

MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY

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Let's Talk About the Civil War

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This was all prompted by a conversation I had with a friend of mine who responded to my having said I had just finished reading a book about Abraham Lincoln by saying that my subsequent perspective on the Civil War and our nation's 16th president was inevitably flawed and I needed to come to grips with the fact that Lincoln was a conspirator and the Civil War was fought over the issue of states' rights and how they had been unjustly denied to the South which resulted in the bloodiest conflict in our nation's history.

I didn't agree with him, but rather than just saying "Oh, yeah?" I determined to pop open the hood on some other resources and attempt to arrive at an informed bottom line that could stand up under critical scrutiny.

But here's the thing: It's not just history. The Civil War teaches a lesson that has profound implications to the way in which Absolutes are either embraced or shunned. That's why this topic intrigued me so and that's why I'm so enthusiastic about sharing it.

Are you ready? Here we go...

What was it that prompted the South to secede from the Union?

Intro

Generations of historians have argued over the cause of the war. "Everyone knew at the time that the war was ultimately about slavery," says Orville Vernon Burton, a native South Carolinian and author of The Age of Lincoln. "After the war, some began saying that it was really about states' rights, or a clash of two different cultures, or about the tariff, or about the industrializing North versus the agrarian South. All these interpretations came together to portray the Civil War as a collision of two noble civilizations from which black slaves had been airbrushed out." African-American historians from W.E.B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin begged to differ with the revisionist view, but they were overwhelmed by white historians, both Southern and Northern, who, during the long era of Jim Crow, largely ignored the importance of slavery in shaping the politics of secession.¹

Slavery stood center stage during the time leading up to the Civil War and while there were other grievances that the South based their platform upon, inevitably those grievances were either agitated or generated by the presence of slavery.

"Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of Slavery, Emancipation and the American Civil War" by Roger L. Ransom lays out real well when he says:

The problem, of course, was that slavery was an institution that had insinuated itself into every facet of American life.²

He goes on to say that the economic and political culture leading up to the spring of 1861 contained a cornucopia of issues, but...

Although the economic historians and the political historians draw somewhat different implications from the results of their research, a common thread runs through the analysis of both groups – the role of slavery in shaping the path of economic and political development in the United States.³

The North and South were based on two very different paradigms. They were distinct in their economic structures which inevitably produced some political differences. They contrasted in their philosophical approach to human rights and that, by default, leads to differences in how one perceives morality and even how certain Biblical Absolutes are to be practically applied.

In short, it was two opposing viewpoints that vied for superiority in the way the nation was to be defined. And the underlying cause – the common denominator of all that which precipitated this vivid difference between these two perspectives - was the institution of slavery.

Economic Tensions: The Nullification Crisis

There were numerous manifestations of slavery as far as how it inspired tension. One example of how it reared its ugly head in the early nineteenth century was in the form of the “Nullification Crisis.”

In 1828, in order to promote the National economy, President John Quincy Adams signed into law a tariff on foreign goods being purchased by domestic businesses. The tariff was designed to make purchasing the same resources from American manufactures more appealing. While it was a financial inconvenience for everyone, it was especially hard on the South, in that England responded to the tariff by reducing the amount of cotton it purchased, thus causing an even greater decrease in overall revenue for Southern states.

The South, who had been bristling beneath the weight of a series of tariffs that had begun after the War of 1812, were very dissatisfied with the passage of the bill and their indignation would prove to be a problem for Adams' successor, Andrew Jackson.

John Calhoun was serving as Vice President under John Quincy Adams when he authored an essay entitled “South Carolina Exposition and Protest.” In his document he declared that the tariffs were unconstitutional and the state of South Carolina was therefore exempt from having to pay them. He attempted to justify his claim by saying that the Federal government could not enforce a tariff for any reason other to simply generate revenue. In the case of the Tariff of 1828, from Calhoun's perspective, it wasn't so much about generating revenue as much as it was about protecting Northern American industries.

Calhoun was serving as Vice President under Andrew Jackson and while Calhoun had hoped that Jackson would be more open to Calhoun's ideas pertaining to the tariff, Jackson responded by declaring South Carolina's refusal to abide with Federal statutes as treason and prepared to take military action. South Carolina's resolve was diminished when they were unable to gain support and a military standoff was averted.

Calhoun would later resign his position as Jackson's Vice President due to the tension that existed between them. Calhoun was perceived by Jackson as divisive and his argument made against the Tariff under the heading

of “states’ rights” was fundamentally flawed. But while Calhoun’s efforts had not succeeded the way he had hoped, his essay nevertheless provided the South a seemingly coherent platform upon which to build their right to secede.

It’s important to note that at the heart of Calhoun’s objection was his concern for the continued existence of slavery. The economic dynamics he elaborated on in his essay were based on an economic system fueled by slave labor and that was the real issue. He says as much in a letter he wrote to Virgil Maxcy, a political ally from Maryland on September 11, 1830. In his candid letter, he refers to slavery as the “peculiar institution of the Southern States.” He writes:

I consider the Tariff, but as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things. The truth can no longer be disguised, that the peculiar domestick institution of the Southern States, and the consequent direction, which that and her soil and climate have given to her industry, have placed them in regard to taxation and appropriations in opposite relation to the majority of the Union; against the danger of which, if there be no protective power in the reserved rights of the States, they must in the end be forced to rebel, or submit to have their permanent interests sacrificed, their domestick institutions subverted by Colonization and other schemes, and themselves & children reduced to wretchedness. Thus situated, the denial of the right of the State to interfere constitutionally in the last resort, more alarms the thinking, than all other causes.⁴

In his book, “Conflict and Compromise,” Roger Ransom says:

...most historians now argue that it was slavery, not economic issues, that was at the heart of the “Nullification evidenced a determination to devise barriers against encroachments on southern rights. Jackson’s firm handling of the situation cause the nullifiers to back down, but Calhoun’s philosophy of “states rights” remained on the southern political agenda from that time forward.⁵

The concept of “states’ rights” was legitimate and was even acknowledged by Abraham Lincoln as absolute and eternally right.⁶ But it had no application to the institution of slavery and when “states’ rights” were being asserted as a legal tactic designed to somehow justify and protect slavery, it was no longer a credible argument.

Still, it sounded good and became a legal rallying point around which Southern legislators and the general population gathered. But at the heart of their claim was a resolve to justify the enslavement of entire race of human beings.

All through that hot and humid summer, emotions among the vociferous planter population had been worked up to a near-frenzy of excitement. The whole tenor of the argument built up in the “Exposition” was aimed to present the case in a cool, considered manner that would dampen any drastic moves yet would set in motion the machinery for repeal of the tariff act. It would also warn other sections of the Union against any future legislation that an increasingly self-conscious South might consider punitive, especially on the subject of slavery.⁷

It is a popular and compelling perspective as far as saying that the Civil War was about a state’s right to secede based on economic injustices. But that was nothing more than a legislative veil that South Carolina developed that other Southern states aligned themselves with in order to protect the institution of slavery.

And as vivid as the issue of slavery was in economic circles, it was even more prevalent in the political landscape.

The Political Landscape

By the time the nation was preparing to choose its Commander in Chief in 1860, there were four political parties: The Northern Democrats, who maintained the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” as the correct approach to the slave issue. “Popular sovereignty” was a term coined by their champion, Stephen Douglas, the famous Senator from Illinois, which declared that states should be afforded the opportunity to choose whether or not it would be a slave state or a free state.

The Southern Democrats believed that slavery should be allowed to spread into other US territories. They chose John C. Breckenridge as their candidate. The Republican Party, led by Abraham Lincoln, opposed the spread of slavery in general and the “Constitutional Union Party” sought to achieve a compromise between the opposing viewpoints by extending the Missouri Compromise line across the United States and evenly divide the number of slave states and the free states.⁸

Each party was distinguished by its stance on slavery. Ransom makes that point by saying:

Of course, slavery was not the only issue that divided the sections. The South opposed protective tariffs designed to foster Northern manufacturing and fought against using the national resources for internal improvements in Northern transportation. But issues like these, however hard fought, were subject to political accommodation. Slavery was not. “We must concern ourselves with what is, and slavery exists,” said John Randolph of Virginia early in the century. Slavery “is to us a question of life and death.”⁹

A “question of life and death.” That phrase captures the way in which the South approached slavery. It was not a mere talking point, it was an institution that defined their way of life and shaped the manner in which they mentally approached the essence of a Republic.

And that’s why the Republican party was watched with such keen interest by the Southern Democrats. Southern newspapers had long threatened that secession would quickly follow a Republican victory. Sure enough, the election was held November 6, 1860. On December 20th of that same year, South Carolina held a state convention and unanimously voted in favor of secession. Over the next six weeks, six additional states followed suit – Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama and Texas.¹⁰

These were bold decisions and while the slavery question had been a source of tension ever since the first Continental Congress met back in June of 1776 and edited those portions of the Declaration of Independence which denounced slavery, now a little less than a century later, the slavery issue could no longer be edited or placated.¹¹ It defined the political landscape, it agitated economic tensions and it was slavery that ultimately inspired the order given to General Beauregard to open fire on Fort Sumter.¹²

Moral, Philosophical and Spiritual Discrepancies

The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States. The overall population of the United States would be reduced by 2% before the conflict concluded.¹³

To accept the cause of the Civil War as a mere economic tension complicated by different interpretations of the Constitution is to marginalize the profound impact a distorted perspective on Absolute Truth can have on a nation.

The Civil War was fought over the way in which a human being was to be defined. And the differences between the opposing viewpoints on that subject were ultimately rooted in one's regard for Truth as defined by the Word of God.

As a proponent of slavery, you were required to gloss over Scriptures such as:

- Genesis 1:26-28; Galatians 3:28: all men are made in the image of God
- Exodus 21:16: prohibition of kidnapping
- 1 Timothy 1:10: those who enslave others are condemned

Some will try to take the passages that mention slavery as being proof that God endorsed the enslavement of human beings. Not so. The passages that are often cited are those found in the New Testament where Paul is admonishing both slaves and overseers to exhibit Christian characteristics towards one another and in that way, change the institution from within.

Both Divorce and Slavery are mentioned in Scripture in terms of how to conduct yourself should you be obligated to endure either of those social statuses. Those verses are not there as a way to endorse those situations, rather they're in place to encourage a Christ-like disposition in the face of the sinful realities of the day.¹⁴

Slavery was condemned in the Bible because it violated the fact that all men are made in the image of God and thus bear His likeness. To abuse or to murder or to enslave another human being was to desecrate a Truth that was both foundational and Absolute.

Conclusion

What makes this topic so important is that unless you broaden your powers of perception to appreciate the true cause of the Civil War, you miss the lesson and the warning contained therein.

John C. Calhoun was more concerned about the law than he was the Truth. He hoped to secure a legal accommodation for a practice that was fundamentally wrong.

The political parties of the day were more concerned about votes than they were about the Truth. Positioning a lie in a way that is palatable and thus popular doesn't change the fact that it's a lie and will ultimately produce death.

The cause of the Civil War was that we had allowed ourselves as a nation to tolerate, not just slavery, but a departure from the Biblical Truths we ultimately based our national and personal identities upon.

The willingness to endure the horror of war requires a resolve founded on a core belief. Political concepts and economic preferences are revealed as ridiculous and trivial in the face of the screams and shrieks heard in combat.

It is the Truth and only the Truth that can sustain a cause and a nation. And should that Truth be challenged by a dynamic that seeks to dismiss or to distort, that dynamic needs to be addressed and defeated. Should it be allowed to endure, the result will be lethal and that which is good and noble will be replaced with corruption and decay.

The cause of the Civil War was willingness on the part of some to embrace iniquity and the impasse it created when opposed by those who knew better. The lesson of the Civil War is to embrace the Absolutes of God's Word and to deploy a godly passion in defeating those forces that seek to undermine the foundation upon which we are built – both personally and nationally - and to do it before it becomes a bloody conflict.

1. "Fort Sumter: The Civil War Begins", smithsonianmag.com, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Fort-Sumter-The-Civil-War-Begins.html#ixzz2Wn7nuawL>, accessed June 21, 2013
2. "Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of the Slavery, Emancipation, and the American Civil War", Roger L. Ransom, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p 9
3. Ibid, p11
4. "John C. Calhoun Statement on Nullification", <http://www.pbs.org/kcet/andrewjackson/edu/calhounonnullification.pdf>, accessed July 13, 2013
5. "Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of the Slavery, Emancipation, and the American Civil War", Roger L. Ransom, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p 91
6. "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln", Doris Kearns Goodwin, Simon and Shuster, New York, NY, 2005, p203
7. "South Carolina Exposition and Protest", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina_Exposition_and_Protest, accessed July 12, 2013
8. By the late 1850s, the Democratic Party was split over the issue of slavery. Northern Democrats generally opposed slavery's expansion while many Southern Democrats believed that slavery should exist across the United States. In the presidential election of 1860, the Democratic Party split in two, with Stephen Douglas running for the Northern Democratic Party, and John C. Breckinridge representing the Southern Democratic Party. Two other political parties competed in this election as well. One of these parties was the Republican Party, with Abraham Lincoln as its candidate. Lincoln and the Republican Party opposed slavery's expansion. The other party was the Constitutional Union Party. The party's candidate, John Bell, hoped to compromise the differences between the North and South by extending the Missouri Compromise line across the remainder of the United States. Slavery would be permitted in new states established south of the line, while the institution would be illegal in new states formed north of the line. The Northern and Southern Democratic Parties only officially existed in the election of 1860. ("Northern Democrat Party", http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Northern_Democratic_Party, accessed July 3, 2013)
9. "Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of the Slavery, Emancipation, and the American Civil War", Roger L. Ransom, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p 142
10. Ibid, p294
11. "Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power", Jon Meacham, Random House, New York, NY, 2012, p105-106
12. "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln", Doris Kearns Goodwin, Simon and Shuster, New York, NY, 2005, p345

13. "The Civil War Fact Sheet", <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/facts.html>, accessed July 13, 2013. See also, "New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll", "New York Times", Guy Gugliotta, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed July 13, 2013
14. Ephesians 6:5-8; Both the OT and the NT included regulations for societal situations such as slavery and divorce (see Dt 24:1-4), which were the results of the hardness of hearts (Matt 19:8). Such regulations did not encourage or condone such situations but were divinely-given, practical ways of dealing with the realities of the day. (NIV Commentary on Ephesians 6:5-8, NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985)

Colossians 3:22-25 - Paul neither condones slavery nor sanctions revolt against masters. Rather, he calls on both slaves and masters to show Christian principles in their relationship and thus to attempt to change the institution from within. (NIV Commentary on Colossians 3:22-25, NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985)