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“Until Another and Better Destiny May be Unfolded”:

The Proslavery Ideology of Four Southern Presbyterians

By Jake Nelson



Reverend Frederick Augustus Ross

In a speech before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, New York, in 1853, Reverend Frederick A. Ross defended the southern institution of slavery, arguing that while it was neither ideal nor permanent, it was not inherently contrary to the law of God. Ross based his argument on the Bible, using scriptural themes and words to make his points. “Let the Northern philanthropist learn,” said Ross, “the relation of master and slave is not sin *per se*.” The

Presbyterian minister put forth his belief that slavery was “of God,” sanctioned and ordained under divine providence. Ross allowed that slavery was not ideal for either master or slave, and he instructed his fellow southerners to “comprehend that God never intended the relation of master and slave to be perpetual.” He instructed southerners to reject the idea that blacks were of a different species and the belief that God had created the different races to remain only in the continent in which they had been born. While Ross went so far as to call slavery “the evil—the curse on

the South” and a “degraded condition,” he believed slavery must continue for the good of the slave, the master, and the American family until God in his divine direction saw fit to let it “pass away.” Ross’s own pro-slavery stance well represented several other antebellum southern ministers’ views on the controversial matter. Many held the same position and argued as Ross did in his 1853 General Assembly speech in New York.¹

Well over a century later, the 2002 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America passed a resolution focused on promoting racial reconciliation within the denomination.² This included corporate confession and repentance of “heinous sins attendant with unbiblical forms of servitude-including oppression, racism, exploitation, manstealing, and chattel slavery” that all “stand in opposition to the Gospel.” The resolution went on to detail the goals of confession and repentance: racial reconciliation, forgiveness, unity, and healing among Christians of all colors and ethnic backgrounds. The resolution spoke openly and solemnly about the Presbyterian denomination’s history of failing to follow some of the commandments and statutes of God. The Assembly admitted to mistreatment of and injustices against African-Americans throughout the denomination’s past, especially insofar

¹ Fred A. Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God* (Kessinger Publishing), 2-3.

² There are important distinctions between several different Presbyterian denominations in the United States today, the PCA being one of them and being among the largest of all the conservative evangelical denominations in the country, with nationwide congregations, recognition, and influence. For the full story of how the PCA separated and distinguished itself from other Presbyterian groups in the mid-1900s, see: Sean Michael Lucas, *For A Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015).

as many Presbyterians, like Frederick Ross, supported slavery in the South for many years before the Civil War.³

While there were many social, economic, political, and cultural changes in the United States, and especially the South, during the period between both General Assemblies, at the core, each gathering dealt with moral issues. Ross appealed directly to the Bible that he and his contemporaries went to for direction on any ethical question. And the 2002 resolution struck a profoundly spiritual chord that ensured anyone who read or heard it would know the gravity of the matters it discussed. So while analyzing how politics, culture, and economics can influence history is important, understanding what informs the moral choices of particular people from a particular time often leads to more significant conclusions. One looks from the recent PCA General Assembly back to the one in 1856 and wonders how the men involved could come to such radically different conclusions and positions. It is striking to note that the men involved in each gathering held not only similar titles—Presbyterian ministers and elders—but on many topics, very similar beliefs as well. Yet, 150 years later, Ross's denominational descendants condemned and confessed as sin the position he and many of his contemporaries in the Presbyterian Church once held.

As the modern PCA confessed and repented of past sins, it looked back and lamented failures of its former leaders. But is that all there was to it—sinful human beings failing to do their moral duty, deliberately choosing to violate their conscience and God's law and instead follow the social, economic, cultural, and political convention of their time and place? Plainly put, how could these

³ The Aquila Report, "Racial Reconciliation: Action of the 30th PCA General Assembly," 18 June, 2015, <http://theaquilareport.com/racial-reconciliation-action-of-the-30th-pca-general-assembly-2002/>.

men have supported slavery? To try to answer these kinds of complex, searching questions, one must investigate and hopefully understand the perspectives and words of the men themselves. Indeed, the first step is analyzing how they *did* support slavery—in a factual, philosophical, historical, and rhetorical way—before ultimately arriving at conclusions about the moral side of the questions.

Reckoning with where a denomination within a certain religion and a certain country has been and what it has done is critical in setting its current goals and articulating its contemporary purpose. Understanding what shaped past leaders' thinking and what factors went into their decisions offers the denomination's current clerical



Reverend James Henley
Thornwell

leadership and laymen alike guidance on both what to do and what to avoid. And more generally applicable to all contemporary people, examining the way any past group answered controversial questions of their time can offer lessons to thoughtful people of any race and any religious or nonreligious persuasion, giving a study like this both broad and particular relevance.

This paper will focus on four southern Presbyterians who held important ministerial positions in the South and were active in the defense of slavery. Reverend Frederick A. Ross, minister and evangelist in a few southern states, primarily Alabama, authored the 1856 pro-slavery pamphlet *Slavery Ordained of God*, a collection of his speeches, letters, and other writings from earlier in the decade defending the South's peculiar

institution.⁴ James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina also wrote and spoke in defense of slavery. Thornwell, president of South Carolina College (today's University of South Carolina) in the 1850s, was a well-known and respected Presbyterian minister and the South's most brilliant theologian according to one historian.⁵ Thornwell wrote extensively on a wealth of topics, but this study focuses on a few chapters of his collected writings: "The Relation of the Church to Slavery" and "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery." Additionally, on May 26, 1850, the South Carolina minister delivered a sermon at the dedication of a new church building "erected for the religious instruction of the Negroes," the title of which was *The Rights and Duties of Masters*. Thornwell also gave a speech to the Presbyterian synod of South Carolina on November 5, 1851, containing a report on the matter of slavery. Along with Ross and Thornwell, Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, was another minister active in the biblical defense of slavery. On November 29, 1860, Palmer delivered his "Thanksgiving Sermon" in which he sought to give assurance to his listeners that the South was the righteous

⁴ Tommy W. Rogers, "Dr. Frederick A. Ross and the Presbyterian Defense of Slavery," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (June, 1967), pp. 112-124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23326127>.

⁵ Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South, 1810-1860*, Vol. 2 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 1113-1157. See also Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "James Henley Thornwell, Pro-Slavery Spokesman within a Calvinist Faith," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January, 1986), pp. 49-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27567932>.

side in the fast-approaching national conflict. Cohorts distributed the address throughout the South in the form of newspapers and pamphlets, and Palmer's influence on the Confederacy is undeniable.⁶ Finally, there was Robert Lewis Dabney of Virginia, one time member of the Confederate army as an officer under General Stonewall Jackson and later author of *A Defence of Virginia*, wherein Dabney articulated many of the same proslavery principles that the three other men put forth.⁷



Reverend Benjamin Morgan
Palmer



Reverend Robert Lewis
Dabney

The dates of each source are close to one another, but there are subtle yet important differences in chronology and context. Both Thornwell and Ross made their biblical defenses of slavery in the 1850s, a time of heightened tension and strained political compromise over the continuation and expansion of slavery as well as over contemporary fugitive slave laws. This context would have also given political significance to the religious defense of slavery they articulated. Still, the singular national tension attendant with secession

⁶ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "Thanksgiving Sermon," *Civil War Causes*. 1860. <http://civilwarcauses.org/palmer.htm>.

⁷ For a biography of Dabney with a discussion of his life, education, work, theology, and influence see Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2005).

and war was not yet a reality at this time.

Palmer and Dabney issued their support of slavery amidst a different national and political climate, and because of this their words carried a different kind and amount of political weight given their particular circumstances. Palmer issued his Thanksgiving Sermon a few weeks after the election of President Abraham Lincoln and about the same amount of time before the state of South Carolina became the first in the South to secede from the Union. In his sermon, he sought to assure the forming Confederacy that it was not only on the right side of the law and providence of God but also on the right side of the coming political conflict. Similarly, Dabney's work held important political as well as religious foundations and meaning. Indeed, the creation of Dabney's *A Defence of Virginia* is an interesting tale in its own right. Dabney spent some time in the army of the Confederacy, both as a staff officer under General Stonewall Jackson then later as a chaplain, before being forced to resign because of illness. Cleared to remain home for medical reasons and seeking to defend his beloved South with a pen in lieu of a sword, Dabney compiled a host of articles he had written some years earlier and published them together in 1863, first in England, hoping to win the British as a southern ally. There the book "languished" for years until the war came to a close, but as a final measure of special devotion to a cause then lost, Dabney published *A Defence of Virginia* in its last form in the United States in 1867.⁸ The story of Dabney's book, then, is most similar in context and timeline to Palmer's sermon. Both came either upon the brink of or during the Civil War, as opposed to the words of Thornwell and Ross, which were issued years before it. With the above context in mind, then, this study first considers key points discerned from the words of Thornwell

⁸ Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life*, 99-128.

and Ross, then from those of Palmer and Dabney, before finally focusing on them altogether to discover a single critical common element that ties them all together.

Examining these men and their words leads to striking realizations that offer insight into their minds and their moral choices. One gains a better understanding of the questions facing the Presbyterian denomination in the South before the Civil War and sees how many antebellum southern Christians dealt with complex, controversial issues of their own time. As leaders and representatives of Christians in their churches, states, and regions, Ross, Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney serve as a way to look into the thoughts, feelings, and choices of a significant group of antebellum white southern Christians, a demographic as fascinating and influential as it was imperfect.

Altogether, the sources paint a complex and revealing picture. These four men believed in the inerrant authority of a Bible that did not explicitly condemn slavery as well as in a sovereign God who in his divine providence ordained slavery as an imperfect, temporary, and legal social system that prevented many potentially worse conditions from arising in a fallen, sinful world. Yet the writings and sermons examined herein also reveal that these ministers bore a contextualized yet powerful racial prejudice against African-Americans of the time that shaped their thought as well. So their views on Christian theology and biblical doctrine were not alone in informing their philosophy and rhetoric. Both how they interpreted the Bible and how they viewed black people as a group molded their position. Ultimately, their racial prejudice combined with three specific aspects of their Christian theology and interpretation of the Bible to form their particular defense of slavery. As a consequence, within their worldview, slavery constituted a complex, layered and morally ambiguous question.

While this paper focuses on Presbyterian ministers in the South, other denominations around the country also held significant and robust debate on the subject of slavery during the same era. Both Baptists and Methodists, to name only two groups, extensively debated the matter in the years leading up to the Civil War. Both denominations possess a complex and meaningful history. But in view of the Presbyterian denomination's extensive history and profound influence in not only the United States but specifically the South, an examination focused on some of its former ministers holds special interest and significance. And in light of the PCA's recent movement to recognize and deal with its past in both positive and negative manifestations, such a study also offers contemporary meaning and import that can be applied to many people in several different ways.⁹

The sources considered herein were all created and published after the Presbyterian denomination split into its Old School and New School branches in 1837. This was primarily a split based on doctrine, concerning the place and authority of Scripture. The Old School Presbyterians held to a literal interpretation of the Bible and a belief in its inerrancy, while the New School branch began to move towards higher biblical criticism and a more socially rather

⁹ See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) and *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820-1860*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Mason I. Lowance Jr., *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debate in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

than spiritually focused ministry. It is important to note that Dabney, Thornwell, Palmer, and Ross all wrote and preached from an Old School perspective, as this both coincided with and influenced their proslavery stance.

The Presbyterian debate over slavery was a complicated one, reaching back to the creation of the United States. In 1787, the denomination adopted a cautious anti-slavery position that sought the institution's gradual demise. Beyond 1818, that stance would find no more growth in supporters or their passion. Hereafter, the issue of slavery became a regional dividing line within the group in addition to the split between Old School and New School. Most northern Presbyterians were antislavery, while many in the South favored their region's peculiar institution.¹⁰

The induction of more focused and fervent abolitionist rhetoric coincided with the Presbyterian split in the 1830s. Beginning in that decade and growing in extent and influence into the 1840s and 1850s, men like William Lloyd Garrison, Charles G. Finney, and Frederick Douglass (among others) spoke out against slavery. Abolitionists used newspapers, such as Garrison's *The Liberator*, along with speeches to argue against what they believed was the corrupt, oppressive institution of southern slavery. These men argued against slavery from a variety of perspectives and angles, and while they often spoke out against it simply using political ideas such as liberty, equality, and basic human rights, many abolitionists also used the Bible to condemn slavery.¹¹

¹⁰ Irving Stoddard Kull, "Presbyterian Attitudes toward Slavery," *Church History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June, 1938), pp. 101-114.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3160673>.

¹¹ Stanley Harrold, *The Abolitionists and the South 1831-1861* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

The biblical debate over slavery involved the whole nation in the three decades before the Civil War that decided the institution's fate. Though not monolithic, at the time the United States was for the most part a nation that not only read the Bible frequently but also believed in its divine origins and authority. Consequently, both proslavery advocates and those against the institution used the Bible to bolster their position. In general, proslavery writers employed passages from Israelite law in the Old Testament—primarily Leviticus but also some portions of Genesis and Deuteronomy—to argue that the God had sanctioned slavery as an institution among his people. They also pointed to the New Testament book of Philemon in which the Apostle Paul instructed a servant to return to his Christian master, for whom he also included instructions on how to treat his restored slave. There were further passages within some of Paul's other writings, his letter to the Ephesians for example, in which he instructed slaves to obey their masters and these same masters to in turn treat them with gentleness and fairness. Antislavery writers argued that their proslavery counterparts misinterpreted any parts of the Bible that appeared to sanction slavery. Hebrew Law, they would say, did not sanction the same kind of slavery as that of the American South, which was hereditary and based upon race, but rather temporary positions of servitude as war captives, debtors, or some other similar situation. And if Paul seemed to instruct slaves to obey their masters, he spoke within Greek and Roman culture to what Americans of the 19th century would better recognize as either indentured servants or even hired men. Furthermore, they argued that even if the Old Testament did not condemn slavery as an institution, the command of Christ in the New Testament to do unto others as you would have them do unto you clearly prohibited slaveholding. No matter the final interpretation, both sides

employed powerful sources that bolstered some persuasive arguments. And in the end, regional and political concerns also informed people's thinking at the same time biblical convictions did. So while both sides ramped up the fervor and power of their arguments as the Civil War approached, the nationwide debate was complicated and had no final conclusion during the years when the four ministers considered here published their works.¹²

To understand the four men's defense of slavery, first it is important to bear in mind their belief in the Bible as the authoritative word of God. This is perhaps a well-known point by now, but understanding what it meant to the question of slavery within their worldview is critical. Wrapped up in the authority of the Bible is the belief that the men recording God's word were inspired by the Holy Spirit—meaning the Bible did not contain merely the words of men but instead the very mind, character, and revelation of the Lord. In short, this belief meant that the Bible was the final decider of all ethical, moral, and spiritual questions. Applying this to slavery meant that if the Bible anywhere explicitly condemned the institution itself, God then commanded these Christian men to not only cease participating in it but to actively work toward its expiration. On the other hand, if the Bible failed to condemn the institution, these men felt they had neither right nor

¹² Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Mason I. Lowance Jr., *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debate in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South, 1810-1860*, 2 Vols. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

duty to do so either. And if indeed the Bible sanctioned the relationship between master and slave, anyone declaring the institution inherently sinful was guilty of either misinterpreting Scripture or, even worse, elevating human values above the word of God. For men like Ross, Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney, the question of whether to support or condemn the South's peculiar institution hinged first and foremost on what the Bible said about it.¹³

The belief in the Bible as the final authority on the contentious issue of slavery ran throughout Ross's proslavery pamphlet *Slavery Ordained of God*. This belief was in many ways implicit throughout the work. Again and again Ross described the Bible in terms of what God said, intended, forbade, commanded, or sanctioned. He also repeatedly referred unequivocally to the Bible as "God's law." Ross went to the Bible first and last when trying to discern the truth about a questionable matter, and slavery was no exception.¹⁴

This idea also manifested itself explicitly in some statements in different sections of the pamphlet. The starkest example was when Ross appealed to the Bible "in its plain and unanswerable authority" when determining whether the "relation of master and slave" was inherently a sin. The implication was obvious. Ross believed in the truth and final authority of Scripture to answer the slavery question. Though people disagreed over what exactly the

¹³ Robert Bruce Mullin, "Biblical Critics and the Battle over Slavery," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1983), pp. 210-226. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23328492>. See also J. Albert Harrill, "The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), pp. 149-186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1123945>.

¹⁴ Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God*, 19-21, 26.

Bible instructed regarding slavery, to this Presbyterian, whatever it did say was true and authoritative, and anyone who failed to believe and proclaim this was treading on dangerous ground in his eyes.¹⁵

Thornwell joined his contemporary Ross in looking to the Bible as the final and authoritative source of answering the slavery question. In his report on slavery before the South Carolina Presbyterian synod, he said that states and communities could honestly differ on slavery as a political question, but as a moral issue, “the Bible has settled it.” To Thornwell, the final authority on the matter of slavery was the Bible. Thornwell connected the idea of biblical authority to the duties, actions, and positions of the Church as a whole. Since the Church was “bound to abide by the authority of the Bible, and that alone,” it had to “[declare] what the Bible teaches, and [enforce] its laws by her own peculiar sanctions.” In other words, if the law of God did not condemn slavery as a sin, the Church could not do so either. To do so, as antislavery Christians did, was to “corrupt the Scriptures” and “profanely add to the duties” of the Church described in the Bible. Thornwell summed up his view by saying, “Where the Scriptures are silent” the Church “must be silent too.” As the Bible was the final authority, the Church could only act upon what the book explicitly stated.¹⁶

In general, the very fact that these men went so quickly and so often to Scripture when defending slavery is telling. One could argue that they simply saw in the Bible an accessible and powerful

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anderson, Charles A., James Henley Thornwell, and John B. Hill, “Presbyterians Meet the Slavery Problem.” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March, 1951), pp. 9-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23324662>, 12-15.

way to defend slavery, their region's peculiar economic, social, and political system. There is perhaps some truth to this assertion, but it fails to tell the whole story. It is true that these men went to Scripture and ended up finding a way to defend something that frequently resulted in abuse, cruelty, and oppression. But the reverence afforded their holy book and the urgency with which they defended its ultimate authority adds another layer to the picture. Within the worldview they subscribed to, the Bible spoke to many complicated issues on which decent and intelligent humans often disagreed. At the time, slavery was just such an issue, and their belief in the authority of the Bible profoundly shaped their decision to defend it.

In examining the two sections of this authoritative Bible, the Old and New Testament, Ross and Thornwell arrived at the conclusion that slavery in and of itself was not sinful. Each minister argued that the social and economic relationship between master and slave was not a transgression of the law of God and therefore not inherently evil. They each fully granted that the institution could and did at times give rise to abuse and injustice on the part of the master. These were sins, and any Christian master should not only avoid them but act in fairness and mercy toward his slaves. The contrast between slavery as an abstract institution and concrete instances of abuse and injustice was an important point of distinction for each minister. Like any human relationship, the one between master and slave could involve cruelty or exploitation. But ultimately, Ross and Thornwell argued that slavery as a social and economic system did not explicitly violate the law of God.

Ross attempted to show the moral neutrality of slavery by first defining sin as the transgression of the law of God and then arguing that the institution itself was not "sin *per se*" (emphasis his). Before the 1853 General Assembly, Ross declared that

antislavery activists must “learn from the Bible that the relation between master and slave is not sin *per se*” but instead slavery was only “evil *in certain circumstances*.” The Presbyterian minister further declared that “God says nowhere it [slavery] is sin.” He expounded and built upon these statements in another speech before the 1856 Presbyterian General Assembly. There Ross argued that right and wrong were not transcendent facts that exist “in the nature of things.” Instead, they were “contingencies” and “means,” existing only by the will of God and expressed in his word. Sin was a deliberate act of the will to break the law of God as expressed in Scripture. To Ross, this meant that if God did not condemn slavery as contrary to his law, it could not in itself be sin. He granted that “*the Golden Rule*,” the ethical teaching of Christ in the New Testament, existed in the relations of slave and master, but pointed to examples of Old Testament figures holding slaves with no condemnation from the Lord and pointed out further that “God in the New Testament made no law prohibiting the relation of master and slave.” Altogether, Ross put forth an argument that was consistent with and coherent within his worldview that the Lord did not explicitly condemn slavery itself.¹⁷

Thornwell explored this principle in a chapter of his collected writings called “The Relation of the Church to Slavery.” In this section, Thornwell questioned whether the Church had any right to “declare slavery to be sinful.” The minister argued there was “little doubt” that the Bible did not condemn the relation of master and servant as “incompatible with the will of God.” Instead, Thornwell argued that abolitionists who used the Bible to preach against slavery failed to let Scripture speak for itself. These people elevated their own values and standards above the law of God. For, according to Thornwell, “no direct condemnation of slavery can

¹⁷ Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God*, 2-3, 17, 20-28.

anywhere be found in the Sacred Volume.” In fact, rather than calling slavery sin anywhere in its pages, the Bible “distinctly [sanctioned] it as any other social condition of man.” Like Ross, the South Carolinian Presbyterian found nothing in the Bible that explicitly named slavery as a transgression of the law of God. Thornwell applied this belief to himself and to the Christian Church as a whole. If the Scriptures did not declare slavery a sin, neither would he—and neither should the Church, whether in the North or the South.¹⁸

While they argued in support of the southern institution of slavery, contending that it was not inherently contrary to the law of God, Ross and Thornwell granted that it was not an ideal system. For a Christian who believed in divine providence and the absolute sovereignty of God over a corrupted world and a sinful mankind, deciding how much to fight injustice in this world and how much to simply live for the next one was a difficult decision. In their worldview, divine providence entailed the daily intervention of the Lord in ordinary affairs of human beings. God’s powerful sovereignty over the universe meant that, while he used human choices, actions, and events to accomplish his will, ultimately he directed everything that happened on earth. And because of the sin of mankind and the resulting corruption of the world, he allowed certain systems to exist that were not ideal and could lead to abuse but still would accomplish his higher purposes for his people. The evidence before these men showed that God had ordained a government that for nearly a century had recognized slavery as a legal system. To rebel against this could be seen as either hastily rushing toward a destiny God intended to bring about later, or,

¹⁸ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.*, Vol 4, *Ecclesiastical* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), <http://bit.ly/1QHuzG0>., 384-386.

worse, heretically denying the authority of the law of God within his creation. This kind of action, then, would not only cause strife in social, political, and economic spheres. Emancipation or abolition coming too soon would also undermine and endanger the spiritual mission of the church, the salvation of souls and the spiritual education of saints both black and white. In short, the line between seeking earthly justice in line with the Lord's will and denying the authority of that will was a blurry one.

The theme of God's providence showed up throughout Ross's *Slavery Ordained of God*. With it was the southern minister's belief founded in the Bible that the world was broken and corrupt because of the sin of mankind and thus must include social systems like slavery that are not ideal but exist often temporarily to prevent conditions that are worse. "Slavery," said Ross, "may, in *given conditions*, be *for a time* better than freedom for the slave of any complexion." Even so, Ross pled with southern Christians to understand and realize that God did not intend slavery to be permanent. While slavery was "of God" according to his divine direction and "not a sin" according to his revealed word, it was still "a degraded condition" that would eventually "pass away in the [fullness] of Providence." But Ross concluded that "until another and better destiny may be unfolded" slavery should continue for the good of slave, master, the American family, and the country as a whole. Ross defended slavery with realism and an eye toward a better future for blacks and whites alike. His position was a careful and complex one. He offered words of caution and reprimand to both northern antislavery advocates and southern Christians, but he concluded that in a fallen world, the proslavery position could be a moral one.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God*, 2-3.

Thornwell joined Ross in defending slavery in this way. The South Carolinian, however, expounded more on the mission of the Church and the duties of Christian masters within a slaveholding society. Thornwell granted that slavery was not an ideal system and believed that it was the result of mankind's fall into sin and the corrupted nature of the world. But in his report to the South Carolina synod and in his collected writings, he discussed the mission of the Church and added another layer to his proslavery stance. First, it was not the mission of the Church to "wage war upon every form of human ill" as a "moral institute for universal good." Thornwell granted that the Church certainly should contribute to the progress and prosperity of society, but the Bible taught that the world could not be "converted into a paradise" by human effort, so social justice should not be the primary concern of the Christian Church. Though Christians could fight many earthly injustices, at times they had to trust some matters to the providence of God and focus instead on the next world. To Thornwell, communicating to people the need for salvation through Jesus Christ constituted the primary aim and mission of the Church. Deciding whether or not to support slavery in the antebellum South was one place wherein understanding that specific mission was critical.²⁰

In *The Rights and Duties of Masters* Thornwell outlined what it would look like for a Christian master to not struggle against an imperfect but necessary and divinely ordained institution but to instead carry out his Christian duty toward his slaves. As it was not the primary concern of the Church to fight earthly injustice, it was

²⁰ Charles A. Anderson, James Henley Thornwell, and John B. Hill, "Presbyterians Meet the Slavery Problem," 10-14; James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters* (Charleston, South Carolina: Steam Power Press of Walker and James, 1850), <http://bit.ly/1R7dssY>, 1-15.

not the only duty of a master to provide for the physical needs of his slaves. Thornwell emphasized the Christian duty of a master to also provide for the religious instruction and spiritual wellbeing of his slaves. A master must render to his slaves what was “just and equal” as far as worldly provision, but instructing black slaves on the tenets and necessity of the Christian life was the “triumph of Christian benevolence.” By doing this, masters showed a deeper love to their slaves, providing for the eternal salvation of their souls. Thornwell took in the providence of God, the sinfulness of mankind, and the brokenness of the world and applied each of them to the slavery question. In the end, the South Carolina Presbyterian joined his fellow southern minister Ross and concluded that supporting slavery could be the right moral choice in their place and time.²¹

Several years after Ross and Thornwell articulated their multifaceted positions, two other Presbyterian ministers echoed their words with a biblical defense of slavery of their own. Palmer and Dabney wrote and preached from their proslavery perspective in the 1860s, a decade with bitter conflicts and difficulties born out of Ross and Thornwell’s time but with new ways of trying to settle them—war and secession rather than just heated rhetoric and portentous political compromise. Palmer’s Thanksgiving Sermon came on the eve of the Civil War and Dabney’s *Defence of Virginia* was published during the very throes of the conflict. Still, the proslavery position of each man was similar to that of both Ross and Thornwell. Palmer and Dabney also focused on the fundamental authority of Scripture, the belief that the Bible did not condemn slavery, and God’s providential ordination of slavery within a sinful and fallen world. Overall, despite any differences in

²¹ Ibid.

political context, the rhetorical pillars of their defense of slavery was the same.

Speaking from his Presbyterian worldview, Palmer shared the others' belief in the power and authority of Scripture to answer the question of whether slaveholding was a sin, but he went a step further. Since southern defenders of slavery followed and believed what the Bible said about it, the abolitionists fighting to end the institution did so in an "undeniably atheistic" spirit. Palmer said that those who denied the authority of Scripture over earthly political and social matters "worshipped reason" and "blasphemously [invaded] the prerogatives of God." To Palmer, no less than his fellow Presbyterians, the Bible was God's law and final word on moral questions. Anyone who denied this truth and sought to elevate other sources, such as human values or reason, above Scripture were guilty of subordinating the word of God to their own goals.²²

Dabney also believed in the authority of Scripture to answer the question of the morality of slavery. He implied the importance and authority of Scripture by associating abolitionist interpretations with heretical biblical critics that disbelieved in the word of God and spread false doctrine. Moreover, Dabney claimed abolitionists in their hearts did not approach the question with an eye toward the authority of Scripture. Instead, they "determined . . . in advance" their position and went to the Bible for reinforcement only, and in doing so they had to twist portions of the text to fit their preconceived values. This was untenable to Dabney, for "the only sure and perfect rule of right is the Bible." In a chapter of *A Defence of Virginia*, he summed up his position on the whole issue: "In the emphatic language of the book whose protection we claim: 'Let God be true, but every man a liar.'" Dabney went to

²² Palmer, "Thanksgiving Sermon."

Scripture first and last in answering the question of slavery, and the southern minister surely meant to follow what he thought the book said on the issue, no matter what others chose to do.²³

Palmer approached the question of whether slavery was inherently sinful in a different way than those who came before him but with a similar conclusion and some deeper implications. In his “Thanksgiving Sermon,” Palmer pointed a finger at abolitionists and antislavery advocates, saying that by attempting to end slavery they disbelieved the word of God and “[set] bounds to what God alone can regulate.” To him, attempts to bring about an end to slavery came from a point of view that both denied the providence of God in human history and failed to trust God’s law enough to condemn only what he explicitly condemned. Palmer pointed to slavery as a system “interwoven with our entire social fabric” and said “these slaves form parts of our households, even as our children.” Most importantly, he declared slavery to be “a relationship recognized and sanctioned in the Scriptures of God.” Consequently, Palmer stated that abolitionists failed to believe the word of God for he believed the Bible sanctioned slavery and was thus on his side and the side of the South. The Bible recognized and sanctioned slavery, and anyone who fought against the institution raged against the very word of the Lord.²⁴

In his *Defence of Virginia*, Dabney also treated the critical question of whether slavery was sin per se. Dabney’s exploration of this question was more detailed and more extensive than that of the other ministers. He delved deeply into the text of the Bible, both Old and New Testament and argued as did the others that the

²³ Robert Lewis Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Portage Publications, Inc., 2005), <http://www.portagepub.com/dl/causouth/dabney.pdf>, 117-129, 140-142.

²⁴ Palmer, “Thanksgiving Sermon.”

“the Bible teaches that the relation of master and slave is perfectly lawful and right, provided only its duties be lawfully fulfilled.” Dabney broke his argument into sections treating both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament history books of Genesis and Exodus, Dabney found numerous examples of Israelite figures holding slaves and even instances where Moses mentioned it in the laws he received from God. In none of these examples did Dabney find an express condemnation of the practice. Nor, according to Dabney’s interpretation, was there in the New Testament a denunciation of slavery as evil. Neither Christ nor the Apostles explicitly forbade the practice, and Dabney argued that they spoke on such matters enough that they would have done so if it were an “essentially religious evil.” Overall, Dabney found no condemnation of slavery within the Bible, and it would have been anathema to him to speak above or ahead of the word of God and to work against an institution permitted according to the law of God.²⁵

At the time, those who debated slavery did not only hold a debate about the literal words of the Bible, though, but also about the overall tone and direction of its moral commands. Many antislavery advocates argued that even if the Bible did not explicitly condemn slavery, the idea of holding another human being as property surely violated the spirit of Christ’s ethical command to treat others as you would want to be treated. Dabney spoke on this distinction between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law. The Virginia Presbyterian responded to this argument and attempted to show that a Christian slaveholder could indeed obey this command without having to resort to emancipating his slaves. In *A Defence of Virginia*, Dabney first stated that abolitionists who advanced this argument did so “with a disdainful

²⁵ Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*, 70-133.

confidence” when really their thinking was “founded on a preposterous interpretation” of the command of Christ. Dabney said that antislavery forces put forth the argument with the underlying assumption that slavery was evil and incompatible with the rule. Furthermore, the Virginian argued that as Christ came to fulfill the Old Testament, no command he issued could contradict what it said but rather built upon it. Christ in building upon the Mosaic Law that sanctioned slavery could not at the same time issue a command that opposed it. The command of Christ to love others and treat them how you would want to be treated was one and the same with commandments in the Old Testament that coincided with laws that sanctioned slavery.²⁶

Furthermore, in attempting to tear down the abolitionist argument, Dabney asked if the so-called Golden Rule also applied to slaves themselves in their relationship to their masters. By the abolitionist interpretation, the slave would be “morally bound to decline his own liberty; i.e., to act towards his master as he, were he the master, would desire.” Dabney described such an idea as absurd and concluded that Christ’s rule of conduct must have meant something else. “The rule of our conduct to our neighbor is not any desire which we might have,” he said, but “that desire which we should, in that case, be morally entitled to have.” Essentially, he contextualized the rule itself. In his view, the rule commanded a master to treat a slave how he would wish to be treated *were he himself a slave*. At the same time, the rule also commanded the slave to treat his masters how he would want to be treated *if he were a master*. In the end, Dabney believed that slaves should respect and obey their masters and perform their labors with diligence and that masters should provide and care for their slaves while treating them with fairness and justice according to their

²⁶ Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*, 122-126.

service. If all this happened, neither slave nor master violated any part of the Bible's commands, either in letter or spirit.²⁷

In his Thanksgiving Sermon Palmer added his voice to those who before him applied the providence of God to the slavery debate. He plainly declared the "existence of a personal God whose will shapes the destiny of nations." Several times throughout the sermon, he underscored his belief in the providence of God specifically over the issue of slavery. The timing of Palmer's speech, mere weeks before the future Confederate states began seceding from the Union, shaped his overall goal: to offer a biblically based defense of the South, the southern way of life, and the institution of slavery. As a result, much of his speech focused on God's providence. Palmer argued that as God had ordained southern slavery up until that point in 1860, abolitionists hoping to destroy the system raged against God himself and disbelieved his word. In defending the South and slavery, Palmer claimed that he and others defended "the cause of God and religion." Antislavery forces, on the other hand, disregarded "*the delicate mechanism of Providence*" and sought to change something "*which the great Designer alone can control.*" To Palmer, the cause of the South was a righteous one that God himself guided and ordained. In defending slavery as existing under God's divine direction, Palmer took a moral stance in which he felt justified. In Palmer's mind, God could choose someday to abolish slavery using human choices and actions as his means, but he believed its abolition should not come at the hasty behest of northern abolitionists and others with a wrong view of society, mankind, and God's word.²⁸

Dabney shared this view, but the Virginian emphasized the fallen nature of the world and the temporary nature of slavery as a flawed

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Palmer, "Thanksgiving Sermon."

but necessary system more than any of his fellow Presbyterians. *A Defence of Virginia* often specifically discussed slavery in the American South as it was at the time, but in communicating his entire proslavery position, Dabney also focused on the ultimate destiny of slavery in an abstract and worldwide sense. “There is a true evil in the necessity of it,” he said, but the origin of slavery could be found in the “sin and depravity of man.” He allowed that the spread of the gospel in love and righteousness could make slavery unnecessary in the same way it would one day abolish the need for prisons. But this would not happen until the return of Christ and the establishment of the new heaven and earth. Until then, mankind could not abolish “true slavery” any more than they could hope to abolish sin itself or even death. Employing his belief in the sinful and corrupted nature of the world, Dabney defended slavery as consistent with the law of God. The Lord directed the broken world and sinful mankind according to his will, and Dabney believed that will could allow slavery to be a moral if imperfect way to organize society.²⁹

The Christian theology and biblical interpretation of Ross, Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney were important aspects of their defense of slavery. It is true that they believed in the final authority of the Bible in answering moral questions, including the question of slavery. They also believed the Bible did not explicitly condemn slavery as inherently sinful. Moreover, they believed that God in his divine providence ordained and sanctioned slavery in the United States, for a time, as a method of ordering society and the economy, and preventing, potentially worse circumstances from arising in a sinful and corrupted world.

Yet these beliefs alone did not account for or entirely comprise their proslavery philosophy. Another and more invidious doctrine

²⁹ Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*, 130-132.

combined with the three specific aspects of Christian theology and biblical interpretation to round out and solidify their rhetoric. Ross, Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney also believed to one extent or another in the inferiority of African-Americans as a race. Each man wrote or spoke about it in different ways and without identical conclusions, but nonetheless it was a common and critical theme in their rhetoric. Most clear in their writings and sermons was a fundamental racial prejudice that can be accurately described as paternalistic, a view that held black people as categorically lower than whites in culture, economic ability, and intellectual, spiritual, and moral development. In the paternalistic view, it was the duty of the white slaveholder—who were often and not coincidentally people much like some of the members of these ministers' churches—to look after their black slaves and provide for them physically, mentally, and spiritually. The prejudicial assumption was that black slaves were, because of their race, unable to do all of this for themselves. The paternalistic model very rarely if ever worked out as it was supposed to by those who held to it, but nonetheless, it was a powerful ideal among many southern whites of the time, primarily slaveholders, and especially among Christians who supported the institution.

Paternalistic racial prejudice against African-Americans as a group was the final and in some ways most critical link in the rhetorical chain of these particular proslavery ministers. They combined it with their other beliefs and argued therefore that supporting and engaging in slavery was a morally acceptable choice at the time. And despite any differences in chronological context, each source plainly bears the unmistakable mark of paternalistic racial prejudice.

Ross's words on the matter did represent a complex perspective. While the harsh realities of well documented abuses concurrent

with slavery make some of his statements ring hollow in retrospect, understanding his point of view as he presented it offers insight. In the clearest example of paternalistic prejudice, Ross claimed in his argument for the continuation of slavery that the institution was “for the good of the slave.” Yet he offered his listeners a word of caution. He pled with southerners to relinquish two false ideas: first, that blacks were “of a different species” than whites, and second, that God had intended all races to remain in their native continents “in swarms, like bees.” Ross hoped people in the South, most particularly those southern Christians who owned slaves, would put away these notions and that a new perspective would bring about more fair and merciful Christian treatment of slaves in the region.³⁰

Ross further detailed this perspective in *Slaver Ordained of God*. He compared the relation of black slaves to white masters with several other relationships that he believed illustrated the necessity and purpose of slavery: “husband and wife; parent and child; teacher and scholar; master and apprentice” among others. Ross used these relationships as comparisons to slavery to make his main point. He believed that “God intended the rule of superior over the inferior, in relations of service” and that this would “exemplify human depravity” and demonstrate God’s “overruling blessing.” Ross argued that different people would at different times and in different contexts be inferior in some ways to other people and would thus need ruling, direction, and instruction. African-American slaves in the South constituted one such case in his mind. For while he believed slavery was far from ideal and only a temporary system, Ross still felt many blacks needed this kind of instruction and ruling and that the institution offered “blessings in its time to the South and the Union” and was for the

³⁰ Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God*, 2, 12, 22-23.

good of those enslaved. Ross supported slavery for a complex variety of reasons, but his belief in the inferiority of blacks, which he believed was neither inherent nor permanent, certainly shaped his position in defense of the South's peculiar institution.³¹

Thornwell's words were also multifaceted but overall were still laden with the distinctive paternalism and racial prejudice. In his sermon on the rights and duties of Christian masters, the South Carolina Presbyterian, like the other ministers, exhibited the assumption that black people as a group were inferior in moral capacity and intelligence to whites. Yet Thornwell had a slightly different focus than his fellow Presbyterians. Though admittedly shaped by his racist perspective, his primary concern for slaves was that they be given proper Christian instruction and spiritual guidance. This may sound insincere to modern ears. But as Thornwell explained elsewhere, the primary mission of the church was not combatting social injustices and economic ills. Instead, the aim of the Church, and thus his goal, was to instruct slaves in spiritual matters that would ultimately save their souls rather than merely securing for them worldly skills and goods or even political liberty.³²

The duty of every Christian master, then, was to not only provide for his slaves physical provisions but to treat him as a fellow sinner in need of the forgiveness of God only received through Jesus Christ. In this way, Thornwell exhorted Christian masters to take their slaves to church as often as possible where they would be ministered to and hear the gospel that was the foundation of Thornwell's worldview. He illustrated these points in a few surprisingly touching passages from the sermon. The South Carolinian stated that even the "meanest slave has, in him, a soul

³¹ Ibid.

³² Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, 47-49.

of priceless value.” Furthermore, he said, “Thought, reason, conscience, the capacity of virtue, the capacity of Christian love” and an “intimate connection to God” were parts of both slaves’ and masters’ “common humanity.” Thornwell felt these “[reduced] to insignificance all outward distinctions.” Most important to him in this sermon was communicating all of humanity’s sin and need for Christ. His message to white slaveholders was plain: Black slaves were poor and lesser in certain ways, but in the end God would treat them no differently. Neither, then, should their white Christian masters fail to treat them with fairness, concern, dignity, and generosity.³³

Palmer echoed Ross and Thornwell with similar sentiments from his sermon in 1860, but the New Orleans man approached the whole matter from a different angle. In his sermon, Palmer criticized the North as hypocrites who attempted to tear down and transform the southern way of life. As he saw it, the Yankees sought to disrupt the whole southern society and end slavery but offered neither insight nor aid in providing employment, sustenance, or education, for the proposed freedmen. Within this criticism lay the assumption that newly freed slaves would be unable to do any of this for themselves. In Palmer’s mind, southern Christian slaveholders were the “constituted guardians of the slaves themselves,” there to protect them, provide for them both physically and spiritually, and do for them things they were not equipped to do for themselves. Again, the realities of many slaves’ treatment at the hands of their masters themselves belie Palmer’s statement, but his words are revealing nonetheless. It was not merely his positions regarding the authority of Scripture, God’s law, and God’s providence that informed his proslavery position.

³³ Ibid.

Instead, these things combined with his view of black people as inferior and unequipped to live successfully in American society.³⁴

In his defense of his home state and region, Dabney argued slavery was not only morally acceptable but temporarily good for those who played a part in it. Certain portions of the book exhibited his paternalistic and prejudicial perspective that helped to shape his proslavery philosophy. Dabney declared once that slavery was not the ideal social organization—indeed there was “true evil in the necessity for it.” According to Dabney, this “evil” was the depravity of man and the brokenness of the world; however, he specifically pointed to “ignorance and vice in the [laboring] classes” as the primary reasons for slavery’s necessity. One understands that he means specifically the ignorance and vice of African-American slaves who, according to his view, could not yet live well enough that liberty would serve them or society.³⁵

Furthermore, Dabney chastened those like Ross who compared slavery to the relationship of husband and wife, pointing out that this relationship existed before the fall of mankind into sin. Slavery on the other hand only needed to exist to be as the “restraints and punishments of civil government” since man was “depraved and fallen.” Again it is key to understand that Dabney had blacks in mind when speaking of ignorance, depravity, and vice. In his mind, as a group and culture, African-Americans were inferior to him and other white Christian slaveholders, whose job it was then to give them direction, instruction, and correction. According to Dabney, too many blacks lacked the requisite level of “true virtue” and “self-command” to operate as free and equal persons to their white counterparts. His belief that blacks could not prosper and

³⁴ Palmer, “Thanksgiving Sermon.”

³⁵ Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia*, 130-132.

live well morally and spiritually on their own joined with his theological ideas to lead him to inform his proslavery rhetoric.³⁶

As the evidence demonstrates, in their time these men attempted to come to clear and coherent moral conclusions on the question of slavery. All the while, their racial prejudice combined with their Christian theology and biblical interpretation. To these Presbyterian ministers, the Scripture by which they lived their lives appeared to come down on their side of the issue. Slavery did not in itself transgress the letter of the holy and authoritative law of God. Nor did the relationship between master and slave violate even the spirit of the law as represented in Christ's command to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In this light, those who argued that the Bible condemned slavery and tried to destroy the institution were agitators on the side of atheists and heretics. In contrast, ministers like Ross, Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney saw themselves as righteous defenders of their faith, their region, and most importantly the word of God.

A paternalistic view regarding black people as inferior, lacking the ability to provide for themselves either worldly goods or spiritual knowledge, also augmented their other purely theological notions. A sense of their own superiority as a race and as individuals combined with the ministers' belief in the authority and teaching of Scripture. As the sources show, this paternalism and racial prejudice further complicated their analysis of the morality of holding another human being as personal property.

In this light it may be tempting to look back on these ministers with a sense of modern moral superiority, believing that in their position, we would not let the prevailing racial prejudices and views of the time color our thinking on a matter as black and white as human slavery. But to truly understand them, we must seek to

³⁶ Ibid.

understand past people's choices on their own terms, in their own context, and with their own information. This should be the goal of anyone who thinks back on issues, questions, and people from the past. Contextualizing the moral choices of some antebellum southern Christians, then, may throw a metaphorical wrench in some modern thoughts of automatically holding higher ethical ground, because in the end, evidence shows that the moral choices of these men were complicated and difficult.

Still, those quintessentially human qualities of pride in oneself and prejudice against others that are different clearly influenced the conclusions and actions of each man considered in this paper. Within his worldview, each one considered the evidence at hand—both divine and earthly—and staked out his position based on what believed was in the Bible, what evidence he could see in the world around him, and perhaps most importantly what was in his heart. In the end, Shaping what each man saw in the Bible and in the world around him was what was in his heart—a fundamental belief in the inferiority of black people. Prejudice united with other factors and opened up the possibility for them that supporting slavery was a morally acceptable choice.

Understanding the complex story of these men and their defense of slavery, along with its implications, adds a new layer to the history of race, slavery, and Christianity in the antebellum south. One can look back at these four antebellum southern Presbyterian ministers and consider that while American slavery was an unjust and oppressive system that often involved much cruelty and abuse, many who supported it did so from a contextual position that was perhaps as articulate and coherent as it is objectionable according to today's standards of racial sensitivity and fairness. Even so, while this point offers some new light by which to examine the mind of southern white Christians before the Civil War it in no

way diminishes the tragedy that was the South's peculiar institution. Recognizing the complex interplay between Christian theology, biblical interpretation, and racial prejudice gives Christians today of any color and any denomination a deeper understanding of how people in the past processed difficult moral questions and harsh realities of their day. American Christians seeking to understand the church's and the country's past can learn that the moral choices of Christians in the South regarding slavery were perhaps not as easy as might be believed now. Even with this moral complexity in mind, modern Christians must also learn the critical lesson of how dangerous it can be to allow racial prejudice and a belief in the inferiority of other human beings to mix with trust in the authority of Scripture and the divine providence of God. If American Christians as a group begin to understand and apply this new understanding, the implications can greatly strengthen the Church as a whole, as the lessons of the past shape the choices, judgments, and relationships of the present.

While the many of the first and most obvious consequences of this study may seem tailored to the relationships and actions of Christians in America—both black and white—who are still seeking to understand and come to grips a complicated past, a story like this also has much wider applications to people of all colors and creeds. First, anyone can and should learn even from these four white southern Presbyterian men how dangerous and corruptive prejudice against any group of people can be. Prejudicial, paternalistic belief in the inferiority of African-Americans caused these otherwise thoughtful, educated, and ethical people to believe that supporting a system as unjust and cruel as American chattel slavery could be a morally good choice. This leads any thoughtful person to conclude that similar prejudices can and do still exist and exert their influence today in

many places and situations around the world. Furthermore, no matter one's race, ethnicity, or religion (or lack thereof), one can discern in this study of human history the importance of context in understanding people and ideas from the past. Surely, as much as they drove the culture in which they lived, Thornwell, Ross, Palmer, and Dabney were also products of their time and place, in many ways taking on some of the choices, attitudes and beliefs of those around them. This kind of realization ought to lead people now to frequently and critically examine the moral choices, attitudes, and beliefs of their time and place with as much objectivity as possible. Human beings must constantly look around the world and question things sometimes taken for granted and decide whether they really are true or right. Perhaps if Thornwell, Ross, Palmer, and Dabney had done this better, they would not have defended and supported slavery at all. Unfortunately, they could not be so objective, circumspect, and detached from their place and time. In the end, they were unable to clearly see and fully believe in "another and better destiny" that Ross spoke of and what it meant for them and their fellow countrymen.

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