

5

# CHURCH HISTORY



*Published by*  
THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CHURCH HISTORY

# CHURCH HISTORY

## EDITORIAL BOARD

MATTHEW SPINKA, *Managing Editor*

ROBERT HASTINGS NICHOLS

REUBEN E. E. HARKNESS, *ex officio*

---

VOL. VII

JUNE, 1938

No. 2

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| PRESBYTERIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD SLAVERY<br><i>Irving Stoddard Kull</i>   | 101 |
| THE CHURCH AND THE SOCIAL ORDER IN THE OLD<br>SOUTH AS INTERPRETED BY JAMES H. THORN-<br>WELL<br><i>H. Shelton Smith</i> | 115 |
| THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY SPIRIT, 1828-1835<br><i>J. Orin Oliphant</i>   | 125 |
| WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH AND THE BROTHERHOOD<br>OF THE KINGDOM<br><i>C. Howard Hopkins</i>                                   | 138 |
| CONRAD GREBEL, THE FOUNDER OF SWISS ANABAPT-<br>ISM<br><i>Harold S. Bender</i>   | 157 |
| NEW DOCUMENTS ON EARLY PROTESTANT RATIONAL-<br>ISM<br><i>Roland H. Bainton</i>   | 179 |
| MINUTES OF THE FOURTEENTH SPRING MEETING OF<br>THE SOCIETY AND THE COUNCIL, APRIL, 1938                                  | 188 |

## THE CHURCH AND THE SOCIAL ORDER IN THE OLD SOUTH AS INTERPRETED BY JAMES H. THORNWELL

H. SHELTON SMITH

*Duke University, Durham, N. C.*

The last generation of the *ante-bellum* South devoted its best thought to the integration of a plantation culture whose economic base was chattel slavery. Every aspect of its civilization had to make its peace with slavery or be rejected. Long before the guns fired on Fort Sumpter, southern civilization had wrought out an ideology that was as dogmatic as Marxism has ever dared to be. Those who rejected this ideology were promptly silenced or ushered into a cooler climate. The liberalism of an older revolutionary South had long ago been smothered in the atmosphere of cultural fascism.

The church, like all other bearers of culture, had to reckon with the South's "peculiar institution." In this process of reckoning, Dr. James H. Thornwell played a master rôle. What Calhoun was to political theory in this period Thornwell was to the social ethics of the church. Indeed, his contemporaries called him the "Calhoun of the Church."<sup>1</sup> Both were sons of South Carolina, the state that led in the secession movement. Both went North for their last period of academic life. Both were surprisingly alike in their passion for logical gymnastics. Both began their careers as devoted nationalists, and both died flaming sectionalists.

Not until he had graduated from college did Thornwell connect himself with the church, although he had given thought to the subject of religion. At one time in his college course, he flirted with Socinianism,<sup>2</sup> but he could not tolerate the rationalistic Deism of his president, Dr. Thomas Cooper. Apparently his own religious views were in flux until near his graduation. About this time, while browsing in a bookshop, his eyes fell upon a copy of the Westminster Confession of

<sup>1</sup> Vander Velde, L. G., *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union* (Cambridge, 1932), 30.

<sup>2</sup> B. M. Palmer, "Life, Character, and Genius of the Late Reverend James H. Thornwell," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XV (1862-63), 265.

Faith. A careful reading of this led him to embrace Presbyterianism unwaveringly for life. He was ordained to the ministry in 1835, but his pastorates were brief and intermittent. His chief service was to be in the field of education. After two highly successful periods of teaching at South Carolina College, he was chosen its sixth president in 1852. After three years, he voluntarily surrendered the presidency of the college to become professor of theology in Columbia Theological Seminary, where he spent the remainder of his life. Chosen a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church at the early age of twenty-four, he was elected moderator in 1847 at thirty-four. As a religious thinker, the South of his day had no greater. He was prominently involved in all the crucial events of his denomination. When, in 1861, the southern churches withdrew from the General Assembly, he became the leading voice in the creation of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States. It is not too much to say that his theological thought has dominated most of the history of Southern Presbyterianism. His conception of the relation of the church to society still controls the thinking of a large proportion of southern churchmen of all denominations.

Thornwell's conception of the relation of the church to the social order defined itself most sharply in reference to the controversial subject of slavery, a subject that steadily became more acute in both politics and religion. As early as 1847 he and his fellow ministers of the South Carolina Synod said: "Slavery is implicated in every fibre of Southern society; it is with us a vital question."<sup>3</sup> The fact that slavery was woven into the entire web of contemporary culture implicated all institutions in its existence, the church no less than the state. Thornwell understood this, and he sought to contrive a theory of the church that would meet the demands of the political no less than the religious situation. He had always advocated the necessity of holding to the "spiritual" conception of the church. Accordingly, he held that temperance, education, and humanitarian projects were not properly functions of the church as a corporate body. With the issue of slavery growing, he now saw that unless the church did restrict itself to what he called "spiritual" matters, both the unity of the church and the unity of the nation would be shattered.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Thornwell, *Works*, IV, 396.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 382; 394-395.

In his approach to a solution, Thornwell resorted to the medieval two-kingdom theory of the relation of church and state. "The provinces of the Church and State," he said, "are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other. The State is a natural institute, founded in the constitution of man as moral and social, and designed to realize the idea of justice. It is the society of rights. The Church is a supernatural institution, founded on the facts of redemption, and is designed to realize the idea of grace. It is the society of the redeemed. The State aims at social order; the Church at spiritual holiness. The State looks to the visible and outward; the Church is concerned for the invisible and inward. . . . They are as planets moving in different orbits."<sup>5</sup>

Making explicit the implications of this doctrine, he said: "It [the church] has no commission to construct society afresh, to adjust its elements in different proportions, to rearrange society, the distribution of its classes, or to change the form of its political constitutions. . . . it is not the distinctive province of the Church to build asylums for the needy or insane, to organize societies for the improvement of the penal code, or for the arresting of the progress of intemperance, gambling or lust."<sup>6</sup> From this it might be inferred that Thornwell conceived such matters to be altogether beyond the province of religion, but this would be a mistake. Although the church limits its operations to "its own appropriate sphere," it nevertheless permeates the life of the individual in such fashion as to "react upon all the interests of man."<sup>7</sup> Christian individuals may make changes in the common life, but it is not allowable for the church, as such, to do so. "The problems, which the anomalies of our fallen state are continually forcing on philanthropy, the Church has no right directly to solve."<sup>8</sup>

But even individuals, Thornwell held, must recognize that there are limits to social reconstruction. In his view, the Fall had infected our social order with maladjustments or imperfections from which it could not hope to escape within human history. Distinctions of rank, for example, may be, from the absolute standard, an evil, "but in our fallen world, an absolute equality would be an absolute stagnation of all enterprise and

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>6</sup> *Works*, IV, 383.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

industry."<sup>9</sup> He looked with disfavor upon those rationalistic humanitarians who thought they could convert this world into the Kingdom of God. Perfection could be attained only beyond history, in heaven, in which state, he admitted, there would be neither slavery nor any other ailment of our disordered earth.<sup>10</sup>

The institution of slavery laid a heavy burden upon Thornwell's doctrine of the relation of church and state. As already stated, he held that church and state were as separate as the planets. And yet he could not relate slavery exclusively either to the church or to the state. It entailed the concern of both, the state in its political aspects and the church in its moral aspects. In taking this position, he found himself opposed to two types of extreme opinion. One extreme point of view was that slavery was exclusively a civil institution, and that the church had no jurisdiction in respect of it. "Though a civil and political institution," he said, "it [slavery] is the subject of moral duties; and the Church has a right to exact the faithful performance of these duties from all her members who are masters or slaves. Cruelty to a servant is as much the subject of ecclesiastical censure as cruelty to a wife. The Church must rebuke *all* sin in *all* the relations of life. The slave she must require to be faithful; the master, merciful and just."<sup>11</sup>

The other extreme point of view against which he protested held that since slavery is a "natural evil," like poverty or disease, the church must seek to bring about its abolition. He rejected this proposition not only because he thought that it would involve the church in matters that were outside its proper sphere, but also because he thought that this course of action ran contrary to the teaching of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> To meet these two alleged false propositions, Thornwell brought into operation all his mental powers.

The thing that incensed him more than anything else was the assumption by critics of the South that slavery was, from the Christian point of view, a sin. When in 1847 the Presbyterian General Assemblies of Scotland and Ireland sent letters to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Amer-

9 Thornwell, "Slavery and the Religious Instruction of the Colored Population," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, IV (1850), 128.

10 Thornwell, "Slavery and the Religious Instruction of the Colored Population," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, IV (1850), 126-127.

11 *Works*, IV, 501.

12 *Ibid.*, 500.

ica implying that slavery was a sin, Thornwell was stirred to sharp rejoinder. After sarcastically reminding the churches of Scotland and Ireland that they had evils at home about which they might well busy themselves, he said: "These letters assume what never can be proved from the Word of God, nor the light of nature, that Slavery is essentially a sin."<sup>13</sup>

Upon the hypothesis that slavery is a sin, Thornwell himself readily admitted that the church would have to cast it off. But on what ground is one to determine whether or not slavery is a sin? "The Bible and the Bible alone," says Thornwell, "is her [the church's] rule of faith and practice. . . . Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak."<sup>14</sup> John Calvin never searched the Scriptures with more zeal than did Thornwell, for he was faced with a burning question. By 1851 he had his biblical verdict, a verdict that he resolutely clung to until his death in the midst of the war. "Certain it is," he said, "that no direct condemnation of slavery can anywhere be found in the Sacred Volume. . . . The master is nowhere rebuked as a monster of cruelty and tyranny, the slave nowhere exhibited as the object of peculiar compassion and sympathy. . . . We find masters exhorted in the same connection with husbands, parents, magistrates; slaves exhorted in the same connection with wives, children, and subjects. . . . The Scriptures not only fail to condemn slavery, they as distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man. The Church was formally organized in the family of a slaveholder; the relation was divinely regulated among the chosen people of God; and the peculiar duties of the parties inculcated under the Christian economy. These are facts which cannot be denied. Our argument then is this: If the Church is bound to abide by the authority of the Bible, and that alone, she discharges her whole office in regard to slavery when she declares what the Bible teaches, and enforces its laws by her own peculiar sanctions. Where the Scriptures are silent, she must be silent too. . . . To this she is shut up by the nature of her Constitution."<sup>15</sup> Thornwell went so far as to say that even if slavery should be adjudged undesirable from the point of view of economics, politics, or general policy, it could never

<sup>13</sup> *Works*, IV, 500.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>15</sup> *Works*, IV, 386-387.

be considered, on the basis of the Bible, repugnant to the will of God.<sup>16</sup>

He was fully acquainted with all the extra-Biblical arguments that were used by the Abolitionists, such as those based upon the theory of natural rights, respect for personality, and the like. But he observed that whatever truth might be contained in these arguments, they did not negate the plain teaching of the Bible. He was certain that social radicals had formed their opinions in the first instance independently of the Bible, and then had tortured Scripture into support of their assumptions. "They seem much more like apologists for the defects and omissions of the Scriptures, than like humble inquirers sitting at the feet of Jesus to learn His will. They have settled it in their own minds that Slavery is a sin; then the Bible must condemn it, and they set to work to make out the case that the Bible has covertly and indirectly done what they feel it ought to have done."<sup>17</sup> The more consistent Abolitionists, he says, "have not scrupled to reject these precepts, and to denounce the Book which enjoins them. They feel the incongruity betwixt their doctrines and these duties, and they do not hesitate to revile the Scriptures as the patron of tyranny and bondage."<sup>18</sup>

Radicals who rejected the Bible were, for Thornwell, not only enemies of right-ordered society, but were atheists in the sight of God. In one of his most dramatic utterances, he said: "The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and Slaveholders; they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battle ground, Christianity and Atheism the combatants, and the progress of humanity the stake."<sup>19</sup>

But if Thornwell fought the Abolitionists who would eliminate the institution of slavery altogether, he also fought the plantation capitalists and others of the South who neglected the moral duties of the slave-master relation. The church has no right to destroy the order of slavery, but it must seek to correct the evils which flow from its abuse.

By 1850 Thornwell had evolved what he called "the Chris-

16 *Ibid.*, 387.

17 *Works*, IV, 392.

18 *Ibid.*, 392.

19 *Ibid.*, 405-406.

tian Doctrine of Slavery."<sup>20</sup> In this doctrine he demanded that the slave be accorded certain rights. In the first place, the slave has a right to be regarded as the white man's brother. He scorned those who, for whatever reason, sought to reduce the Negro to the status of the brute. "Science, falsely so called, may attempt to exclude him from the brotherhood of humanity. Men may be seeking eminence and distinction by arguments which link him with the brute; but the instinctive impulses of our nature, combined with the plainest declarations of the Word of God, lead us to recognize in his form and lineaments, in his moral, religious and intellectual nature, the same humanity in which we glory as the image of God. We are not ashamed to call him our *brother*."<sup>21</sup>

On numerous occasions Thornwell urged the church to concern itself more actively with the implications of this right, and seek the Christian conversion and Christian instruction of the slave population. He sharply castigated as infidels those who dared to neglect the salvation of the Negro on the false assumption that he was without a soul. "The meanest slave," he urged, "has in him a soul of priceless value."<sup>22</sup> "The injustice of denying to them food and raiment and shelter, against which the law effectually guards, is nothing to the injustice of defrauding them of that bread which cometh from heaven."<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, of course, the conception of what religion is to do for the slave is pathetically narrow. "Our design in giving them the Gospel," says Thornwell, "is not to civilize them, not to change their social condition, not to exalt them into citizens or freemen; it is to save them."<sup>24</sup> To masters who feared that religion might put ideas of freedom into the heads of their servants, Thornwell said: "None need be afraid of His [Jesus'] lessons. . . . He was no stirrer up of strife, no mover of sedition. . . . Is anything to be apprehended from the instructions of Him in whose textbook it is recorded: 'Let as many servants as are under the yoke, count their masters worthy of all honor'? Christian knowledge inculcates contentment with our lot, and, in bringing before us the tremendous realities of eternity, renders us comparatively indifferent to the incon-

20 *Ibid.*, 398-436.

21 *Works*, IV, 403.

22 *Ibid.*, 433.

23 *Ibid.*, 433.

24 *Ibid.*, 433.

veniences and hardships of time. It subdues those passions and prejudices from which all danger to the social economy springs."<sup>25</sup> Marxians would have more than a little ground here for saying that such a gospel serves as an opiate in the mind of those in bondage.

In the second place, the slave is not the mere creature of the master. The master has a right to his labor, but not to an unlimited control over his person.<sup>26</sup> Among the remaining rights of the slave are the right of protection against injury and cruelty; the right to acquire knowledge, and especially religious knowledge; the right to protection against sexual exploitation; the right to the enjoyment of family life.<sup>27</sup>

All of these rights, however, must be granted in light of the fact that the Negro is a slave, not a freeman. The right of the slave, in other words, is a relative right. The Golden Rule, for example, is equally applicable only between master and master or between slave and slave. As between a slave and his master, the Golden Rule is met when the slave is accorded such treatment as one in his station has a right to expect. To those who held that the application of the Golden Rule would lead to the emancipation of the slave, Thornwell said: "The same principle which would make the master emancipate his servant on the ground of benevolence would make the rich man share his estates with his poor neighbors."<sup>28</sup> And this, he warned, "would make havoc of all the institutions of civilized society."

On the brink of the Civil War, Thornwell indulged in a bit of prophecy concerning free labor that has had an uncanny fulfilment in the twentieth century. Observing the rising tide of unrest among free workers of the industrial areas of Europe and the United States, he said:

Where labor is free, and the laborer not a part of the capital of the country, there are two causes constantly at work, which, in the excessive contrasts they produce, must end in agrarian revolutions and intolerable distress. The first is the tendency of capital to accumulate. Where it does not include the laborer as a part, it will employ only that labor which yields the largest returns. It looks to itself, and not to the interest of the laborer. The other is the tendency of population to out-

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, IV, 434.

<sup>26</sup> Thornwell, "The State of the Country," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XIII (1860-1861), 874.

<sup>27</sup> *Works* IV, 432.

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, IV, 391.

strip the demands of employment. The multiplication of laborers not only reduces wages to the lowest point, but leaves multitudes wholly unemployed. While the capitalist is accumulating his hoards, rolling in affluence and splendor, thousands that would work if they had the opportunity are doomed to perish of hunger. The most astonishing contrasts of riches and poverty are constantly increasing. Society is divided between princes and beggars. If labor is left free, how is this condition of things to be obviated? The government must either make provision to support people in idleness; or it must arrest the law of population and keep them from being born; or it must organize labor. Human beings cannot be expected to starve. There is a point at which they will rise in desperation against a social order which dooms them to nakedness and famine, whilst their lordly neighbor is clothed in purple and fine linen and faring sumptuously every day. They will scorn the logic which makes it their duty to perish in the midst of plenty. Bread they must have, and bread they will have, though all the distinctions of property have to be abolished to provide it. The government, therefore, must support them, or an agrarian revolution is inevitable. But shall it support them in idleness? Will the poor, who have to work for their living, consent to see others, as stout and able as themselves, clothed like the lilies of the field while they toil not, neither do they spin? Will not this be to give a premium to idleness? The government, then, must find them employment; but how shall this be done? On what principle shall labor be organized so as to make it certain that the laborer shall never be without employment, and employment adequate for his support? The only way in which it can be done, as a permanent arrangement, is by converting the laborer into capital; that is, by giving the employer a right of property in the labor of the employed; in other words, slavery. The master must always find work for his slave, as well as food and raiment. The capital of the country, under this system, must always feed and clothe the country. There can be no pauperism, and no temptations to agrarianism. That non-slaveholding states will eventually have to organize labor, and introduce something so like to slavery that it will be impossible to discriminate between them, or else to suffer from the most violent and disastrous insurrections against the system which creates and perpetuates their misery, seems to be as certain as the tendencies in the laws of capital and population to produce the extremes of poverty and wealth.<sup>29</sup>

Comparing the social situation in the South with that in the North, he says: "We do not envy them their social condition. . . . As long as the demand for labor transcends the supply, all is well; capital and labor are mutual friends, and the country grows in wealth with mushroom rapidity. But when it is no longer capital asking for labor, but labor asking for capital; when it is no longer work seeking men, but men seeking work—then the tables are turned, and unemployed labor and selfish capital stand face to face in deadly hostility."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Works* IV, 539-541.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

If Thornwell's analysis of the process of capitalistic industrialism is decidedly Marxian, his proposed method of preserving the privileged against social catastrophe is startlingly fascistic. As already pointed out, Thornwell himself believed in a social order as definitely class-patterned as that of feudalism. The more democratic ideals of the liberal era of the Old South, he, like Calhoun, unhesitatingly rejected. When he said, "We cherish the institution [slavery], not from avarice, but from principle,"<sup>31</sup> he reflects the same sort of illusion that characterizes the holders of social power in every period of crisis.

When the cultural crisis of the Old South approached the catastrophic stage, Thornwell flung to the winds his own theory of the separate provinces of church and state, and heatedly discussed politics from the pulpit.<sup>32</sup> When the matter of political secession was being discussed, his own Synod promptly assured those in political power that the churches would sanction this sort of action. And when his own state, South Carolina, met in extraordinary session to consider withdrawal from the Union, Thornwell was there to lead the opening prayer.

<sup>31</sup> Thornwell, "National Sins—A Fast Day Sermon," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XIII (1860-1861), 679.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 649-688.