

---

# TELLING THE TRUTH

---

White Presbyterians and Race in the 19th Century

---

---

# A PRESBYTERIAN TRAGEDY

---

- Presbyterian attitudes about race and slavery developed and transmuted from the colonial period to Reconstruction:
    - Regional difference to a degree: Southerners tended to be more pro-slavery throughout
    - Theological shifts: the growing Old School commitment to the “spiritual mission of the church”
    - General inconsistency, especially on the part of the New School
-

---

# EARLY PRESBYTERIAN STATEMENTS ON SLAVERY

---

- Following in line with the early revolutionary rhetoric in the 1780s and 1790s, Presbyterians consistently supported the general abolition of slavery (Thompson, 1:324ff):
    - 1787: Synod of New York and Philadelphia approved “the general principles in favor of universal liberty, that prevail in America, and the interest in which man of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery”; urged members to seek the same in their states.
    - 1792: David Rice, a Kentucky Presbyterian minister, published a pamphlet, “Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy.”
      - Rice: “The slavery of Negroes began in iniquity: a curse has attended it, and a curse will follow it. National vices will be punished with national calamities. Let us avoid these vices that we may avoid the punishment they deserve.”
-

---

# EARLY PRESBYTERIAN STATEMENTS ON SLAVERY

---

- Following in line with the early revolutionary rhetoric in the 1780s and 1790s, Presbyterians consistently supported the general abolition of slavery (Thompson, 1:324ff):
    - 1794: Transylvania Presbytery (KY) overtured the General Assembly regarding holding fellowship with slaveholders
    - 1795: General Assembly replied by urging forbearance, but also noting the 1787 action of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia.
    - 1800: Synod of Virginia declared “that it was wrong in the first instance to reduce so many of the helpless Africans to their present state of thralldom, will be readily admitted and that it is a duty to adopt proper measures for their emancipation, will it is presumed, be universally conceded.”
    - 1802: Synod of North Carolina urged its members “to carry into effect the directions and recommendations of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia.”
-

---

# EARLY PRESBYTERIAN STATEMENTS ON SLAVERY

---

- In the first decades of the nineteenth century, many Presbyterian attitudes were the same:
    - 1815: George Bourne, a Kentucky Presbyterian minister, began to agitate against slavery, arguing that “slavery as known in Virginia, was incompatible with the gospel; that slaveholding and church membership were a contradiction.”
      - He would publish a little book, “The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable,” that would influence the abolitions of the next generation.
    - 1816: John Holt Rice, legendary early Virginia Presbyterian minister, published a plea for the abolition of slavery [Thompson, 1:328]
-

---

# EARLY PRESBYTERIAN STATEMENTS ON SLAVERY

---

- In the first decades of the nineteenth century, many Presbyterian attitudes were the same:
    - 1818: General Assembly adopts its strongest antislavery stance: “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...It is manifestly the duty fo all Christians who enjoy the light of the present day...to efface this blot on our holy religion and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom” [Thompson, 1:331]
-

---

# SHIFTING TIDES

---

- While Presbyterians consistently supported the abolition of slavery, they were generally uncomfortable with a multiracial society.
    - Hence, many Presbyterian leaders passionately supported the American Colonization Society (ACS) as the ultimate solution to the “race problem.”
      - 1817: the General Assembly endorsed the organization of the ACS. From its founding to its foundering, this society would receive repeated endorsements from the assembly as well as southern synods and presbyteries.
      - 1820: Liberia is founded on land purchased by the ACS; missionaries would go through the next two decades to evangelize colonized and native Africans.
      - Archibald Alexander, in particular, would be a long-time, ardent support of the ACS, writing a history of the organization and its work in 1846.
  - Even when they did not support colonization, the assumption was that abolition would be “gradual” and would require “education”—which southern states generally outlawed.
-

---

# SHIFTING TIDES

---

- Throughout the 1830s, an increasing reticence to address the slavery question at all:
    - An increasing opinion that it should be dealt with as a civil matter, not an ecclesiastical one (Thompson, 1:385-6, 90)
  - Slavery will be one of the unstated factors in the Old/New School division in 1837
    - An allusion to the issue in the 1837 “Testimony and Memorial”—Discipline #5 [Reader, 155-56]
    - The connections between New School theology and anti-slavery, Old School and pro-slavery (Marsden, 96-97)
  - Slavery will not be a southern issue merely; it affected northerners as well: Charles Hodge (Guelzo, 308).
-

---

# SHIFTING TIDES

---

- The Old School Presbyterians in 1845 would adopt a paper written by James Henley Thornwell and Nathan Rice that (Thompson 1:530-31):
    - Affirmed the spiritual nature of the church: “The church of Christ is a spiritual body, whose jurisdiction extends only to the religious faith, and moral conduct of her members. She cannot legislate where Christ has not legislated”
    - Denied that slaveholding is a sin: “It is impossible to answer this question in the affirmative, without contradicting some of the plainest declarations of the word of God.”
    - Allowed slaveholders to be members of church
    - Recognized that this position was necessary for the continued unity of the Old School Presbyterian Church.
-

---

# SHIFTING TIDES

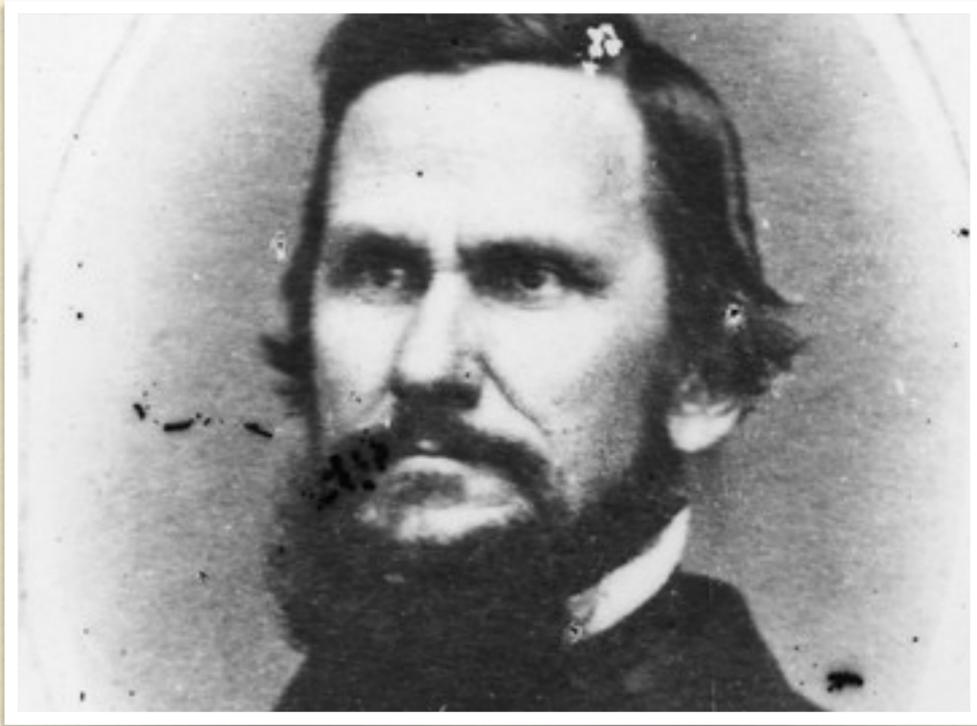
---

- Pro-slavery arguments—slavery as a positive good—would be articulated by Presbyterians (and others) especially in the 1830s. Several factors:
    - The creation of the cotton gin (in 1794) began to change the economics of slavery, making it appear indispensable to southern economy.
    - Political arguments connected with the new Virginia state constitution in 1831-32.
    - The Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner slave rebellions and the sensationalism that accompanied them.
    - The rise of immediate abolitionism, agitated from the North toward the South—and especially its theological component.
-

---

# PROSLAVERY PRESBYTERIANISM

---



- The proslavery argument was fairly consistent across theologians. Robert Lewis Dabney's can serve for the rest (Lucas):
    - A recognition of the abuses of slavery (but abuse doesn't nullify proper use)
    - A determination to "push the Bible arguments" through a selective and literalistic hermeneutic (Mark Noll: "the Reformed literal hermeneutic"): Ham; Abraham; Ten Commandments; Mosaic law; Jesus; Paul
    - An attack on the egalitarian ideology underlying abolitionism and a defense of patriarchal, hierarchical society
    - A race-based approach to slavery
-

---

# SLAVERY AND WAR

---

- Between Lincoln's election in November 1860 and the firing upon Fort Sumter in April 1861, it became clear that both country and church would divide.
  - The Southern Confederacy would exist to “perpetuate slavery” (B. M. Palmer; Reader, 204-9)
  - Southerners generally avoided the May 1861 General Assembly in Philadelphia: over half of the southern presbyteries unrepresented; those which did come were largely from border states (Vandervelde, 43)
  - The Gardiner Spring resolutions (Reader, 211-2)
-

---

# THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

- The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America formed on December 4, 1861, at First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, GA.
  - B. M. Palmer was the first moderator, but James H. Thornwell was the main driver, authoring the “Address” (Reader, 212-8)
    - The Spring Resolutions “confounded Caesar and Christ”
    - The political fact of secession made a “national” church desirable
    - The differences over slavery a good thing (he had prepared an alternative address).
-

---

# ECCLÉSIASTICAL EQUALITY OF FREEDMEN

---

- John L. Girardeau read a paper to the 1866 PCUS GA meeting in Memphis on “Our Ecclesiastical Relations to the Freedmen.” While the paper was not adopted, it did stimulate a great deal of interest in the topic.
  - While acknowledging that there was a fundamental spirituality unity between black and white believers in Christ, that did not argue for political or social equality.
    - By extension, neither does it argue for ecclesiastical equality—which would seem to argue for a separation of black Presbyterians into their own denomination.
    - Yet Girardeau does not believe that blacks are able to rule themselves in their own denomination.
-

---

# ECCLESIASTICAL EQUALITY OF FREEDMEN

---

- John L. Girardeau read a paper to the 1866 PCUS GA meeting in Memphis on “Our Ecclesiastical Relations to the Freedmen.” While the paper was not adopted, it did stimulate a great deal of interest in the topic.
  - And so, he proposed various plans: electing blacks to the office of deacon or even elder (as long as that office was for the congregation and not for the presbytery); or allow blacks to hold all offices in a congregation (pastor, elder, deacon), but not be represented at presbytery; or treat black congregations as branches of white congregations under their oversight.
  - None of these plans were adopted; but the 1867 Synod of Virginia contemplated ordaining black preachers—a move that would ultimately be defeated by Dabney (Lucas, *Dabney*, 144-48)
-