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Religious Schism as a Prelude to the American Civil War

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RELIGIOUS SCHISM AS A PRELUDE TO THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: METHODISTS, BAPTISTS, AND SLAVERY

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Optimism reigned in early and middle nineteenth-century America. Faith was focused on human potential, and hope was placed in achieving human perfection through the reform of both individual lives and society as a whole. The Protestant churches stimulated reform of every type as they united across denominational lines to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Being the moral leaders of antebellum America, the Protestant churches unfortunately failed to confront unitedly the slavery issue. The problem was ignored as long as possible, but the 1840s saw schism in the nation's two largest Protestant denominations—the Methodists and the Baptists. The ecclesiastical split of these denominations along geographical lines not only foreshadowed the national political schism of the 1860s, but also contributed to it.

1. *The Influence of Religion in American Life*

The religious revivals which swept parts of the country under Charles G. Finney and others in the decades before the Civil War were influential in shaping the morals and the reformist thoughts of the nation. Albert Barnes, a prominent Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia in the 1840s, could state that there was rarely "a city or town or peaceful hamlet that has not been hallowed by revivals of religion and in this fact we mark the evidence, at once, that a God of mercy presides over the destinies of his people."¹

Multitudinous benevolent societies and reform organizations sprang up under the influence of Protestant religion. In the 1830s,

¹Quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 103-104.

that optimistic clergyman-reformer Lyman Beecher commented in the following way on the value and influence of such societies:

They constitute a sort of disciplined moral militia, prepared to act upon every emergency, and repel every encroachment upon the liberties and morals of the State. By their numbers, they embolden the timid, and intimidate the enemy; and in every conflict the responsibility, being divided among many, is not feared. By this auxiliary band the hands of the magistrate are strengthened, the laws are rescued from contempt, the land is purified, the anger of the Lord is turned away, and His blessing and protection restored.²

Of all the obstacles to a state of perfection in society, slavery remained the most formidable barrier to evangelical hopes. The anti-slavery crusade was only one of many nineteenth-century reform movements, but it rose to prominence because of the scope of its appeal, because of its clear-cut effort to apply Christianity to the American social order, and because it was the most obvious antithesis to the professed ideals of democratic institutions. Another reason for the popularity of the anti-slavery cause was that slavery was “close enough to irritate and inflame sensitive minds, yet far enough removed that reformers need have few personal relations with those whose interests were affected.”³

The involvement of the churches in the issues of reform was of immense significance, for religion played a tremendously influential part in American life. Alexis de Tocqueville, that keen observer of the American scene, had been amazed by the power of religion in America in the 1830s. De Tocqueville noted that there existed “no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”⁴ He also observed how closely intertwined were the struggles for democracy and morality: “In France I had seen the spirits of religion and

²Quoted in Jerald C. Brauer, *Protestantism in America* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 150.

³Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago, 1966), p. 134.

⁴Quoted in Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York, 1957), p. 18.

of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land."⁵

Similar observations about the impact of religion in American life were made by James Dixon, a prominent British Methodist who traveled widely in America in the 1840s. Said Dixon:

It is my deep conviction, that religion is the conservative power of American society. It is the salt of the community; it is the life of the soul of public and private virtue; it is the cement, the power of coherence which holds the states together; and, by purifying the public morals, elevating the soul with noble sentiments, creating the sense of responsibility, and stimulating to industry, it is creative of their greatness and power.⁶

Robert Baird, writing at a time when the religious press and educational institutions were flourishing as never before, stated that it was "interesting to mark the influence of Christian institutions on society . . . and the great amount of knowledge communicated in the numerous discourses of a well instructed ministry."⁷ By 1850, for example, religious publications accounted for over one-fourth of the total newspaper and periodical circulation in New York, and in Massachusetts the proportion was even greater.⁸

Protestantism had dominated the religious and cultural scene in the United States from the beginning of settlement, but it was stronger than ever in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Winthrop S. Hudson, Protestantism "had established undisputed sway over almost all aspects of national life." In a "Protestant America that had been fashioned by the churches," their influence "extended far beyond their somewhat narrowly defined membership," and "among the populace at large the patterns of belief and

⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), p. 295.

⁶James Dixon, *Personal Narrative of a Tour Through a Part of the United States and Canada: with Notices of the History and Institutions of Methodism in America* (New York, 1849), p. 192.

⁷Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America* (New York, 1969; originally published, Glasgow, 1844), p. 412.

⁸Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (New York, 1965), p. 104.

conduct—both public and private, individual and corporate—were set by the churches.”⁹

2. *Methodist and Baptist Strength*

The revivalist spirit that swept so much of the country prior to the 1840s did more to benefit the Methodist and Baptist churches than any other denominations.¹⁰ The South had been especially influenced by the evangelical Christianity of these groups at the expense of the Episcopal Church in that region. As an aftermath of revivalism, the South became grounded in a firm evangelical orthodoxy. By 1855 in the country at large, Methodist and Baptist main-line denominations and their splinter groups accounted for seventy percent of the total Protestant membership.¹¹

The Methodist Episcopal Church experienced remarkable growth in the early 1840s. The church census for 1840 showed a total membership of 842,517, which included nearly 100,000 blacks.¹² By 1844, Methodist membership was numbered at 1,068,525; but total adherents were estimated to be 4,500,000.¹³ In spite of some variations in membership statistics, there is little doubt but that the Methodist Episcopal Church had the largest following of any denomination in America during the 1840s. Other statistics of interest include the facts that in 1849 the Methodists had 1,476 traveling preachers in rural areas, that by 1860 Northern Methodists alone were operating twenty-six colleges and 116 academies and other schools, and that in 1852 the State of Indiana could claim that eleven of its thirteen congressmen were Methodists, along with one senator and the governor.¹⁴

⁹Hudson, pp. 109-110.

¹⁰See Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (New York, 1962; originally published, Minneapolis, 1944), p. 39; and Cross, pp. 252-253.

¹¹Smith, p. 22.

¹²Charles Elliott, *Sinfulness of American Slavery*, 2 (New York, 1969; originally published, 1850): 343.

¹³*Methodist Quarterly Review*, 3d series, 5 (October 1845): 54. In 1843, *Niles' National Register* presented a Methodist membership figure of 1,168,526, including 128,410 Negroes and 3,379 Indians.

¹⁴See Craven, p. 115, and Smith, p. 24.

The Baptist churches in America, although lacking the governmental structure and organic unity of the Methodist Church, formed the second largest denominational group in the country during the period under consideration. Membership in Baptist churches in 1850 was reported at 587,423;¹⁵ and four years later, this number had increased to 704,926 actual members and 4,000,000 total followers.¹⁶ By 1860, Baptist-sponsored educational institutions numbered 33 colleges and 161 secondary-level institutions.¹⁷

Both Baptist and Methodist churches published dozens of religious papers and journals. Even in the 1830s the *Baptist Register* of Utica, New York, could boast over 200 agents; and as Whitney Cross points out, "It seems an inescapable conclusion that a considerable proportion even of laymen read and relished the theological treatises."¹⁸

In the antebellum decades, Baptists and Methodists were leaders in constructing new church buildings, as well. In 1841 alone, out of a total of 880 such edifices erected in the United States, approximately 250 were Baptist and 250 were Methodist facilities.¹⁹

3. *Response to Abolitionism*

While prospering numerically, the churches found themselves in a dilemma when it came to active involvement in controversial reform, such as abolitionism. Although they held sway over the professed morality of the nation, yet they were fearful of alienating groups and sections within their folds. Prior to the Methodist and Baptist sectional splits of 1844 and 1845, official church declarations in these denominations and in most others were often neutral on the slavery issue, or even clearly anti-abolitionist. Abolitionists, some of whom had lashed out at the Constitution and even at the Bible as being pro-slavery, harshly criticized the churches for their lack of conviction and decisive action. Meanwhile, the churches

¹⁵C. C. Goss, *Statistical History of the First Century of American Methodism* (New York, 1866), p. 150.

¹⁶*Methodist Quarterly Review*, 3d series, 5 (October 1845): 55.

¹⁷Smith, p. 36.

¹⁸Cross, pp. 105-109.

¹⁹Baird, p. 728.

agonized over their proper roles and pondered the effects on the unity of the nation if they were to pursue the abolitionist cause.

The criticisms and pleadings addressed to the churches are indications that their influence was strong and that their cooperation was considered vital to the success of the anti-slavery crusade. William Lloyd Garrison, writing in the *Liberator*, violently attacked the nation's churches for tolerating slavery, but at times he was more gentle in appealing for the help of religion in ridding the land of this evil. According to the *Liberator*, churches must not divorce themselves from the slavery question, and they had little to fear if they pursued the just cause of abolitionism. One *Liberator* editorial declared that abolitionist principles and true Christian precepts were one and the same. The cause of the slave would not create division if carried into the churches, for Christian duty and the good of humanity were synonymous. "If our brethren in the school of Christ are willing to imbibe his spirit, and, knowing his duty, [are] willing to perform it, they will have no fears that the cause of mercy will divide the churches."²⁰

Abolitionists urged the clergy to set an example for their people by repudiating slavery. Public speeches, as well as the press, were employed in exhorting American Christianity to commit itself to the cause. An abolitionist picnic and rally held in Westminister, Massachusetts, on the Fourth of July 1843, included a speech asking if it were right for slavery to be tolerated by "ye ministers and professed disciples of HIM who came to preach deliverance to the captives; and who placed himself in the condition of a slave and a malefactor to redeem the world?" The speech continued:

Are you yet stumbling blocks in the way of the Lord, which is being cast up for his ransomed? . . . Do you know the love of God as it is in Christ, and still not abhor slavery with your whole heart? . . . They shall not see the face of the Lord's anointed, til they bless his coming in every great work of reform. And you of the ministry, and church who see and feel your duty, will you lead off in this work?²¹

When abolitionists' pleas for anti-slavery commitment and involvement on the part of the churches produced insignificant results,

²⁰*Liberator* (Boston), October 13, 1843, p. 161.

²¹Adin Ballou, "The Voice of Duty," *An Address Delivered at the Anti-Slavery Picnic at Westminister, Mass. July 4, 1843* (Milford, Mass., 1843), p. 9.

criticism of the churches' apathy followed. An anti-slavery tract of the 1850s found it deplorable that "the great majority of ministers of every denomination, remained utterly indifferent to the facts and the arguments which were set forth concerning slavery." Its author, Charles K. Whipple, went on to say that "both church and congregation soon learned to appeal to the indifference of so pious and excellent a man as their minister, as a sufficient reason for their own indifference to the guilt and the danger involved in slavery."²²

By placing moral responsibility on each individual, not just on the clergy, appeals were also made to the laity of apathetic churches to take action against slavery, as in the following *Liberator* editorial:

Let the religion that you profess be brought to bear with mighty power against slavery, this enemy of the religion of Christ. . . . Let me remind you that you cannot shift off your duties and responsibilities onto the clergy or other persons; then speak out, brethren, for the groans of the slave rise to heaven from this professed enlightened Christian land. Shall professed Christians be silent? If you honor the religion you profess, which has been accused of upholding slavery, speak out.²³

Tension between abolitionist societies and organized religion reached such a point that the latter was often held directly responsible for slavery by the former. A caustic critique of "Modern Christianity" in the *Liberty Bell*, written by Henry Clapp, Jr., was one of many articles denouncing hypocrisy in the churches and stating that it would be almost better to be an infidel than to be an American Christian. According to that polemic, there was a simple way to get rid of slavery: "But do this—dethrone the pro-slavery priesthood of America and its cannibal god—and humanity will spring to her feet with the alacrity of youth; the cords of oppression which have worn deep into her quivering flesh, will be snapped assunder; the clouds of superstition . . . will be scattered."²⁴

Another article in the *Liberty Bell*, by H. I. Bowditch, maintained that "if the Church did not exert a decidedly enslaving influence upon the community, emancipation would have taken place

²²Charles King Whipple, *Relations of Anti-Slavery to Religion* (New York, 1856), p. 1.

²³*Liberator*, September 29, 1843, p. 154.

²⁴Henry Clapp, Jr., "Modern Christianity," *Liberty Bell*, 1847, pp. 19-20.

long since." The same article continued with the following indictment: "The Southern Church of the present day allows a man to sell his brother into wretched bondage; and the Northern Church says 'Amen' by its ominous silence."²⁵

The Church in the North was held responsible for failing to provide an example which would prick the Southern moral consciousness, as evidenced, for instance, in the words of Wendell Phillips: "But for the countenance of the Northern Church the Southern conscience would have long since awakened to its guilt, and the impious sight of a Church made up of slaveholders and called the Church of Christ, been scouted from the land."²⁶

James G. Birney, the National Liberty Party's presidential candidate in 1840 and 1844, wrote a scathing attack in 1842, entitled *The American Churches, the Bulwarks of American Slavery*. This book linked the existence of slavery to the permissiveness of the church. Birney would have agreed with Whipple's contribution to the *Liberator*:

If the Church and the clergy had been faithful to their principles, anti-slavery societies would never have existed, for they would never have been needed.

. . . the position, character, and influence of the clergy and the Church, render them far more dangerous enemies of the anti-slavery cause than all its other enemies combined.

Nothing can be plainer than that, if the religion of a country does not actively oppose slavery, it will be its defense and bulwark.²⁷

Furthermore, even such a prominent member of the clergy as Albert Barnes was forced to admit that "it is probable that slavery could not be sustained in this land if it were not for the countenance, direct and indirect, of the churches."²⁸

It is clear that the tremendous influence on society wielded by the American churches was recognized by opponents of slavery.

²⁵Henry I. Bowditch, "Slavery and the Church," *Liberty Bell*, 1843, pp. 9-10.

²⁶Wendell Phillips, "Disunion," *Liberty Bell*, 1847, pp. 19-20.

²⁷Charles King Whipple, "The Church and the Clergy," *Liberator*, January 26, 1844, p. 13.

²⁸Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery*, 2d ed. (Detroit, 1969; originally published, Philadelphia, 1857), p. 28.

And in turn, many American Christians squirmed with discomfort at the criticisms of abolitionists. Indeed, many Protestants became convinced that perhaps they did share in the guilt of slavery, though the denominations with substantial followings in the South were understandably reluctant to act with haste in opposing slavery. It would take much agonizing and wrangling before a clear anti-slavery posture was taken by the mainline denominations.

4. *Sectional Division Within the Churches*

Since the two denominations most numerous in membership had considerable followings in both the North and South, any disturbance in Methodist and Baptist unity along sectional lines would have repercussions extending beyond mere theological debate. These denominations grew up in America, in intimate contact with slavery; and it was this very issue of human bondage which was to cause the greatest schism ever experienced by America's churches. Evangelical Protestantism may have been capable of producing a spirit of reform and religious fervor, but it was unable to hold itself together when the nation was divided in opinion concerning slavery. The problems of the churches were the problems of the nation at large, and because of the churches' vast influence on society, it was likely that ecclesiastical schism over slavery would sharpen sectional hostility and push the issue even more heatedly into the arena of politics.

Ecclesiastical division—preceded by several years of heated moral debate over slavery in pamphlets, the press, and the pulpit—erupted in the 1840s as Methodists and Baptists sectionalized over the slavery issue. The Methodist Episcopal Church in its 1844 convention was faced with strong convictions coming out of New England. These convictions, as summed up in the Boston Convention's position, were "that slave-holding is sin; that every slaveholder is a sinner, and ought not to be admitted to the pulpit or the communion; that the Methodist Episcopal Church is responsible for slavery in its pale; and that nothing short of a speedy and entire separation of slavery from the church could satisfy the consciences of honest Abolitionists, and therefore reformation or division is the only alternative."²⁹

²⁹Quoted in Lucius C. Matlack, *The Anti-Slavery Struggle and the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1969; originally published, New York, 1881), p. 152.

When a motion to suspend Bishop James Andrew, who through inheritance had become a slave owner, was presented, the denomination was churned into a frenzy. The suspension of the Bishop, it was prophesied by a Virginia delegate, could have devastating consequences:

The division of our church might follow, a civil division of this great confederacy may follow that, and then hearts will be torn apart, master and slave arrayed against each other, brother in the church against brother, and the North against the South; and when thus arrayed with the fiercest passions and energies of our nature brought into action against each other, civil war and far-reaching desolation must be the final results.³⁰

A strongly sectional vote suspended the Bishop, and Southern reaction was swift. "The South cannot submit," stated a declaration produced by the Southern caucus, "and the absolute necessity of division is already dated."³¹

Baptists were soon to follow the divisive ways of the Methodists. Their home and foreign mission societies—areas of ministry which fostered Baptist cooperation and loosely tied the denomination together—became the scenes of bitter agitation between abolitionists and pro-slavery Southerners. One Southern committee drafted a resolution declaring that abolitionism was unscriptural, in violation of the national constitution, in opposition to the peace and prosperity of the churches, and dangerous to national union.³² Both home and foreign mission agencies in their triennial conventions decided on a parting of the ways, goaded by the board's ruling that no slaveholder could be accepted as a foreign-missionary candidate. Thus, the Southern Baptist Convention was born.

5. *National Reaction to Ecclesiastical Division*

It was clearly recognized in both press and government circles that religious passions had indeed been heated to a dangerous degree by the slavery controversy. The moral arguments dividing the North

³⁰*Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 2, *Debates of 1844* (New York, 1844), p. 95.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

³²William Wright Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-53* (Nashville, Tenn., 1954), p. 23.

and South over the institution, as well as the denominational divisions triggered by the slavery issue, did not go without notice among the American people and the nation's political leaders. Although opinions varied somewhat, the religious schism in the country was generally viewed with a great deal of alarm and regret. Men in high places perceived an ominous sign of worse things to come.

The Methodist and Baptist churches had heretofore bound together separate and often disparate segments of the population. Prior to the Methodist schism of 1844, Bishop Nathan Bangs, for instance, had pointed out to New England audiences that Methodism was "the chief religious and, in a sense, the chief social tie between the Northern and Southern states."³³ There were, of course, other ties uniting North and South, such as the American democratic tradition and family relationships, but the breaking of the ecclesiastical tie between the sections came as a devastating blow to national unity.

Immediately following the adjournment of the 1844 Methodist Conference, the press reacted to the important news of a division within Methodism. The Charleston *Mercury* published a protest of the Southern delegates over the Bishop Andrew affair, stating also that the schism marked "an epoch—the first dissolution of the Union." The Columbia *South Carolinian* felt that the division within Methodism was desirable because it would "arouse the North to a proper sense of the pernicious influence of abolitionism." If the North would only take heed to the dangers of abolitionism, there would be "a closer, and happier union, religious and political." But if it would not do so, "then it is evident that the separation will soon end in a political one."³⁴ The *New York Daily Tribune* carefully reported the events of the 1844 Methodist General Conference, and provided reasons for the widespread attention which that convention had received:

The session just closed is, we believe, the longest ever held by this important ecclesiastical body, and its proceedings were certainly never watched with more absorbing interest either by members of the Methodist Communion or by the public at large. The

³³Quoted in Smith, p. 189.

³⁴Quoted in Charles B. Swaney, *Episcopal Methodism and Slavery* (New York, 1969; originally published, 1926), p. 287.

eminent character and ability of its members, its important relations to society and the Church, and, above all, the nature and bearing of the questions on which it was called to act, were calculated to secure for it a large share of public attention, and to excite the deepest interest in its proceedings in every part of the country.³⁵

South Carolina's powerful Senator, John C. Calhoun, watched the Methodist General Conference of 1844 with keen interest, and he invited a number of Southern delegates to meet with him in Washington on their return from the New York convention. In later years Calhoun was to place great significance upon this rupture. And, writing in retrospect in 1867, Methodist leader Abel Stevens also placed great importance on the church split in terms of national events which followed: "This stupendous rupture, it cannot be doubted, was the effective beginning of the great national rupture which soon after startled the world with the greatest civil war of modern history."³⁶

The Methodist Church rupture of 1844 certainly did not create the slavery issue, for two opposing camps had long been forming, even under the dome of the nation's capitol. The ecclesiastical crisis, however, brought the issue into the national spotlight, and by dividing North and South on moral principles, it certainly made the possibility of political division far from remote. Well-known public figures such as Henry Clay were quick to see a connection between what was happening in religious circles and what might occur in the political realm. In April of 1845, Clay wrote as follows regarding the Methodist division:

It was, therefore, with the deepest regret that I heard, in the course of the past year, of the danger of a division of the [Methodist Episcopal] church, in consequence of a subject of slavery. A division, for such a cause, would be an event greatly to be deplored, both on account of the Church itself and its political tendency. Indeed, scarcely any public occurrence has happened for a long time that gave me so much real concern and pain as the menaced separation of the Church, by a line throwing all the Free

³⁵*New York Daily Tribune*, June 13, 1844, p. 2.

³⁶Abel Stevens, *A Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York, 1867), p. 526.

States on one side, and all the Slave States on the other. I will not say that such a separation would necessarily produce a dissolution of the political union of these states; but the example would be fraught with imminent danger, and, in cooperation with other causes unfortunately existing, its tendency on the stability of the Confederacy would be perilous and alarming.³⁷

The need for Baptist unity in North and South was recognized, and schism in the Baptist Church was deplored, just as the Methodist division had been. A Southern Baptist leader, Richard Fuller, gave a strong plea for Baptist unity before a split actually occurred in that body. Burdened over the possible consequences of a denominational division along sectional lines, he wrote in 1845:

My chief hope for the Union is in the conservative power of religion, and the day is not far when that power will be required in all its stringency. Look at the distracted condition of the land; reflect on the appalling character of a civil war; and if you love the country, or the slave, do not sever the bonds which unite Baptist churches. Compared with slavery, all other topics which now shake and inflame men's passions in these United States, are really trifling.³⁸

At the time of the Baptist crisis, *Niles' National Register* reported in May of 1845 that "the crisis is approaching—the Baptists have been aroused; their deepest feelings have been probed." The *Register* went on to point out that the Baptist denomination "is the largest in the United States, it has had an influence and a sway at the south which is hardly understood, a movement made here will be a wide one."³⁹

Later the same year, *The Christian Review*, a Baptist periodical, noted that "to sever ties by which the parties had been so long bound together, to draw a dividing line between North and South, was a solemn and momentous act. It was a deed not to be hastily or rashly done." No one, it continued, "can calculate the extent of the

³⁷Letter to Dr. W. A. Booth, April 7, 1845, in Calvin Colton, ed., *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (New York, 1856), p. 525.

³⁸Richard Fuller, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (New York, 1847), p. 3.

³⁹*Niles' National Register*, May 24, 1845, p. 187.

influence which this single act may exert, not only upon the great work of imparting Christianity to the heathen, but upon the interests, or even the existence, of our common country.”⁴⁰

After both Methodists and Baptists had divided sectionally, the *Richmond Christian Advocate* found the schism objectionable “on the ground that, if we had Northern and Southern churches, it would not be long before we should have Northern and Southern Confederacies.”⁴¹ In fact, as sectional issues were strained almost to the breaking point in 1850, the ecclesiastical division over slavery was also used as evidence in political circles to show the seriousness of the national situation, and it was widely suggested that the Union was clearly in jeopardy.

In his last formal speech before the Senate on March 4, 1850, Senator Calhoun described the erosion of the Union by various factors, not the least of which was ecclesiastical division:

It is a great mistake to suppose that disunion can be effected by a single blow. The cords which bound these States together in one common Union, are far too numerous and powerful for that. Disunion must be the work of time. It is only through a long process, and successively, that the cords can be snapped, until the whole fabric falls asunder. Already the agitation of the slavery question has snapped some of the most important, and has greatly weakened all the others. . . .

The cords that bind the States together are not only many, but various in character. Some are spiritual or ecclesiastical; some political; others social. . . .

The first of these cords which snapped was that of the powerful Methodist Episcopal Church. The numerous and strong ties which held it together, are all broken, and its unity gone. They now form separate churches; and, instead of that feeling of attachment and devotion to the interests of the whole church which was formerly felt, they are now arrayed into two hostile bodies, engaged in litigation about what was formerly their common property.

The next cord that snapped was that of the Baptists—one of the largest and most respectable of the denominations. . . . If the agitation goes on, the same force, acting with increased intensity,

⁴⁰“The Division of the Baptist General Convention,” *The Christian Review*, 10 (December 1845): 487.

⁴¹Quoted in Swaney, p. 288.

as has been shown, will finally snap every cord, then nothing will be left to hold the states together except force. But, surely, that can, with no propriety of language, be called a Union. . . .⁴²

A few days later, in his famous "Seventh of March" speech, Daniel Webster once again pointed out how significant the moral and religious arguments over slavery had been in the land. The anti-slavery moral argument was a big factor in the differences between North and South, and ecclesiastical division greatly deteriorated national unity. Strong religious convictions, Webster feared, would in the case of slavery produce serious results. In his mention of disappointment in the split of the Methodists, it is clear that he saw slavery as the cause of that split; and he concluded that arguments involving religious principles were to be feared because of the passion aroused. Webster referred to Calhoun's earlier speech, as he declared:

Why, sir, the honorable Senator from South Carolina, the other day, alluded to the great separation of that great religious community, the Methodist Episcopal Church. That separation was brought about by differences of opinion upon this peculiar subject of slavery. I felt great concern, as the dispute went on, about the result; and I was in hopes that the difference of opinions might be adjusted, because I looked upon that religious denomination as one of the great props of religion and morals, throughout the whole country, from Maine to Georgia. The result was against my wishes and against my hopes. . . .

Sir, when a question of this kind takes hold of the religious sentiments of mankind, and comes to be discussed in religious assemblies of the clergy and laity, there is always to be expected, or always to be feared, a great degree of excitement. It is in the nature of man, manifested by his whole history, that religious disputes are apt to become warm, and men's strength of conviction is proportionate to their views of the magnitude of the questions.⁴³

There were those in the United States who saw the validity of moral and ecclesiastical arguments over slavery and felt that the

⁴²Richard K. Crallee, ed., *Speeches of John C. Calhoun, Delivered in the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States* (New York, 1851-1856; reissued, New York, 1968), pp. 542-558.

⁴³*Congressional Globe* (Washington, D.C.), 21/1 (March 8, 1850): 477.

churches must lead society down the narrow path of justice. William Goodell, author of a book published in 1852 dealing with both sides of the slavery question, was such an individual. He, too, bore testimony of the connection existing between political and religious division: "It was seen by many, at an early day, that the same principle that required *political* secession, required, in like cases, *ecclesiastical* secession; and the more especially as the church is naturally expected to be purer than the State, and to constitute the guide and teacher, by which, on great moral questions, the legislation of a country must be moulded." Furthermore, he made a dire prediction that unless the churches took the moral lead and the government followed, "it is evident that the sun of American liberty must go down in darkness, or be subjected to a baptism in blood."⁴⁴

Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, on the other hand, had little patience with those who debated the morality of slavery. To argue in such fashion, he maintained, was to endanger severely the existence of the Union. He said, "I do not know of any tribunal on earth that can decide the question of the morality of slavery or any other institution."⁴⁵ In his 1858 debates with Abraham Lincoln, Douglas reiterated his position in the following way:

I hold that the people of the slaveholding states are civilized men as well as ourselves; that they bear consciences as well as we, and that they are accountable to God and their posterity, and not to us. It is for them to decide, therefore, the moral and religious right of the slavery question for themselves within their own limits.⁴⁶

This remark by Douglas had been made on October 13. Two days later, Lincoln pointed an accusing finger at the menace of slavery. It was slavery which was at the root of the ecclesiastical division, Lincoln declared, and it was the slavery controversy that was eroding the Union:

We have sometimes had peace, but when was it? It was when the institution of slavery remained quiet where it was. We have

⁴⁴William Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery* (New York, 1968; originally published, 1852), pp. 487, 585.

⁴⁵Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), p. xxvi.

⁴⁶Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (New York, 1965), p. 275. From the debate of October 13, 1848, at Quincy, Illinois.

had difficulty and turmoil whenever it has made a struggle to spread itself where it was not. . . .

Parties themselves may be divided and quarrel on minor questions, yet it extends not beyond the parties themselves. But does not this question [slavery] make a disturbance outside of political circles? Does it not enter the churches and rend them asunder? What divided the great Methodist Church into two parts, North and South?

Has any thing ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very institution of slavery?⁴⁷

6. *Conclusion*

Clearly, the moral and religious division over the issue of slavery in the period from 1840 to 1860 was perceived as being highly significant by elements of the press, by church leadership, and by public figures. When we deal with historical causation, there is a sometimes-overlooked element: namely, that the significance of an idea, a movement, or a single event is dependent on how that idea, movement, or event is *perceived* by those whom it affects at the time. For this reason alone, the denominational and moral crisis over slavery was highly significant, for it was viewed by a great many persons as being very influential.

If any issue could divide the churches in mid-nineteenth-century America, it was slavery. Keeping unity in the ecclesiastical and the political realms proved to be impossible; and it was the same issue, slavery, that was largely responsible in both cases. That issue was a multi-faceted one, as is often the case; for it involved political, social, economic, moral, and religious elements all at once. The ecclesiastical split came first, and through it the moral disjunction of the United States became institutionalized.

There can be little doubt but that the snapping asunder of the ecclesiastical cords that helped to unite the nation provided more than a prophecy of the sectional hostility and violence that was to come. The split in America's churches was not only the first major institutional break between North and South; it was also a significant contributor to the disruption of the Union represented in the Civil War.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 313, 314, 317. From the debate of October 15, 1858, at Alton, Illinois.