
Race, Christianity, and the Slavery Debates

I. Introduction

A. Two accounts of Christianity and slavery

1. Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

a) “Christianity of this land” versus Christianity of Christ.

2. James Henley Thornwell, “The Rights and Duties of Masters”

a) Slavery allowed by the Bible

b) Slavery helps society function

c) Slavery a fitting position for “Africans”

B. The Civil War as a “Theological Crisis”

1. Majority of religious people in the United States were Protestants, but they could not resolve slavery, the central religious question of the day. Indeed, denominations split over slavery before the country did.

2. In this episode, we are going to explore two questions:

a) Why couldn't white evangelical Protestants resolve the slavery question?

b) Why did so many white Protestants believe slavery to be compatible with Christianity?

II. The Slavery Crisis

A. By the 1840s and 1850s, there was a new urgency to the debates about slavery.

1. Slavery debates became sectional around the 1820s

a) 1820: Missouri Compromise failed to balance the power between slave and free states. It did not work.

2. Slave revolts elevated fear in the South and led to more restrictions on slaves.

3. Growth of abolition sentiment in the North, including some white evangelicals (like Charles Finney) who called slavery a sin.

4. Other white evangelicals rejected the argument that slavery was a sin owing to how they read the Bible.

III. White Evangelical Bible Reading and Slavery

A. Common Sense Realism shaped how white evangelicals read the Bible

1. According to Common Sense Realism, God gave all people a common sense that enabled them to apprehend the world correctly.
2. According to Common Sense Realism, God also made the Bible so that all people could apprehend it correctly without interpretation.
3. White evangelicals pointed out that the Bible does not forbid slavery.

B. There were other ways of reading the Bible on slavery in the 19th century

1. Douglass: You cannot reconcile American slavery with the witness of Jesus.
2. African American Interpretive Tradition: God's liberating work for the Israelites specifically and the arc of liberation in the Bible generally show that God desires human liberation, not slavery.
3. Historical and Textual Arguments: Biblical slavery fundamentally different from American slavery; Golden Rule precludes slavery

C. Problem for Common Sense Realists: All of these other ways of reading the Bible violate Common Sense Realism. For many white evangelicals, these ways of reading the Bible seemed to be trying to get around the plain meaning of the text.

1. George Armstrong: If "slavery" in the Bible meant something different than slavery in the United States, words have no determinative meaning and, thus, the Bible has no clear meaning. All attempts to use historical investigations or the example of Jesus to combat slavery were simply attempts to get around what the Bible clearly taught.

D. Some pro-slavery Christians claimed that defending slavery was part of defending the clarity of the Bible.

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1. Pro-slavery Christians also noted that some abolitionists were theologically heterodox and, thus, association with the abolitionist position was dangerous to orthodoxy.

IV. Slavery, Bible reading and Race

A. White evangelicals tended not to see something about the Bible and slavery: biblical slavery was not race-based. If slavery is biblical, there is no biblical reason not to enslave white people.

B. White evangelicals—believing that they were “just reading the text”—were reading race into the Bible.

1. Thornwell: moves from an abstract biblical defense of slavery to making specific claims about what is “good” for white people and what is “good” for Africans.

- a) Thornwell treated race, a human construction, as something that named real differences among groups of people.

- b) Like Thornwell, many white evangelicals applied their ideas of racial difference to the Bible and then called those ideas biblical.

C. Many white evangelicals who disagreed with slavery agreed with racist thinking. They did not think black people should be enslaved, but they also did not think they should be citizens.

V. Conclusion

A. Why couldn't white Protestants resolve the slavery question?

1. White Protestants shared a way of reading the Bible that made it hard for them to argue against slavery on biblical terms.

2. For some white Protestants, defending slavery became enmeshed with defending the Bible, which really meant defending a particular way of reading the Bible.

3. Even some white Protestants who disliked slavery found it hard to beat the pro-slavery argument on Common Sense Realist terms.

4. White Protestants did not recognize that they were reading race into the Bible and that their arguments could be used to justify the enslavement of white people.

B. Implications

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1. The Civil War resolved the question of whether slavery would continue in the United States, but it did not resolve the question of whether one race was superior nor what the Bible really said about slavery.
 2. Biblical authority undermined by the use of the Bible to support slavery
 3. Idea that black people were inferior and unable to be citizens remains
 4. Many white Southerners remained convinced that racial hierarchy was God's will.