

A SLAVE STORY: A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF AMERICAN SLAVERY AND
CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is not an exhaustive history of the life of slaves. It does not examine Indian slaves, child labor, or indentured servants. It does not speak on racism in the modern era. While it may make brief excursions, its focus is primarily on American Christians' interactions with, teachings about, and the lives of Black slaves in the British Colonies and the subsequent United States. It draws extensively from primary source material of slaves, preachers, and church records to show the rhetoric surrounding American Slavery and Christianity. Testimonies from many individuals include Olaudah Equiano, Francis Le Jau, Peter Randolph, Frederick Douglass, Richard Allen, and Jeremiah Asher. The thesis will also look in depth at some Lutheran synods and their interactions with slaves, slavery, and the Abolition movement.

INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no topic of American history that is more uncomfortable to discuss than slavery. Why? Perhaps we are ashamed, ashamed that the light of freedom shone so much brighter on some rather than others. Perhaps it is fear, fear of appearing insensitive or too sensitive. Others may feel that the issue was no longer applicable ever since the ink on the Emancipation Proclamation had dried. Whatever the reason may be, I feel that it must be discussed. Ijeoma Oluo asserts in her book, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, that the history of slavery is something that simply cannot be forgotten: “Ignoring it does not make it go away. There is no shoving the four hundred years’ racial oppression and violence toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube.”¹

The purpose of this thesis is not to induce a feeling of shame, to push for a particular political platform, or to address modern racial issues. The purpose of this thesis is simply to listen, to listen to the history, story, and struggles of Black slaves, clergy, and Christians. Oluo believes that one of the most important things to do on any issue that has race as a factor is to listen to people’s lives and experiences that are different than our own.² This thesis forces us to subject ourselves to a portion of their story. It purposely draws from primary source material and is also supplemented with historian’s information. The rationale being, to be subjected to one’s story, we must first listen to the words of the ones who lived the story.

1 Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race* (Seattle: Seal, 2019), 43.

2 Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, 80.

During the period before the Civil War, dedicated individuals continued to speak about the hardship, sin, and mistreatment of Black people. Very often, individuals refused to listen. Others heard, but that was all. Some said the complaints were exaggerated. Some slave owners used the Bible as a tool to free themselves and chain another in acts of gross hypocrisy. Preachers were discredited, opposed, and even killed for preaching Christian treatment of Christian people. The vast majority of Christians were silent. Listening is important, but there are many things that Christians should have done after being subjected to the slave story. Many people were aware of what was taking place in their country, in their town, and their own fields. But they did nothing. Looking back, we see that their actions implicate them. Their silence condemns them.

I pray that the reader would read with ears that are open, mind clear, and heart eager. The story that is presented here may not be a part of your own story, but it is still worth speaking about. The story of slaves' interaction with American Christianity may not even interest you, but it is certainly close to the hearts of many. Let us all listen to the lives and history of a people who felt it was worth sharing with others. There is no way of changing the history of slavery in America. But racism will continue to exist. Hypocrisy will continue to find fertile soil in the lives of Christians. I also pray that we, as Christians, would move our listening ears to speaking lips and active hands. When we see racism in our country, in our town, or our own lives, let us not be silent. Let our words ring up and out. Let our actions show concern. Let our hearts seek to chase the hypocrisy from our own selves.

PART I: OPENING THE CASKET

Necessity of Seeing

A casket is an interesting concept. In many American funerals, they are glistening, ornate, and even beautiful pieces. If you had no idea what a casket was used for, you would simply see a perfectly squared and eloquently decorated box. It's just a box. But once you ripped the top off, you would see the true reality. A stinking and rotting body lies within. Putridity and death lie within something that had once been covered.

In a sense, the world has many casket concepts. A historical event or person can seem harmless, unnoteworthy, or even noble. But once you investigate, and delve into the historical circumstances, and open the top of the casket, you stand horrified at the sheer magnitude of disgusting evil. What had seemed like a harmless fact, was indeed filled with blood, screams, and death.

Slavery is a casket concept. Many people understand that slavery was bad. Many sympathize that it was unfortunate that human beings were owned by another race. But many modern Americans might not be as well educated on the depths of the cruelties that were inflicted upon generations of Black men, women, and children.

The first part of this thesis draws upon almost entirely primary source material to allow the reader to see inside the casket. The stories are all historically vetted, studied, and verified. The vast majority of this section is quotations from those who experienced slavery's harsh sting. To try to describe it from my own mouth would be a disservice to the words and lives of those who felt its sting, who witnessed the splashing of blood, and who had no power to stay the hands of those who hurt them.

There is perhaps the necessity of a disclaimer before beginning the first section. It may seem to be overly gruesome to some and other may be disturbing for certain audiences. However, I encourage you to continue to read through it, even though it may be uncomfortable. I feel, as the author, that to listen to the whole story of American slavery and its interaction with Christendom, we must learn of the nature of the institution from those who have experienced it and have written about what it was like.

The Atlantic Voyage

More than twelve million men, women, and children were taken across the Atlantic before the nineteenth century.³ Two and a half million Africans were brought directly to North America.⁴ There was at least one ship in the 1790s that contained over 90% children.⁵ Even after the Atlantic slave trade was made illegal in 1808, more than a quarter of a million slaves were illegally taken from Africa and sold to plantations in the South before the Civil War.⁶

Treated simply as human cargo, the conditions were beyond comprehension. Every person was given less than a square yard for the extent of the voyage.⁷ Chained and bound, they had to relieve themselves wherever they were placed. The unsanitary conditions led to vomiting

3 “Wall Text.” Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

4 “Wall Text.” Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

5 Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 44.

6 Delbanco, 27.

7 Delbanco, 43.

and uncontrolled diarrhea. The ships could be smelled for miles. Many tried to kill themselves, only a few succeeded.⁸

Olaudah Equiano, a boy who was taken from Africa and later became a Christian

Abolitionist writer described the slave vessels as such:

“The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.”⁹

The European slave vessel is something out of a horror film. But this was the reality of so many millions of unfortunate humans. Women aboard the vessels were subjected to near-constant sexual assault. Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon on slave ships noted: “The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature.”¹⁰

The Life of the American Slave

Unfortunately, the life of the Black slave did not get any more pleasant once sold in the United States. Immediately upon arrival, the slaves were chained, taken to lots to be bid upon, and sold

8 Delbanco, 43-44.

9 “First Hand Accounts Case Study,” http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=376&Itemid=237.html.

10 “First Hand Accounts Case Study,” http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=376&Itemid=237.html.

to their new owners. Jesse Torrey, a Philadelphia doctor, was aghast at what he had seen in merely the transportation of the slaves in 1817. He witnessed a group of slaves bound with ropes and chains. He could not control his emotions to see men bound with instruments that he had only ever seen used on field animals.¹¹ The journey of slaves usually did not end after they arrived at their first owner's property. They were frequently split up and sold with no regard for family ties. The chance of being sold to another plantation was thirty percent. Almost one hundred percent of slaves had a direct relative sold away from them.¹²

The information that follows is drawn from the sources at Whitney Plantation in Louisiana. It is the only museum in the world which is dedicated to the life of Black slaves in Louisiana. Guided by a knowledgeable staff member, the participant is led through the grounds and given information on the sad existence of a sugar cane slave. From the day that a slave stepped foot on a sugar plantation, their average lifespan was 10 years. Slaves were never given enough food to sustain their own life, so they had to grow supplemental gardens to keep themselves alive. Between six and ten people were assigned to each room which contained one single bed. The vast majority of slaves never had the opportunity to lie on a mattress for their entire lives.

Perhaps the most chilling information from this museum is gleaned from the *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall* memorial. It is a memorial dedicated to the 107,000 people enslaved in Louisiana and documented in the Louisiana Slave Database built by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. It also draws on testimonies from the Federal Writers' Project. This was a government-ordered

11 Delbanco, 27.

12 Edward Ayers, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (Video, The Great Courses, <https://www.thegreatcoursesplus.com/americas-long-struggle-against-slavery>, 2018.)

program in the early twentieth century that sought out to document the stories of those that they could find, who had been born and raised in slavery before the Emancipation Proclamation. The Project, which is fully accessible online, contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slaves who lived in its bonds before the Civil War.

A woman named Julia Woodrich wrote on how slave women were bred like livestock: “My ma had fifteen children and none of them had the same pa. Every time she was sold she would get another man. My ma had had one boy by her moss that was my missis brothers child. You see, every time she was sold, she had to take another man. She had fifteen children after she was sold de last time.”¹³ A slave named Mary Ann John describes how she narrowly escaped this horrendous fate:

“You know, my ma always told me if we had not been set free when us was, in about two years they would have made me have a baby, at age 10. They had a big old husky man on de place dey would send all de gals to. If dey didn’t want to go, dey given dem a lashin’ and make dem go. If dey did not get pregnant de first time, dey was forced to go back.”¹⁴

Slave masters wasted no time to increase their labor force. The slaves were treated as pure animals. The masters would force them to get pregnant and work until the day of labor. Over one-third of babies died before their first birthday.¹⁵

Julia Woodrich also describes how slave girls would be raped by their masters whenever they desired: “I ‘member how my master used to would come and get my sister, maker her take a bath and comb her hair, and taker her down in the quarter all night, den have de nerve to come around de next day and ask her how she fee.”¹⁶ Female slaves were sold at a high price if they

13 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

14 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

15 Edward Ayers, “A New History of the American South” (2018).

16 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

were young and deemed desirable for slave master's sexual passions. They were advertised in the papers under a special section called 'Fancy girls'. These were slave girls of light complexion as young as 12 years old who were seen as valuable rape victims for white plantation owners.

Another Louisiana slave, Jenny Proctor, recalled the inhumane punishment inflicted upon her as a child: "... he comes in and he grabs me and starts beatin' me wid dat cat-o'-nine tails, and he beats me 'till I fall to de floor nearly dead. He cut my back all to pieces, den dey rub salt in de cuts for mo' punishment. I's only 10 years old."¹⁷ Peter Hill adds that the slave masters used 'creative' punishments on the slaves as well: "Some of de time on de plantations was terrible. My sister didn't like to work, so dey stake her out and let a tree fall on her and break her legs."¹⁸ Slavery's sadism is abundantly clear in these accounts. But what is more painful to know, is that these recollections are only a tiny fraction of the pains that were inflicted. All of these quotes are only from people from Louisiana, and only the ones who have been recorded. There were at least 12 million more souls who experienced life under this institution who are not part of this group.¹⁹

Slaves were beaten with specific instruments to cause pain. Certain owners used paddles with small holes that would raise blisters that could be cut with a whip at a later occasion. A Black person would constantly have to watch their actions in order to avoid the looming threat of the whip. Dogs were trained from the time they were puppies to attack a Black person who was moving faster than a walk. A Black man who was running was able to be whipped without

17 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

18 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

19 Wall Text. *Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall*, Whitney Plantation, Edgard, LA.

question, to discourage any chance of ‘foul play’. Some masters used the pain of their slaves as entertainment. There are records of some owners who would force their slaves into fights to the death. They would place bets and force them to kill each other using only their nails, teeth, and hands. If they refused, they were whipped to the death.²⁰

The Lens of History?

One might raise the question, is this concept of illegitimate and cruel practice simply a bias from our modern sensibilities? There is no way that it could have been that bad. Perhaps some might even argue that this was a good institution that benefitted both parties and the slaves might not have seen it to be as terrible as we do now. While this will be addressed more later in this thesis, the answer is no.

As early as 1688, there were groups, such as the Quakers, who publicly organized and protested that slavery was a heinous and sinful institution.²¹ From the lips of the ones who endured, there was something obviously wrong with the institution both humanely and spiritually. Solomon Northup, a free man, who was drugged, stolen from his family, and sold to a plantation in the South spoke with pain in his heart in retrospect: “Alas! I had not then learned the measure of “man’s inhumanity to man,” nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain”.²² Northup was enslaved for twelve years with no ability to assert his freedom.

20 Delbanco, 33.

21 Edward Ayers, “A New History of the American South” (2018).

22 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853; repr., Edinburgh: Black & White, 2015), 20.

One Black minister in Ohio, who had escaped slavery, stated that Satan could “rent out hell and move to the United States,” where he would feel more at home.²³ A slave girl named Harriet Jacobs laments in her memoirs the absurdity of the idea that some Americans of her time held. There must have been some, even at that time, who were propagating the idea that slavery was not as bad as they had heard. She says of the ones who say the complaints against slavery are exaggerated: “What does *he* know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die?”²⁴ To Harriet, to the slave, slavery was nothing short of total degradation and horrendousness.

Even from this short introduction to the subject, we can generally assume that American enslavement of Blacks is not inhuman to our modern sensibilities, but also to those who were living at the time. The many thousands of people who planned for years to desperately escape its clutches, give a powerful picture of the reality that the risk of flight was less than the idea of living under its shadow. The fact that so many slaves and observers speak of its reality with sheer repugnance, shows that this was not seen as a symbiotic relationship. Perhaps the most saddening evidence that slavery wasn’t something that people were just ‘used to’ were the unnamed number of slaves who tore out their own throats, hung themselves upon a tree or starved themselves simply to release themselves from slavery’s bondage.²⁵ American slavery was horrible. American

23 Delbanco, 6.

24 Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Linda Brent (Boston, 1861), 114.

25 “First Hand Accounts Case Study,” http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=376&Itemid=237.html.

slavery was terrible back then to the eyes of those who experienced it, and it is terrible to our own as we look upon it in our modern age.

PART II: SLAVERY AND CHRISTIANITY

‘Biblical’ rationale for American Slavery

The support and argumentation for slavery, especially in the South, went through many stages and different foundations of rationale until the Civil War. Early on in the years of the nation, preachers of many denominations unashamedly preached on the evils of slavery. But as time progressed, the message of abolition regressed in the pulpits of the South. Church gatherings, especially among the rapidly growing Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians,²⁶ produced a level of discomfort in many white members. A Southern society, which was much more hierarchical than the North, was somewhat unaccustomed to sharing a space with people of a supposed lesser race.²⁷ And eventually, the Christian faith became warped into the most widespread rationale to white people for why slavery was not only permissible but even part of God’s plan.²⁸

Donald G. Mathews summarizes that the arguments in support of Christianity followed two distinct but related lines of thinking. He defines the arguments as being either a “proslavery ideology” or a “slaveholding ethic”. He summarizes the two theories as such:

“The former emphasized the structure of slaveholding society and was designed to explain how the system worked and why it should be maintained; it took no account at all of the moral character of Black people and whatever rights they may be expected to have. The latter—the slaveholding ethic—emphasized the moral responsibilities of both master and slave and was concerned with securing benefits to both. The former was characterized by the singleness of purpose and arrogant assurance, while the latter was characterized by ambivalence in a sense of guilt.”²⁹

26 These churches are later classified under the term “Evangelicalism”. In the remainder of the thesis, when speaking generally or in a way that concerns multiple denominations of the sort, the term “Evangelical” will be used even though it was not popularized until later in the eighteenth century. When referencing specific denominations, the specific church body will be used.

27 Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 46.

28 Edward Ayers, “A New History of the American South” (2018).

29 Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 173.

While this thesis will not go into depth on every argument and categorizing each according to this system, these categories serve as a beneficial point to remember. Every argument for slavery was not uniform, entirely consistent, or even compatible with each other.

Many Southerners wanted to propose that it was God's will to enslave Africans to teach them Christianity, and their job was to make them into moral creatures.³⁰ There is a debate among scholars whether a poor interpretation of the Bible caused the support of slavery, or whether it was racism that already existed that led to poor interpretation of the Bible. Most historians seem to agree that both of these were present and tended to feed on each other which exasperated the problem. Regardless, we know that these are the ideas and arguments that were presented that are related to the Bible.

The first stage of creating a slaveholding ethic was to strip slaveholding of any moral constraints. Prior to the vast abolitionist movements of the 1830s, the slaveholding ethic was rather simple. Many Southerners who would be classified today under the name as Evangelicals, held that God had sanctioned slavery among the Jews of the Old Testament and had even permitted it in the New Testament. They also firmly believed that slavery was a proper way of governing a false idea of a degraded and inferior race. The ten commandments never explicitly condemned slavery, and the patriarchs owned slaves. Thus, it cannot be a sin in and of itself. Thus, slavery served a dual divine purpose. They alleged that it protected society from an immoral and primitive people and also had no condemnation in the pages of scripture.³¹ In a clever way, this turned slavery into not a burden on Black people but a righteous cross upon white slaveowners.

30 Edward Ayers, "A New History of the American South" (2018).

31 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 151-152.

Some Southerners reviled the attitudes and attacks of the North, believing that Northerners simply thrust Black people as far away from them as they could, while Southerners had drawn them closer to themselves in order to care for them spiritually.³² Southern masters tried to justify their ownership of slaves to the North by stressing their 'Christian' stewardship to the slaves.³³ They also accused them of using poor exegesis, lofty moral arguments, and refusing to acknowledge the clear passages. They could not understand how one could take Genesis 16:9 and the whole book of Philemon and say that God would not approve of slavery.³⁴ However, this argumentation is not reserved to only Southern Clergy and members. In an analysis of 55 major proslavery pieces of literature written by clergymen in the 1830s, 37 of them were written by Northerners.³⁵

However, not all of the activities of Southern churches were as overtly offensive as others. Some were even contested as honorable to some, while completely unethical to others. For example, the Mission to Slaves was formed in the 1830s with the goal of spreading the gospel to Black slaves. However, the Mission was also attacked by abolitionists as a thinly veiled attempt by Southerners to perfect the slave system by conforming the thoughts of slaves to be the same as white evangelical masters.³⁶ “If missionaries could agree that slaves were ignorant,

32 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 174.

33 Edward Ayers, “A New History of the American South” (2018).

34 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 176.

35 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 166.

36 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 146.

dishonest, lazy, immoral, and degraded, they could also agree that such depictions³⁷ of slave life were irrelevant.”³⁸

After the abolitionist movement of the 1830s, many Southern Evangelicals redoubled their efforts to justify and support the practice of owning slaves. This stage of history tried to paint slaveholding as moral behavior. This might be due as well to the fact that at this time, a generation of Southerners had grown up their entire lives within the confines of a slave society. They might have felt the pressure to react to the idea that they were steeped in an environment that had been labeled as sinful.

Perhaps the most important factor in all of the arguments for slavery, and the bedrock on which it is built, is the pervasive opinion that Black people were simply inferior to whites. Mathews writes: “So pervasive was the belief in Black inferiority that many evangelical tracts on slavery never really took the trouble to prove it, and instead merely assumed that it was one of those social and moral axioms which competed with the law of gravity for credibility.”³⁹

One specific argument that many Southern Evangelicals took for the morality of slavery was the Doctrine of the Fall. They believed that since the fall into sin, the human race is prone to violence, sexual immorality, and theft. Left to our own devices, the human race would surely destroy itself in a boiling pot of sin. God, therefore, established governments and societies to keep the human race safe. They argued that since Black people were less moral than white people, they required more constraint than the average person.⁴⁰

37 “Depictions” in this quote is a reference to the words, articles, and memoirs that were being produced spread that showed the terrible conditions of the lives of Black slaves.

38 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 139.

39 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 167.

40 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 168-169.

To justify this idea, many Christians turned to specific poorly interpreted Bible passages for justification. One common section to point to Black inferiority was the so-called 'curse of Ham' in Genesis 9:20-27. After Noah falls asleep naked and drunk, his son Ham came in and then told his brothers which was disrespectful to his father. As a result of this action, Noah curses his son Ham's descendant, Canaan, to be the servants of the other two. Through this section, many 'bibliophiles' deduced that this must mean the descendants of Canaan were the Africans, and they were bound to be cursed and live in servitude forever.⁴¹

An additional biblical 'proof' comes from the mark of Cain. This is recorded in Genesis 4 after Cain had killed his brother Abel. God cursed Cain and banished him from the land but placed a mark on him so no one would kill him. Many assumed that the 'mark' must have been dark skin. Some even went so far as to say that the descendants of Cain married the sons of Ham and made them double cursed.⁴² This was how they could reconcile the perceived inferiority of Africans and Christianity. The unwarranted reading of the cursed pronounced on Cain and Canaan, allowed many Americans to continue to believe the false idea that Blacks were licentious, murderous, degraded, and disorderly.

These arguments all play into the dilemma of trying to establish clean lines on why slavery was supported by Christians. Many thought of Blacks as a sort of personification for sin. They were cursed by God to be servants, savages, brutes, completely separate from humans, and full of all evil things. Others, thought of them as humans, but prone to sins, requiring constant supervision, and moral building institutions to raise them to the morality of white Europeans.

41 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 171.

42 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 171.

Resistance to New Black Converts

While American slavery had been argued as a positive thing, since it introduced Africans to Christianity, this idea was not clearly seen by the actions that many churches took in admitting and interacting with slaves or freed Black people in worship. Many writers and clergy of the time noted the difficulties that came with slaves who desired to enter into Christianity. After reading many of the accounts laid out in the following pages, one could argue that many churches went through much effort to keep the gospel from slaves. Black slaves flocked to worship as often as they could, but the comments of many white Christians were tinged with a sense of wariness about the authenticity of slaves' Christian commitment. Many saw them as simply joining the church to escape from work on Sunday.⁴³

One of the earliest records of this comes from Dr. Francis Le Jau. Le Jau was an Anglican minister in the early 1700s. He describes in his journal that the process for a slave to become baptized or even admitted into worship was a laborious process. In order for a slave to be admitted to worship on Sunday, they must first get written consent from their master. They must also provide proof that they were a 'good worker' and that they were obedient to their master. Before becoming members, the slave must confess before the church that they would not use their new faith to aid in freeing themselves.⁴⁴

Le Jau records that the slave must receive permission to gain more knowledge of Christ in whatever form it took. He admits that most masters did not permit their slaves to go to church

⁴³ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 47.

⁴⁴ Francis Le Jau, "The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999), 26.

or be baptized.⁴⁵ This is corroborated by another memoir of a former slave, who remembered that the passes to go to church were difficult to attain. The passes for a predominantly Black church were more often than not refused.⁴⁶

Francis Le Jau notes that almost all of the slaves that he encountered were forbidden from reading the Bible since they might use it for “less desirable tasks.”⁴⁷ Of those slaves who were allowed to read, many of them had ‘doctored’ Bibles. Sections of Scripture that could be seen as inspiring rebellious ideas, were torn out from the book before given to the slaves.⁴⁸

Peter Randolph, a man born in slavery who later became a Baptist minister, states bluntly that many masters would not permit their own slaves to be Christian. Often the slaves would meet in secret on Sundays and take turns watching for the masters and overseers. Many white slave masters were fearful of slave worship as a breeding ground for rebellious thoughts.⁴⁹ They would flee if necessary, and some were proud to be whipped for the sake of Jesus. Even praying to Jesus was considered to be a whippable offense on some plantations. And if a slave would call out to the Lord during their punishment, they would be often threatened with death.⁵⁰

45 Francis Le Jau, “The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717,” 26-28.

46 Peter Randolph, “Slave Cabin to the Pulpit, The Autobiography of Reverend Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life.” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999) 66.

47 Francis Le Jau, “The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717,” 30.

48 Julie Zauzmer, “The Bible was used to justify slavery. Then Africans made it their path to freedom,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-bible-was-used-to-justify-slavery-then-africans-made-it-their-path-to-freedom/2019/04/29/34699e8e-6512-11e9-82ba-fcfeff232e8f_story.html.

49 Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 68.

50 Peter Randolph, “Slave Cabin to the Pulpit, The Autobiography of Reverend Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life,” 67-68.

Even after Christianity had taken hold in slave societies, they faced hurdles in worship. In the South, Evangelicals adopted the practice of Anglican churches of relegating Black worshippers to the back of churches, upper galleries, or even sheds outside of the church. If there were enough white members who showed up to church on Sunday, the slaves were excluded from the churches entirely. After the American Revolution, this practice became even more segregated. It was very common for preachers only to preach to white or Black crowds, not wanting to preach to a mixed-race crowd.⁵¹

Black Clergy Struggles

Many slaves resented the hypocrisy of the Christian faith of their white masters. They would so often tell them to learn God's Word, but they were not allowed to read. The masters would tell them not to be violent but were beaten by them relentlessly.⁵² Even so, many former slaves worked their way up to become pastors and preachers. This was more common in the North, where it was much easier for a slave to become free and learn to read. However, the racial struggles did not end after a Black man was in the pulpit.

As stated, in the years after the American Revolution, the church in the North was no racial paradise. Northern Blacks were often spared the whip, but they still felt the racism within the walls of the church. A prime example of this was the existence of the "Negro Pew." Jeremiah Asher, a Baptist preacher, eventually left his church in Hartford, Connecticut because of this practice. Asher describes that the "negro pew" were small benches with high sides in the farthest

⁵¹ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 67.

⁵² Edward Ayers, "A New History of the American South" (2018).

corner of the church. They had high sides so that you could not see the rest of the congregation or the minister. Blacks were not allowed to sit anywhere else, even though there was plenty of empty seats in the rest of the church. After bringing this to the concern of the church, they got rid of them. This was a seeming triumph. But shortly after they had made special chairs for Blacks in worship that they would sit on. This seems like a progressive move, but there was a problem. The church decided that the Blacks needed to pay a yearly fee to use the chairs that they had made for them. Thankfully, after a powerful sermon by Asher, they got rid of the idea.⁵³ But this encounter shows evidence of the sentiment, that Blacks are not equal to whites.

Richard Allen, a slave who bought his freedom, became a talented Methodist preacher. He was a rotation preacher at St. George's Church in Philadelphia. He preached to a mixed crowd on Sundays. But in 1790, the church passed the resolution to segregate their worship services. The preacher left after the leadership told him he could not sit next to the whites in worship. Allen and another Black preacher named Absalom Jones wanted to start their own all-Black church. The Methodist conference stated to them that if they continued to build this church, they would be expelled from the church connection of Methodism. Many Black members were tossed out of fellowship with the Methodist church, without any witnesses or chance for defense of the member.⁵⁴

They trudged forward in their efforts, trusting God to bless their work, and succeeded in building the first African church in all of the United States in 1794. Even still, the church would

⁵³ Jeremiah Asher, "Incidents in the Life of the Rev. J. Asher, Pastor of Shiloh (Coloured) Baptist Church, Philidelphia, and a Concluding Chapter of Facts Illustrating the Unrighteous Prejudice Existing in the Minds of American Citizens Toward Their Coloured Brethren," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999), 224-227.

⁵⁴ Richard Allen, "The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen." in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999), 147.

give their offerings to the white ministers who would preach for them. They were eventually accepted back into the conference, but only after they agreed to relinquish their property and assets to the Methodist Conference. After they were accepted, the Conference stated that they would not be supplied with preachers unless they paid dues to the Methodist Conference. But since their assets had been taken from them, they had no ability to pay. As a result, their church went vacant without church services for some time. Allen admits that this type of money asset seizing was fairly common for Black churches during the time after he completed the church.⁵⁵

By the time of his death, his all-Black church had nearly 3,000 members. He set about to help the poor in the city, provide nurses during the yellow fever epidemic, and work to help all in need. But even he was not safe from racism's clutch. White Irish patients accused his Black nurses of stealing, slave catchers targeted him because they thought he must be a runaway, and his church was subject of a collection attempt by the Methodist Conference who did not like his message of abolition.⁵⁶

In the South, the racial attacks against Black preachers were much more overt. The journal of a Methodist preacher named Isaac Lane shows the struggles that many Black preachers faced for the sake of the gospel. Born a slave in Jackson, Tennessee, he was shortly after converted to Christianity. He felt strongly that he could and should be a preacher of the gospel. He inquired of two ministers who refused to teach him because he was Black. He then wrote a letter to the Conference of the Methodist church, who replied that they did not "believe it proper" to give a license to Blacks to preach. Eventually, he gained his license, but he and many people who listened to him were in danger. The white people who went to his services were

55 Richard Allen, "The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen," 150-152.

56 Richard Bell, ""America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (2020).

reprimanded and attacked, and the churches which Lane preached at were burned down.⁵⁷ So persistent was the anxiety about Black members in the South, that mob attacks on Black preachers and worshippers occurred well into the nineteenth century.⁵⁸

Hypocrisy of the Masters

Some slaves found the greater hypocrisy to be that their Christian masters were more brutal than the non-religious. One of the fiercest and harshest critics of the hypocrisy practiced by Christian slaveholders was Frederick Douglass. He was a man who was born in bondage but escaped to freedom in Maryland in 1838. In many of his writings, he states that Christian masters were the most feared due to their harsh punishments.⁵⁹ He asserted that once his master converted to Christianity, “it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways.”⁶⁰ He even went so far as to say: “Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me.”⁶¹

Douglass also resented the hypocritical teaching of the clergy bitterly. The talented writer expresses his remorse over the situation:

“We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during

57 Isaac Lane, “Autobiography of Bishop Isaac Lane, LL.D. with a Short History of the C.M.E. Church in America and of Methodism.” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999), 246-247.

58 Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 47.

59 Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press; 1999), 102-103.

60 Michael Luo, “American Christianity’s White-Supremacy Problem,” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem>.

61 Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” 103.

the week fills the pulpit on Sunday and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me.”⁶²

It is no wonder that Douglass, and many other Black preachers, had such a passion for many of the words of Christ which he spoke to the Pharisees who prided themselves on piety but neglected the true nature of the law.

The clergy often noted the actions of some of their members against their slaves. Le Jau noted a particular horrible action that one of his members was guilty of. He tells the story of a man in good standing in his church, who went to church with one of his slaves who was later baptized. The slave fell asleep in the field and the Christian master stuffed his baptized brother in Christ into a metal cage for several days until the slave asked one of his own children to stab him to death. The minister reported that this was the common pattern among his Christian members. While Le Jau categorized this as sinful, he took no action against the master.⁶³

Sometimes the message of the clergy was more inconsistent than anything else. The evangelist, George Whitefield, who was hugely influential in the Great Awakening of the early eighteenth century, condemned the cruelty of slave owners but at the same time campaigned for slavery’s legalization in the colony of Georgia.⁶⁴ Charles Finney, a revivalist preacher, and abolitionist did not allow slaveholders to take communion in his church. But at the same time, he

62 Frederick Douglass, ““Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” 106.

63 Francis Le Jau, “The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717,” 31.

64 Michael Luo, “American Christianity’s White-Supremacy Problem,” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem>.

was openly against interracial marriage and prohibited Black members from being in church offices.⁶⁵

Abolitionist Messages and Reactions within Christianity

Until the 1830s, the only group that truly was anti-slavery were the Quakers in England and the Colonies. This is almost 200 years after the first slaves arrived on American soil.⁶⁶ The first anti-slavery protest in the United States took place in 1688. It occurred in Germantown Pennsylvania, which was organized by Francis Daniel Pastorius, a Quaker. They addressed a letter to their church's regional council stating their case against slavery. They objected against slavery in this early protest on the grounds of theft. They stated that slavery in America was simply stealing on a grand scale, an institution that stole people from somewhere else for their personal use.⁶⁷

Shortly after the Quakers, the Puritans began to join in the debate for abolition. Judge Samuel Sewall, a Puritan, wrote a pamphlet called *The Selling of Joseph*, in 1700. Within this short work, he condemns slavery as a sin from the Bible stating that stealing is ranked among the most atrocious of capital crimes. He also rejected the belief that Blacks possessed the curse of Ham which designated them as suitable slaves. This was immediately responded to with a proslavery sixteen-page response by John Saffin. Both were revolutionary ideas about the same subject matter, but with a radically different reception. Saffin's *A Brief and Candid Answer*, was

⁶⁵ Michael Luo, "American Christianity's White-Supremacy Problem," *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem>.

⁶⁶ Edward Ayers, "A New History of the American South" (2018).

⁶⁷ Richard Bell, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (Video, The Great Courses, <https://www.thegreatcoursesplus.com/americas-long-struggle-against-slavery>, 2020).

received, reprinted, and spread to others across the United States. However, Sewall's antislavery document almost immediately faded into obscurity.⁶⁸

There are other notable Quakers in the abolition movement. Benjamin Lay wrote furiously against the institution and even made grand shows of the barbarity outside of Quaker meetinghouses, such as standing in the snow without clothing. Due to his efforts and other Quakers, such as John Wooman, the Quaker church passed a resolution to excommunicate any member who owned or purchased slaves in 1776.⁶⁹

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, Anthony Benezet published books that documented the lives of slaves in the United States. He continuously tried to educate, free, and speak on behalf of the enslaved Blacks in America, but was resisted by most except his fellow Quakers.⁷⁰

Perhaps one of the most well-known Christian abolitionists was William Lloyd Garrison.⁷¹ Garrison produced *The Liberator* in 1831, which was one of the first abolitionist newspapers in the nation. Garrison wrote strongly on Christian morals and the necessity of ridding America of slavery entirely. He tried to persuade other evangelical Christians to join him in support of the immediate emancipation of slaves. He wrote voraciously and told the truth of the condition of the slaves to take the moral high ground from the proslavery argument. His publications are riddled with accounts of brutal treatment of slaves, as well as the suicides that slaves used as their only release. He frequently intertwined the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 in his writing to appeal to many of his readers who were devout Christians.

68 Richard Bell, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (2020).

69 Richard Bell, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (2020).

70 Richard Bell, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (2020).

71 Richard Bell, "America's Long Struggle against Slavery," (2020).

Garrisonians were opposed quickly and vehemently. They were outcasts from society. They were usually ostracized by their families. While being a pacifist organization, they were frequently attacked by mobs and bounty hunters. Their presses were burned, they were jailed, and some were killed. Sadly, much of this came at the hands of other alleged Christians.⁷² Even Garrison himself was dragged through the streets of Boston at the end of a rope based on what he had published.⁷³ Even after this incident, Garrison continued to write, publish, and work for the abolition of slavery.

72 Richard Bell, ““America’s Long Struggle against Slavery,” (2020).

73 Edward Ayers, “A New History of the American South” (2018).

PART III: THE LUTHERAN RESPONSE

Early Anti-abolition Sentiments among Lutherans

Many historians have assumed that in the Revolutionary era, the majority of the anti-abolition sentiment came from individuals who owned slaves themselves. The assumption that the freedom of slaves would lead to increased crime, a poorly performing economy, and hordes of Blacks would seem to fit well with those who would be defending their self-interests amidst large populations of Black slaves.⁷⁴ This leads to the logical assumption that the anti-abolition sentiment would come from southern slave owners.

However, some anomalies go against this assumption. One, in particular, comes from the Lutheran German and Dutch citizens of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey before 1800. This was an area where the ratio of whites to Black was very high, the slaveholding percentage was low, and emancipation was proposed for the future generation of Blacks.⁷⁵ This group of people was particularly opposed to the abolition of slavery, even though they were surrounded by a majority of citizens who supported it.

During the 1780s in the Northern Colonies, members of many Christian denominations were the leading forces for the abolition of slavery. An anomaly from this group, however, were the Lutherans and Germans. In fact, a statistical analysis shows that the most consistent opponents of the freedom of slaves in these geographical regions between 1779 and 1788 were German Lutherans and Calvinists.⁷⁶ Ireland states very bluntly concerning the sentiments of

⁷⁴ Owen S. Ireland, "Germans against Abolition: A Minority's View of Slavery in Revolutionary Pennsylvania," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3, no. 4 (1973): 685.

⁷⁵ Owen S. Ireland, "Germans against Abolition," 686.

⁷⁶ Owen S. Ireland, "Germans against Abolition," 687.

slavery in Pennsylvania at the time: “The German Lutherans and Reformed stood alone as the consistent opponents of abolition”.⁷⁷

The Pennsylvania General Assembly voted ten times on the issue of abolition during these twelve years, and the votes factored along the ethnoreligious lines, show how striking this is. The Quakers, of all different ethnicities, supported the abolition of slavery at 81 percent. The English, of all religions, supported the abolition of slavery at 84 percent. The Germans were split down the middle and the Lutherans were last with only 17 percent supporting the abolition of slavery.⁷⁸ When combined, this group was by far the biggest opponents of the freeing of slaves. As Ireland deduces from the data: “All of the German opponents of abolition for whom religious data are available were Reformed or Lutheran. Thus all of the Germans who were neither Lutheran nor Reformed voted in favor of abolition, and the vast majority of the Germans who were Lutheran or Reformed (70 percent) voted against it.”⁷⁹

These percentages are also corroborated by the geographical data. The four counties of the German crescent, four areas of heavy German immigration, never elected abolitionist advocates during this near-decade-long period.⁸⁰ The representatives from Pennsylvania who were not German, or who were German but not Reformed or Lutheran, tended to vote in favor of abolition.

Later on, the most vehement opposers of abolition among Lutherans was the South Carolina Synod. In 1835, they passed their own resolutions. They stated unanimously that the Northern abolitionists were “enemies of our beloved country”. They also agreed that they would

77 Owen S. Ireland, “Germans against Abolition,” 697.

78 Owen S. Ireland, “Germans against Abolition,” 689.

79 Owen S. Ireland, “Germans against Abolition,” 690.

80 Owen S. Ireland, “Germans against Abolition,” 693.

not read any abolitionist publications from the Northern synods, nor enter into a discussion of slavery. After these statements, the South Carolina Synod makes no mention of abolition until after the Civil War. The Virginia Synod resolved in the same year, that abolitionism was opposed to both civil and religious institutions and ultimately folly. They too refused to read or circulate any literature that supported abolition.⁸¹

Slave ownership among Lutherans

However, while the German Lutherans did not support the abolition of slavery, they had an extremely low percentage of slave owners. Before 1800, they owned only ten percent of the slaves while being the largest ethnic group in Pennsylvania.⁸²

In North Carolina, approximately twelve percent of Germans in North Carolina held slaves, according to the census of 1790. This is much lower than the statewide average of nearly thirty-one percent.⁸³ However, this began to change as the Germans broke from their traditionally communal society. In 1802, ‘almost all’ Germans in Lincoln county owned slaves when just ten years prior only thirteen percent had owned slaves.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 79-80.

⁸² Owen S. Ireland, "Germans against Abolition," 694.

⁸³ William Herman Gehrke, "Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 14, no. 4 (1937): 307-308.

⁸⁴ William Herman Gehrke, "Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina," 308.

Many German Lutherans also prided themselves on treating their slaves well. While self-attested, one German Lutheran stated: “Lutheran slaves... were well cared for”.⁸⁵ In 1840, a slave was sold to a Lutheran pastor for the specific purpose that he might be treated well.⁸⁶

It was not all well and good to be sold to a German though. There are records of German owners who weekly beat their slaves. There is also a record of two German owners who beat a pregnant slave mercilessly over four months until both the mother and child died.⁸⁷

Slaves and Worship in Lutheran Churches

While it is not conclusive, the records of slaves being baptized and confirmed in Lutheran churches does not seem to be common until the 1800s. This would seem to suggest that Black people were not the primary objective of Lutheran evangelism efforts. The first evidence of Lutheran mission work among the slaves in North Carolina comes from a baptism record of two slaves in July of 1803.⁸⁸

In 1814, the Lutheran Synod of North Carolina began a discussion of Black Americans in their churches. While they agreed that there should be no obstacles to educating Blacks, they did not grant them equal standing in the churches. They were to have a place prepared for them to hear, “since it is not expedient that they sit among the white people.”⁸⁹ While this was a major step forward, even this resolution to allow instruction and worship of Black people in the

85 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 308.

86 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 310.

87 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 311.

88 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 313.

89 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 313.

Lutheran church was not unanimously supported. In South Carolina, the 1814 resolution to allow Black people to receive instruction was met with “much opposition”.⁹⁰ Even six years later, the Synod had to step in because a congregation in South Carolina had forbidden their pastor to take Communion because he had administered Communion to Blacks.⁹¹

The Franckean Synod

In 1836, the relatively new Hartwick Synod, a group of Lutherans mainly living in New York, had brought to discussion the abolition of slavery. This took the form of resolutions that expressed many members’ abhorrence of the institution. After a whole day of discussion, the matter of abolition was to be “indefinitely postponed.” Two years later, after the discussion was brought up again, the convention said that the members of the churches should avoid the subject which caused division among Christian brethren.⁹²

Partly due to this refusal to address the issue of slavery, a group of angered ministers and their churches withdrew from the Hartwick synod to form the strongest voice of abolition in the Lutheran Church, the Franckean Synod. The Franckean Synod’s radical stance on abolition can be considered one of the most extreme, even among all other American Christian denominations.⁹³

90 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 314.

91 William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 315.

92 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 75.

93 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 75.

In May of 1837, a meeting of pastors who would later help to form the Franckean Synod adopted a constitution with a radical precedent. They stated that no layperson could have a seat at the conventions if they owned slaves, no pastor could be a member of the synod if they owned slaves, trafficked slaves, or advocated for slavery as it existed in the United States.⁹⁴ At the first convention of the Franckean Synod, the following resolutions were adopted:

- “1. Resolved, That Slavery as it exists in the United States, is a sin....., opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and a violation of the inalienable rights of man.
2. Resolved, That we do not deem it inexpedient for ecclesiastical bodies to interfere with the abolition of slavery; but that it is the duty of all such bodies of every evangelical denomination, to bear their decided testimony against the *Sin of Slavery*.
3. Resolved, That we have abundant cause for deep humiliation before God, that, as a denomination, we are so deeply involved in the *Sin of Slavery*, and that so many of our ministers practice the crime, and that so many others justify in this iniquity.
4. Resolved, That we view the traffic in human beings as carried on in this country between the ministers of the Gospel and members of the churches, as revolting to humanity and as repugnant to the laws of Christ, as ever was the foreign slave trade.”⁹⁵

This position of the Franckean Synod was condemned by the General Synod (a Lutheran synod originally comprised of the Maryland-Virginia Synod, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the New York Ministerium, and the North Carolina Synod) because it was seen as causing division contrary to the spirit of the gospel.⁹⁶

In the 1840s, the Franckean Synod became even more emboldened in their fight against slavery. They refused to admit anyone to Communion who owned slaves. However, their most aggressive action was the transmission of *Fraternal Appeal*. This was a treatise that rebuked the

⁹⁴ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 76.

⁹⁵ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 77.

⁹⁶ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 78.

system of slavery and encouraged Lutheran synods to denounce it. It was mailed to every Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1842. In 1843, the President of the Franckean Synod, Rev. P. Wieting, stated with disappointment that not a single synod had responded to the appeal in agreement.⁹⁷ While not every Evangelical Lutheran synod was actively pro-slavery, no synod other than the Franckean Synod stated clearly that they were against it. Most of the synods responded negatively. The responses could be summarized with this overly reductive statement: not the right time or place.

In 1844, the Franckean Synod cut all ties with any church body that was not on the side of abolition. They refused fellowship with all Christians who supported, apologized for, tolerated, or were silent on the subject of slavery. If slavery was a sin, then they could not be in fellowship with those who supported it.⁹⁸ At its convention in 1851, it also expressed firm condemnation of the Fugitive Slave Law.⁹⁹

Other Lutheran Synods and Abolition after 1800

The vast majority of Lutheran Synods before the Civil War were basically silent on the issue of slavery in general and took no position on abolition. These include but are not limited to: The Olive Branch Synod, The Miami Synod, the Synod of Illinois, the Synod of Northern Illinois, the Synod of Kentucky, the Synod of Northern Indiana, the Synod of Southern Illinois,

⁹⁷ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 81.

⁹⁸ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 83.

⁹⁹ Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 86.

the Synod of West Pennsylvania, the Synod of East Pennsylvania, the Synod of Central Pennsylvania, the Synod of Western Virginia, the Mississippi Synod, and finally the Missouri Synod.¹⁰⁰ While individuals in these synods may have spoken their own opinions on the matter, none of these synods passed any official resolutions or doctrinal statements on the matter of slavery.

The Pennsylvania and New York ministerium did not officially consider the question of slavery until after the Civil War had started. And according to Fortenbaugh, (excluding the statement in 1822) the Tennessee and Ohio Synods had taken no action concerning slavery before the Civil War.¹⁰¹

There are some notable actions taken by some Lutheran Synods concerning slavery before the Civil War outside of the Franckean Synod. The Ohio Synod stated that slavery was a sin in 1844. Two years later the Pittsburgh Synod agreed that the slave trade was immoral and an offense against God. The Wittenberg Synod condemned it in 1847. The Pittsburgh Synod refused to join the General Synod purely on the basis that they refused to take a stand against slavery.¹⁰²

The Scandinavians were averse to the institution upon their immigration to the United States. Eielsen's Synod, comprised of Norwegian Lutherans, in article fourteen of their constitution acknowledges that they cannot consent to the institution of slavery and will do anything they can to bring about its cessation.¹⁰³

100 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 87-89.

101 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 74.

102 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 82-86.

103 Robert Fortenbaugh, "American Lutheran Synods and Slavery, 1830-60," *The Journal of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1933): 90.

In 1822, at a convention of the Tennessee Synod, there was unanimous condemnation of the institution. A Mr. Keicher posed the question of whether slavery was a great evil and should be tolerated in the land. The Tennessee Synod responded: “Resolved: That the Synod unanimously consider it great evil in our land, and wish that the government if possible, would devise some means, as an antidote to this evil.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ William Herman Gehrke, “Negro Slavery among the Germans in North Carolina,” 318.

CONCLUSION

The story of slavery and Christianity in America is one of complexity and great length. Through these pages, we have covered hundreds of years of history, multiple different denominations of Christianity, and different geographical regions of the United States. We have listened to the words and lives of slaves and free men who have spoken to us their history and lives as they experienced them during the slave years in America.

An area of research that could be further investigated, would be to examine the spiritual struggles of Black Americans after slavery had been abolished. The era of reconstruction would have brought unique spiritual implications to Christianity. Masters and slaves would be members of the same churches under a supposed equal standing. One side of the country who had fought under a 'biblical' banner for slavery, now would have to struggle with its near-universal condemnation. Millions of Blacks who were regulated in their Christianity now had the freedom to study, preach, and form their churches without oversight. Throughout my research, there seems to be a large gap in the history of the American Church and its rhetoric in and with the Black community during the period of Reconstruction.

As we have seen, the interactions of slaves and Christianity were sometimes progressive. There were a small number of very dedicated individuals who used their voices, their ink, and even their lives to improve or address the sin of slavery. Many slaves and clergy used Christianity as a powerful platform to speak the truth and gain strength for the emancipation and education of Blacks in America. But more often than not, the interactions were neutral or regressive. For almost every Christian abolitionist, there was an alleged Christian who supported keeping Black people in the institution of American slavery. For the slaves who wanted to

become Christian, there were Christian masters who held them back. For almost every Black clergyman, there were people who resisted the work of a Black Christian preacher.

Despite this reality, this story is not the whole story. We have only examined an extremely small slice of the story of slaves and Black Americans. This story is only limited to the lives of slaves in the United States, interacting with Christianity, and before the start of the American Civil War. We did not address the conversations and stories of slaves in other regions. We did not hear from the thoughts or read the documents of Christian Churches in Europe or elsewhere. We did not hear from the slaves' interactions with other faith groups. This is only a sliver of the story.

At the close of this thesis, I pray that anything beneficial is solely to God's glory, and anything damaging is only to my own fault. After reading this, I hope that you as the reader feel more educated and equipped to both hear and act. Listening to the story of slavery and its intersections with Christianity will hopefully give you the courage and humility to listen to others in your own lives. As we have seen, there are so many different ways that racism spread like venom among Christianity in pre-Civil War America. We must always be on alert for ways that it can seep into Christianity in our twenty-first-century America. Let us as Christians be humble enough to listen and to act to rid ourselves of racism's sinful sting. If we hear about it, let us listen. If we see it, let us speak against it. May we, with God's help, never be looked upon as those with stopped ears, silent voices, or idle hands. To God be the Glory as we seek to bring His peace to all of his people.

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