Did Christianity provide an effective defense of slavery?

Viewpoint: Yes. Proslavery theorists used the Bible to support their position that slavery was ordained by God, arguing that the Israelites, God’s Chosen People, had owned slaves, that Jesus never denounced slavery, and that St. Paul admonished slaves to obey their masters.

Viewpoint: No. Slavery violated the spirit of Christianity; opponents of slavery believed that it was wrong because it prevented master and slave alike from living virtuous, moral, and Christian lives.

Antebellum Southerners had every confidence that both the Old and New Testaments sanctioned slavery. God himself, they reasoned, had instituted slavery as part of his plan to expose the heathen peoples of Africa to the blessings of Christian civilization. Those who mounted a scriptural defense of slavery regarded it as a “positive good” rather than a “necessary evil” for which there existed no practical alternative. Slavery, for example, compelled masters to live up to the doctrines of Christian ethics by nurturing their slaves. Proslavery theorists argued that slaves enjoyed better lives than did industrial wageworkers in the North and Europe, to say nothing of impoverished rural peasants, in whose welfare employers and landlords took no interest. Slavery was God’s way of providing social, political, institutional, and familial structures in which morally frail human beings could live together in peace, each free to serve him according to his station.

Opponents of slavery, by contrast, increasingly viewed the institution as immoral for violating the fundamental law of Christ: love thy neighbor as thyself. The tortured and blasphemous efforts of apologists to justify slavery masked its inherent and ruthless exploitation. Moreover, argued the abolitionists, slavery imperiled the souls of both blacks and whites, preventing both from living Christian lives. Slavery made of the master a vicious tyrant and of the slave a helpless victim. The resulting degradation of manners and morals spread evil throughout society. For some, the existence of slavery portended divine retribution as atonement for the national sin of the United States.
Viewpoint:
Yes. Proslavery theorists used the Bible to support their position that slavery was ordained by God, arguing that the Israelites, God’s Chosen People, had owned slaves, that Jesus never denounced slavery, and that St. Paul admonished slaves to obey their masters.

By the 1830s, Southern thinkers had come to depend on religion to justify their defense of slavery. Confronted with abolitionist pronouncements that slavery mocked and defiled the spirit of Christianity, Southerners introduced detailed evidence from both the Old and the New Testaments to demonstrate that God himself had sanctioned it. God’s Chosen People, the Israelites, including Abraham and the other patriarchs, had owned slaves. Jesus and the Apostles, who denounced every imaginable sin, spoke no word against slavery, even as Christ drove the money changers from the temple. St. Paul admonished slaves to obey their masters.

Southerners also credited the Israelites with establishing a more benevolent and humane form of slavery. South Carolina planter and statesman James Henry Hammond emphasized that the Israelites, finding slavery in a barbarous state, had attempted to reform rather than to eradicate it. They understood slavery to be the “invariable condition of human society.” In “The Bible Argument: or Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation” (1850), one of the most popular and influential proslavery tracts, Baptist minister Thornton Stringfellow of Virginia argued that slavery, “when engrafted on the Jewish constitution, was designed . . . to ameliorate the condition of the slaves in the neighboring nations.” Similarly, Episcopalian cleric and editor of Southern Review Albert Taylor Bledsoe wrote in “Liberty and Slavery: or, Slavery in the Light of Moral and Political Philosophy” (1856) that

the treatment of slaves among the heathen was far more severe and rigorous than it could lawfully be under the Mosaic law. The heathen master possessed the life and death, of scourging or imprisoning, or putting to excessive toil, even to any extent that he pleased. Not so among the Hebrews.

Moreover, Bledsoe hastened to add, the Jews had exposed their slaves to a knowledge of “the one living and true God.”

Reverend Frederick A. Ross, a Presbyterian from Huntsville, Alabama, did not linger over the question of what God had permitted the Israelites. In Slavery Ordained of God, published in 1857 explicitly to refute abolitionist arguments, Ross announced that God had commanded the Israelites to be slaveholders. “He made it the law of their social state. He made it one form of his ordained government among many.” Ross, further, reminded abolitionists that those who called themselves Christian had to accept Scripture as the revealed word of God and had to concede that God, not man, defined sin and virtue. He thereupon proceeded to defend Southern slavery as an extension and continuation of Hebrew slavery, and attested that slavery furnished a model of social and political order:

Every Southern planter is not more truly a slaveholder than Abraham. And the Southern master, by divine authority, may today, consider his slaves part of his social and religious family, just as Abraham did. . . . He is a slaveholder in no other sense than was Abraham. . . . So, then, Abraham lived in the midst of a system of slave-holding, exactly the same in nature with that in the South—a system ordained of God as really as the other forms of government round about him.

In his Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America (1858), the jurist Thomas R. R. Cobb of Georgia distinguished two classes of slaves among the Israelites. The first consisted of their Hebrew brethren, the second of strangers and heathens. “Hebrew slaves,” Cobb explained, “were subject to six-year terms of service, and had the option of accepting perpetual servitude if they could not care for themselves as free men.” He clarified the status of “Hebrew slaves,” writing:

A marked difference was made in the law as to the status of a Hebrew servant and one bought from the heathen. He was not to serve as a bond-servant, but as a hired servant and sojourner. He was not to be treated with rigor, but as a brother “waxen poor.” He lost, in his bondage, only his liberty, none of his civil rights. He was still a citizen, and might acquire property of his own. . . . In case of war, the slaves “born in the house” were frequently armed and went forth to battle with the master.

Those whom Cobb described as “pure” or “foreign” slaves, bought “from stranger and heathen, or captives taken in war,” were, by contrast, subjected to “rigorous treatment.” Unlike “Hebrew slaves,” they had no civil or legal rights, could not file a complaint against their master, could not give testimony in court, and could not own property. Foreign slaves were also bound in perpetuity, as were their children and their descendants.

Largely silent on the question of how Mosaic law applied to foreign as opposed to Hebrew slaves, Cobb nevertheless distinguished variations in the nature of slavery and
the treatment of slaves that enabled him more clearly to define the practice in the South. Southern slavery, he declared, was not absolute slavery, which deprived the slaves of the rights that common law guaranteed to every citizen: the right to security, the right to liberty, and the right to property. In the South, Cobb wrote, the system of slavery had been so modified that "partly by natural law, partly by express enactment, and more effectively by the influence of civilization and Christian enlightenment," the rights of slaves received a measure of security and protection, the denial of which "would shock an enlightened public sense." Louisa S. McCord echoed these sentiments, pointing out that in the South "the Negro has in many cases an appeal from the judgments of his master who is responsible to the law for cruel oppression," while "perfect slavery implies authority without appeal, in the one individual, and subjection, without right of resistance, in the other."

Even when the Israelites had been brutal masters, as doubtless on occasion they were, the existence of such cruelty, proslavery advocates argued, did not provoke God to withdraw his approval of slavery itself. Proclaiming that God had ordained slavery among the Israelites, the eminent political economist, statistician, journalist, and editor J. D. B. De Bow wrote that although it was "not improbable, many of the Jews . . . abused the institution, as they did other laws. . . . we may well affirm that slavery presents no worse aspect in the civilized nations of the present day, than it did among the Hebrews." Reverend George D. Armstrong of Norfolk, Virginia, declared in The Christian Doctrine of Slavery (1857) that "the condition of slaves in Judea, in our Lord's Day, was no better than it is now in our Southern states, while in all other countries it was greatly worse." An anonymous writer in De Bow's Review avowed that the Israelites had, in fact, been far more vicious masters than were Southerners. "The [Hebrew] master could punish or chastise the slave, and even maim him, at his pleasure. He exercised rights which no Southern planter would dare to exercise, and which a Southern negro would not submit to." The laws regulating the Hebrew system of slavery were "worse for the slave than the laws of any Southern states."

However dubious this assertion, it evinced a tendency among Southern slaveholders and their spokesmen to regard slaves as members of an extended family who warranted the consideration of their masters. No passing sentimentality to quiet uneasy consciences and no mere rationalization for the exercise of despotic power, the expression "my family, black and white" offered the assurance that the South was a community of Christian households into which the slaves had been assimilated. In Lecture Delivered before the Young Men's Library Association, of Augusta, April 10th, 1851, Showing African Slavery to be Consistent with the Moral and Physical Progress of a Nation (1851), Christopher G. Memminger, the future Confederate secretary of the treasury, described the familial relations that theoretically prevailed among the slaveholders of the South:

The Slave Institution at the South increases the tendency to dignify the family. Each planter in fact is a Patriarch—his position compels him to be a ruler in his household. From early youth, his children and servants look up to him as the head, and obedience and subordination become important elements of education. Where so many depend upon one will, society assumes the Hebrew form. Domestic relations become those which are most prized—each family recognizes its duty—and its members feel a responsibility for its discharge. The fifth commandment becomes the foundation of Society. The state is looked to only as the ultimate head in external relations while all internal duties, such as support, education, and the relative duties of individuals, are left to domestic regulation.

The duties of the masters included the responsible management of property, which Southerners deemed part of man's social nature. Yet, Southerners expressly denied the bourgeois concept of property that gave owners an absolute right to do with it as they pleased. Secular and religious law required that the masters of slaves protect, nurture, and govern all their household dependents, including their human chattel. Perhaps it had always been necessary that one class of men labor for the benefit of another, as proslavery theorists reasoned. A genuinely Christian slavery, however, organized and institutionalized inequality and exploitation to correspond to the ethical canons of the Bible, and thus alone made possible material progress without the terrible economic, social, political, and moral disturbances that plagued the North and Europe.

Reverend James Henley Thornwell, president of South Carolina College (later the University of South Carolina) and editor of the Southern Presbyterian Review, went so far as to proclaim that the South stood as the last bastion against a multitude of ideologies and heresies that threatened to undo Christian civilization. Slavery, preferably in a form compatible with the teachings of Scripture, would everywhere have to prevail over the social relations of free society if that civilization were now to survive. During the secession crisis of 1860-1861, Thornwell clarified the ideas upon which he had ruminated for more than a decade:

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non-slaveholding states will eventually have to organize labour, and introduce something so like to slavery that it will be impossible to discriminate between them, or else to suffer from the most violent and disastrous insurrections.

The Christian view of slavery that Thornwell expounded implied that slaves, as children of God and as human beings with immortal souls, had rights that masters dare not abridge. Along with many other Southern social thinkers and theologians, Thornwell repudiated the conviction that masters had limitless authority over their slaves. "The idle declamation about degrading men to the condition of chattels and treating them as oxen or swine, the idea that they are regarded as tools and instruments and not as beings possessed of immortal souls," Thornwell wrote, "betray a gross ignorance of the real nature of the relation." Masters who violated the rights or neglected the welfare of their slaves ought to expect a rebuke from the church, but also punishment from the state. Thornwell minced no words: "In treating slavery as an existing institution, a fact involving most important moral relations, one of the prime duties of the State is to protect, by temporal legislation, the real rights of the slave." That, too, was the will of God.

Divine law, in Thornwell's judgment, superseded property rights. Masters held their slaves only in trust, to discharge the will and purpose of God on earth. The sinful abuse of that authority, therefore, invited his wrath. Thornwell argued repeatedly, and with unquestioned sincerity, that should the Christian people of the South ever become convinced that slavery was a sin, they would not waste a moment eradicating it. Slavery, in Thornwell's view, was not sinful, and his writing in its defense grew into an extraordinary critique of modernity.

In a sermon titled "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," Thornwell launched a general denunciation of the radicalism of the age. He asailed the abolitionists not only for attacking slavery but also for threatening the foundations of social order. He traced abolitionists' errors to misconceptions about human nature. Like other species of radicals, Thornwell charged, abolitionists had forgotten that men, if left to their own devices, were neither good nor benevolent. They lived instead in a fallen world for which God had established relations of authority and subordination as the principle of order. It was, therefore, not slavery that was sinful, but the attempt to erase all distinctions between men and to impose absolute equality of condition upon them. In what must surely rank among Thornwell's most ardent polemics, he announced that the combatants in the present struggle were not merely the abolitionists and the slaveholders. The ranks also included "Atheists," "Socialists," "Communists," "Red republicans," and "Jacobins" on one side, and the friends of civilization on the other. The world, Thornwell professed, had become a battleground divided between Christianity and atheism, with the fate of mankind hanging in the balance.

Thornwell undertook to institute in the South a Christian polity that reconciled, as far as was possible in this world, social order with social justice and the duties of men with the dignity of man. For that purpose the complacent support and heartless celebration of the free market would not serve. Thornwell proposed instead the imposition of some form of personal servitude on all workers, white as well as black, which would spare them the anarchy of the market and afford them a sense of security and decency that current economic, social, and political regimes did not provide. Such arrangements, he knew, would impede economic growth and development. Yet, in his view there was no other option, for the costs of material progress had become too great to bear if men did not wish to rebel against God and imperil their souls.

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Viewpoint:
No. Slavery violated the spirit of Christianity; opponents of slavery believed that it was wrong because it prevented master and slave alike from living virtuous, moral, and Christian lives.

Proslavery theorists were fond of reminding their opponents of the many ways in which the Bible sanctioned slavery. They pointed out that the Israelites, including Abraham and the other patriarchs, had held slaves. Christ remained silent on slavery, except to advise the faithful "to render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's," and from the Southern perspective, slavery belonged unequivocally to Caesar. St. Paul, finally, instructed slaves to accept their fate and obey their masters. Nowhere in Scripture did Southerners find justification for the belief that slavery was a sin.

The abolitionists were dismayed at the biblical evidence arrayed in defense of slavery. Such antislavery spokesmen as Reverend William Ellery Channing, a noted evangelist, and Dr. Francis Wayland, president and professor of
THE CORRECT PLAN

Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton, New Jersey, submitted for publication to E. N. Elliott an article that included the following passages:

It is on all hands acknowledged that, at the time of the advent of Jesus Christ, slavery in its worst forms prevailed over the whole world. The Saviour found it around him in Judea; the apostles met with it in Asia, Greece and Italy. How did they treat it? Not by the denunciation of slaveholding as necessarily and universally sinful. Not by declaring that all slaveholders were men-stealers and robbers, and consequently to be excluded from the church and the kingdom of heaven. Not by insisting on immediate emancipation. Not by appeals to the passions of men on the evils of slavery, or by the adoption of a system of universal agitation. On the contrary, it was by teaching the true nature, dignity, equality and destiny of men; by inculcating the principles of justice and love; and by leaving these principles to produce their legitimate effects in ameliorating the condition of all classes of society. We need not stop to prove that such was the course pursued by our Saviour and his apostles, because the fact is generally acknowledged, and various reasons are assigned, by the abolitionists and others, to account for it. The subject is hardly alluded to by Christ in any of his personal instructions. The apostles refer to it, not to pronounce upon it as a question of morals, but to prescribe the relative duties of masters and slaves. They caution those slaves who have believing or Christian masters, not to despise them because they were on a perfect religious equality with them, but to consider the fact that their masters were their brethren, as an additional reason for obedience. It is remarkable that there is not even an exhortation to masters to liberate their slaves, much less is it urged as an imperative and immediate duty. They are commanded to be kind, merciful and just; and to remember that they have a Master in heaven. Paul represents this relation as of comparatively little account; "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant (or slave), care not for it; though, should the opportunity of freedom be presented, embrace it. These external relations, however, are of little importance, for every Christian is a freeman in the highest and best sense of the word, and at the same time is under the strongest bonds of Christ." 1 Cor. vii:20-22. It is not worth while to shut our eyes to these facts. They will remain, whether we refuse to see them and be instructed by them or not. If we are wiser, better, more courageous than Christ and his apostles, let us say so; but it will do no good, under a paroxysm of benevolence, to attempt to tear the Bible to pieces, or to exhort, by violent exegesis, a meaning foreign to its obvious sense. Whatever inferences may be fairly deducible from the fact, the fact itself cannot be denied that Christ and his inspired followers did treat the subject of slavery in the manner stated above. This being the case, we ought carefully to consider their conduct in this respect, and inquire what lessons that conduct should teach us.

We think no one will deny that the plan adopted by the Saviour and his immediate followers must be the correct plan, and therefore obligatory upon us, unless it can be shown that their circumstances were so different from ours, as to make the rule of duty different in the two cases. The obligation to point out and establish this difference, rests of course upon those who have adopted a course diametrically the reverse of that which Christ pursued. They have not acquitted themselves of this obligation. They do not seem to have felt it necessary to reconcile their conduct with his; nor does it appear to have occurred to them, that their violent denunciations of slaveholding and of slaveholders is an indirect reflection on his wisdom, virtue, or courage. If the present course of the abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles were wrong. For the circumstances of the two cases are, as far as we can see, in all essential particulars, the same. They appeared as teachers of morality and religion, not as politicians. The same is the fact with our abolitionists. They found slavery authorized by the laws of the land. So do we. They were called upon to receive into the communion of the Christian Church, both slave owners and slaves. So are we. They instructed these different classes of persons as to their respective duties. So do we. Where then is the difference between the two cases? If we are right in insisting that slaveholding is one of the greatest of all sins; that it should be immediately and universally abandoned as a condition of church communion, or admission into heaven, how comes it that Christ and his apostles did not pursue the same course? We see no way of escape from the conclusion that the conduct of the modern abolitionists, being directly opposed to that of the authors of our religion, must be wrong and ought to be modified or abandoned.

moral philosophy at Brown University, insisted that if anyone could show that the Bible vindicated slavery, then sincere Christians had an obligation to discard the Bible as an evil book. (The Brown family of Providence, Rhode Island, whose fortune derived from the slave trade, had endowed Brown University.) Whatever false lessons desperate men and women might deduce from Scripture, abolitionists insisted that slavery so completely and obviously violated the spirit of Christianity that all arguments to the contrary required no serious refutation.

For others, such as the Quakers, or Society of Friends, opposition to slavery became a crucial test of religious purity and faith. According to radical Philadelphia Quaker Benjamin Lay, for example, “As God gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him might have everlasting Life; so the Devil gives his only begotten Child, the Merchandize of Slaves and Souls of Men, that whosoever believes and trades in it might have everlasting Damnation.” Slavery was, according to Lay, a “Hellish Practice,” a “filthy sin,” “the greatest Sin in the World, of the very Nature of Hell itself, and in the Belly of Hell.” If, as historian David Brion Davis has suggested, Lay was not quite sane, “one should remember that the sanest minds found excuses for Negro slavery.” In his impressive studies of the problem of slavery, Davis has shown that Lay’s antislavery religion evolved from a long process of soul-searching that took place within the Society of Friends.

Initially, slavery presented few, if any, moral problems for the Quakers. The growth of the Society, in fact, coincided with the imperial expansion of Great Britain and the advent of the slave trade. “Indeed,” writes Davis, “the destiny of the Society of Friends was intertwined with American slavery in an almost providential design.” Quakers were slaveholders in Barbados and Jamaica, which William Penn’s father, who was not himself a Quaker, had captured from Spain in 1655. Quaker merchants in Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania participated extensively in the slave trade, from which they made their fortunes. Although George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, encouraged slaveholders to practice Christian charity, brotherhood, and love in their relations with the slaves, Fox also acquiesced in slavery as one, albeit extreme, instance of the subjugation of man to God. The bondage to sin, St. Augustine had taught, was the only bondage that mattered; temporal bondage ought not concern the elect, who remained spiritually free.

Not until Christians changed their minds about the nature and meaning of sin could they question the justice of slavery. “Men could not fully perceive the moral contradictions of slavery,” Davis insists, “until a major religious trans-

formations had changed their ideas of sin and spiritual freedom; they would not feel it a duty to combat slavery as a positive evil until its existence seemed to threaten the moral security provided by a system of values that harmonized individual desires with socially defined goals and sanctions.” As early as the 1670s, Quaker William Edmundson had pointed the way toward the Christian rejection of slavery.

Unlike Fox, Edmundson was not convinced that Christianity would inspire masters to conduct themselves with greater humanity toward their slaves, a belief that had traditionally formed the basis of the Christian defense of slavery. In 1676, Edmundson circulated a general letter to Quakers in the slaveholding colonies. He observed that although slaves in the Caribbean were free to act according to their own sinful natures, they were not free to be baptized and to devote their lives to loving and serving the Lord. Slavery thus prevented the slaves from becoming good Christians. Blacks, Edmundson declared, were slaves to sin because they were slaves to men. Slavery was incompatible with Christianity and was, therefore, sinful.

Christianity also motivated such early British and American abolitionists as Granville Sharp, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Samuel Hopkins, Samuel Sewall, and Benjamin Rush, to say nothing of their nineteenth-century counterparts William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Theodore Dwight Weld. In some respects, the antislavery movement was an extension of the philanthropic tradition that had begun to take shape during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was predicated on the teaching that morality required good Christians not only to behave well but also to love their neighbors. The growth of charity, however, had done nothing to prevent or mitigate the slave trade and had excited no general denunciations of slavery itself. Benevolence could not be permitted to interfere with the rights of property or the requirements of social order. The Christian impulse to oppose slavery thus moved in another direction.

For many mainstream Protestants, slavery facilitated the idolatrous worship of Mammon (material wealth or possessions). Always mistrustful of unlimited power, antislavery Protestants also feared that those masters who systematically denied their slaves religious instruction had substituted themselves for God. Such blasphemies could not be allowed to prevail. Slavery, sinful in itself, was the occasion for even greater sins: greed, lust, and impiety, to name only the most obvious and the most deadly.

Those who rejected Calvinism, particularly the belief in predestination and human depravity, also came to find slavery abhorrent. During
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Latitudinarians, as they were known, increasingly turned to societies more primitive than England as models of virtue and probity. The heathen, they argued, although ignorant of the gospel, might carry within himself a truer spirit of Christianity than the urbane sophisticate who had committed the Articles of Faith to memory. It was not long before the righteous but downtrodden slaves and the lawful but heartless masters became religious and literary conventions, representing, on the one hand, compassion, solace, fellowship, and truth, and on the other, luxury, power, decadence, and sin. The slaves were innocents, undeserving of their fate. Their pleas for freedom and justice could not go unheeded among Christian men and women. The progress, and perhaps the survival, of humanity depended upon their emancipation. The abolition of slavery gave proof through human agency of God’s benevolence and love.

American abolitionist James Freeman Clarke, in *Slavery in the United States: A Sermon Delivered in Amory Hall, on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1842* (1843), asserted that it was “a mistake to speak of the African as an inferior race to the Caucasian.” Similarly, essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson declared: “Here is a man: and if you have a man, black or white is an insignificance. The intellect—that is miraculous! Who has it, has the talisman: his skin and bones, though they were of the color of night, are transparent, and everlasting stars shine through, with attractive beams.” Only the depraved institution of slavery
kept blacks from realizing their infinite potential as human beings. In 1841, Channing extended the implications of this argument to include a condemnation of slaveholders. He exclaimed that “a people, upholding or in any way giving countenance to slavery, contract guilt in proportion to the light which is thrown on the injustice and evils of this institution... The weight of guilt on this nation is great and increasing.” Channing called forth images of guilt in the sins of slavery.

The wars, the sacked and burning villages, the kidnapping and murders of Africa, which begin this horrible history; the crowded hold, the chains, stench, suffocation, burning thirst, and agonies of the slave ship; the loathsome diseases and enormous waste of life in the middle passage; the wrongs and sufferings, of the plantation, with its reign of terror and force, its unbridled lust, its violation of domestic rights and charities—these all are revealed.

“To shut our eyes against all this,” he concluded, “to shut our ears and hearts... this, surely, is a guilt which the justice of God cannot wink at, and one which insulted humanity, religion, and freedom call down fearful retribution.” Slavery, it seems, was becoming the American national sin. Only its abolition could expiate the guilt and reconcile the nation to the Almighty; failure would incite his wrath.

For Clarke there was an “irrepressible conflict” between Freedom and Slavery. The opposition is radical and entire; there can be no peace nor permanent truce between them, till one has conquered the other.” Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker demanded repentance and atonement, implicating Northerners and Southerners alike, along with every current citizen of the United States, and all previous generations, in the sin of slavery. He agonized in “A Letter to the People of the United States Touching the Matter of Slavery” (22 December 1847):

Think of the nation’s deed, done continually and afresh. God shall hear the voice of your brother’s blood, long crying from the ground; His justice asks you even now, “America, where is thy brother?” This is the answer which America must give: “Lo, he is there in the rice-swamps of the South, in the fields teeming with cotton and the luxuriant cane. He was weak and I seized him; naked and I bound him; ignorant, poor and savage, and I over-mastered him. I laid on his forehead my grievous yoke. I have branded him with my fetters; beat him with my whip. Other tyrants had dominion over him, but my finger was thicker than their loins. I have branded the mark of my power, with red-hot iron, upon his human flesh. I am fed with his toil; fat, voluptuous on his sweat, and tears, and blood. I stole the father, stole also the sons, and set them to toil; his wife and daughters are a pleasant spoil to me. Behold the children also of thy servant and his handmaidens—sons swarthier than their sire. Asketh Thou for the African? I found him a barbarian. I have made him a beast. Lo, there Thou hast what is Thine.”

Nor in their zeal did abolitionists spare institutional religion, appealing to a more unspoiled and often private version of Christianity. They assailed the churches of both regions and all denominations as the “refuge and hiding-place” of slavery. Stephen Symonds Foster, in The Brotherhood of Thieves (1886), characterized the clergy who refused to condemn slavery as a “brotherhood of thieves.” “If the Church must be cast down by the strugglings of Humanity to be free,” wrote Garrison, “then let the Church fall, and its fragments be scattered to the four winds of heaven, never more to curse the earth.” Most abolitionists, however, exhorted Christians not to abandon the faith but to abide fully by its precepts, which required the steadfast opposition to slavery. “Thus, we see, that the Christian religion not only forbids slavery,” affirmed Wayland in Elements of Moral Science (1835), “but that it also provides the only method in which, after it has once been established, it may be abolished, and that with entire safety and benefits to both parties.”

In the end, many who called themselves “Christian” believed they had to decide whether slavery was right or wrong. The question, if not the decision, was simple. That people could arrive at contradictory answers ought to be obvious. After all, most of the Protestant churches in the United States divided over the question of slavery years before political partisans set the nation asunder. Both sides appealed to God to justify their convictions and their cause. The advocates of slavery found much in Scripture to bolster their arguments, but in time events compelled them to admit that it was the enemies of slavery whom God had vindicated. Although he was president of the triumphant Union, Abraham Lincoln reflected not upon impending victory in his Second Inaugural Address (1865) but upon the searing tragedy that slavery had wrought in the United States. His words serve as a reminder that no matter how men and women may use religion, the Almighty has purposes of his own:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil...
shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood
drawn with the lash, shall be paid for by
another drawn with the sword, as was said
three thousand years ago, so still it must be
said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and
righteous altogether."

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