

The Southern Presbyterian Church and Racism

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The history of racism is a painful subject. Many of us in the US would prefer that the topic just went away. We don't personally have any overt racist feelings, and while we are concerned about poverty, we don't see that as an essentially racial thing any more. We are aware of subtle stereotyping that occurs, directed at all kinds of groups, but we feel that is best handled at the personal level, not by public debates and accusations. We also don't want to cast stones at the actions of our forefathers or the forefathers of others, whether Northerners or Southerners. "With malice toward none" we would prefer to just leave the past behind.

Yet as the old adage goes, those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. There are some among us who have actively been propagating a view of history which essentially presents the view that the North was a secular, imperialist aggressor and the South a virtuous, noble nation standing against tyranny. It is sometimes also argued that slavery and racism had nothing to do with the Civil War. Do such views matter? Yes, they do, for several reasons. First, blacks in our midst may very seriously question whether we have ever repented of racism. True biblical reconciliation happens when sins are confessed to our brothers, not just ignored. Second, such teachings evidence a spirit of self-righteousness, that is, a need to justify the actions of our forefathers as part of our own sense of self worth, rather than trusting in Christ alone for our justification. We are all sons of Adam, and also of other sinners; we have no need to justify everything our forefathers have done. And finally, whenever falsehoods are propagated, we should be concerned for the truth.

The Letter of the Southern Presbyterian Church to the Churches of the World

The first focus of this essay is the letter to all the churches of the world issued by the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA). This has been reprinted in the book, *The Historical Birth of the Presbyterian Church in America*, by John Edwards Richards (Liberty Press, Liberty Hill, South Carolina, 1987). This book is a history of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which includes many churches which were members of the PCCSA.

In 1861, the PCCSA sent out a letter to "all the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the earth" which was "unanimously adopted at their sessions," (that is, unanimously adopted by the leadership of all the member churches) explaining to the world their reasons for separation from the northern church. The letter is therefore not just the radical thinking of a few cranks, but the official, unanimous, public teaching of one of the most important denominations of Christians in the Confederate States. While

Southern thinking had many different currents, it is fair to say that this document is representative of the dominant views in society at the time.

The first half of this letter is a lengthy, fairly reasonable pragmatic argument. The letter argues that when nations are divided, churches should divide along national lines, especially when those countries are at war. This argument will likely resonate with modern readers; in modern polity, most Presbyterian denominations follow national boundaries, unlike the Catholic church which transcends national boundaries and can be seen as a rival to nations. The letter argues that the Church is not fit to decide the legitimacy of the civil government, but must submit to whatever government is *de facto* in control, although it reserves the right to call on that government to enact godly laws.

The second half of the letter is a lengthy answer to the question, “Is slavery a sin?” While claiming to not have an official position either for or against slavery, “either to propagate it or to abolish it,” the letter admits that if slavery was, indeed, an egregious sin, such a position of neutrality would be unacceptable among Christians.

One thing that comes across clearly in the letter is that slavery was the main issue of the Civil War. The founders of the PCCSA will have nothing to do with the modern revisionist view that the war was really about limiting the power of the government, or resisting secular impulses, etc. They say, “The antagonism of Northern and Southern sentiment on the subject of slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the Federal Union and involved us in the horrors of an unnatural war.” The Southern Presbyterians did not bring up any other moral issue to discuss in their 7000-word letter—no discussion of the size of federal government, no discussion of expanding industrialism in the North, no discussion of taxation, no discussion of differing views on the nature of society in general—just discussion of one moral issue: for 3500 words, addressed to “all the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the earth,” they give a defense of the morality of slavery. This agrees with what the vast majority of historians have said since then, that slavery was the issue: the South seceded because with the election of Abraham Lincoln they feared that slavery would soon be outlawed, and so they preempted this by removing themselves from the jurisdiction of the federal laws. This same view is given in the inauguration speech of the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens. In contrast to the idea that blacks and whites are equal, he said, “Our new government is founded on exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural condition.”¹ Stephens, presumably, was not booed from the stage when he said this. It is therefore historically inaccurate to say that the South was not primarily motivated by its desire to maintain its system of slavery. The Southern Presbyterians understood that their nation stood or fell on the morality of this institution, and argued accordingly.

¹ Quoted in James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 244.

What of their moral case? It is easy for us to judge, not being of their time and place. Can we judge them by their own standards?

The 1861 letter of the PCCSA makes two main arguments in favor of slavery. The first argument is that slavery is not forbidden in the Bible, and we cannot forbid what the Bible does not.

Here is crux of the issue for Christians. This is also perhaps the main motivation of modern apologists for the Confederacy. They are concerned that if people condemn slavery, they are indirectly condemning the Bible (or at least, are embarrassed by it). How do we, as Christians 150 years later, respond to this?

We must begin our response by understanding the critical error made by both the North and South in defining slavery in terms of the cultural institution they knew. “Slavery,” to both Northerners and Southerners, meant a permanent state of subjugation of one race by another, on the basis of innate inferiority of the enslaved race. Slaves in this system did not have the same human rights as others. The PCCSA letter makes this explicit:

“Human rights are not a fixed, but a fluctuating quantity... As you go up, the number of rights increases, but the number who possess them diminishes. As you go down the line, the rights are diminished, but the individuals are multiplied... Before slavery can be charged with doing him injustice, it must be shown that the minimum which falls to his lot at the bottom of the line is out of proportion to his capacity and culture.”

No biblical arguments are invoked to justify this sweeping philosophy. What we see in this argument is pure social Darwinism, the idea that inferior types of people deserve to be in a permanent state of subjugation, with less rights than others.

In this context, when the South saw “slavery” allowed in the Bible, it interpreted this as justification for its system. When Christians in the North saw slavery discussed in the Bible, they interpreted the term the same way, and therefore tried to argue against it either on the basis of rejecting the Old Testament (but this doesn’t really help, since Paul tells slaves to obey their masters in the New Testament) or by making “penumbra” arguments that the “spirit” of the Bible rejects slavery, which Southerners easily mocked as a slippery slope which could be used to justify just about anything. What neither side did very much was to ask whether the institution of Southern slavery followed the Bible’s many injunctions about slaves; in other words, was Southern slavery similar to *biblical* slavery at all? Though the PCCSA letter comes to us from a large body of Bible scholars, there is essentially no interaction with the actual Bible texts on slavery.

The Bible does allow slavery, of a sort, as it allows many other cultural institutions as a possible lesser of evils in a fallen world. For example, the Bible allows polygamy, warfare, divorce, prostitution, and monarchy, in addition to slavery, and has passages dealing with regulations for each. Yet each of these is presented as an evil,

something not to be desired for a society. The Bible is not utopian about the societies of this world, but it does not set these things up as normal; in particular, it does not forbid a society from abolishing any of these. It is interesting that the PCCSA letter did not apply the same logic to the cases of polygamy, prostitution, and monarchy—since the Bible does not utterly outlaw them, then by their logic, no society can do so either!

In this context, the Bible has several principles and laws dealing with slavery which the South, and also largely the North, paid no attention to. The first is the principle that the slave is a person equally created by God with the same legal rights. The Old Testament law clearly states, “There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.” (Exodus 12:49) These rights include the explicitly stated right to take a master to court for an injury, with the right to freedom on any permanent injury, even as small as a tooth: “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth,” (Exodus 21:26-27), and including the death penalty for murder: “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged,” (Exodus 21:20). What court could a slave go to in the South to get redress for excess punishment?

The Bible also forbids slave catching: “You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.” (Deuteronomy 23:15) How would obedience to this have changed Southern slavery? The Underground Railroad was completely justified by this principle, and fiercely opposed by the South.

One could well ask how slavery could exist at all in any society if this short law had been enforced and any slave could simply walk away. The context of the Bible implies that biblical slavery was actually something desired by many of the poor, and amounted to an agreement to work in exchange for food and housing. There are several laws that deal with the right of a slave to *not* be freed—the slave can insist on being a permanent slave, saying he loves his master too much (Deut 15:16). If a slave ran away, he forsook the food and housing and took his chances on the mercy of others.

An additional principle is that members of the covenant community could become slaves only voluntarily, and they were set free every seventh year, at which time the master was required to send them out with liberal provision (Deut 15:12-14). Slaves from other nations could be kept permanently, though still with all the legal rights discussed above. Since the Presbyterian church has historically taught that the Old Covenant principles translate to the New, and the church is the new Israel, it would seem a natural extension that members of the covenant community of the church should not keep each other as permanent slaves, but at most allow an institution which we would call indentured servitude, for up to six years, which was practiced among Europeans until the early 1800’s. This seems to be the whole point of the letter of Paul to Philemon, that Philemon, as a brother in Christ, should not keep Onesimus, a believer, in slavery. Paul does not demand Onesimus’ freedom, but appeals to Philemon to voluntarily accept Onesimus “no longer as a slave... but as a beloved brother,” (Philemon 16). The

Southern Presbyterians professed in this letter to have the goal of evangelizing the slaves and bringing them into the kingdom of God. How could they then justify a *permanent* slavery for these new brothers in Christ?

The answer is that the Southerners saw the blacks as permanently inferior to themselves, even if they became Christians. As discussed above, the arguments of both the North and South both failed because what they understood as slavery was not merely the economic arrangement discussed in the Bible, which could happen to anyone, but a state of *permanent subservience based on innate inferiority*. The Northern Christians, therefore, did not argue that the South violated specific laws of the Bible regarding slavery, but instead argued that all men are equal. They might have made more headway with Southern Christians if they had argued that the South did not follow biblical law on slavery. But they did argue correctly against the main argument being made by Southerners: that people are not equal, and blacks are inferior. Northern racism is well documented; they were no paragons of love; but by and large they did agree on the principle of equal legal rights for blacks, a principle expressly rejected by the South.

This brings us to the second argument of the 1861 PCCSA letter to the churches of the world. After arguing that the Bible does not forbid slavery, the letter turns to an argument based on pure racism. This racism is not of the malevolent sort, e.g. a desire to do harm to blacks, but what can be called the “paternalistic” sort. Blacks are viewed as a race with permanently childlike qualities, and whites as their parents. This attitude was propagated for generations in the South by the use of the term “boy” to refer to adult black men. As inferiors, blacks should be evangelized, but they could never be admitted as full members of the church of God or full members of society. No biblical support for this view is given in the letter. Some modern scholars have made the argument that the North proceeded on unbliblical, Enlightenment grounds, while the South was biblically based, but this argument for the permanent underclass status of blacks is full of Enlightenment thinking and utterly devoid of Bible references. The 1861 letter embraces the idea of an upward ascent of man, with modern man at the top: “As you go up, the number of rights increases, but the number who possess them diminishes. As you go down the line, the rights are diminished, but the individuals are multiplied.” This is uncut Enlightenment evolutionism.

The letter makes clear that this situation is *permanent*, not a temporary state:

“We cannot forbear to say, however, that the general operation of the system is kindly and benevolent; it is a real and effective discipline, and without it, we are profoundly persuaded that the African race in the midst of us can never be elevated in the scale of being. As long as that race, in its comparative degradation, co-exists side by side with the white, bondage is its normal condition.”

In other words, Africans are degraded and low in the “scale of being” and therefore must forever submit to the “benevolent discipline” of the whites.

It is hogwash, then, to put it bluntly, to argue that the Confederacy and the Southern Presbyterian church were founded only on noble, biblical ideals trashed by the Northern churches. Southern Christians embraced an Enlightenment notion of evolution of races, with whites at the top and the inferior races at the bottom, and they overturned the biblical regulations on slavery as well as the biblical principles of the brotherhood of all Christians and equal rights for aliens and sojourners, in their efforts to justify their system. Nothing but biblical repentance for these un-Christian attitudes is in order.

Racism and Miscegenation

One of important theologians of the time, who almost certainly had an influence on the PCCSA letter to the churches of the world, was Robert Dabney. Dabney is well known theologian in Presbyterian circles, yet hear his racist views:

“While we believe that ‘God made of one blood all nations of men to dwell under the whole heavens,’ ... “we know that the African has become . . . a different, fixed *species* of the race, separated from the white man by traits bodily, mental and moral, almost as rigid and permanent as those of *genus*.”²

He argued that blacks have “parasitical servility and dependence of nature, which characterizes the race everywhere, and in all ages.” Note again the sense of permanence—these traits persist in all ages, with no hope of change. Bringing the Christian Gospel to these people will not change their basic inner inferiority and servility.

Dabney also brought up the issue of “miscegenation” (mixed-race children), which was absent in the letter of the PCCSA to the churches of the world. Dabney argued that miscegenation would “mingle that blood which flowed in the veins of our Washingtons, Lees, and Jacksons, and which consecrated the battle fields of the Confederacy, with this sordid, alien taint, that the bastard stream shall never again throb with independence enough to make a tyrant tremble.”³ One can only imagine how a black Christian aware of these views would feel to hear Dabney quoted today with respect. Even Luther, in his attacks on the Jews in later life, did not go this far.

The issue of miscegenation persisted long after the issue of slavery was dead. We can see this in one of the original documents leading to the foundation of the PCA which John Richards included in his history of the PCA, cited above. This a long letter which he himself wrote in 1965 and sent to all the churches of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), which was the denomination into which the PCCSA evolved. Again, this is not the work of a fringe crank, but a respected pastor who prepared the

² Robert L. Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia, and Through Her, of the South* (New York: E. J. Hale & Son, 1867); As quoted by Robert Tracy McKenzie, in “Doug Wilson and Steve Wilkins on Slavery and the Civil War,” (Department of History, University of Washington, Seattle).

³ R. L. Dabney, “The Negro and the Common School.” As quoted by Robert Tracy McKenzie, in “Doug Wilson and Steve Wilkins on Slavery and the Civil War,” (Department of History, University of Washington, Seattle).

docket for the first General Assembly of the PCA and acted as the administrator of the organizing committee of the denomination. He reports that after he sent the letter to the churches of the PCUS, letters from PCUS members which he received in response ran 60% in favor, 40% against.

Including “racial amalgamationism” in a list of evil worldly movements, he went on to spend about 1000 words, the bulk of the letter, in building a racist argument:

“The vast majority of good thinking people prefer to associate with, and intermarry with, people of their respective race; this is part of the God-given inclination to honor and uphold the distinctiveness of separate races. But there are many false prophets of oneness, and many shallow stooges, who seek to force the amalgamation of the races.”

Here he raises what was the main issue at the time of the Civil Rights movement and the opposition to it. Slavery was a dead issue, but many people from the South (as I can attest from talking with my own Southern family members of that generation) were greatly opposed to interracial marriage, viewing it as nearly an abomination. From this followed the need for segregation, lest young black men meet white women and marry them (or seduce or rape them). Richards makes his argument with no reference to the Bible, but just what “the vast majority of good thinking people” say, and then goes on to insinuate that if blacks are allowed to freely roam, perversion will be the result:

“Contemporary incidents are abundant illustration of this truth. The press of Macon, Georgia, reporting on the capture of a man of another race who entered the dormitories of female students at night in two of our educational institutions, quote him as saying he did so to discuss interracial marriage with the young ladies. Surely no one would be so naive as to dissassociate such lust, perversion, and violation of rights from the preachments of oneness abroad in the land...”

He then brings up the issue of miscegenation:

“No human can measure the anguish of personality that goes on within the children of miscegenation... Let those who would erase the racial diversity of God’s creation beware lest the consequence of their evil be visited upon their children. ”

Last, he explicitly rejects the Declaration of Independence statement that “all men are created equal,” saying,

“People speak today of the ‘equality of men.’ The main thing wrong with this is that it is not true.”

Richards goes on to argue that people are clearly not created *identical*, thereby conflating the original meaning of “equality,” used in the Declaration of Independence, with a silly straw man. In the Declaration of Independence, “equality” clearly meant that no higher

classes of people existed with extra legal rights—the issue at the time of the American Revolution was the rejection of higher classes of “nobles” and monarchs. Some in the South have shrouded their cause in the Civil War as a “second American Revolution,” but as the PCCSA letter and Richards’ letter 100 years later make clear, the South *explicitly* rejected the foundation of the Declaration of Independence, and instead had a sort of “Southern aristocracy” view of classes of people, with blacks at the bottom.

Rousas Rushdooney, an influential author in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, writing around the same time as Richards, argued against miscegenation on the basis of an obscure reading of an Old Testament law:

“But Deuteronomy 22:10 not only forbids unequal religious yoking by inference, and as a case law, but also unequal yoking generally.... ‘Helpmeet’ means a reflection or mirror, an image of man, indicating that a woman must have something religiously and culturally in common with her husband. The burden of the law is thus against inter-religious, inter-racial, and inter-cultural marriages, in that they normally go against the very community which marriage is designed to establish.”⁴

Rushdooney argues that “the burden of the law” is against inter-racial or inter-cultural marriages between two believers. Yet two of the most celebrated marriages in the Old Testament, included by name in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, are between Jews and non-Jews. One is the prostitute Rahab, from one of the nations given over for destruction, and the other is Ruth, the ancestor of David. The book of Ruth is in fact an entire book of the Bible dealing with just this issue, the case of how a person from an idolatrous culture far from that of Israel could be included in the covenant community, with full rights. Ruth’s statement, “Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God,” was used by Jewish rabbis as the formula for conversion to Judaism for centuries. Note that the formula is not just “your God will be my God,” but also “your people will be my people.” In the covenant community, people are one by faith—“there is neither Jew nor Greek.” Some might argue that Ruth was less culturally distant from the Jews than blacks from whites, but this would only show ignorance of the great cultural divides at the time; Jews considered Moabites, as they did the later Samaritans, truly as another “race.”

The Civil Rights movement came at a time of great social upheaval on many issues: the sexual revolution, the youth movement, pacifism, socialism, etc. At the time, people tended to lump all these issues together. It is perhaps not going too far to say that liberals deliberately lumped the issues together, so that conservatives who were discredited on one issue would be discredited on all. To this day, conservatives are associated with racism.

The above survey shows that this is not entirely a false association. Many theological conservatives have historically argued that blacks should be permanently excluded from full membership in the covenant community in various ways. In so doing,

⁴ Rousas John Rushdooney, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), p. 256-257.

they departed from their biblical mode of argumentation. The PCCSA invoked no Scripture in its letter to the churches of the world, but instead Enlightenment and Darwinist ideas of races ascending a ladder of increasing rights and fewer people at the top. Dabney argued in biological terms of species and “bastard races.” Arguments for segregation based on the presumed sin of miscegenation persisted well into the 1970’s in conservative circles, yet these arguments were based on the opinions of “the vast majority of good thinking people” or the “burden of the law” (which one might call a “penumbra” of the law).

Conclusion

What should we say about all this? The Gospel tells us not to wallow in guilt, whether personal or societal. But because we are justified by grace alone, we do not need to justify the works of either ourselves personally or our forefathers or their society. We can freely admit that we are heirs of sinners; ultimately we are all heirs of the sinner, Adam. This does not discredit everything they did; many of them were godly people who stood up against many evils, but had a blind spot for others. We can even honor the bravery of men who fought for what they felt was right, on both sides of the Civil War. To learn from them is not to embrace everything they said and did.

We can also look to prevent old errors from continuing to be propagated in the church today. If we do not, we appear to approve of such teachings. The cause of Christ is never advanced by untruths.