1832. As he stepped out into the world as a fully fledged Presbyterian minister he found the church's principles accorded well with his own, and continuing his fight against slavery, drew heavily upon them.¹⁰

IMAGINARY EVILS

Breckinridge's first major article on emancipation written in 1830, *Hints on Slavery*,

¹⁰ Unfortunately no major published biography exists on Robert J. Breckinridge, although James C. Klotter has written an expansive volume on the Breckinridges as a family in which he devotes four chapters of Robert. James C. Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), pp. 39-94.

represents something of a transition piece.¹¹ Written in the year of his conversion but prior to his reception into the ministry, the article's main focus was not the theology that would shape his future but the politics that had defined his past. For some time there had been agitation in Kentucky for a new or modified constitution. The movement, however, had aroused the opposition of Robert Wickcliffe, sometime senator for Kentucky. A change in the constitution, argued Wickcliffe, would allow the religious societies to sway the vote in favour of immediate emancipation. Although he asserted that he himself was a friend of the slave and of any scheme of gradual emancipation, this he believed would take centuries. In the meantime, he argued, the slave owner should look to his interests by opposing, if possible, any change to the constitution. Breckinridge sensed a humbug. Immediate abolition, he argued, was unheard of. No one he knew had ever promoted such an absurd scheme. 'It could not therefore', he retorted, 'be just reasoning, to suppose that opinions are held which all men renounce, and then infer from them the magnitude of evils which must be absolutely imaginary.'¹² Wickcliffe, he thought, was creating a bogey man. Either, he wanted to scare off abolition or he desired, for reasons unexplained, to avoid any modification in the constitution.

Taking Wickcliffe for the emancipationist he supposedly claimed to be, Breckinridge, presumed the latter, and attempted to show how the gradual emancipation of Kentucky's slaves could be legally effected without the modification of the state's constitution. This, he believed, could be done by imposing a tax on luxury goods (i.e. slaves) which could then be used to annually purchase, with or without the owner's consent, the freedom of a certain number of bondsmen and provide for their colonization in Africa. In essence, Breckinridge's

¹¹ Klotter comments of all three of Breckinridge's articles included here but with less depth, unconnected to the broader Presbyterian discussion and does not consistently highlight their anti-abolitionist tone: Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky*, pp. 66-67.

¹² Robert J. Breckinridge, 'Hints on Slavery', *Kentucky Reporter* (April, May, June, 1830). Republished as Robert J. Breckinridge, *Hints on Slavery* (1843), p. 5.

plan offered to use the state legislature to not only free the slaves but to completely remove them from Kentuckian society.

Nevertheless, what is striking about *Hints on Slavery* is not the plan itself but the assumptions on which the appeal is made. Breckinridge consistently assumed, and this in 1830, that his readers would agree that slavery was not only an evil but that it should be removed. Indeed, Breckinridge's major point of departure from Wickliffe was not over the moral status of slavery, this was always assumed to be evil, but over Wickliffe's inability to put the emancipation on a realistic timescale. This, Breckinridge lamented, was his failing:

In this circular, Mr. W. states that slavery will exist in the southern states for "centuries yet to come." And does a gentleman avowedly hostile to the perpetuity of slavery—openly expressing his reliance on Providence for the means of its extinguishment—and directly pledging himself to co-operate at all times in favor of any plan which will even tend to "effect the emancipation of the whole slave population gradually"—seriously recommend the postponement of every effort on this subject until after the lapse "of centuries yet to come"¹³

The extent to which Wickliffe felt compelled to expand the timescale of emancipation suggests he did not desire nor take emancipation too seriously and this, despite Breckinridge's forbearance, probably drove his opposition to constitutional change. Yet, the fact that he felt compelled to at least give lip-service to the idea highlights the sway it held over him and public discourse as a whole. The rhetoric of gradual emancipation and anti-slavery was a common inheritance, even if it sometimes lacked sincerity, while the idea of 'immediate emancipation' was, at this time, uncommon enough to be considered by Breckinridge as nothing more than a bogey man used to ward off any real discussion of

¹³ Breckinridge, *Hints on Slavery*, pp. 9-10.

gradual emancipation. Breckinridge's world in 1830 enunciated, sincerely or otherwise, an anti-slavery discourse, but this was all about to change.

HATEFUL TO SOCIETY

Written three years later in 1833 and published in Charles Hodge's *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 'Hints on Colonization and Abolition with Reference to the Black Race' was Breckinridge's second major foray into the public debate over slavery.¹⁴ It showed a man struggling to maintain, in the spirit of 1818, the old anti-slavery consensus that had permeated society only three years before. The change that had been wrought must have filled Breckinridge with fear and indignation.

In William Lloyd Garrison and *the Liberator* Wickcliffe's bogey man, and by extension his argument, had come alive. Wickcliffe could now point to the immediate emancipationist as a real threat and not merely an imaginary straw man filling in the holes of his argument. Moreover, the sensationalist activism of Garrison and the formation of the anti-slavery society shattered the peaceful consensus that had once bound the old anti-slavery men together.

From here Breckinridge would be forced to fight a battle on two fronts. On the one hand there were the slave owners, quickly deserting the camp of the gradualist, they now, increasingly, sought the ultimate justification of their position not in the eventual extermination of slavery but in the expediency of the institution itself. On the other hand were the abolitionists, or anti-slavery men, these sought the immediate cessation of slavery wherever it stood. Fighting against both was the sincere gradualist, Breckinridge. He sought in his article to maintain colonization and gradual emancipation against its detractors but especially the abolitionist

¹⁴ Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky*, p. 68.

who he believed to be primarily responsible for the increasing opposition of slave owners to any form of emancipation.

Beginning with some typically nineteenth century remarks on race Breckinridge quickly moved into a discussion of abolition and colonization. Abolition, he maintained, amounted to a complete levelling of the races which while not immoral was, he thought, against commonsense. The repugnance the white man felt for the African was natural and in accordance with nature, any attempt to mix the races would meet with public aversion. Even if it were possible, the course of nature would frustrate them, making again the races they sought to unify.¹⁵ Unless the Abolitionist could show that this aversion was, in and of itself, criminal staking a plan on overcoming it would be, argued Breckinridge, preposterous 'so long as any other way existed of effecting the chief end in view, which in this case [was] the good of the blacks.'¹⁶ Such a way, according to Breckinridge, did of course exist,

Colonization:

'The black man possesses no single advantage here, which he will not retain in an equal or higher degree in Liberia; he abandons no enjoyment here, which he will not be an hundred fold more likely to acquire there, than he ever can here.'¹⁷

The plan to see the immigration of 'the black man' both free and slave to the west coast of Africa would not only, he believed, avoid the racial tension present in society, and doubly present in the America dreamed of by the Abolitionist, but would bring the light of the

¹⁵ Robert J. Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization and Abolition with Reference to the Black Race', *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (July, 1833), pp. 285-288.

¹⁶ Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', pp. 285-286.

¹⁷ Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', pp. 287-289.

Christian gospel to the ‘dark continent’ and provide a place of reform free from the racial prejudice that had seen them so unfairly convicted and demonized in white America.¹⁸

Yet, in case anyone should mistake colonization, and Breckinridge, for one of those men who, like Wickcliffe, used gradual emancipation as a cover for a secret love of slavery and slave owning Breckinridge uttered, even quoted, a denunciation of slavery very much in the vein of 1818. Slavery he defined as the ‘condition enforced by the laws of one-half the states of this confederacy, in which one portion of the community, called masters, is allowed such power over another portion called slaves as’ to rob them of their rightful earnings, to encourage among them universal prostitution, to perpetuate their ignorance, and to set up between parents and children an authority higher than God.¹⁹ Such a system Breckinridge declared, citing the declaration of 1818 for support, was against the law of God:

And who will dare to say, that the Holy One of Israel will approve of and perpetuate that which is “inconsistent” with his own law, and “irreconcilable” in its repugnance to the Gospel of his Son? It cannot be; it will not be. Nature, and reason, and religion unite in hostility to this system of folly and crime. How it will end time only can reveal; but the light of heaven is not clearer than that it must end.²⁰

Nevertheless, to Breckinridge, it was the abolitionist and not the slave owner who was most responsible for retarding the end of slavery. By proposing a plan that was ‘hateful to the

¹⁸ Although clearly a participant in the racial prejudices of his period the early writings of Breckinridge often show some surprising deviations from the 19th century norm. He often argued that the poverty and ignorance of freemen was primarily the result of their inability to engage in civil affairs. He, very surprisingly, highlighted Haiti as an example of the civil virtue that could be achieved by freedmen, and, he even suggested that those of mixed European-African heritage were, far from being inferior to both races, those most inclined to show initiative in the freedmen community. Sadly such views waned, at least in his writings, over time. Compare for example the language of ‘Hints on Colonization’ with Robert J. Breckinridge, ‘Letter of Rev. Dr. R. J. Breckinridge to Hon. Charles Sumner’ *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review* 1, no. 7 (July, 1855).

¹⁹ Mark A. Noll argues that Breckinridge with Hodge ‘conceded that the Bible sanctioned a kind of slavery’, this essay suggests that at this early date Breckinridge did not think that the Bible sanctioned slavery but rather held, with the abolitionist, that slavery was criminal. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 415. Breckinridge, ‘Hints on Colonization’, p. 293.

²⁰ Breckinridge, ‘Hints on Colonization’, p. 296.

community' and 'ruinous to the blacks' the abolitionists drove the slave holder to disgust and 'set him more firmly against every scheme that [tended] toward emancipation'.²¹ In fact he went so far as to say that 'the abolitionists of America, have done more to rivet the chains of slavery, than all its open advocates have done!'²² For Breckinridge abolitionism was so utterly impractical that it was destroying any hope of emancipation. Its measures were impolitic and its plan, patently absurd. Yet the question was not one of mere expediency, it was equally moral and theological.

The abolitionists called for the immediate emancipation of slaves not on the basis of its practical benefits but on the grounds that slave holding was itself a sin. If, argued the abolitionist, slave holding was a sin then it was a moral imperative of all Christians to cease such activity immediately, therefore outlawing the possibility of any mediate or gradualist plan of emancipation. Breckinridge conceded the point. Slavery, he said, was 'criminal' (effectively he says it is a 'sin', redefining and nuancing the words of 1818 which judiciously avoided the phrase) but this, he thought, did not imply that slavery must end immediately. Rather, declared Breckinridge, 'it is the undeniable truth that society has the right of restraining the liberty, and taking away the life of any citizen for the public good.'²³ As mass emancipation was not in the interest of the public good, the state could restrict the liberty of former slaves and only gradually, as the 'public good' permitted, provide for the increase of their rights and their eventual colonization in Liberia. While the slave owner, under the supervision of the law, would act no longer as a master but, like a parent with a child, as a trustee, meaning the former master avoided the compromising moral position of a man unable to renounce his sin by claiming the title of one upholding the public good.²⁴ Thus there was, thought Breckinridge, no basis for abolitionism practically or morally. Practically it was

²¹ Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', pp. 303, 298.

²² Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', p. 298.

²³ Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', p. 298.

²⁴ Breckinridge, 'Hints on Colonization', pp. 298-303.

superseded by colonization, and morally it was no better than gradual emancipation, perhaps even, on account of ‘the public good’, worse. Taken as a whole abolitionism was ‘not more sound in morals, than it [was] hurtful if not impossible in practice’.²⁵

A SMALL AND ODIOUS PARTY

Despite Breckinridge’s public appeals the abolitionist cause continued to march forward, and he became increasingly alarmed at the progress of the ‘small and odious party’, his frustration even leading him to debate British abolitionist George Thompson in the June of 1836 (published as *Discussion on American Slavery*).²⁶ Thompson had, in an open letter to the *London Patriot* in May, offered to debate a certain ‘Dr Cox’ in order to establish his charge of sin against ‘America and American ministers’ he also offered to discuss the slave question publicly with any ‘American clergyman’. Breckinridge, who was at that time travelling from Wales to Glasgow as a delegate of the American Presbyterian Church, accepted the challenge. The following June the pair met in the chapel of anti-slavery clergyman Ralph Wardlaw to debate before a crowd which, after restrictions were removed, was ‘large and promiscuous’ with attendance far in excess of twelve hundred.²⁷ Sitting at the front of the chapel was Thompson, his aim: to defend the policy of the immediate abolitionists and his claim that slavery was ‘a national sin of America’.²⁸ Across from him sat Breckinridge, his purpose: to encourage the British public to disassociate themselves from the immediate abolitionist movement by assuring them that slavery was a state issue and therefore the imputation of national sin was invalid, by arguing that immediate emancipation was, practically speaking, absurd with little hope of success, and finally, by accusing the Abolitionist movement of misrepresentation and gross misconduct.

²⁵ Breckinridge, ‘Hints on Colonization’, p. 303.

²⁶ Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky*, pp. 69-70. Robert Breckinridge and George Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery* (Glasgow: George Callie, 1836), p. 8.

²⁷ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. iv. Note: See first footnote.

²⁸ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 15.

The imputation of slavery as national sin was more than mere hyperbole. If slavery was a national sin, it implied that slavery was to have a national solution. If the Northern states shared equally in the guilt of slavery as did the Southern states then it was a moral imperative that they should also participate in its end. In effect the idea of a national sin validated abolitionist tactics and anti-slavery actions on a federal level. Thus, it was Thompson's declared aim to 'show that Slavery in America was American Slavery—that the Congress of America—that the Constitution of America made it an institution of the country, and therefore a national sin of America.'²⁹ And if it were a national sin then it was, on all Christian principles, to be nationally, 'immediately, totally, and for ever abolished.'³⁰

If, however, as Breckinridge argued, the constitution merely provided for the federal union of otherwise independent republics with their own institutions and laws, slavery became a localized issue, concerning only slave owners and slave-owning communities. 'If Slavery were wrong, as he was fully prepared to assert it to be, then those States or communities which tolerated it were justly responsible at the bar of God, and at the tribunal of an enlightened world.'³¹

Although the difference between the two positions was at first glance innocuous, Breckinridge knew the Southern states well enough to know that Thompson's position was politically dangerous, even if he was right. If the Northern states were via congress to interfere with slavery, as Thompson sought, even if they were to interfere only with that slavery which existed in the District of Columbia it would threaten more than just the livelihood of the slave owners, it would threaten disunion:

²⁹ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 15.

³⁰ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 11.

³¹ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 34, 44.

Abolitionism asserts, that it is the clear duty of Congress to abolish Slavery instantly in that district, without regard to what may occur afterwards in consequence of that act. Let us admit, that the dissolution of the Federal Union is a consequence not worthy of regard, even when distinctly foreseen; and that all the evils attendant on such a result, to society, and to all the great interests of man throughout the earth, are as nothing, compared with the establishment of a doubtful definition, having an antiquity of at least four years, and a paternity disputed between Mr Garrison and Mr Thompson.³²

For Breckinridge, Abolitionism was no longer an absurdity it was a danger. It did not merely promote a slightly eccentric scheme of emancipation but peddled an interpretation of constitutional law that the Southern states would never accept. Like the Know-Nothings he would come to support, the stability of the Union, was to him, far more important than the crusade against slavery, for the imputation of national sin threatened an evil worse than slavery. This, however, would merely be the dreadful result of an already dreadful plan.

Abolitionism was, decried Breckinridge, an impossible scheme that hindered emancipation by its own absurdity. On an individual level it was simply inhumane. Were, he hypothesised, a man in the state of Louisiana to be convicted by their principles and immediately emancipate all his slaves the state, which did not recognise emancipation within its boundaries, would pick them up as vagrants and they would be immediately imprisoned or re-enslaved. Abolitionist principles, he felt, simply did not consider the long-term prospects of the slave, nor provide a reasonable outlet for the individual concerned with emancipation,

³² Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 84.

whereas colonisation provided the freed slave with a place ‘ready to receive’ him and a country ‘certain to be benefited’ by him.³³

Even on a grand scale, Abolitionism was left wanting. It proposed that slaves should not only be set free immediately but that on receiving their freedom they should be introduced to every civil right. This, argued Breckinridge, was tantamount to revolution. If the abolitionist had their way he assured his audience that ‘a revolution far more terrible and revolting would immediately follow throughout all our Slave States, than would follow in Britain, by enfranchising in a day every boy in it fifteen years old—even if your House of Lords were substituted by an elective Senate, and your Parliaments made annual!’³⁴ Such an insolent proposal surely even his British audience could abhor! The abolitionist scheme was, implored Breckinridge, simply not worthy to ‘supplant Colonization’ in the hearts of any ‘thinking people’ least of all those of America and Britain.³⁵

Despite all this Breckinridge did not think one had to seriously address abolitionist arguments, one could purely assess their behaviour to form an opinion of their plans reasonable enough. Thus, throughout the entire course of the debate he accused William Lloyd Garrison of inciting a mob against him in Boston, indicted Elizur Wright for creating a riot in an attempt to free a runaway slave, and accused Thompson of: deliberately misrepresenting the facts, using suspect evidence, making violent and injudicious remarks during his tour of the Northern States, using absurd logic, and possibly even telling a student at Andover Seminary that ‘every slave-owner deserved to have their throat cut, and that his slave ought to do it.’³⁶

³³ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, pp. 82-84.

³⁴ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 85

³⁵ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, p. 82

³⁶ William Lloyd Garrison would later publish his own version of the debates between Breckinridge and Thompson with his own ‘commentary’ in which he repaid Breckinridge’s unfavorable remarks in kind. William Lloyd Garrison, *Discussion on American Slavery Between George Thompson, Esq., and Rev. Robert J.*

Nevertheless, the most damning evidence that Breckinridge could bring came from within. On the fifth and last night of the debate Breckinridge, on ascending the platform, was given two items. The first was the paper Breckinridge had earlier cited, without evidence, concerning Thompson at Andover; the second was a brand new book, the first edition published in Glasgow, by the old time anti-slavery man and Unitarian, William Channing.³⁷ Thompson had widely praised Channing so when the short work, simply entitled *Slavery*, included more than a few unfavourable remarks as to the actions and behaviour of the Abolitionists and this from one of the foremost anti-slavery intellectuals of New England, the result would have been more than a little embarrassing.³⁸ On quickly leafing through the work Breckinridge commented to the audience: ‘Now, it so happens, that in this little book there is a chapter headed "Abolitionism." I have looked at it casually, within the last hour; and I beseech you all to read it carefully, and judge for yourselves of the utter recklessness with which Mr Thompson makes assertions.’³⁹ Although Breckinridge only recommended the work to his audience, over the coming years anti-abolitionists would gleefully quote from Channing to attack the cause. Nothing, it seemed, impugned the anti-slavery cause more than the self condemnation of its own behaviour.

BRECKINRIDGE & GRADUALIST OPPOSITION TO ABOLITIONISM

In 1849 the state of Kentucky finally called for the constitutional convention that Robert Wickliffe had so feared. Hoping to make good on the principles he had so stoutly defended against the abolitionists, Robert J. Breckinridge led an eclectic party of anti-slavery moderates, radicals, and conservatives whose aim was to ensure that the new constitution made a provision for the gradual emancipation of Kentucky’s slaves. Despite attracting some

Breckinridge, With Notes by Mr. Garrison (Boston: Isaac Knap, 1836). Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, pp. 24-23, 90, 105, 141-142.

³⁷ Andrew Delbanco, ‘Slavery and the Problem of Evil’, *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 116-153. See especially, pp. 123-137.

³⁸ William E. Channing, *Slavery* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1835).

³⁹ Breckinridge and Thompson, *Discussion on American Slavery*, pp. 142-143.

of the states foremost citizens to the cause, including: Henry Clay, Cassius Clay, William Breckinridge, John G. Fee, and Walter N. Haldeman, the friends of emancipation lost the vote.⁴⁰ Dwelling on Breckinridge's electoral failure, his friend and fellow Presbyterian Charles Hodge was not at a loss to apportion blame:

The recent discussions on abolitionism have generated a state of morbid excitement in the public mind. The unreasonableness of a part of the people in the northern States, has produced a corresponding unreasonableness in a portion of the South.⁴¹

Breckinridge could not have agreed more. While he believed with the Abolitionist that slavery was a sin and like the abolitionist ardently argued that it should be removed, their sensationalist behaviour combined with their eccentric views on American society and government were, he believed, responsible not for encouraging the freedom of the slaves but for riveting more firmly their shackles. They stunted the real progress of emancipation by making themselves a stench to slave owners and slave-owning communities. Their behaviour toward them was, as Channing displayed, insulting. Their understanding of the federal government and the constitution in relation to slavery, even if it was right, was such that they would never accept. Their desire to extend the elective franchise and civil rights, after abolition, to all freed slaves would appear to them as nothing short of revolutionary. And their naive conception of race would create a society which would be abhorred by the slave owner and be completely unfavourable to the former slave. This made Breckinridge all the more frustrated for, he believed, a reasonable plan of emancipation did exist, gradual emancipation and colonization. Robert J. Breckinridge's anti-abolitionism was driven by his gradualism.

⁴⁰ For an account of Breckinridge's campaign, see: Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky*, pp. 70-76.

⁴¹ Charles Hodge, 'Emancipation', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), p. 520.

CHAPTER TWO

CHARLES HODGE & SCRIPTURE

Jonathan Edwards left a permanent mark on American Calvinism. His erudite interpretation of Reformed theology carefully combined enlightened thought with an articulate defence of ‘the surprising work of God’ – the religious revivals that swept New England and the American colonies. A popular theologian, his methodology, a combination of speculative metaphysics and traditional Calvinism, was adopted and expanded by a new generation of scholars and revivalists. The resulting ‘Edwardsean’ culture that sprung up among New England theologians systematised and adjusted his thought for a new generation. Foremost among such men were Samuel Hopkins, Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, and most notoriously, Nathaniel William Taylor. Following in the footsteps of their teacher these theologians employed Edward’s metaphysical language to promote their social causes and revivalism.¹

Traditional Presbyterians, however, were not always willing to sing Edward’s praises. Although they appreciated his work and often adopted him as theologian in their own tradition, they were desirous to purge from their discussion what they saw as an excess of metaphysics, these ‘dangerous speculations’ seemed to place philosophy, reason, and conscience as the interpreter of scripture and the rule of faith, while traditional standards like the Westminster confession were ignored or maligned. Such behaviour, tolerable in the conservative Edwards, became increasingly unacceptable in the Edwardseans who begun the significant modification of New England Calvinism. Classed by traditionalists as heterodox these Edwardseans were often placed outside of the respectable theological spectrum, their

¹ Mark A. Noll provides a broad picture of the impact of the Edwardseans on American Reformed theology in his seminal work. Mark A. Noll, ‘The Americanisation of Calvinism: The Congregationalist Era, 1793-1827’, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 269-292.

beliefs labelled as Hopkinsianism or worse, the Taylorism of New Haven. Such innovation would not have concerned the traditional Presbyterians anymore than the pantheism of the German Transcendentalists, except for the fact that the Edwardseans formed a major party within their own church.²

Beginning in 1801 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church had contracted an agreement with the Congregationalist Association of Connecticut which was to provide for the mutual extension of their churches into the new settlements west of New York. As we saw in the introduction, the scheme allowed for the creation of Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and mixed Presbyterian-Congregationalist churches under the governance of the Presbyterian General Assembly. The general effect of the union halted the expansion of Congregationalist churches into new areas and multiplied the number of mixed Presbyterian churches, eventually resulting in the creation of four synods: The Synod of Western Reserve, the Synod of Utica, the Synod of Geneva, and the Synod of Genesee.³

But with the influx of New England Congregationalists came New England's peculiar schemes and Edwardsean theology. The resulting tension between traditional Presbyterians and New England Congregationalists simmered quietly under the surface of Presbyterian decorum until it burst forth in the mid thirties. Old School Presbyterians, dismayed at the

² For an overview of Hodge's relationship to Edward's theology and that of the Edwardseans, see: E. Brooks Holifield, 'Hodge, the Seminary, and the American Theological Context', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 103-123. See especially: 'Hodge and His Predecessors', pp. 107-110.

³ Most of the contemporary histories of the Plan of Union are written by partisans on one side or the other, the general facts are, however, clear: 'Minutes of the General Assembly 1801', *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its Organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), pp. 216, 221, 224-225. Alexander A. Hodge, 'The Disruption of the Presbyterian Church (1834-1838)', *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880), pp. 285-320. See especially: pp. 285-289. See especially: pp. 350-353. Benjamin M. Palmer, 'Old and New School Controversy', *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), pp. 181-210. Samuel J. Baird, 'The Plan of Union', *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxten, Remsen & Hafflefinger, 1868), pp. 154-168. William S. Kennedy, *The Plan of Union* (Hudson: Pentagon Steam Press, 1855). Ernest Thrice Thompson, 'Seeds of Division', *Presbyterians in the South, Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), pp. 350-361.

growing heterodoxy within their denomination and the General Assembly's seeming inability to stem its advocacy adopted *the Act and Testimony*.

Written by Robert J. Breckinridge and promulgated at an extra-judicial meeting in 1834, *the Act* deplored the theological variances introduced by New School Edwardseans and committed its adherents to the reformation of the Church and the discipline of its wayward members, it stated:

It is our steadfast aim, to reform the Church; or, to testify against its errors and defections, until testimony will be no longer heard. And we commit the issue into the hands of him who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.⁴

Nevertheless, the reasons for the 'old and new school controversy' or 'disruption', as it came to known, were more complex than is generally acknowledged by contemporary accounts of the 'thrice told tale'. While opposition was focused around Hopkinsianism and Taylorism, these theologies fed into a wider debate concerning more practical issues over which the New School was exerting their influence: co-operative missionary societies, polity, interpretation of the confession, and slavery. It was only with the culmination of these secondary concerns that the Old School was able to rally their forces and permanently remove the offending parties.

Among the secondary complaints levelled against the New School men was their growing tendency to adopt abolitionist sentiment. Even before 1830, overtures were brought to the Assembly on the subject of slavery, these were all ignored, but 'Southern commissioners were forced to listen again and again... as their right to church fellowship was questioned.'⁵

The overtures were, however, merely a matter of annoyance and many Southern Synods remained lukewarm in the fight against the New School. Yet, from 1830's onwards this

⁴ *The Act and Testament* quoted in Baird, *The History of the New School*, p. 425.

⁵ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p.384.

‘annoyance’ turned into a positive threat. New School Synods, largely in New York, became hotbeds of abolitionism and the General Assembly the focus of their actions. Every year they threw down the gauntlet to the Assembly, and every year their party grew. The prominent abolitionist Theodore Weld even reported that the number of anti-slavery men on the floor of the Assembly in 1835 had increased ten-fold on the previous year, possibly numbering as high as forty-two and potentially making up a quarter of the assembly!⁶ So when, for the first time since 1818, the Assembly of 1835 took up the gauntlet and sent the question of slavery to a committee for report, the Southerners woke up from their stupor.⁷

But anti-Abolitionist sentiment did not belong to the South alone rather it was widely represented throughout the controversy by whole spectrum of the Old School. First among them was Breckinridge. The heart and soul of the movement, he was not given to the abolitionism that drove the New School. As we saw in the previous chapter Breckinridge reviled those who insisted upon immediate emancipation for antagonising the Southern States and riveting harder the chains of slavery by the impropriety of their actions.

Second to Breckinridge were the Southerners themselves. Some like Amasa Converse, editor of the *Southern Religious Telegraph*, were still willing to admit with the declarations of the old General Assembly that slavery was an ‘evil’ but that it was bar to Christian communion or that abolitionism was a sound solution, he strenuously opposed.⁸ More common, however, Southern bodies simply dropped the language of evil entirely. The Synod of Virginia resolved

⁶ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 384.

⁷ ‘Minutes of the General Assembly of 1835’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), pp. 472, 490. When the committee reported to the Assembly of 1836 it proposed, after ‘furious’ debate, to indefinitely postpone any discussion of slavery, neither condemning slavery (as the abolitionists desired) nor declaring it a subject which the church had no authority to legislate (as the Southern Presbyterians desired). A significant minority, however, offered a minority report condemning slavery which no doubt encouraged Southern delegates to excise the New School the following year. No one was satisfied. *Minutes of the General Assembly in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1836), pp. 247-250, 271, 293-294. Ernest Thrice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 387-388.

⁸ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 381.

that slavery was not a sin, that the church had no right to legislate on the subject, and that ministers of the gospel should do nothing more than that proscribed by their ‘proper province’, teaching masters and slaves the duties enjoined upon them by scripture.⁹ The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia adopted a similar protest against Abolitionism but employed much stronger language, concluding:

Should this subject ever again be agitated by the Assembly or brought before it in any form, the Synod regard it as due to truth and justice and as required for the peace, the harmony and good of the Church, to settle it definitely and forever by adopting a resolution declarative of the sentiment, that the CHURCH HAS NO AUTHORITY TO LEGISLATE ON THIS SUBJECT.¹⁰

The third and most eclectic Old School group were the Princeton or moderate party, consisting of the professors of the Princeton Theological Seminary. They agreed with the Southerners that slavery was not a sin but, resisting a simple biblical literalism, they held with Breckinridge that slavery must still end. Immediate abolitionism, they held, constituted not only an improper and dangerous approach to scripture but retarded the emancipation of the slaves, provoked unnecessarily the division of the Church, and precipitated blindly the dissolution of the nation. Thus, while they held that slave owning was not a sin, they also argued that the ameliorating influences of the gospel must gradually secure, in the foreseeable future, the freedom of the slave and his elevation to citizenship. The man who encouraged Princeton to walk this middle path between pro-slavery and abolitionism was Charles Hodge (1797-1878).¹¹

⁹ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 385.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 386.

¹¹ For nature of Charles Hodge’s anti-slavery ideal, see: Allen C. Guelzo ‘Charles Hodge’s Anti-Slavery Movement’, in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 229-325. Mark A. Noll, ‘Failed Alternatives’, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 402-417. See especially: ‘Conservative Reformed’, pp. 413-417.

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHARLES HODGE

Born at the stroke of midnight on the eve of December 28th 1797, Charles was the fifth, and last, child of Hugh and Mary Hodge. One of only two surviving children he was brought up in Philadelphia by his soon widowed mother. For the next fourteen years she provided for the upbringing and education of her two children with an income derived from the Water Street Warf, which she had inherited. The coming war of 1812, however, and the non-intercourse act left the wharf and, by extension, her finances stifled. Forced to find a new means of support and desirous to provide for the further education of her sons she removed herself and her two boys to Princeton where she rented a small house and took in borders. Later that same year Charles, following his older brother Hugh, and entered the College of New Jersey. Distinctly Presbyterian, the College was founded by New Light Presbyterians and boasted among its first presidents evangelical Calvinists Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies. It was during the course of his studies at New Jersey that Charles made a confession of religion, the result or possibly the cause, of a minor revival in the College. Whatever the case, the experience had a profound effect on the young Charles and following his graduation in 1816 he entered the nearby and newly established Princeton Theological Seminary from whence he graduated in 1819. Although poised to enter upon a life of ministry, Hodge was, to his surprise, asked to return to the Seminary as lecturer in Greek, and more especially, Hebrew. From here the young scholar was appointed Professor of Oriental Languages and Biblical Literature at Princeton and became one of the first Americans to continue further study on the continent, creating international ties with some of the Germany's greatest intellects. Indeed, with a breadth of knowledge that could only be described as staggering, a confident tone, and a sincere love for science and reformed theology, Hodge was himself the epitome of the Renaissance man. He was not, however, locked in an ivory tower but spread his influence

through one of the foremost academic journals in the Presbyterian Church and indeed Britain and America, known by a number of names but most famously as *The Princeton Review*.¹²

IF SLAVE HOLDING IS A CRIME THE CHURCH IS, IPSO FACTO, DIVIDED

Charles Hodge's first anti-abolitionist article in *The Princeton Review* was a piece simply entitled 'Slavery'. Published at the height of the Old and New School controversy, it sought to maintain the unity of the Church by showing the errors of the New School and Northern Abolitionists. It was his peculiar aim to dissuade the New School from adopting legislation that would result in the secession or expulsion of Southern members. The essay was not, however, the first time the journal had published an anti-abolitionist article. Previous entries in the journal included a report on 'African Colonization' and Robert J. Breckinridge's 'Hints on Colonization and Abolition' noted earlier. These old articles formed the basis of Hodge's sentiment and he freely adopted and systematised much of their language and many of their ideas, but he also subtly critiqued those thoughts that struck him as unscriptural, especially those of Breckinridge.

The fiery Kentuckian had adopted the General Assembly's anti-slavery declaration of 1818 as his own, and the momentous report's strong denunciation of slavery shaped his language and, in turn, his theology. Thus, when the report stated that slavery was 'utterly inconsistent with the law of God' Breckinridge took it to mean with the abolitionists that slavery was both a crime and a sin. And while he attempted to counteract the abolitionist implication (that slavery should, therefore, end immediately) by employing the right of the civil government to restrict the liberties of certain citizens for the 'public good', Hodge appeared to think the whole argument was superfluous. Breckinridge had conceded too much to the abolitionist.

¹²For an overview of the Princeton Review, see: Howard Miller, 'Princeton Review', in Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 287-295. For an overview of Hodge's life, times, and influence, see: Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge*. John W. Stewart, 'Introducing Charles Hodge to Postmoderns', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 1-39.

Immediate emancipation was fallacious not because the government had the right to defend the 'public good' (although Hodge firmly believed it did have the right to do so) rather, immediate emancipation was wrong because scripture, the word of God and the rule of judgement, testified to the fact that slavery was simply not a sin.

To begin with, though, Hodge reaffirmed one of Breckinridge's main complaints the impolitic behaviour of the abolitionists which instead of bringing slavery closer to an end actually drove the slave owner into reaction. The abolitionists, he argued, appealed not to reason but to emotion. Foregoing rational and impassionate assessment they made heart wrenching, minute, and subtle descriptions of the worst forms of Southern slavery, calculated not to rationally convince but emotionally enrage. Quoting the work Breckinridge merely mentioned in an aside, Channing's *Slavery*, Hodge said: 'they have fallen into the common error of enthusiasts, that of exaggerating their object'.¹³

Enunciating exactly what he thought was wrong with their system of agitation Hodge argued that it was the difference between Britain and America, between an empire ruled from the metropol and a federation based upon states. The British abolitionist could appeal to and agitate an audience who, while owning no slaves, had the representative power and responsibility to end slavery throughout the empire. But the American abolitionist addressed himself to Northern men who had no power to end slavery. The scheme, Hodge declared, was absurd: 'We do not expect to abolish despotism in Russia, by getting up indignation meetings in New York.'¹⁴ The effort made to agitate the North, other than being a waste of energy, merely incited the planters against the abolitionists and did nothing more than make the prospect of emancipation all the more unlikely.

¹³ Charles Hodge, 'Slavery', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), p. 477.

¹⁴ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 476.

Be that as it may, all this meant nothing to Hodge in comparison to the abolitionist's erroneous approach to scripture which not only alienated slave owners but faithful Christians as well. Men, he thought, were too often on par as to their 'powers of reason'.¹⁵ They could honestly differ on a range of subjects and come to no clear conclusion. Thus, if there was to be any consensus among men, it must be on the basis of an authority higher than man. Only scripture then, not abstract reasoning, could ascertain the proper rule of judgement and the appropriate conduct to be taken in regards to Slavery. And in this matter, Hodge argued, scripture was clear:

It is on all hands acknowledged that, at the time of the advent of Jesus Christ, slavery in its worst forms prevailed over the whole world. The Saviour found it around him in Judea; the apostles met with it in Asia, Greece, and Italy. How did they treat it... Not by appeals to the passions of men on the evils of slavery, or by the adoption of a system of universal agitation. On the contrary, it was by teaching the true nature, dignity, equality, and destiny of men; by inculcating the principles of justice and love; and by leaving these principles to produce their legitimate effects in ameliorating the condition of all classes of society.¹⁶

Hodge's commonsense reading of scripture merely stated what he saw to be the 'facts' of the matter. Slavery was not condemned by Jesus and the Apostles rather they taught to all men true piety and love towards others, and allowed these principles to ameliorate, change, and improve society.

Thus, when the abolitionists denied this commonsense reading of scripture and substituted their own erroneous and doubtful interpretation declaring the slave owner to be a sinner and unworthy of the church's fellowship, the slave owner was rightly offended. For such people

¹⁵ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 480.

¹⁶ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 480.

could not be wiser than scripture, nor advance such an interpretation without calling into question the very actions of Christ and his Apostles.¹⁷ If slavery was a sin it did not merely challenge southern society it questioned the faith of the believer and very truth of Christianity itself.

Dramatic as the assertion appeared, Hodge could not be accused of staking the truth of Christianity on a simplistic or literalistic interpretation of scripture. He was quite willing to engage with, refute, and accept the historico-critical arguments that the abolitionists (and unscriptural gradual emancipationists) brought forward to explain away the Apostles' impious acceptance of slavery. Thus, when Channing argued that the scriptures could never really have accepted slavery because the Apostles condemned in turn all the attributes of the horrible Roman system, Hodge wryly retorted that there was, in fact, no stronger argument in its favour.¹⁸ If the Bible condemned all injustice and cruelty but not slavery did that not bespeak to its benefit? Did that not suggest that slavery could exist without all the sinful concomitants attributed to it in the Roman and American systems? This, Hodge affirmed.

Slavery as a relation, as the duty to labour for another, was *adiaphora*, that is, it belonged in morals to the category of things indifferent. Hodge illustrated this with the image of the Roman despot. The scriptures enjoined obedience to the Roman government, they did not, however, enjoin obedience to that government's cruelties or idolatries. Simply put, the apostles did not condemn the possession of power, even despotic, but they did condemn its abuse. The position, Hodge argued, was analogous with slavery. The Apostles enjoined obedience to the slave masters but never sanctioned their immorality. The relationship was innocuous. The possession of power was innocuous. Any abuse of that relationship or power was not. Slavery, the possession of despotic power on a miniature scale, could not be, Hodge

¹⁷ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 484.

¹⁸ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 485.

adamantly maintained, in and of itself sinful and those who maintained that it was perverted the very word of God. Yet, the perversion of scripture went deeper than the Abolitionists' false premise; it extended to their policy and theory of action, imperilling the scheme of emancipation and the very life of the church itself.

Emancipation and amelioration were principles that Hodge, like Breckinridge, took seriously. It was his firm belief that while the scriptures enjoined obedience to a society's power structures they also set about transforming those power structures from the inside out, elevating wherever possible every individual found within. Thus, while he maintained that slavery was not a sin, he rigorously advanced the position that holding people perpetually in a degraded state was:

It no more follows that because the master has a right to hold slaves, he has a right to keep them in a state of degradation in order to perpetuate their bondage, than that the Emperor of Russia has a right to keep his subjects in ignorance and poverty, in order to secure the permanence and quiet possession of his power. We hold it to be the grand principle, of the gospel, that every man is bound to promote the moral, intellectual, and physical improvement of his fellow men.¹⁹

Such a 'grand principle', he maintained, would not only ameliorate the condition of slave but eventually set him upon every principle and right of an American citizen.²⁰ And yet, this 'grand principle' contrasted not with those who justified slavery (Hodge deemed them to be nothing more than simple reactionaries) but the abolitionists and New School men.²¹

¹⁹ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 508.

²⁰ Hodge, 'Slavery', pp. 510-511.

²¹ Hodge's thought the pro-slavery argument was barely worthy of comment: 'It is so extreme an opinion when the mass of the population are slaves, that ignorance and degradation are conducive to excellence, that it is impossible that its disinterested advocates should ever be numerous.' Charles Hodge, 'West India Emancipation', *Princeton Review* 10 (1838, Oct), p. 608.

Immediate abolitionists were, in Hodge's mind, driven by one single overarching proposition: the belief that slaveholding was a heinous crime in the sight of God and that it should, therefore, end immediately. This moral imperative drove them to try and convince society of their principles and pushed them to enact them in practice. But as long as scripture served as the rule of judgement, and as long as they struggled to prove that it condemned slavery, American society, he thought, would remain unconvinced and their principles would be calculated not to resolution but mischief. The scriptural variance of the abolitionist would lead to the division of the friends of freedom, schism in the church, division in the nation, and more ominously, cause the nation to spiral into civil war.²² This was no more apparent to Hodge than in the actions of several New School Presbyteries:

[If the abolitionists follow their principles then] We shall become two nations in feeling, which must soon render us two nations in fact. With regard to the church, its operation will be much more summary. If slaveholding is a heinous crime, slaveholders must be excluded from the church. Several of our judicatories have already taken this position. Should the General Assembly adopt it, the church is, ipso facto, divided.²³

The actions of the abolitionists among the New School men appeared to Hodge as the vanguard of dissolution. Their attempt to discipline the slave holders through the church courts would end only in disaster. The result would place the slave owners beyond the influence of the church, fatally imperilling the scheme of gradual emancipation, and result in

²² Hodge, 'Slavery', pp. 504-505. On war see the quote below:

"Dr. Wayland says, that if the apostles had pursued the opposite plan of denouncing slavery as a crime, the Christian religion would have been ruined; its very name would have been forgotten. Then how can the course of the modern abolitionists, under circumstances so nearly similar, or even that of these reverend gentlemen themselves, be right? Why do not they content themselves with doing what Christ and his apostles did? Why must they proclaim the unlawfulness of slavery? Is human nature so much altered, that a course, which would have produced universal bloodshed, and led to the very destruction of the Christian religion, in one age, is wise and Christian in another." Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 488.

²³ Hodge, 'Slavery', p. 507.

ideological and actual division in the nation. Such a catastrophe, Hodge foresaw, would befall the country if the abolitionist continued in his principles and refused to submit to the commonsense reading of scripture. Prophetically disunion and schism struck but not, perhaps, where Hodge would have first expected.

A DISREGARD FOR THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

In Hodge's writings the abolitionist movement appeared as one giant monolithic anti-scriptural creature. Making up the numerous appendages of the beast were the orthodox abolitionists, verbally aggressive Garrisonians, and scripturally suspect gradual emancipationists. They all coalesced to such a degree in his mind that the orthodox abolitionist came under censure for the ideas of Garrisonians, and the suspect Gradual Emancipationist for cultivating the thoughts of orthodox abolitionists. All were condemned in one breath as manifestations of 'abolitionism' and all were stoutly accused of misunderstanding scripture. Yet, because he addressed them as one singular entity, one anti-scriptural behemoth, he never stopped to think that the word of God would become a source of disunity among the abolitionists themselves.

As the eighteen-thirties drew to a close abolitionism was ripped apart by internal tensions. Like Hodge and Breckinridge, many of the church-based abolitionists grew increasingly uncomfortable with the virulent approach that was championed by William Lloyd Garrison and *the Liberator*. Exasperated at their failure to turn the church institutions into vessels of abolitionism the Garrisonians, never particularly orthodox to begin with, had begun to promote the full participation of women while attacking: Sabbath observance, the authority of the clergy, and scripture itself, placing them increasingly at odds with both clerical and church-based abolitionists. Although seemingly unaware of the tension within abolitionism Hodge could see the fruit of the Garrisonian innovations and inadvertently, while attacking abolitionism as a whole, opined as to the true source of their woes. Contributing an article to

the *Princeton Review* in 1838 on the schemes of gradual emancipation employed in the British West Indies, Hodge begun his discussion by commenting on the current state of abolitionism and, because he either could not or would not tell them apart, the Garrisonian innovations.

The systemic problem with ‘abolitionism’ was their approach to scripture. They either set up among themselves an authority higher than the word of God or they, as Hodge had previously argued, wrested scripture ‘to suit their own purposes’.²⁴ The effect of which was to leave the individual in a moral vacuum. Where there had once been a ‘rule’ or a ‘guide’ there now sat ‘anarchical opinions’ which arbitrarily declared ‘truth and duty’, the abolitionists considering ‘their own light a surer guide than the word of God’.²⁵ The path cleared of biblical debris, liberal abolitionists could now, to the horror of their more conservative brethren, advocate the most radical and extreme views with impunity. In Hodge’s opinion such ideas tended to disaster: ‘Let these principles be carried out, and there is an end to all social subordination, to all security for life or property, to all guarantee for public or domestic virtue.’²⁶ Indeed, the Garrisonian advocacy of women’s rights was, in Hodge’s view, the primary example of such moral breakdown. Female activists simply applied the same approach to scripture that the abolitionists employed in their approach to biblical slavery.²⁷ Orthodox abolitionists were the authors of their own woes. Thus, whether Garrisonian or not, Hodge asserted that it was the immediate abolitionists’ erroneous approach to scripture that allowed such radical deviations. The Garrisonians were merely taking abolitionist principles to their logical conclusion.

LET GOD BE TRUE, BUT EVERY MAN A LIAR

Despite the eventual schism in the abolitionist movement, and the Old School’s exclusion of

²⁴ Hodge, ‘West India Emancipation’, p. 603.

²⁵ Hodge, ‘West India Emancipation’, p. 604.

²⁶ Hodge, ‘West India Emancipation’, p. 604.

²⁷ Hodge, ‘West India Emancipation’, p. 605.

the New School synods in the Presbyterian controversy of 1837-1838, a minority of abolitionists in the Church still sent overtures to the General Assembly calling on them to enforce the principles of 1818. These were, until 1845, roundly ignored but the consistent provocation may well have been what drew forth Hodge's third anti-abolitionist article in 1844. Appropriately entitled 'Abolitionism' the piece summarised and expanded upon his previous thoughts. It highlighted again the ultimate importance of scripture, it displayed what he believed to be the primary reason for the deviation of abolitionist from the biblical truth, and finally it showed the course that the Churches should, therefore, take in relation to slavery.²⁸

Opening with two cursory but new arguments, Hodge dismissed abolitionism because it condemned sincere and sensible Christians in the most violent terms. Their abusive attitude towards sound and reasonable people, Hodge maintained, could only be drawn from a perverted moral sense and a false principle.²⁹ In the second argument Hodge drew on the philosophy of Scottish Commonsense and argued that because all things are immediately perceived in their true character when they 'fairly presented', and because abolitionism had failed to gain the assent of a majority, it was, therefore, probably false.³⁰ Nevertheless, whatever may have been the merits of such arguments they were insignificant against the declaration of scripture. 'Let God be true, but every man a liar.'³¹

In Hodge's world all things bent to scripture, and in scripture it was 'plainly' taught that slavery was not, in itself, a sin. That the word of God inculcated this he thought was so obvious that it was a waste of time to even bother proving that scriptures taught it and that it was 'a great deal worse than a waste of time to attempt to make [the scriptures] teach the

²⁸ Charles Hodge, 'Abolitionism', *Princeton Review* 16 (1844, Oct), pp. 545-581.

²⁹ Hodge, 'Abolitionism', pp. 547-551.

³⁰ Hodge, 'Abolitionism', pp. 551-554.

³¹ Hodge, 'Abolitionism', p. 554.

contrary.’³² Still, ‘obvious’ as the case was, Hodge spent the next twenty pages making it. He first expounded what a ‘slave’ was. Spoke of the true nature of ownership and relation in society, then appealed first to the Old Testament then the New for evidence, concluding that scripture nowhere condemned slavery. Moreover, he commented, if the reader still found slavery unacceptable he assured them that because it was the very word of God itself, they must look to themselves as the source of the error and not scripture.³³

But what inside themselves was the source of their discontent with biblical truth? Such discontent, Hodge hypothesised, was derived from a misunderstanding of the word of God. The Abolitionist was either unable or not sufficiently enlightened enough to draw a distinction between slavery as sanctioned in scripture and the southern slave laws.³⁴ When they thought of slavery they thought of the injustice the southern laws perpetuated: the separation of families, the cruel treatment, and the forbiddance of religion. But scriptural slavery enjoined none of these things. On the contrary it called upon its practitioners ‘to do the direct reverse’: to protect families, to deal kindly with their slaves, to teach them Christianity, and to recompense them for their work.³⁵ Any candid man, Hodge argued, could see ‘that the scriptural doctrine is adapted to promote the best interest of the slaves’.³⁶ But because abolitionists confounded scriptural slavery with southern slavery and so, on the principles of the morality taught in scripture, condemned slavery in the abstract and in turn condemned the word of God on its own principles, they were led to either deny, ignore, or by ‘violent exegesis’ make scripture say what it never said. The tension, Hodge argued, could be alleviated by not confusing contemporary slavery with the injunctions of scripture.

³² Hodge, ‘Abolitionism’, p. 554.

³³ Hodge, ‘Abolitionism’, pp. 554-572.

³⁴ Hodge, ‘Abolitionism’, pp. 572-579.

³⁵ Hodge, ‘Abolitionism’, p. 576.

³⁶ Hodge, ‘Abolitionism’, p. 579.

Concluding his argument Hodge summed up in three points what he thought scripture required of northern Christians and in the process took aim at those northern presbyteries and abolitionists who continued to send overtures to the Assembly in favour of disciplining slave owners. In the first, he argued, any church court that decreed that slave owning was a sin trampled on the word of God. In the second, he declared that the church courts had no authority to interfere with slavery in the South. It was for southern Christians as citizens of their respective states to oppose the injustice of the southern slave laws. And lastly, he taught that it was sole role of the church not to lead a crusade against slavery but to enjoin upon its communicants their proper duties toward society, family, and slaves, and so commend themselves to everyone.³⁷ That was the end of the matter.

Hodge's article on 'Abolitionism' was as close as he ever came to a pro-slavery position. It was not that he desired to see slavery continue indefinitely, on the contrary, he was attacking what he perceived to be sole cause of its continuance. Rather, his article was generated by what he saw as the flagrant abuse and continuing misunderstanding of scripture among his own churchmen. The fact that the article ends in a rousing three point appeal to the Presbyterian Church courts is telling enough. Hodge wanted to see the position of scripture maintained in the Church even if that risked coming across as decidedly pro-slavery. The defence of the word of God meant upholding in strongest language and the clearest terms possible that Slavery was not, in and of itself, sinful. If the church courts would not maintain this principle it 'would be to trample on the word of God... rend the church, send abroad a spirit of malice and discord, and... cut off the slaves themselves from one of the most important means appointed by God for their improvement and emancipation; the instructions and kind treatment of believing masters.'

³⁷ Hodge, 'Abolitionism', pp. 579-581.

HODGE & SCRIPTURAL OPPOSITION TO ABOLITIONISM

Long after the civil war had past, when Charles Hodge came to look back upon his vast work for the *Princeton Review* he took the time to comment especially on slavery:

Nothing that the Bible pronounces true can be false; nothing it declares false can be true; nothing is obligatory on conscience but what it enjoins; nothing can be sin but what it condemns... and as, beyond doubt, the apostles admitted slave holders to the communion of the Christian Church, the conductors of this *Review*, from first to last, maintained that the doctrine that slave-holding is in itself a crime, is anti-scriptural, and subversive of the authority of the word of God.³⁸

Hodge's anti-abolitionism was, at its heart, a concern for the Bible. His driving principle was to maintain a common sense reading of scripture, however unpopular, against anyone who would attempt to explain away its overt and clear dictation. The abolitionists sinned in Hodge's eyes not because they promoted a scheme that was absurd, or dangerous, or inexpedient but because they affronted, twisted, and maligned the very word of God itself. It was his concern for scripture as holy writ that was forever paramount; every other concern to Hodge was subsidiary or secondary.

Indeed, Hodge held that every other concern was not only subsidiary but flowed forth as a manifestation of the abolitionists' erroneous approach to scripture. Thus, the untenable claim that Bible condemned slavery as a crime and a sin was the instigator, he believed, of an iliad of woes. By unjustifiably insulting the slave owners the abolitionist discouraged emancipation in any form. By ignoring the plain teaching scripture and arbitrarily dictating what was right and what was wrong the abolitionist set himself up as an authority higher than God opening society to anarchical opinions and beliefs. Finally, and most threateningly, the

³⁸ Charles Hodge, 'Retrospect of the History of the Princeton Review', *The Princeton Review* (1871) quoted in Alexander Archibald Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 333-335.

repeated attempts to discipline slave owners through the church judicatories would not reform the slave owner but give rise to his secession from both the Church and the Union itself. Allowed free reign anti-scriptural abolitionism would lead, Charles Hodge believed, to the dissolution of society.

CHAPTER THREE

JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL & CIVILISATION

The Act and Testimony radically altered the Presbyterian Church. From its inception in 1834, Robert J. Breckinridge's document changed the very nature of Presbyterian polity. By calling for an extra-judicial meeting of conservatives prior to the General Assembly of 1835 it transformed the disparate and uncoordinated discontent of traditional Presbyterians into a focused ecclesiastical force. For five long years (1830-1834) the Assembly had been under the control of a New School majority. The New School, while often quite traditional in themselves, were disinclined to reprimand those members among themselves who held to modifications of New England Calvinism, like Lyman Beecher and Albert Barnes. They also advocated the merger of Church missionary endeavours into independent missionary societies emanating from New England. But hardline traditionalists abhorred their tolerance of theological variance and doubly despised the idea of putting their missionary efforts solely into the hands such men. Thus, when the extra-judicial meeting called for by *the Act* finally led to an Old School majority in the Assembly of 1835, the traditional Presbyterians quickly set about enacting a raft of reforms. Most notably they annulled the plan of union (but did not abrogate it) and forbade any further churches to be founded on its intermediate platform. Furthermore, they declared it a right of the Presbyteries to be satisfied as to qualifications of their applicants (especially those tainted by the heterodoxies of the New School), and they made provisions for the adoption of a Foreign Missionary Society to be controlled not by an independent board but by the General Assembly.¹

¹ 'Minutes of the General Assembly of 1835', *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), pp. 461-492. See especially: pp. 484-487.

A plan half completed, however, is a plan easily reversed. By 1836 a resurgent New School had returned a small majority to the General Assembly who quickly set about rescinding many of the reforms of the previous year. Although they made no attempt to resurrect the plan of union they did block the acceptance of the church controlled Foreign Missionary Society and, more seriously, acquitted Albert Barnes (and by extension Lyman Beecher) of heresy.² Conflict was inevitable. The Old School, now properly incensed, was aroused to action. Convening after their defeat they organized yet another extra-judicial meeting of conservatives prior to the next General Assembly. The following year found the pre-assembly conference amply attended by Old School men set upon enacting severe disciplinary measures against the New School or, failing that, purging the Church of them all together. Thus, when the General Assembly of 1837 was convened and the Old School discovered themselves to be in a sizable majority, they finished what they begun two years ago. Making their first major move on the fifth day of assembly, Breckinridge proposed, with the Assembly's consent, that a committee of equal members from the Old and New Schools should consult together upon the possibility of a voluntary division of the church. The plan, however, was thwarted and committee was discharged when Old School members came to suspect that the New School was stalling for time. If the New School could force the matter to be passed over to the next General Assembly, they could present a majority and turn the tables.³ Aware of the situation, Old School leaders consulted as to how they might move the division forward and in a manoeuvre both bold and brash, William S. Plumber proffered the following position:

² *Minutes of the General Assembly in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1836). See especially: the trial of Albert Barnes, pp. 251, 256, 265-266, 268-271, 287-289; and the refusal to accept the Foreign Missionary Society, pp. 257, 278-279, 291-293.

³ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1845* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1845). See especially: pp. 426, 427, 430-437.

That, by the operation of the abrogation of the Plan of Union of 1801, the Synod of the Western Reserve is, and is hereby declared to be, no longer a part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.⁴

After several fierce exchanges the resolution was passed and the same rule was then adopted a few days later for the Synods of Utica, Genesee, and Geneva. In a moment almost half the Church was excinded. The New School, however, still had one more card to play.⁵

On the dissolution of the General Assembly members of the excinded synods held counsel. Unwilling to acknowledge their removal they declared, among other things, the abrogation of the Plan of Union and the excinding of the four synods to be unconstitutional and, therefore, null and void. They then enjoined upon their commissioners to claim seats in the General Assembly of 1838 and, failing that, to organise a ‘constitutional’ assembly. The battle would come down to a physical showdown. As the time approached both sides held pre-assembly conferences, the Old School determined to maintain the action of 1837; the New School defiantly planned to see that it was declared void. The situation was precarious.

Commissioners from the four synods were no longer acknowledged by the Old School as members of the church but if the New School could physically control the floor they might be able to force, by presence of person, the enrolment of their members. Aware of this the Old School commissioners arrived early, filling up the foremost pews of the church and forming a protective barrier around the Moderator. The New School, kept from the front of the assembly, was forced back nine or ten rows, their leaders forming a centre, somewhat distant from the pulpit, in the middle line of pews. The actors had taken their places. The former moderator, a Dr. Elliot, then stood up, preached his opening sermon, and proceeded to report the roll and organise the assembly. But, just at that moment, one of the New School leaders, a

⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1845*, pp. 439-440.

⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1845*, pp. 441, 444-446

Dr. Patton, leapt to his feet and shouting ‘Moderator! Moderator!’ requested permission to tend certain resolutions to the house that concerned the roll. Elliot was not, however, in sympathy with the New School and pronounced him out of order, he appealed, but Elliot again pronounced him out of order, informing Patton that no house yet existed for him to appeal to. The clerks then began the enrolment but commissioners from the four excised Synods were refused. Tensions mounted. The New School, sensing their scheme was falling through, fell upon their secondary plan and proceeded to organise a ‘constitutional’ Assembly in the middle of the Old School Assembly! In a distinct reversal of Presbyterian decorum, ministers stood on seats and on the back of pews as they watched New School commissioners loudly proclaim a Dr. Beman temporary Moderator of the General Assembly. Some feared a riot, but the newly formed ‘constitutional’ Assembly then judiciously retreated out of the building and proceeded to reorganise themselves at the nearby First Church. Thus, did the New and Old School controversy end.⁶

The Presbyterian schism is unique in antebellum America. For, unlike the latter controversies in the Methodist, Baptist, and New School Presbyterian churches, the Assembly did not divide over slavery nor did it segregate Northern and Southern men down the Mason-Dixon Line. Rather, in the expulsion of the New England element of the Church, the Assembly

⁶ The Minutes of the General Assembly summarise the events succinctly but without detail, ending: ‘It was then moved to appoint a Committee of Elections to which the informal commissions might be referred. But the reading by Mr. Cleaveland still continuing, and the Moderator having in vain again called to order, took his seat, and the residue of the Assembly remaining silent, the business was suspended during the short but painful scene of confusion and disorder which ensued. After which, and the actors therein having left the house, the Assembly resumed its business.’ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1838* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1838). See especially: pp. 1, 7-8. Other summaries of the events, of which the above is a composite account, include: Samuel J. Baird, ‘The Disturbance of 1818’, *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Hafflefinger, 1868), pp. 537-558. Benjamin M. Palmer, ‘Old and New School Controversy’, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), pp. 181-210. Alexander A. Hodge, ‘The Disruption of the Presbyterian Church (1834-1838)’, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), pp. 285-320. Mark A. Noll, ‘Calvinism: Explosion 1827-1860’, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 293-329. See especially: ‘Presbyterian Schism, 1837-1838’, pp. 308-311. C. C. Goen, ‘Secession Scenario’, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 68-74. Ernest Thrice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963). See especially: ‘Old and New Schools’, pp. 362-376; ‘An Aroused South’, pp. 377-394; ‘Reforming and Constitutional Assemblies’, pp. 395-412.

united political and theological conservatives from across the country. This is not to suggest that slavery played no part in the schism. As we have seen in the previous chapter many of the Southern bodies were rallied to action out of a fear that abolitionist sentiment in the New School would lead the General Assembly to adopt punitive action against the Southern Synods. But as many Southern Presbyterians merely tolerated the New England innovations the introduction of the issue of slavery was as much an excuse to expel the troublesome Synods as it was a reason in and of itself. Furthermore, many of the Anti-Slavery conservatives, like Hodge and Breckinridge, were as keen to be rid of the abolitionist element as was the most ardent pro-slavery Southerner. Thus, while they were unified in their common cause against the innovations of New England they were held together in that unity by their mutual disdain for abolitionism.

The expulsion of the abolitionist element, however, and the resultant waning of anti-slavery sentiment among the Southern Synods significantly altered the prevalent position of the Church on slavery. Throughout the controversy with the New School, Breckinridge had strongly maintained the declaration of 1818 against its Southern detractors. He refused to allow its revocation as a condition to the participation of Southern Synods but he did extend an olive branch by agreeing to not agitate the issue for the duration of the disturbance.⁷ Yet, as time wore on and the divisions in the Methodist and Baptist churches in 1845 necessitated a new report upon the issue of slavery, the opportunity presented itself to supersede the increasingly embarrassing declaration of 1818.⁸ As was previously seen the Southern Synods desired to see the Church adopt a position of neutrality on the subject of slavery, while other anti-slavery conservatives like Hodge were keen to be rid of the ambiguous language of 1818 which, tending to suggest the criminality and sinfulness of slavery, played into the hands of

⁷ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, p. 393.

⁸ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1845* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1845), pp. 16-18.

abolitionists. The new report, adopted by the General Assembly of 1845, reflected these new opinions:

Resolved, 1st. That... the existence of domestic slavery, under the circumstances in which it is found in the southern portion of the country is no bar to Christian communion.

2d. That [to make slavery a matter of discipline]... is evidently to separate the northern from the southern portion of the Church;-a result which every good citizen must deplore as tending to the dissolution of the union of our beloved country, and which every enlightened Christian will oppose as bringing about a ruinous and unnecessary schism between brethren who maintain a common faith.⁹

The neutrality of the position may well have been shaped by Hodge who, as we have seen, wrote an article with similar sentiments only a year before. But the guiding hand and spirit of the new declaration was a Southern Clergyman by the name of James Henley Thornwell.

THE EARLY LIFE OF JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL

The son of an obscure estate manager in Marlborough District, South Carolina, James Henley Thornwell was born to the sights and sounds of plantation life on December 9th 1812, almost a generation behind his major contemporaries, Hodge and Breckinridge. Orphaned at only eight years, Thornwell was raised by his mother, a pious Baptist of Calvinistic persuasion, and educated under the auspices of two benefactors who took an interest in the promising young man, a planter by the name of General James Gillespie, and a young lawyer, William Robbins. Financially supplied and personally befriended by these men, Thornwell was afforded the opportunity of a liberal education that saw him through the local academy and into the young South Carolina College, where he first encountered the common sense

⁹ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1845*, p. 18.

philosophy he would champion, honed his skills as an acute metaphysician, grew in his love of the classics, and struggled with his Christianity. Following his graduation he taught at an Academy in Cheraw, resolved the religious tension in his life, united with the Presbyterian Church, and sought acceptance as a candidate for ministry. The following year, after a brief sojourn at Andover and Harvard, he was licensed to preach and given his first pastorate. Nevertheless, his life as a local pastor would be brief, for only two years later he was appointed Professor of Logic and Belles Lettres at his old College in 1837. Despite several brief pastoral stints Thornwell would remain in South Carolina College serving in one capacity or another, his presence giving the Presbyterian Church undue influence throughout the country. A state of affairs amplified by his eventual appointment as President, a position he only relinquished late in life when he took up his post as professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. In the meantime, however, he served as a Presbyterian representative within the College and extended his spiritual influence over the students through his appointment in 1841 to the College Chaplaincy and the chair that came with it ‘the Professorship of Sacred Literature and the Evidences of Christianity’. Throughout his academic life he remained active in his local Presbytery and Synod, and was regularly appointed as a delegate to the General Assembly, where he gained prominence in the debate over the question of ‘Romish Baptism’ in 1845. Allied with his strong personal friend Breckinridge against Hodge and the *Princeton Review*, Thornwell maintained in several well received speeches and articles the invalidity of Roman Catholic Baptism. The position he took carried the Assembly and the day by a vote of one hundred and seventy-three to eight.¹⁰ Thornwell’s articulate attack won the esteem of the assembly and it was, then, to no surprise that the committee charged with forming the Assembly’s new position on slavery consulted

¹⁰ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1845*, pp. 15.

this new champion of orthodoxy and adopted, with modifications, a report largely from his hand.¹¹

THE MANIA OF ABOLITIONISM

The Romish affair had far reaching consequences for the nature of anti-abolitionism. The Presbyterian Church was by nature collegiate, its ecclesiastical structure not investing power in a single individual but in a complex system of presbyteries, synods, and assemblies, which served legislative, judicial, and governmental purposes on local, regional and national levels respectively. The complex system of government made the exertion of influence equally complex and difficult. If an individual or a group desired action upon, or the national acceptance of, certain theological, judicial, or governmental principles it was required of them to convince a majority of the commissioners that their desires were sound. Such an influence could not be easily exercised. On a personal level, private correspondence could ensure that influential persons backed the cause. Equally imperative were the skills of rhetoric, a strong performance on the floor of the Assembly could secure votes. Increasingly important, party-based tactics and the use of pre and post assembly conferences, as seen in the Old and New School Controversy, assisted in developing a common mind and a common action. But more subtle than any of these measures was the ability to control academic opinion. Thus Princeton, the first and the largest theological college in the Church, and the *Princeton Review*, the Church's only academic quarterly, could sway the Assembly in the formation of the mind and move the Synods in the dissemination of its opinion. Yet, Southern Presbyterians like Breckinridge and Thornwell often found themselves at odds with *Princeton's* esteemed editor, Hodge, the Romish question being neither the first nor the last of their disagreements. The differences were all the more troubling to Breckinridge and

¹¹ For a general overview of James Henley Thornwell, his life, character, and influence, see: Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*. And James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986). See especially: 'The Southern Clergy and the Slavery Debate', pp. 195-234.

Thornwell because of Hodge's influence in the Church. Unwilling to be placed under the ban and censure of his strong editorial hand, Thornwell formed a counterweight, the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, which not only gave a distinctly Southern voice to the theological discussion but helped construct a distinctly Southern Presbyterian culture and worldview. And to what must have been Breckinridge's increasing dismay, a biblical defence of slavery provided much of framework for that worldview, altering the very nature of anti-abolitionism in the Presbyterian Church and giving it the air of pro-slavery.¹²

It was not long after the Romish affair that the new theological quarterly struck a distinctly Southern note. In 1847 two articles in quick succession from Thornwell's pen discussed the issue of slavery in relation to infant baptism and religious education. What is striking about both these essays is the complete nonchalance with which they approach the issue of slavery. In the Northern Press slavery had always been presented as *the* issue, as *the* question to be resolved, as *the* position to be attacked or defended. This was equally true of the *Princeton Review* and Hodge whose articles always discussed slavery in relation to gradual emancipation, opposition the abolitionism, or biblical justification. Yet, Thornwell's *Southern Presbyterian Review* simply accepted slavery as the state of affairs in which society operated and discussed not the expediency of the institution itself but cursory theological questions which assumed from the outset a general acceptance of slavery.

Foremost in such assumptions was Thornwell's first article on slavery for the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 'The Baptism of Servants', which commented on and defended the

¹² For Thornwell and Breckinridge's conflict with Hodge, the Princeton Review, and the founding of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, see: Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*. See especially: the conflict with Hodge, pp. 251-261, 288-291; the founding of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, pp. 295-296; Thornwell's opinion of Hodge, pp. 297-299, 386-387. For a brief overview of the Southern Presbyterian Review, see: Jack P. Maddex, Jr., 'Southern Presbyterian Review', in Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 303-311.

resolutions of the Synod of South Carolina on the question of paedobaptism and slavery.¹³ The Presbyterian Church, like other bodies developing out of the magisterial reformation, upheld and defended the infant baptism of children on the basis of the parent's faith. The question then arose for Southern Presbyterians as to the duty of believing masters towards the newly born children of their slaves. The Synod resolved, and Thornwell defended, that because the Abrahamic covenant included the circumcision of his slaves and their inclusion in the familial promise, therefore, baptism which supersedes circumcision as the mark of the new covenant was to be administered to all newly born children under master's care, whether slave or free, because slaves were considered part of the family and therefore part of, and under the protection of, the family covenant.

His second article, 'the Religious Instruction of the Black Population', moved forward on the same foundational principles.¹⁴ Ignoring all discussion of the morality of slave owning, Thornwell discussed instead the expediency of the fledgling plan to found a church in Charleston solely for the religious instruction of the slave population. John B. Adger, a prominent Presbyterian pastor and missionary, felt that despite the good intentions of many slave owners to worship together at church with their slaves, the services were not catered towards their level of understanding nor did the churches have the physical space to accommodate both free and slave. The solution, he and others proposed, was the creation of a Presbyterian Church solely for the religious instruction of the slaves, to which Thornwell gave his hearty approbation. Entirely absent from this discussion, however, was any defence whatsoever of slavery. It was always taken as a foregone conclusion in these minor matters that slavery was not itself the problem.

¹³ James Henley Thornwell, 'Baptism of Servants', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1 (June, 1847), pp. 63-102.

¹⁴ James Henley Thornwell, 'The Religious Instruction of the Black Population', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (December, 1847), pp. 89-103.

The serene acceptance of slavery revealed a southern church, if not a society, secure in their opinion and, therefore, surprisingly unconcerned in their anti-abolitionism. Indeed, insofar as abolitionism appears at all in Thornwell's early discourse it is represented as the distant concern of somewhat insane men that are so obviously false that one need merely address them in the offhand and once done not even bother to mention them further. Thus, Thornwell in the first five pages of the 'Baptism of Servants' describes them as men who are 'impatient with the scriptures' or desire to impose upon them 'a new and holier meaning'. Men whose attempts at disproving the scriptural acceptance of slavery have been 'signal failures', and whose minds have been 'smitten with the mania of abolitionism'.¹⁵ Indeed, Thornwell was inclined to think of abolitionism not as something to be reasoned with but almost as an actual form of insanity. Six years before he had visited England and the continent and happened to travel some distance with a man who turned out to be a quite ardent abolitionist, writing of him in his journal he commented:

[Abolitionism] is a hot, boiling, furious fanaticism, destroying all energy of the mind and symmetry of character and leaving its unfortunate victim like the [?] oak, a spectacle of pity and dread...

Abolitionism is only a single aspect – a special distinction of an absorbing mania – a particular form of a general spirit of madness and fanaticism. Socialism, teetotalism, perfectionism are all symptoms of the same great disease. The agitations of modern times, the convulsions of Church and State [are] the elements which have produced this monstrous gangrene [sic] of society.¹⁶

Thornwell's anti-abolitionism was fuelled by contempt and driven by the belief that abolitionists were incomprehensible, men with a malady of the mind which could be

¹⁵ Thornwell, 'Baptism of Servants', pp. 65, 68, 66.

¹⁶ Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, pp. 217-218.

addressed by neither reason nor good sense. They were not worthy of a response. Yet, as America began to teeter on the edge of disunion and the country threatened to ‘shiver into atoms’, Thornwell, the ardent unionist, would be driven to address what he saw as source of the present madness: a misconception of the nature of biblical slavery and its relation to civilisation in the present age.

AGAINST THE DESPOTISM OF THE MASSES

John B. Adger’s plan to construct a church solely for the religious education of the slaves received a mixed reception among the residents of Charleston. Some defended the benevolent project and even showed a willingness to help fund the construction of the edifice and a similar one for the Episcopalian Church. Others, however, like the unnamed Presbyterian who anonymously styled himself ‘many citizens’ were strongly opposed to the project and it was not long before such ill tempered opinions caused the controversy to descend into violence. In the December of 1849 a large mob formed late in the evening and set upon tearing down the partially completed structures. Not too soon, the angry crowd was tempered by the quick thinking of several prominent citizens who promised there would be a public meeting to gain the sense of the community on the project. The timely appeal paid off and the benevolent scheme was carried forward on the impassioned speeches of John C. Calhoun’s replacement, Senator Francis H. Elmore, and prominent local politician James L. Petigru.

Half a year after the disturbance the Anson street Presbyterian Church was completed, but with the riot still fresh in the memory of Charleston’s citizens it was felt prudent to assist in allaying any residual fear. Adger, therefore, enlisted the help of the prominent Presbyterian and South Carolinian who had written so articulately in defence of the scheme, James Henley Thornwell. Having recently relinquished his duties at South Carolina College, Thornwell had received a pastoral change in Charleston, from whence he would soon be recalled to take up his place as president of his old College. In the meantime, however, Adger put his eminent

mind to good use and asked if Thornwell might christen the new Church with a discourse upon ‘the question of our country and day’, slavery. It was Adger’s hope that the sermon, delivered to a group of respectable white Charleston citizens, might: disabuse their minds of any lingering doubt as to his purpose, encourage them to instruct their slaves in religion, and help correct any ‘world-wide errors which prevailed as to the true character of slavery’.¹⁷

Delivered on May 26th 1850, Thornwell’s discourse, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, depicted Southern Society in its struggle with abolitionism as a war between regulated freedom on the one hand and the despotism of the masses on the other.¹⁸ Undergirding this contrast was a belief in organic society. The idea that a healthy society, which under God’s providence has come from the unfathomable depths of history, grows and matures slowly over time toward an equally unfathomable future, and that sudden and dramatic alterations by human hands to such an incomprehensible organism are unhealthy and dangerous and make an impious sport of civilisation in the same way the infidel does with the name of God. This Thornwell contrasts with what he refers to as ‘society as machinery’. The belief that society as manmade is understandable like a machine and may, therefore, be tinkered with and modified as faults are believed to appear. The first emphasises the sovereignty and providence of God, the second, the ingenuity and ability of man.

¹⁷ For the events surrounding the construction of the Anson street church including the riot and Thornwell’s time in Charleston, see: John B. Adger, ‘Five Years’ Work as Missionary to the Negroes in Charleston’, *My Life and Times* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899), pp. 164-200. Palmer, ‘Call to Charleston’, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, pp. 339-354. Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁸ James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1850). Reprinted as: James Henley Thornwell, ‘The Rights and Duties of Masters’, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 4 (December, 1850), pp. Mentioned in: Thornwell to General James Gillespie, 17th June 1850, in Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, pp. 345-346. For an alternative reading of the text, see: in Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, pp. 220-226. Mark A. Noll, ‘The Bible and Slavery’, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 386-401. See especially, pp. 393, 399-400. And Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, pp. 536-537. For an understanding of Thornwell’s argument in the Pro-Slavery context, see: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, ‘The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders World View’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 216-219.

Using this as a framework for his understanding of the present crisis Thornwell then casts the abolitionists with those machine revolutionaries of Europe:

The parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders – they are atheists, socialist, communists, red republicans, jacobins, on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other.¹⁹

The duty of man was not to radically alter society as he found it but to discharge his duties to God and maintain steadfastly the principles of social order. For real change in civilisation came not from man but over vast periods of time by the super-inducement of the spirit. Nevertheless, Thornwell was aware that his opponents in America were, for the most part, neither philosophical deists nor atheists but professing Christians and the larger part of his argument was dedicated to proving how they had misunderstood biblical slavery and inadvertently adopted the spirit of socialism.

The first point Thornwell made was that the abolitionists had misapprehended the nature of slavery as revealed in scripture. William Channing, the eminent Harvard Unitarian, and William Whewell, the English theologian and moral philosopher, had both argued in their works on morals that slavery abrogated the foundational relation of man to man. Forced to obey completely the will of another, the slave, they argued, was divested of his moral nature and became no longer a person but a thing. Not a human but an object with no independent existence. Slavery was, thus, a complete and utter infraction of humanity itself. Thornwell could not have disagreed more. The property of man in man was a fiction, he argued, completely unscriptural and utterly impossible:

“The blind passivity of a corpse, or the mechanical subservience of a tool,” which Dr. Channing, and Prof. Whewell regard as constituting... slavery – precluding as it does

¹⁹ Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, p. 14.

every idea of merit or demerit, of approbation or of censure, never seems to have entered the head of the Apostle. He considered slavery as a social and political economy, in which relations subsisted betwixt moral, intelligent, responsible beings, involving reciprocal rights and reciprocal obligations. There was a right to command on the one hand –an obligation to obey on the other. Both parties might be guilty of injustice... Religion held the scales of justice between them – and enforced fidelity upon each by the awful sanctions of eternity.²⁰

Abolitionists were therefore wrong to impute sin to slavery on account of an infraction of basic humanity or the abrogation the slave's morality to another. No one, maintained Thornwell, could be divested of their moral nature. The soul may be lost but it could not be taken, sold, or made gift of. On the contrary, he argued, slavery was only ever slavery insofar as the bondsmen had the moral obligation to labour for another and the voluntary will to do so freely or with recalcitrance. This, Thornwell upheld against the abolitionists, was the slavery of scripture and the Apostle Paul.

Drawing back toward his central accusation, Thornwell's second point argued that Abolitionism was a form of perfectionism in the vein of socialism which was incompatible with the temporal reality of a sinful world. Channing and Wayland had, with many others, put forward the idea that even if slavery was not incompatible with the letter of the scriptures it was incompatible with the spirit of Christianity. Thornwell trod carefully. That slavery was incompatible with the spirit of Christianity fully consummated in the new kingdom, he wholeheartedly affirmed. There would be no bondage in heaven. But that slavery was incompatible with that spirit in the present world, he completely denied. The Abolitionists had confounded the present state of sin with the future prospect of glory:

²⁰ Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, p. 21.

We are not to judge the institutions of the present by the standard of the future life – we are not to confound the absolute and relative. For aught that we know slavery may stand in somewhat the same relation to political society, in a world like ours, in which mortality stands to the human body; and it may be as vain to think of extirpating it, as to think of giving man immortality upon earth. It may be, and perhaps is, in some of its forms, essential to the imperfect society; and it may be, and perhaps is, the purpose of God that it should be found among men as long as the slime of the serpent is over the earth.²¹

The mistake of the Abolitionists was an eschatological error. It centred upon their confounding of two realms. The consummated kingdom where every member stood in equal relation to the other before God, and the present degraded realm where sin necessitated graduations, limitations, harsh laws, hospitals, punishments, and an array of other unsightly devices to help society function and keep public order. Moving forward on this misnomer the abolitionists condemned ‘every arrangement of society’ in this life that did not to secure the complete equality of position in the next. They marched forth against the South not in the hope of heaven but in the chaotic belief that they could make heaven on earth. ‘It is,’ concluded Thornwell, ‘the very spirit of socialism and communism’.²²

At the heart of James Henley Thornwell’s discourse was the relation of slavery to civilisation. Slavery, he argued, was a concomitant of society in the present age, useful for keeping order in a sinful world. He repeatedly attempted to disabuse it of any religious implications either in morals or eschatology. It was, he believed, a question of moral indifference and a state of things that may form part of society till the end of the age and the return of Christ. What mattered in this present age was fulfilment of duty by men in their respective roles. There

²¹ Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, pp. 33-34.

²² Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, p. 35.

should not, in Thornwell's view, be any attempt to tamper with society. It was an incomprehensible organism, undue modifications entailed disaster. Abolitionists and those who enunciated similar principles such as Channing, Wayland, Whewell, confused the present age with that to come and so fell into the eschatological error of perfectionism and socialism. Their attempt to enact their levelling principles was an attempt to bring heaven to earth and their inconsiderate tampering in the name of benevolence would bring about the ruin of America's 'vast imperial Republic'.²³

A WEAPON OF THE SOCIALIST AND THE LEVELLER

By 1851 South Carolina was hot with the fervour of secession and Thornwell, the ardent Unionist, was appalled to find the spirit ran through not only many of its foremost citizens but many of the clergy as well who, to his great displeasure, fanned the flame of secession and urged South Carolinians 'on to the most desperate measures'. Writing to Robert J. Breckinridge in the March of that year he deplored the secessionist sentiment in his native state and lamented the unpopularity of the pro-union position. 'From the beginning,' he wrote to his old friend, 'I have opposed, according as I had the opportunity, all revolutionary measures.'²⁴ Yet, convinced as were most anti-abolitionists and pro-union southerners that the source of their woes lay with Northern radicals, Thornwell appropriately counselled caution at home and the non-interference of radicals abroad, in one of his many responses to the secessionist crisis.

Adopted by the Synod of South Carolina as its position in 1852 and intended as a circular to all Christian churches being published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* of that same year, Thornwell's 'Report on Slavery' advocated the spirituality and definability of the church's

²³ Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, p. 9.

²⁴ Thornwell to Robert J. Breckinridge, March 28th 1851, Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, p. 477. Thornwell had uttered similar sentiments in an undated manuscript on slavery. 'Revolutions are always dangerous', he wrote, 'Long established institutions cannot be destroyed without countless hazards', James Henley Thornwell, 'undated manuscript', *Thornwell Papers* quoted in Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, pp. 217-218.

power and encouraged her, and those churches who had taken the opposing position, to simply stay out of civil affairs as the only way to save the nation.²⁵ The report could roughly be broken up into three sections: the advocacy of *Jure Divino* Presbyterianism, the misapprehension of scripture and slavery, and the immediate danger of abolitionism.

Jure Divino Presbyterianism, in its simplest form, could be described as the belief advocated by Thornwell, Adger, and Breckinridge among others that the church has no authority to legislate where the scriptures have not enjoined. This was in contrast the prevailing position advocated by Hodge which argued that where Christ has not enjoined and not prohibited the Church was at liberty, under the wise counsel of the scriptures, to do that which would most effectively further her enterprise.²⁶ Although primarily related, in the aftermath of the Old and New School controversy, to the utility of Missionary boards, Thornwell had extended the doctrine to encapsulate the question of the Church's relation to slavery. In conformity with this viewpoint, Thornwell regarded it as the duty of all Christian churches to remain silent as to the sinfulness of slavery, and only enjoin upon their members the duties scripture had prescribed which, of course, fell far short of condemning slavery. In promulgating this position Thornwell undoubtedly had in mind those churches which had, only recently, divided over the Mason-Dixon Line by adopting some form of disciplinary action against slave owners: Baptists, Methodists, and in 1858 New School Presbyterians. Had these churches stood on the naked testimony of scripture instead of adopting abolitionist principles, Thornwell argued, the church would have been spared 'the most effective dissertations against slavery'.²⁷

²⁵ James Henley Thornwell, 'Report on Slavery', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (January, 1852), pp. 379-394.

²⁶ For a brief summary of *Jure Divino* Presbyterianism, see: Thompson, 'Jure Divino Presbyterianism', *Presbyterians in the South*, pp. 510-529.

²⁷ Thornwell, 'Report on Slavery', pp. 380-383.

Having laid down his doctrine as to the nature of church government, Thornwell moved against the principles of Christian anti-slavery, both abolitionist and gradualist, by asserting that their attempts to prove that the scriptures condemned slavery were based upon the most strained and strange interpretations of scripture. Breaking down the anti-slavery argument he placed it in to three categories: those who drew their principles from abstruse speculations, those who attempted to strain or force the meaning of biblical passages, and those who forced scriptural principles through a system of morals that necessarily excluded part thereof.

Nevertheless, the foundational principle in all these approaches, he felt, was the pre-determined belief that slavery was a sin and the retro-active attempt on their part to prove how scripture had somehow, in spite of the evidence, condemned it. Such principles of exegesis, he declared, undermined the scriptures and society:

Who is authorised to limit the application of this sweeping principle to the sole relation of slavery? It is as much the weapon of the socialist and the leveller as of the abolitionist, and the church cannot accept it without renouncing the supremacy of the scriptures.²⁸

Abolitionism, Thornwell repeatedly asserted, attacked more than just slavery, for when the abolitionist, in his ignorance swung his axe at the institution of slavery he threatened to bring down upon their heads the lofty branches of civilisation itself.²⁹

If society was to be saved, if the Union was to be maintained, Thornwell urged, abolitionists had to abandon their principles. Men were not at liberty to invent systems of morality from their own mind; they could not ignore, according to their own will, the words of the Bible; nor could they dictate new doctrines to scripture which in attacking slavery also assaulted the covenant of grace and Christian assurance. If men continued to collude in abolitionist

²⁸ Thornwell, 'Report on Slavery', p. 387-388.

²⁹ Thornwell, 'Report on Slavery', pp. 384-390.

principles and join in their ‘unhallowed crusade’ against slavery they would all soon have reason to repent when it had ‘crushed and ground to powder the safeguards of life and property among themselves.’ The Union, Thornwell exhorted against the northern abolitionists and South Carolinian secessionists alike, could not last unless Christian men realised that slavery was no grounds for discord. In Jesus Christ there was neither bond nor free. Why, then, did Abolitionists persist in drawing the distinction?³⁰

JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL AND SOCIETAL OPPOSITION TO ABOLITIONISM

As the presidential election of 1860 approached, James Henley Thornwell’s anti-abolitionism, his patriotism, and his strong distaste for secession or revolution almost brought his opinions full-circle. For a moment, but only a moment, he considered endorsing the scheme of gradual emancipation, the scheme that had been so warmly promoted by his old friend Breckinridge. Far away from the growing conflict Thornwell had been on his second tour of Europe. From May to early September the Old World had shielded him from the growing tensions of his native state and country. His letters, unconcerned by the escalating excitement, were filled with the warm patriotism of a home-sick American and revealed a sincere Unionist, a man proud of his state and equally proud of the esteem his country was held in throughout all of Europe.³¹ Reminiscing privately to his friend and future biographer Benjamin Palmer, Thornwell had said it was there, so far from home, in Europe when he had decided to move for gradual emancipation:

In relation to this, however, it may be incumbent upon the writer [Palmer] to mention here a fact connected with the subject of these memoirs, which is perhaps known only to himself. Dr. Thornwell said to him, in 1861, that whilst in Europe he had made up his mind to move, immediately upon his return, for the gradual emancipation of the

³⁰ Thornwell, ‘Report on Slavery’, pp. 390-394.

³¹ For an account of Thornwell’s trip to Europe, see: Palmer, ‘Second Trip to Europe’, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, pp. 449-466. See especially: p. 457, 459.

negro, as the only measure that would give peace to the country, by taking away, at least, the external cause of irritation. "But," added he, "when I got home, I found it was too late; the die was cast."³²

Although at first confusing, the momentary emancipationist fits well in Thornwell's overarching worldview. It highlights, especially, one peculiar aspect of his anti-abolitionism: his complete and utter distaste for revolution and his strong disinclination to encourage any form of societal modification.³³

For Thornwell society was complex incomprehensible organism which God had brought from the unfathomable past and was taking forward to an incomprehensible future. Change was natural but slow, progressive, and induced by the Holy Spirit. While moral perfection was unlikely if not impossible due to the continuing affects of sin in the world. Thus, Civilisation, in his view, was not something that should be or could be greatly altered without generating an avalanche of disorder or disaster. Hence, abolitionists and those who held to similar principles such as perfectionists, and some gradual emancipationists, were anathema to Thornwell because they promoted a worldview that encouraged the manmade modification of a 'machine' society and upheld as an ideal for that civilisation an image that looked distinctly liked heaven. This explains his constant allusions to abolitionism as the spirit of socialism and communism, for both these movements attempted to achieve by revolutionary measures on earth what Thornwell thought should be left to heaven. But, when push came to shove and South Carolina threatened to secede, Thornwell's anti-abolitionism reversed its focus. The greatest revolutionary threat came now not from the North but southern firebrands. His brief acceptance, therefore, of gradual emancipation probably represented in

³² Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, pp. 482-483.

³³ This is a distinctly different interpretation of James Henley Thornwell's anti-slavery moment than that offered by William H. Freeling. Freeling linked Thornwell's consideration of gradual emancipation to his grand image of a rightly enforced biblical slavery, but this reading connects it to his organic conservatism and his disdain for revolution. Both readings are, however, compatible. William H. Freeling, 'James Henley Thornwell's Mysterious Antislavery Moment', *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 3 (August, 1991), pp. 401-403.

his mind the lesser of two evils. Better that slavery should slowly disappear than that the United States should be dissolved. The nation trumped the peculiar institution as the most worthy thing to be preserved. Thus, we could speak of Thornwell's anti-abolitionism as a form of organic conservatism that resisted dramatic modification but made allowances for lesser alterations if these would stave off more revolutionary alterations. James Henley Thornwell's anti-abolitionism was conservatism with a pressure valve.

CONCLUSION

As to slavery, it is a question about which men may differ, according to the necessities of their condition and point of view from which they consider it. But the cordial, and indissoluble Union of these States, is a matter which no true American who has a true heart in his bosom, can possibly have but one opinion – one purpose.

- Robert J. Breckinridge to Charles Sumner, 1855¹

On the 20th December 1860 South Carolina voted to secede. The following May the General Assembly met in Philadelphia, united for last time. Few southerners were in attendance, some refused to take their seats, others rightly feared for their safety. But despite their absence, many still held out hope that the Church might yet stay united amidst the storm. Accordingly, on the third day of the Assembly when Dr Gardiner Spring enquired as to the whether the General Assembly might make ‘some expression of their devotion to the Union of these States, and their loyalty to the Government’ the resolution was voted down by a hundred and twenty three votes to a hundred and two.² Just as the Old School had held that the abolitionist had no right to make slave owning a bar to Christian communion, so they now opined on the same principles that Unionists had no right to make their interpretation of the constitution a condition of fellowship in the Church. The following morning, however, the General Assembly awoke to indignation of the popular press and a ‘shower of threatening telegrams’.³ More ominously, a clerical effigy hung from a tree outside the meeting place, a shingle attached to its foot read “Death thus to clerical traitors”.⁴ Three days later Spring again

¹ Robert J. Breckinridge, ‘Letter of Rev. Dr. R. J. Breckinridge to Hon. Charles Sumner’ *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review* 1, no. 7 (July, 1855), p. 301. Also: Robert J. Breckinridge, ‘A Letter to Hon. Charles Sumner’, *The New York Times* (July 25, 1855).

² *Minutes of the General Assembly in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1861). p. 303.

³ Alexander A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), p. 22.

⁴ Ernest Thrice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 564.

brought resolutions encouraging the Assembly to adopt pro-union sentiments. This time they were not laid on the table.⁵ Discussions were heated but a sizable portion of the Assembly, led by Charles Hodge, continued to stand by its principles. Events were, however, moving against them. During the debate Hodge was repeatedly approached by John Bergen, an old acquaintance. “What shall I do?” he had exclaimed in apparent distress, “I am opposed to these resolutions, but if I vote against them, I can never go home.”⁶ Bergen’s fear was evidently felt by many for when Spring’s resolutions were again put to the house they were passed this time by a majority of one hundred and fifty-six to sixty-sixty.⁷ When Bergen was called to give his vote, Hodge recalled, he arose and said, “Mr Moderator, I want to say no, but I must say yes.”⁸ Thus, what the abolitionist had failed to achieve in thirty years, the violent temper of American patriotism had achieved in twelve days. The eventual failure of the Old School Presbyterian Church, however, should not lead us to discount as unimportant the anti-abolitionism that held them together throughout the antebellum period. Rather, the persistence of the Old School Presbyterian Church emphasised the importance and continuing vivacity of their conservative worldview in the antebellum world.

Old School anti-abolitionism was wedded to the old anti-slavery movement. Although often portrayed in scholarship as worn and tired out, Presbyterians like Robert J. Breckinridge and Charles Hodge continued to advocate gradual emancipation and colonization as the only plan with a reasonable hope of success. It provided for the gradual removal of slavery without promoting class warfare or levelling, it avoided inhibiting racial tension, provided a place for the free development of the former slave, and brought the gospel to the heart of Africa. By contrast immediate abolitionism was a practical absurdity and a moral misnomer that achieved nothing but the ruin of gradual emancipation. The abolitionists, it was argued,

⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1861*, p. 308.

⁶ Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge*, p. 22.

⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1861*, pp. 329-330.

⁸ Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge*, p. 22.

appealed not to reason and good sense but promoted revolution and radical social levelling by a tirade of impassioned abuse and denunciation, driving the slave owner into reaction and riveting harder the chains of slavery, the end result destroying all prospect of emancipation from within slave owning communities. But such behaviour, they believed, was merely the outworking of a more devious principle, the deliberate misapprehension of scripture.

The defence of a common sense reading of scripture constituted the ideological heart of the Old School's opposition to abolitionism. The abolitionists held it as their foremost principle that slavery was a sin and that it must, therefore, end immediately, and like most antebellum Americans they justified their case by appealing to scripture. To argue such a position, however, the abolitionist had to ignore the plain reading of scripture by adopting historico-critical arguments that explained away the Bible's acceptance of slavery or by making appeals to the 'spirit' of the scriptures over and above their basic literal sense. Traditional Presbyterians, however, despised such an approach to scripture. Hodge and James Henley Thornwell argued that the abolitionist was retroactively attempting to apply his ideals to scripture and so set himself as an authority higher than scripture. The effect was to undermine the foundational moral structure of society leading to the collapse of traditional understandings of social subordination, virtue, security, property, and indeed, civilisation itself.

Indeed, the Old School's anti-abolitionism was not merely linked to their old anti-slavery worldview or their traditional conception of scripture but constituted a defence of society itself. Thornwell, giving the debate a distinctly Southern tone, argued that the postmillennial perfectionism of the abolitionist encouraged them to achieve on a sinful earth what could only be possible in the perfection of the new creation. The abolitionist thought they could modify and perfect the world like a machine, but such a conception of society, Thornwell believed, was erroneous if not disastrous. Thornwell conceived of society as an

incomprehensible organism that had come from an unfathomable past and was going forward, by the grace and providence of God, to an equally unfathomable future. Thus, tinkering with society was to make sport with the unknown. For how could a man fix what he could not comprehend? The inconceivability of society made all revolutions and all major modifications of society undesirable. Whether it was the social revolution of the communist, the societal dissolution of the anarchist, or the immediate emancipation of the slaves, it was all equally undesirable and all equally to be opposed.

Yet, all these concerns were subsidiary to one single aspect of the Old School's anti-abolitionism, the preservation of a non-sectional Presbyterianism and the ongoing integrity of the United States of America. Although Breckinridge, Hodge, and Thornwell as Christians and Presbyterians always had a higher concern than that of the country, the one note that was repeatedly struck throughout all their lives was the belief that abolitionism was precipitating the destruction of the nation. Breckinridge had warned his listeners in Glasgow that if the abolitionist attempted to interfere, by action of the federal government, in the Southern States peculiar institution the result would be Civil War. Hodge had urged similar concerns, if the abolitionist enacted discipline against slave owners through the Church the Southern members would secede creating two nations in feeling which would soon render them two nations in fact. Finally, Thornwell declared that if the abolitionists did not abandon their principles all the safe guards of life and property would be ground into dust and the Union would be lost. The anti-abolitionism of Old School Presbyterians was at its core a defence of the Union. So what then happened?

The Old School Presbyterians had hoped that if they could stay united in their opposition to abolitionism the Union could be saved. But they inevitably forgot in their discourse that they were not the only evangelical Church in America. William S. Plumber's dreadful prophecy of Christian disunion precipitating a bloody civil war may not have been true for the Old School

Presbyterian Church but it was for the significantly larger Methodist and Baptist Churches.

Thus, when the nation inevitably did 'rend the star-spangled banner in twain', the Old School Presbyterians were at a crossroads. Would they, in defiance of a nation at war, maintain their unity? Or would they finally succumb to the spirit of the age? History tells us that they chose the latter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

‘Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1787’, *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Embracing the Minutes of the General Presbytery and General Synod 1706-1788*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), pp. 527-541.

‘Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1793’, *Extract from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1802* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803), pp. 1-13.

‘Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1795’, *Extract from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1802* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803), pp. 1-5.

‘Minutes of the General Assembly 1801’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its Organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), pp. 211-234.

Minutes of the General Assembly 1817’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), pp. 635-668.

‘Minutes of the General Assembly 1818’ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), pp. 668-696.

‘Minutes of the General Assembly of 1835’, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), pp. 461-492.

Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1836 (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1836).

Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1838 (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1838).

Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (New York: Scatcherd & Adams, 1838). Note: New School.

Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1845 (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1845).

Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America A.D. 1861 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1861).

Adger, John B., ‘Five Years’ Work as Missionary to the Negroes in Charleston’, *My Life and Times* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899),

Baird, Samuel J., ‘The Disturbance of 1818’, *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxten, Remsen & Hafflefinger, 1868).

Breckinridge, Robert J., ‘Hints on Slavery’, *Kentucky Reporter* (April, May, June, 1830).
Republished as Robert J. Breckinridge, *Hints on Slavery* (1843).

Breckinridge, Robert J., ‘Hints on Colonization and Abolition with Reference to the Black Race’, *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (July, 1833), pp.281-305.

Breckinridge, Robert J., (with George Thompson), *Discussion on American Slavery* (Glasgow: George Callie, 1836).

Breckinridge, Robert J., 'Letter of Rev. Dr. R. J. Breckinridge to Hon. Charles Sumner' *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review* 1, no. 7 (July, 1855).

Channing, William E., *Slavery* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1835).

Garrison, William Lloyd, *Discussion on American Slavery Between George Thompson, Esq., and Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge, With Notes by Mr. Garrison* (Boston: Isaac Knap, 1836).

Hodge, Charles, 'West India Emancipation', *Princeton Review* 10 (October, 1838), pp. 602-644.

Hodge, Charles, 'Abolitionism', *Princeton Review* 16 (1844, Oct), pp. 547-581.

Hodge, Charles, 'Slavery', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), pp. 473-511.

Hodge, Charles, 'Emancipation', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), pp. 513-538.

Hodge, Charles, 'Retrospect of the History of the Princeton Review', *The Princeton Review* (1871)

Hodge, Alexander A., *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880).

Kennedy, William S., *The Plan of Union* (Hudson: Pentagon Steam Press, 1855).

Palmer, Benjamin M., *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875).

Schaff, Phillip, *America* (New York: C. Scribner, 1855).

Thornwell, James Henley, 'Baptism of Servants', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1 (June, 1847), pp. 63-102.

Thornwell, James Henley, 'The Religious Instruction of the Black Population', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (December, 1847), pp. 89-103.

James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1850). Reprinted as: James Henley Thornwell, 'The Rights and Duties of Masters', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 4 (December, 1850).

Thornwell, James Henley, 'Report on Slavery', *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (January, 1852), pp. 379-394.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Farmer, Jr., James Oscar, *The Metaphysical Confederacy* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986).

Freeling, William H., 'James Henley Thornwell's Mysterious Antislavery Moment', *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 3 (August, 1991),

Genovese, Eugene D., (with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese), 'The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders World View' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 211-233.

Goen, C.C. , 'Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Regional Religion and North-South Alienation in Antebellum America', *Church History* 52, no. 1 (March, 1983), pp. 21-35.

Goen, C.C. , *Broken Churches, Broken Nation* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

Guelzo, Allen C., 'Charles Hodge's Anti-Slavery Moment', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 299-325.

Delbanco, Andrew, 'Slavery and the Problem of Evil', *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Holifield, E. Brooks, 'Hodge, the Seminary, and the American Theological Context', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 103-123.

Klotter, James C., *The Breckinridges of Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

Kull, Irving Stottard, 'Presbyterian Attitudes Toward Slavery', *Church History* 7, no. 2 (June, 1838).

Maddex, Jr., Jack P., 'Southern Presbyterian Review', in Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 303-311.

McKivigan, John R., *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Miller, Howard., 'Princeton Review', in Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 287-295.

Moore, Edmund A., 'Robert J. Breckinridge and the Slavery Aspect of the Presbyterian Schism of 1837' *Church History* 4, no. 4 (December 1935), pp. 282-294.

Nettles, Tom, *The Baptists, Volume Two: Beginnings in America* (Ross Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2005).

Noll, Mark A., *America's God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Purifoy, Lewis M., 'The Southern Methodist and the Pro-Slavery Argument', *The Journal of Southern History* 32, no. 3 (August, 1966), pp. 325-341.

Smith, Elwyn A., 'The Role of the South in the Presbyterian Schism of 1837-1838' *Church History* 29, no. 1 (March, 1960), pp. 44-63.

Staiger, C. Bruce, 'Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837-1838', *The Mississippi Historical Review* 36, no. 3(December, 1949), pp. 391-414.

Stewart, John W., 'Introducing Charles Hodge to Postmoderns', in John W. Stewart and James H. Moorhead, eds., *Charles Hodge Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 1-39.

Sweeney, Douglas A., *The American Evangelical Story* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005),

Thompson, Ernest Thrice, *Presbyterians in the South Volume One: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963).

Tise, Larry E., *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).