

Why did Southern Christians maintain their pro-slavery stance before and during the Civil War

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Abstract:

The paper explores the reasons behind Southern Christians' staunch pro-slavery stance before and during the American Civil War, focusing on the religious perspective rather than the more commonly studied economic aspects. The paper examines how Southern Baptists, in particular, justified slavery as a part of their religious beliefs and identity, viewing it as a divinely sanctioned institution integral to their way of life. The paper highlights the role of the Southern Baptist Church (SBC) and its significant influence on the pro-slavery ideology, emphasizing the theological arguments made by Southern pastors and theologians. These religious leaders believed that slavery was morally and religiously justified and that the North's attempts to abolish it were an infringement on their religious freedom. The study utilizes both primary and secondary sources, including speeches and letters from Southern Baptist leaders, to illustrate how deeply entrenched these beliefs were in Southern Christian thought, ultimately arguing that this religious justification was a central factor in the South's resistance to abolition.

Keywords: The southern and northern Christians, Human rights, Abolitionist Movement, Religious culture

1. Introduction

This paper will study why the southern American Christians do not support the abolitionist movement from a religious perspective. As we all know, American abolitionism plays an important role in the development of history which is necessary to explore it in different ways. Many scholars used to be accustomed to taking an economic perspective, believing that abolishing slavery would cut off the South's main source of income. However, this understanding is limited and over-simplified. This paper will analyze the true reasons why Southern Christians do not support abolition from the perspective of their religious beliefs. Southern Christians believed that slavery was an integral part of their religious practice and identity, and therefore that the North was guilty of violating their own rights to religious freedom.

2. Background

To explore the faith of Southern Christians in the United States, an understanding of the Baptist Church is essential. The origin of the Baptist Church can be traced back to early 17th century England. At that time, some dissatisfied individuals with the Church of England began to seek religious practices that were more in line with their understanding of biblical teachings. Subsequently, the Baptist

Church quickly spread to North America and gained widespread development in the southern United States and other regions.[1] Baptist churches are usually independent and self controlled, with each church independently deciding their faith and time. At the same time, they regard the Bible as the highest authority and traditionally support religious freedom and the separation of church and state. [2] Understanding these has a certain correlation with the subsequent content of this article.

Next, let's talk about the Southern Baptist Church (SBC) in the United States, which had a great influence on the issue of abolitionism throughout the South. Due to differences over slavery, religious institutions in the South and North were divided. For example, in 1845, the Southern Baptist Church split from the Northern Baptist Church due to its support for slavery and established the Southern Baptist Church.[3] The SBC is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, with millions of members and thousands of congregations, particularly in the Bible Belt in the Southeast. This split reflected the firm religious beliefs of Southern Christians. Some southern churches also established specialized missionary organizations to preach to slaves, attempting to make them obedient and loyal through religious education. This activity not only upheld slavery, but also attempted to consolidate the institution of slavery through religious means. Many Southern

pastors spread this ideology widely, preaching and participating in political activities everywhere, thus deepening the Southern identification with the idea of slavery.[4]

3. Secondary Source Discussion

Many scholars have rarely studied the influence of religious beliefs on abolitionism in the South before, and they prefer to choose to study the economy, social patterns, and other perspectives. I found two valuable secondary sources for reference: one of them is an article by a Yale law professor, which roughly elaborates on the historical evolution of religious thought among Southern Christians. The article argues that Southern theologians and pastors believe slavery is a part of the divine order and in accordance with God's will. They believe that slavery is not only necessary economically, but also morally and religiously justified. What's more, he mentioned that the propaganda of southern pastors had a great impact on opposing abolitionism.

The primary sources which the professor used in his article were a thanksgiving sermon in a Virginia church in 1861. The sermon believed that people in the South had a new and valuable opportunity, which was a very solemn order - to implement a form of government in which everyone's legitimate and constitutional rights were guaranteed. Northern Christians believed that this opportunity was a responsibility bestowed upon them by God, and they were at a very important period in world history. What's more, northern Christians also believed that they hold a task in their hands, which can only be faithfully executed through divine and self-sacrifice, fully following God's plan. This secondary source can prove that many Southern Christians in the United States support slavery in terms of ideology and spirit.[5]

The other secondary source I found was a lengthy academic research paper which was written by Chandra Manning in 2020. This paper discusses the entire history of religious evolution in the southern United States during the 19th century, which contains three main parts: the history of Baptists Church and emancipation; theoretical shifts during the 19 century and the civil religion. These primary sources which the scholar used not only reflected how religion served as a tool to influence the outbreak, process, and consequences of civil wars but also studied the intrinsic content of religious belief and its position in the inner life of believers. Through these materials, the author argues for the multiple roles of religion in American society during the Civil War and explores the development and challenges of academic research. By reviewing the development path of historical research, the author calls on scholars to not only consider the instrumental role

of religion, but also pay attention to its theological content when studying it.[6] Therefore, people will have a more comprehensive understanding of the religions in civil wars.

4. Methods

Based on the above materials, a question arose naturally. Why do members of the Baptist Church support slavery so much, and what kind of faith and ideological drive do they have? This paper will use two primary materials to help me explore these questions, one of them is a speech by members of the Southern Baptist Church in 1863 about the abolitionist movement at that time[7], and the other one is a letter from the leadership of the Southern Baptist Church in 1823[8]. The Southern Baptist Church, officially known as the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which I have mentioned before, is the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. and it plays an important role in religious life of American people. This speech is from the annual year-end speech of the Baptist Church, which is given by representatives of member churches who gather once a year to determine the direction and policies of SBC. Due to the significant influence of the Baptist Church in American history, these primary sources are highly reliable and useful. Both of these primary sources directly reflect the independent thinking of Baptist members, and there are many descriptions in the literature that reflect their views on abolitionism. Although the two documents were written in different times and in different forms, they happen to reflect the thoughts that Baptist churches wanted to express at different times. These primary sources reflect a common theme: Southern Baptist believers regard God's will as the highest authority, and God's will is their fundamental reference.

5. Primary Source analysis

This paper will first focus on the letter which was written by a representative of the Southern Baptist Church to the governor in 1823. The letter contained different parts and they embody the legitimacy and morality of Southern Baptist believers' defense of slavery.

To begin with, this article reflects the spirit of humanitarianism, which emphasizes that Baptist slave owners have a responsibility to treat their slaves with justice and humanity, providing appropriate living conditions and religious education. This means that slave owners should ensure that their slaves have sufficient food, suitable clothing, and a suitable living environment to meet their basic living needs. Furthermore, slave owners were required to provide fair treatment to their slaves, avoid cruel punishments, and ensure that their spiritual and religious needs

were met. This includes allowing slaves to participate in religious ceremonies, receive education on religious doctrines, and provide them with spiritual care and support.

The representative also mentioned that slave owners should uphold the basic rights of their slaves and avoid unfair treatment and exploitation. This means that they should consider the abilities and health status of slaves in labor arrangements, and not forcing them to engage in labor beyond their abilities. They believe that slave owners should treat their slaves in a fair and humane manner, avoiding cruel punishment and abuse just like they were members of their own family, respecting their personality and dignity in accordance with Christian doctrine.

Although the Baptist representatives mentioned the humanitarianism, they still regard slavery as a legitimate existence. Representatives request the governor to establish a public day of thanks, thanking God for cracking down on the premeditated slave rebellion. The representatives believe that this public gratitude helps to enhance the public's faith and dependence on God, while preventing crime and promoting social virtues and actions. However, some citizens in the South hold opposing views, fearing that this will cause unrest among the black population and motivate them to further resist. On the contrary, representatives believe that these concerns do not pose a threat, and publicly expressing gratitude can more effectively demonstrate God's grace and the power of the government, dispelling potential rebellious thoughts.

Furthermore, in the letter, a lot of emphasis was placed on the legitimacy of slavery, attempting to prove its legitimacy through the teachings and history of the Bible. It mainly expresses two main viewpoints. The first is that in the New Testament, both slaves and their masters are accepted as part of the Christian church, although their master-slave relationship has not been dissolved. The "servants under the yoke" mentioned by Paul in the Timothy were instructed to respect their masters rather than demand liberation. Secondly, the article discusses the golden rule of Christianity, which is "treat others as you wish to be treated", and argues that this rule should not be used to oppose slavery, as it is considered a part of the order established by God. Therefore, the Baptist Church believes that slavery is acceptable within the framework of Christianity and emphasizes the respective responsibilities and obligations of slave owners and slaves.[9]

The second primary source is a speech by members of the Southern Baptist Church during the Civil War, who firmly believed that their war was just, not only fighting for political freedom, but also defending the right to religious conscience. To begin with, the speaker demonstrated his address by clarifying that all people are sinners, southerners included. But he went on to argue that the North as

a "wicked" nation. In doing so, he made it clear that he considered the North to be separate nation from the South. He even claims that the North is the country trying to violate what he calls "political liberty": meaning, in this case, the liberty to secede from the union. Mobilizing human rights language in the name of slavery, the Baptist minister claims that it is the North who is attacking the "rights of conscience" in the South, and it was the North that was using religion in the name of "fanaticism". It was explicitly about slavery.

What's more, the believers emphasized that the war of southerners was not only about defending their territory or political rights, but more importantly, about defending their religious beliefs and freedom of religious practice. Southern believers believed that the radical activities carried out by Northern abolitionists in the name of religion led to national division and war, and they were described as attempting to forcibly change the religious and social structure of the South by abolishing slavery. The Southern War was described as not only for political freedom, but also for religious freedom. They believe they are defending a way of life that includes the combination of religious beliefs and slavery.[10]

6. Conclusion

This research article indicates that, both before and during the American Civil War, the majority of Southern Baptists believed that slavery was an integral part of their faith. They could not relinquish their deeply held beliefs, which led to ideological differences with the North. We can conclude that Southern Christians always considered themselves a cohesive whole, relatively independent in terms of ideology and religious beliefs. They would not abandon their original convictions to conform to contemporary trends or political correctness, we cannot deny whether supporting slavery in the South is right or wrong, instead, we can regard this belief as a way to defend themselves from harm.

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