

GOD'S
Almost
CHOSEN
PEOPLES

**A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF
THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR
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PROLOGUE

In August 1864, Presbyterian editor Amasa Converse concluded that the past three years of war had clearly demonstrated the power of prayer. The first great Confederate victory at Manassas in July 1861 had followed an official day of prayer. But then a period of spiritual indifference during the fall and winter had preceded disastrous losses in Tennessee. The southern people again fell to their knees during the spring of 1862, and Richmond had been delivered from General George B. McClellan's mighty hosts. Other victories had followed, but too much faith had been placed in generals and armies, and so once again God's favor had temporarily departed, and General Robert E. Lee had retreated from the bloody Antietam battlefield. March 27, 1863, had been another day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, and a little over a month later came the dramatic triumph at Chancellorsville. Yet, once more, people had relied on human strength, neglected prayer, and received their just punishment at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. But after a fast day in August 1863, southern arms enjoyed a glorious victory at Chickamauga, thus sparking a season of intense revivalism in the Confederate armies. And following a fast day on April 8, 1864, southern armies had enjoyed a nearly "unbroken" string of successes that had stymied both Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman.¹

One could easily object to Converse's chronology and theology, but his long editorial exemplified a pervasive, providential interpretation of the Civil War. Men, women, and children, free and slave, Protestants, a growing number of Catholics, Mormons, and even the small number of Jews formed a complex cultural mosaic, but one that nevertheless shared a providential outlook on life. Historians have yet to write a religious history of the Civil War, but many Americans living during the era saw God's hand in the war's origins, course, and outcome. Prominent Methodist divine Daniel S. Doggett recognized how reluctant historians might be to acknowledge the Almighty's role in human history. "It has become customary for history to ignore God," he lamented in an 1862 Thanksgiving sermon. "The pride of the human heart is intolerant of God, and historians are too obsequious to its dictates. They collect and arrange their materials; they philosophize upon them. But their philosophy knows not God." Ministers often excoriated both individuals and nations for a variety of sins, but Doggett feared that historians failed to recognize, much less understand, how the war marked the unfolding of divine purpose. "Those who undertake the task of committing to posterity the record of our times,

will be guilty of startling dereliction, if the manifest and acknowledged hand of God be discarded from their pages.”²

Doggett was largely right about the historians, but many of his contemporaries embraced a providential understanding of not only the war but also everyday life.³ Everything—storms, harvests, illnesses, deaths—unfolded according to God’s will. Popular understandings of how the Almighty shaped the destinies of individuals and nations may not have been profound, but such beliefs were pervasive. Northerners and southerners, blacks and whites often spoke in remarkably similar ways. References to God’s will filled diaries, letters, conversations, and presumably many people’s thoughts. For some folks, explaining fortune in terms of divine favor or calamities as signs of divine judgment might have been simply customary or habitual, verbal ticks that hardly bespoke deep piety. And those hostile or indifferent to any religious world view hardly thought in such terms. But even taking such people into account, a good number of Americans sincerely believed that the Almighty ruled over affairs large and small. So it was hardly surprising when they saw the anguish of sectional strife and civil war reflecting a providential design.

In what remained a largely pre-Darwinian world, countless Americans would have agreed that the Lord’s will governed all operations in the universe. Presbyterian Robert Lewis Dabney, eulogizing another stern Presbyterian, Thomas J. Jackson (struck down in the hour of victory at Chancellorsville by friendly fire), clung to the strictest Calvinist precepts: “God’s special providence is over all his creatures, and all their actions; it is them that fear Him; for their good only. By that almighty and omniscient providence, all events are either produced; or at least permitted, limited, and overruled.” In battle, the smallest actions conformed to the divine will. “Even when the thousand missiles of death, invisible to mortal sight, and sent forth aimless by those who launched them, shoot in inexplicable confusion over the battle-field, His eye gives each one an aim and a purpose according to the plan of his wisdom.”⁴

Dabney’s view reflected a belief in divine sovereignty firmly rooted in the Protestant Reformation, English Puritanism, and the Great Awakening. Despite the emphasis on human agency in the Second Great Awakening, the spread of Arminianism, Charles G. Finney’s “new measures” revivalism, and the fracturing of Calvinism, traditional notions of providence held sway among clergy and laity alike. The laws of God still determined the course of human history. Even as the sectional conflict reached a crisis point in the wake of Abraham Lincoln’s election, any resolution remained outside human control. A New School Presbyterian editor warned that “there is a Third Party, higher than both—the great Judge of all the Earth, the Governor among the nations,

who has a controversy with the whole people, not so much for their sectional injuries to each other as for their common and united offenses against Him.” But it was not only Calvin’s heirs who made such statements. Methodists, Episcopalians, and many others believed in a sovereign God who decreed the fate of nations.⁵

Many pious folk surely missed the irony of citizens in a republic affirming the unlimited sovereignty of God. There was after all a certain tension between divine authority and popular democracy, but to most Americans faith and freedom went hand in hand. Indeed, freedom and voluntarism had become hallmarks of religious practice in the United States, and most people did not even notice any contradictions between civil and biblical religion. Civil religion in America developed as a set of beliefs about the relationship between God and the nation that emphasized national virtue, national purpose, and national destiny. A general faith in the work of divine providence in human history grew into a more specific conviction that Americans were a people chosen by God to carry out his mission in the world. The creation and growth of the American republic therefore acquired transcendent meaning and signified the Lord’s direct intervention in human history. Religious faith and civic belief reinforced each other as the nation’s unfolding history and democratic institution became expressions of God’s will.⁶

Puritans, Quakers, and Baptists among other groups had long described God as an absolute monarch. From an orthodox perspective, all human institutions, including churches, had limited authority, an assertion that ironically gave Americans increasing freedom to decide the most fundamental religious questions for themselves. In stressing both divine sovereignty and human means to advance the Lord’s kingdom in America, Finney and other revivalists squared a changeless God with an ever-changing society. As millennial optimism followed in the wake of revivalism, many of the devout no longer viewed God’s kingdom as otherworldly but rather expected the reign of a triumphant Christ to begin soon (if it had not already begun) on earth—and specifically in America. Relying on tortured readings of Revelation and other prophetic scriptures, Americans tied messianic hope to national destiny. Of course, premillennialists still anticipated a fiery judgment before Christ’s return, but many Americans exuded a far more optimistic faith. This kind of reasoning produced one notably striking conclusion: a host of social problems ranging from materialism to alcoholism to slavery could and would be alleviated, if not eradicated altogether.⁷ But despite such optimistic expectations, sectional tensions mounted, and the war came.

So did millennial hopes then give way to apocalyptic fears? In the war’s first

years not at all, and only rarely in the war's later years, even as Confederates watched their dream of separate nationhood collapse. Apocalyptic imagery acquired a certain currency, but rebel and Yankee alike saw themselves as part of a righteous, redeemer nation. Even warnings about divine judgment became justifications for patriotic sacrifice, a call to action rather than a surrender to despair. As Abraham Lincoln would eloquently observe toward the war's end, both sides not only prayed to the same God but also read the same Bibles. And whatever their differences over such matters as slavery and political preaching, both sides read their Bibles in remarkably similar ways. Ministers had long seen the American republic as a new Israel, and Confederate preachers viewed the southern nation in roughly the same light.⁸ The relentless, often careless application of biblical typologies to national problems, the ransacking of scripture for parallels between ancient and modern events produced a nationalistic theology at once bizarre, inspiring, and dangerous. Favorite scripture passages offered meaning and hope to a people in the darkest hours and, at the same time, justified remorseless bloodshed.

Complex rationalizations and special pleading reflected more than simply the process of patriotic nationalism corrupting religious faith. A great crisis compounded life's normal uncertainties, especially over questions of ultimate meaning. When war breaks out, people often sacrifice religious to patriotic principles, but theological inconsistencies reflected more than intellectual dishonesty or even a failure of moral imagination. It was one thing to believe that divine providence governed human history, quite another to discern the Lord's purpose with any degree of clarity and certainty. Dabney readily admitted—as any good Calvinist would—that human minds were too “puny” to comprehend the ways of God. Ultimately, faith could not be separated from the irreducible mystery that human beings saw, at best, through a glass darkly. Given the confusion of ideas and purposes in the war itself, Nathaniel Hawthorne wondered if the “Great Arbiter to whom they [northerners and southerners] so piously and solemnly appeal must be sorely puzzled to decide.” Few Americans, however, would have expressed such doubts. Despite the temptation to view calamities as punishment for sin, whether such a simple relationship actually reflected the Lord's immediate purpose—much less some larger plan—remained to be seen. A Unitarian and former Harvard president made this very point in an election sermon before the Massachusetts legislature. His censure of self-righteous busybodies who seemed to delight in human suffering was a point well taken, but many people longed to find some larger significance in all the sacrifice and bloodshed. Satisfactory answers were not forthcoming, not even from experts. Correspondents asked the editor of the nation's leading religious weekly, the *Independent*, to explain how the war's

course fulfilled prophecies in Revelation: he demurred except to argue that God surely willed the death of slavery.⁹

However much the problems and contradictions might weigh on historians studying wartime religion, many people of the Civil War generation simply looked to their religious faith for consolation, if not understanding. To ask whether the war shattered millennial hopes or even weakened religious faith is to pose the wrong question. Both in the short term and even by the end of the war, a providential interpretation of events with millennial overtones showed remarkable staying power. Religious faith itself became a key part of the war's unfolding story for countless Americans, and historians must address that reality.

I have chosen to subtitle this work "a religious history of the American Civil War." The grand and sweeping narratives of the sectional crisis and Civil War from James Ford Rhodes to Bruce Catton to Shelby Foote and beyond have seldom paid attention to religion much less tried to create a religious narrative of the conflict.¹⁰ Yet many devout people of the time would have considered this a curious omission. Likewise, the easily overlooked article "a" is important here. There could well be many different religious histories of the Civil War written, and in these pages I am presenting merely one. Given the richness of the sources, the importance of the subject, and the complexity of the questions involved, there will be plenty of room left for other religious histories of the conflict.

In fact, the sources themselves require some comment. Not surprisingly, members of the clergy often have prominent speaking roles in this narrative. Ministers of various stripes held forth often and at length on the ripening sectional conflict and war. The published sermons alone are staggering in quantity and diversity, if not always profundity. One friend sarcastically asked how I could stand to read "all those sermons." One obvious answer was in small doses over time, but despite their arid and repetitive nature, the sermons are vitally important, often revealing, and occasionally even stimulating sources for understanding how Americans interpreted the war through a religious lens. Some readers might prefer a more exegetical and extended treatment of major statements on religion (including famous sermons), but I decided not to take this approach because it would have involved hauling out the usual suspects when the point was that many of the ideas discussed in these pages extended beyond the nation's leading pulpits not only into the pews but out into the wider world.¹¹ Civilians and soldiers alike echoed many of the central themes as they struggled to understand what was happening to themselves, their families, their communities, and their nation. The sheer diversity of per-

spectives in the midst of certain common assumptions and ideas poses a continuing but worthwhile challenge to anyone tackling this endlessly intriguing topic.

That being said, the purpose here is not primarily to explore the role of the clergy or even the churches. This work is not “church history” in the usual definition of that term, but obviously the history of the churches is an important part of the story. The various synods, conferences, associations, and other ecclesiastical bodies often made official statements about the war, and their records contain important material on a variety of questions.¹² Denominational papers and periodicals proved equally valuable. The three largest Protestant denominations, the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, all published newspapers that carried voluminous material on any number of subjects. Then too the Catholic press expressed a range of opinion often ignored by students of Civil War religion who have focused almost exclusively on Protestants.¹³

In a still broader sense, Americans who commented on the war whether in newspaper editorials, diaries, or letters to friends and family often remarked about how religious beliefs shaped their views of passing events and larger questions. Here too there are problems of representativeness, and any attempt to comprehensively examine the available material would be more than a lifetime’s work. Whatever their limitations, the sources on the topic are rich and virtually endless; for each citation in the notes, five or six were cast aside. I have endeavored throughout the manuscript to include a cross section of denominational and theological perspectives (including the nonreligious), but this was not possible on every issue, especially as I trimmed the documentation from two earlier and considerably longer drafts.

Although this is not a thesis-driven work, it does address important questions about the war’s origins, course, and meaning. It is not a history of theology, yet theologians make an occasional appearance, and certainly theological questions receive considerable attention.¹⁴ Nor is the book primarily concerned with the relationship between religious values and the war’s conduct. Harry Stout has already offered a searing critique of how civil religion helped justify and sustain an increasingly brutal conflict in his “moral history” of the Civil War.¹⁵ And however pervasive civil religion proved to be in both the Union and the Confederacy, it is far from being the entire story. Instead, what follows is a broad narrative that shows how all sorts of people used faith to interpret the course of the Civil War and its impact on their lives, families, churches, communities, and “nations.”

This is by no means a straightforward story, and the narrative has to zigzag

and even backtrack to do justice to the struggles of the Civil War generation. For example, emphasizing an all-encompassing civil religion would present a much simpler tale but would miss important exceptions, ignore significant dissenters, and overlook paths not taken. Whatever the obvious pitfalls involved in a more comprehensive and complex religious narrative, it has the advantage of dealing with the many ways in which religious values touched people during the war.

Religious faith had long shaped political attitudes and behavior, not only in the obvious tensions between Protestants and Catholics but also as a reaction to sectional conflict in the 1850s. Not surprisingly, many Americans viewed the secession crisis from a religious perspective.¹⁶ Providence, sin, and judgment became powerful themes in both public and private discourse, and wartime jeremiads—complete with castigation of sinners and warnings of impending judgment—began to appear even before the first shots were fired.¹⁷ From April 1861 on, many northerners and southerners tried to make sense of a brutal war by thumbing through their Bibles, listening to their preachers, and even interpreting battles as a fulfillment of a mysterious, divine plan. Few churchgoers hesitated to hitch their faith to patriotism, and the pious sent off young men to war with remarkable unity and enthusiasm. For clergy and laity alike, the war became a holy crusade.

But how was its course and conduct to be interpreted? Sacrifice and bloodshed tested faith and produced wildly divergent assessments of divine intent. What sins had merited God's wrath? Would the war itself, and especially the evils of camp life, destroy faith, weaken the churches, and delay the coming of God's kingdom?

Folks at home might pray for the soldiers, and chaplains struggled to meet their spiritual needs. Yet, ironically, neither government did much to support those chaplains, and there were never enough good ones.¹⁸ The strain on families and indeed on the churches themselves became a constant, everyday reality. Religious consolation often proved elusive because the war spun out of control and God seemed so far away. Religious beliefs shaped popular thinking on the conflict, but then the war buffeted not only clergy and the laity but also the indifferent and skeptical. Religious faith could be both wind and weathervane—a driving force and a sensitive gauge—but what was perhaps most striking was its flexibility and resilience in the face of political and military storms such as Americans had never before endured.

With remarkable consistency, large numbers of believers persisted in taking a providential view of both daily life and wartime events. Indeed, the idea of divine judgment on various personal and national transgressions became a standard response to any major or minor trial. Many believers held

that the Lord kept track of individual and collective sins, doling out victories and defeats according to a precisely calculated evaluation of the contending sides. Days of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, along with days of special thanksgiving, marked such judgments. Amid anguish on the battlefield and home front, many people searched for purpose, justification, and meaning in their religion. Naturally, the staggering numbers of wounded and dead raised doubts and hard questions. Loved ones cherished the dying words of their soldier boys but could not help asking *why*, as the war vastly multiplied the uncertainties of life—why so many missing faces in churches, so much bitter division in the border regions, and so many assaults on faith in the camps, on the marches, in battle.¹⁹

Explaining human affliction and reckoning with divine judgment became necessary adjuncts to relentless war. Benevolence found outlets in the hospitals and various volunteer organizations, while emancipation kept millennial hopes alive in the North. Then too division, disillusionment, and despair sorely tested faith at home as it did in the armies. By 1863 the devout and skeptical alike wondered if the war might drag on indefinitely. Camp revivals, draft riots, sad holidays, and too many vacant chairs around firesides all whipsawed emotions as casualties mounted on battlefields, in hospitals, and in prisons.

Yet religion undoubtedly helped sustain morale and lengthen the war, a point recognized by even the indifferent and the skeptical. Writing privately for his own family after the war, the Confederate artilleryman Edward Porter Alexander scorned religious interpretations of the contest. “Providence did not care a row of pins about it,” he commented sharply. “If it did it was a very unintelligent Providence not to bring the business to a close—the close it wanted—in less than four years of most terrible and bloody war.” Yet he ironically acknowledged that countless fellow Confederates would have disagreed: “Our president and many of our generals really and actually believed that there *was* this mysterious Providence always hovering over the field and ready to interfere on one side or the other, and that prayers and piety might win its favor from day to day.” He considered this a “serious incubus” and thought it a “weakness to imagine that the victory could ever come in even the slightest degree from anything except our own exertions.” But, of course, Stonewall Jackson and even George McClellan believed exactly that, as did countless officers, enlisted men, and civilians.²⁰

To the pious, the war was always fought for some higher purpose. In fact, even as Alexander was critiquing a providential interpretation of the war, J. William Jones and William W. Bennett were compiling massive volumes emphasizing the piety of Confederate soldiers.²¹ Admittedly, the truly devout were a significant though in many ways powerful minority in the Union and Con-

federate ranks.²² Yet there is no doubt that religion helped overcome the soldier's natural fear of death and sustained morale. And so, even if the genuinely pious remained a minority, their influence may have well have loomed large in keeping the armies in the field.²³ And one might add, equally large at home.

How then does a religious history of the Civil War change our understanding of the Civil War itself? It should drive home the point that many people on both sides of the conflict turned to religious faith to help explain the war's causes, course, and consequences. In short, religious conviction produced a providential narrative of the war. These religious convictions created a fatalism grounded not in deism but in providence. Many Americans believed in a providential God who was also a personal God, a God deeply invested in the fate of nations and individuals. This is precisely the view Abraham Lincoln adopted in his Second Inaugural: if God wills that the war continue "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword," then so be it, for "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether." Faith not only buttressed morale in the armies and at home but offered ways to give all the bloodshed some higher and presumably nobler purpose. Many Americans found in their Bibles, their churches, and their families, and even in the armies, answers to some of the most pressing questions raised by the war. Suffering and sacrifice, anguish and bloodshed certainly brought despair and disillusionment, and even a certain loss of faith.²⁴ But the attributes most remarkable and most revealing about countless believers of the Civil War generation were their persistence and endurance in viewing their lives and the war itself as part of an unfolding providential story.

Chapter 1

CRISES OF FAITH

As the Lord commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai.

— Numbers 1:19

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

— Matthew 7:12

Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.

— Proverbs 14:34

Émigré theologian and church historian Philip Schaff returned to Berlin in September 1854 to deliver two important lectures on the state of religion in his adopted country. Schaff's European background, American experiences, and ecumenical theology made him acutely sensitive to the relationship between religious practices and national character. Be it Sabbath observance, church schools, Bible societies, foreign missions, or worship attendance, he found Americans "already in advance of the old Christian nations of Europe." In the United States, there were "probably more awakened souls, and more individual efforts and self-sacrifice for religious purposes . . . than in any other country in the world."¹

Such a comparison sounded more quantitative than qualitative, and that was no accident because Americans increasingly calculated ways to improve their lives and tried to measure such improvement precisely. This attribute had developed slowly, but even in matters of faith, what counted was often defined as what could be counted.² Yet it was not until 1850 that the census offered the first crude numerical assessment of religion's central place in the United States. By then an estimated one in seven Americans was a church member; fifty years earlier it had been no more than one in fifteen. Some four to five million Americans adhered to some form of evangelical Protestantism, and if one counts children and adults who attended a church without joining, those numbers jump much higher.³ The religious mix of the population had changed radically. Congregationalists and Episcopalians had lost ground, and Presbyterians had more or less held their own. Baptists and especially Methodists had enjoyed explosive growth, and Catholics had steadily gained adher-

ents in both eastern cities and the Midwest. During the final decade before the Civil War, the number of Jews roughly tripled.⁴

And any such estimates undercounted religious strength. Especially in the more evangelical groups, people who either doubted they had experienced a “second birth” or hesitated to proclaim it in front of a congregation nevertheless attended services. Without joining a church, thousands of Americans remained religious. During the Civil War, English journalist Edward Dicey reported that in New York the number of “churchgoers” is “larger in the proportion to the population than it would be in London.”⁵ All such generalizations revealed nothing about the depth of individual faith, the vitality of the churches, or the meaning of all this apparent spirituality for the wider society. And Dicey’s statement paid no attention to the substantial number of Americans who remained outside any religious tradition.

The numbers of the faithful, however, were both striking and ironic. The steady erosion of established religion during the eighteenth century and the birth of an American republic conceived during the Enlightenment’s heyday had launched an experiment in religious voluntarism. There may not have been a “wall” separating church and state under the Constitution but there was at least a fairly sturdy fence roping off public life from religious control. Yet at the same time, and especially with the revivalism of the so-called Second Great Awakening during the early decades of the nineteenth century, religion deeply influenced American society and culture. Religious and social life became intertwined for many Americans, and so even overblown estimates of conversions show how churches enticed the indifferent or merely curious into their orbit at least for a time.⁶

The growing power of organized and barely organized religion in American life extended well beyond the churches as cooperation in benevolent enterprises created any number of mission groups and reform societies. Campaigns against various sins, the desire to build holy communities, and a sense of God’s presence in daily life produced not only a willingness to tackle social problems such as alcoholism and poverty but a conviction that such problems could ultimately be solved by human efforts aided by divine grace.⁷ Missionary, Bible, tract, and Sunday school societies embodied this organized benevolence: forming committees, raising money, and proselytizing across the nation. Much of this activity reflected expectations about an advancing Kingdom of God in America, a millennial optimism that became ever more prominent as religion assumed a larger role in American society and culture.⁸

Only one thing appeared to stand in the way of a glorious future: slavery. By the 1830s, equivocation and conservatism on the issue seemed utterly spineless

to antislavery ministers and many of the laity for that matter. Abolitionists declared slavery a sin against God and man that demanded immediate action. In renouncing gradualism, colonization, and other halfway measures, abolitionists embraced a vision of America, its people, and its churches reborn free of sin. Whatever their differences over the legitimacy and efficacy of political action, William Lloyd Garrison and his fellow abolitionists believed the nation faced a clear choice between damnation and salvation. For some abolitionists, especially those who had lost their youthful spiritual fervor, the crusade against slavery became a substitute for religion. And in the calls for immediate emancipation, one could hear echoes of perfectionism and millennialism.⁹ Then, too, abolitionists took aim at southern churches that buttressed an unjust social order; what passed for religion there only mocked genuine Christianity. In the view of Garrison and countless others, southern ministers had become pawns of wealthy slaveholders and southern theologians apologists for oppression.¹⁰

The targets of such attacks responded swiftly and unequivocally. So far as defenders of slavery were concerned, the abolitionists assailed religion itself. The “parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders,” declared James Henley Thornwell. “They are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, jacobins, on the one side, and 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 at stake.”¹¹ That this son of a poor overseer growing up without a father but also experiencing the nurturing kindness of a cousin and a teacher should view the conflict in such Manichaean terms and long for the protection of family and hierarchy in a cruel world is hardly surprising. His linking of slavery to human progress jars the modern reader but became common enough as southern intellectuals and politicians shifted from necessary evil to positive good arguments.

Stoop-shouldered and hollow-chested, the diminutive Thornwell sometimes seemed to be all intellect. He could lecture students on moral character, condemn novel reading, and declare social dancing immoral as readily as he could debate fine points of reformed doctrine. Wedded to theological abstractions but also drawn to creature comforts, Thornwell defended slavery as the linchpin of the southern social order. Many of his fellow Presbyterians owned human property, and like most apologists for slavery, Thornwell never commented much on particular slaveholders or slaves. Although readily acknowledging abuses in the master-slave relationship, Thornwell adopted an idealist approach to social problems that seldom examined the messiness, the conflicts, the fears, or the violence that were part and parcel of slave society.

For example, he argued that slavery was not in fact property in man because slaveholders owned only the slaves' labor and therefore slaveholder and slave could live harmoniously. Like John C. Calhoun, Thornwell reveled in such philosophical propositions without bothering to address the practical difficulties, much less the injustices inherent in a system of class and racial domination.¹²

Thornwell's literal reading of the scriptures turned into an intellectual trap, but then that was true for southerners and northerners of various theological stripes. Americans favored a commonsense understanding of the Bible that ripped passages out of context and applied them to all people at all times. *Sola scriptura* both set and limited the terms for discussing slavery and gave apologists for the institution great advantages. The patriarchs of the Old Testament had owned slaves, Mosaic Law had upheld slavery, Jesus had not condemned slavery, and the apostles had advised slaves to obey their masters—these points both summed up and closed the case for many southerners and no small number of northerners. Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, African Americans, and even some Presbyterians might offer alternative ways of reading and applying scriptures to the slavery question, but none were convincing or influential enough to force the debate out of the rut of an often slavish (pun intended) literalism. Abolitionists vainly appealed to the spirit of the Gospel in an age that preferred citations to chapter and verse, and because they seemed to be losing the biblical argument, some decided to abandon religious appeals altogether.¹³

So long as the controversy centered on the Bible and slavery in the abstract as opposed to religion and slavery in practice, southern defenders of the institution felt confident. According to Robert Lewis Dabney, the “masses” plainly understood the matter—that “we must go before the nation with the Bible as the text, and ‘Thus saith the Lord’ as the answer. . . . we know that on the Bible argument the abolition party will be driven to unveil their true infidel tendencies. The Bible being bound to stand on our side, they have to come out and array themselves against the Bible. And then the whole body of sincere believers at the North will have to array themselves, though unwillingly, on our side. They will prefer the Bible to abolitionism.” The appeal of such reasoning extended well beyond Presbyterian theologians such as Dabney and Thornwell. On the basis of their reading of the Hebrew scriptures, some American Jews found the case for slavery persuasive and suspected New England abolitionists of being anti-Semitic.¹⁴

Racial considerations underlay some religious arguments and certainly shaped popular thinking. Those church leaders who emphasized the biblical foundations for servitude often added that slavery was necessary to govern

supposedly primitive Africans and was well adapted to their character. Even northern Episcopalians doubted that darker-skinned people would ever be capable of self-government, and one of their leading church papers declared that the Caucasian was “morally and intellectually superior to all other races, black, brown, red, or yellow.” The biblical curse of Ham that consigned Africans to permanent inferiority—an idea that could be traced back not only to rabbinical teachings but to the early church fathers—rested on thin textual evidence and required a great leap of logic to tie the incident involving Noah’s son to any race at all, but that hardly prevented everyone from Brigham Young to conservative Presbyterians from trotting it out when needed.¹⁵

The absence of any consensus on slavery mirrored the country’s religious diversity, despite the great success of evangelical revivals. Disagreements grew out of particular religious traditions or denominational divisions. Most notably, the “confessional” or “liturgical” churches were often more cautious and reticent in dealing with slavery, especially in contrast to evangelicals. Lutherans, for instance, often fought over doctrinal issues but avoided taking stands on political questions, though largely independent synods could chart their own course.¹⁶ Unitarians devoted far more energy to promoting liberal theology, genteel reform, and social respectability than to worrying about slavery. Their clergy—with some notable exceptions such as William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker—had little stomach for angry confrontations with slaveholding southerners, and their churches depended on wealthy, conservative supporters who deplored political agitation.¹⁷

In Hartford, Connecticut, with its strong economic ties to the South, Congregationalist Horace Bushnell sounded a similar note. He tempered opposition to slavery and his own romantic idealism with concern for social stability. His evolving idea of Christian nurture stemmed from a belief in the organic but increasingly fragile unity of church and family. To Bushnell, the debates over slavery above all else threatened to destroy the sacred Union. As for slaveholders, he advised them to prevent the breakup of slave families, hoping they would ultimately see the wisdom of emancipation. Like all too many moderates, Bushnell saw little future for freed blacks in the United States, though the whole question of territorial expansion eventually pushed him into declaring slavery a national curse. Even then, however, he never gave up searching for an ever more elusive middle ground.¹⁸

In many ways the most agonizing quest for answers to the slavery question occurred among the already fractured Presbyterians. The 1801 Plan of Union between the Presbyterians and Congregationalists had marked an alliance between evangelical religion and moral reform, but theological fissures soon appeared. The “Old School” Presbyterians remained staunch Calvinists, skept-

tical about the younger revivalists and reformers. The slowly developing and theologically heterodox “New School” faction espoused cooperation with Congregationalists and interdenominational societies. By 1838 the New School forces had been driven out or withdrawn (depending on one’s theological perspective) from the General Assembly and, in effect, formed their own denomination.¹⁹

The Presbyterian schism did not grow directly out of divisions over slavery, though southerners went largely with the Old School faction. Like many religious conservatives and moderates, Presbyterian leaders struggled mightily to prevent the slavery question from disturbing their churches. A faculty member at Princeton Theological Seminary for more than half a century, editor and theologian Charles Hodge rejected Thornwell’s biblical defense of slavery but denied that slavery was a sin in itself. In 1844 he wrote to a British friend deploring recent criticism of American churches. Pilate-like, he absolved them of any responsibility for the evils of slavery: “It cannot do us any good to tell us that it is wrong to be cruel, to be unjust, to separate husbands and wives, parents and children, or to keep servants in ignorance. Our churches do not sanction any of these things, though our laws often do.” Kentuckian Robert J. Breckinridge partly agreed with Hodge but had freed his own slaves and denied that slavery as practiced in the southern states was sanctioned by the Bible. Indeed, he believed that God had created everyone free (though hardly equal). Ironically, his antislavery convictions waned after the 1830s, even though he remained a staunch and prickly Unionist.²⁰

The desire for peace and order (and not solely among Presbyterians) ran deep and grew out of real concern for the churches’ mission in the world. Keeping mum about slavery often became the price for evangelical success, especially for interdenominational organizations. The American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday School Union had all thrived by steering clear of sectional questions.

Yet increasingly charge and countercharge became the pattern as churches, ministers, and the laity battled over slavery. Disputes over the Bible divided the clergy and sometimes denominations, but there was very little real discussion and hardly any give-and-take. Abolitionists and proslavery ideologues staked out uncompromising positions, though moderates could be equally dogmatic. Almost everyone talked past one another. People tossed around terms such as infidelity, corruption, and sin carelessly and self-righteously. Some cast themselves with the apostles in the book of Acts, preaching divine truth and letting the consequences take care of themselves. Those seeking peaceful accommodation faced great difficulties but always placed a premium on order and espe-

cially on union in church and state. At stake was the mission of the churches and seemingly their very souls.

The steady decline of antislavery sentiment in southern churches, most dramatically among the Methodists and Baptists, helped solidify the position of clergymen and their flocks in the southern social order. Patriarchy, hierarchy, and subordination in household, congregation, and community all exalted the authority of Christian masters and not coincidentally their clerical allies. Therefore, it was easy for proslavery clergy to spurn the Enlightenment legacy of equality and natural rights. Responding to abolitionist charges that slaveholding violated the golden rule, leading southern Baptist Richard Furman maintained that this law of love did not overturn the “order of things, which the divine government has established.” A father wished his son to obey his instructions, but that hardly meant that the father should also obey the son. Creditors could not simply forgive debtors, nor would rich men distribute property to their poor neighbors. Rather all people must be treated under the law of the Gospel according to their station in life. Fellow Baptist Basil Manly agreed that the master-slave relationship entailed mutual obligations with the full realization that both served a greater master in heaven.²¹

The idealization of slaveholding society went beyond a literal biblicism, abstract theories, or special pleading. As Dabney pointed out in a series of articles published in the *Richmond Enquirer*, “slaveholders will have to pay a price” to enjoy the sanction of the Holy Scriptures. They “must be willing to recognize and grant in slaves those rights which are a part of our essential humanity, some of which are left without recognition or guarantee by law, and some infringed by law.” He would never defend separating families or “violat[ing] chastity of the female by forcible means.” This seemingly hard-hitting commentary aimed at amelioration and reform, not abolition. Nor could Dabney explain how owning human beings had become “part of our essential humanity,” though like many other conservatives he drew a sharp distinction between slavery as a social evil and slavery as a moral evil.²²

For their part, ministers preached about masters’ obligations to slaves and likely with greater success than their sermons about slaves’ duties to masters. Prominent religious leaders supported legal recognition of slave marriages, and a few favored laws to prevent the separation of families. Deeds unfortunately never matched words. In practice, churches could not protect slave marriages and had to be flexible about allowing couples separated by sale to remarry. Ministers harangued slaves about the sanctity of marriage, and church discipline cases regularly dealt with adultery and other family prob-

lems in the quarters, but slaveholders need not have worried about interference with their prerogatives. After explaining how masters should hold wedding ceremonies for their slaves, one Episcopalian layman quickly added, “I of course do not advocate legal interference to prevent the master from exercising sole and unfettered control over his servants as property.”²³

When slaveholders provided religious instruction for slaves, they faced an equally stunning paradox. States often forbade teaching slaves to read, but churches insisted on the centrality of the Bible; indeed, many pious folk held that the slaves’ religious conversion became the final sign that the Lord approved their work. But all this was a decidedly uphill struggle. Despite a genuine affection for his slaves and an idealistic vision of a biracial Christian community, Reverend Charles Colcock Jones could never convince enough ministers or slaveholders to develop an effective program for religious instruction. Jones labored year after year but with increasingly little success as slaves evidently did not find his Presbyterian preaching all that appealing. For their part, too many slaveholders seemed content to go through the motions, showing little genuine or at least consistent interest in their slaves’ spiritual welfare. In 1851 a Baptist association in Hancock County, Georgia, pointedly asked “Who, among us, who is a slave-holder can with a clear conscience say or feel he has as a Christian discharged his duty to these [the colored] people?” Other evangelicals admitted there were many slaves who had never heard even a small part of the gospel message.²⁴

To calm nervous masters, Texas Baptists promised to “employ none but discreet, pious and tried men, men who will instruct and not merely excite the emotions of this excitable people.” Put most simply, in the words of one Baptist association, religion made for “good masters and good slaves.”²⁵ Such reassurance must have been necessary. Patriarchal planters had traditionally proved resistant to preaching that struck at their pride or authority. The whole idea of repentance and submission had cut against their grain, not to mention clashing with antique notions of honor. To be on equal footing with women and children before God presented enough of a problem, so it is hardly surprising that to think of slaves as brothers and sisters in Christ aroused skepticism and apprehension. Whatever might be the case in the world to come, temporal distinctions remained, and the churches had to work within the social structure, not against it. Therefore religious instruction and even separate black churches were perfectly safe so long as white paternalists remained firmly in control.²⁶

Regardless of such limitations, the flowering of African American Christianity in the slaveholding states had been remarkable. One contemporary estimate placed slave members in all southern churches on the eve of the

Civil War at nearly 450,000. Blacks made up anywhere from 30 to 40 percent of Georgia Baptists and Methodists.²⁷ The churches scrambled to accommodate black members, who in turn carved out a place for themselves both in their churches and in God's kingdom.

Jerusalem Methodist Church in Green County, North Carolina, was a rough, frame building standing in the woods. At monthly services, a crowd equally divided between blacks and whites gathered to hear three uneducated "exhorters," who each preached long enough "for any common sermon," or so a visiting New York woman complained. Even if blacks had to sit in the back of the church, both races heard the same scriptures and the same sermon. But in larger churches, and especially in towns and cities, there was separate worship for slaves in the afternoon. A Virginia Baptist association explained that the "colored members" needed special services because they were not "receptive" to sermons heard by white congregations.²⁸

Devout masters insisted slaves attend church, though with what result is difficult to say. Some blacks worshiped with great enthusiasm, others appeared stolidly indifferent, and still others simply enjoyed the opportunity to rest. Perhaps many slaves did become good Christians, but there remained a strong suspicion among pious whites that the blacks simply put on a good show. Slave recollections illustrated how much racial perspectives diverged. Some recalled sermons emphasizing obedience to the masters with the usual proslavery passages from Paul's epistles and little else. Slaves heard messages that stated the obvious: the world was a place of toil, trouble, sickness, and death. Ministers might offer hope for happiness in the world to come, but some slaves claimed they never learned a thing about Jesus or salvation or heaven.²⁹

Church services and plantation missions could never satisfy the hunger for more genuine religious experience. On a few plantations, slaves conducted their own preaching and prayer meetings each week, but more commonly these gatherings were less regular and more furtive. Whites on occasion visited the prayer meetings and were delighted to hear slaves blessing their masters and mistresses; one slave thanked the men "who come here to read the Bible to us, and pay so much attention to us, though we ain't the sort of people as can enterpret thy word in all its colors and forms."³⁰

Such performances proved that the slaves were the "sort of people" who could fool gullible slaveholders. Though wary of slave patrols, blacks more freely expressed their faith at secret meetings in the woods. Some prayed for deliverance not only from sin but from slavery, and the earthly implications of spiritual equality became much more explicit. Here slaves could sing the spirituals that spoke of sorrow and salvation, they could talk of the Exodus,

and they could compare themselves to the children of Israel. For slaveholders, this underground religion aroused fears about losing control of “their people.” A Mississippi master warned his slaves Rich and Viney that he would whip them whenever he heard any praying. “Yessir,” they replied, “but you can whup us ever’ day, but you can’t make us stop prayin’ to my Jesus.”³¹ It must have stunned this slaveholder to meet such defiance and, worse, to hear slaves lay claim to “my Jesus.”

In cities and especially in the Border South, “mission” churches evolved into separate congregations. From Richmond, to Macon, to Mobile, to Houston, African American churches sprang up as population pressures, black preferences, and white inclination converged.³² Most black congregations had white pastors and were less than independent. At Calvary Episcopal Church in Charleston, there were fifty raised seats for white supervisors so the worshippers would have “a sensible eye image of the subordination that is due those to whom, by the course of Providence, they are to look upon as rulers.” Slaves, however, had good reason for associating cities with greater freedom, and white control of black churches remained tenuous. This fact was all too evident during the 1850s as sectional alarms kept slaveholders on tenterhooks. A scene described by a northern visitor illustrated what most worried southern whites. During a service at the African Baptist Church in Charleston, one woman affirmed that the Son of God had made her free, and another declared, “Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith God shall make you free.”³³ She dared not say whether this meant spiritual freedom or some other kind but did not need to.

On a more fundamental level, religion provided the wherewithal for surviving slavery. Black preachers challenged the white monopoly on religious faith, speaking to their people’s misery and to their hope. They might craftily preach the master’s Gospel but could not become too closely tied to whites or grow too aloof from their fellow slaves. Nor could they go too far in pushing a message of spiritual liberation that might stir their listeners to physical resistance or trigger white repression. Earthly deliverance would be a far too dangerous message, despite occasional apocalyptic visions of masters being whipped for their sins or armed black rebels loosening the shackles of slavery. Accommodation (often accompanied by day-to-day resistance) became a costly compromise between docility and defiance.³⁴

Nor was this a purely southern phenomenon. Tired of discrimination and segregation in white Methodist churches, former slave Richard Allen had founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Philadelphia. By the 1850s the church had grown to some twenty thousand members. Fighting against slavery and prejudice, northern black preachers taught that the

Almighty was no respecter of persons. “I owe my freedom to the God who made me,” declared fugitive slave and minister Jermain Wesley Loguen. “I will not, nor will I consent that anybody else shall countenance the claims of a vulgar despot to my soul and body.” Such messages anticipated wartime calls for general emancipation. Although in 1851 AME bishop William Paul Quinn asserted, “Nine times out of ten when we look in the face of a white man we see our enemy,” most black preachers offered a less militant message of moral improvement and racial uplift. Like white ministers who linked faith in progress to biblical prophecies, black ministers sometimes dreamed of a grand mission to Africa to regenerate that continent.³⁵

As slavery threatened to tear apart the churches and set believer against believer, such hopes might have seemed out of place. But millennial expectations had flourished during the heyday of the Second Great Awakening and continued to shape theological and even political debate. The connections between social reform, mass revivalism, and popular politics might not be obvious, but for many Americans both religious enthusiasm and a vital democracy seemed a providential blessing. An evolving civil religion reflected an optimistic faith in the United States as a reforming and ultimately transforming force in the world. The intermingling of secular and religious hope was typically American, but so were nagging doubts about the future.³⁶

Pious antislavery advocates presented a beatific vision of a nation purged of that great iniquity, yet proslavery ministers often proved equally idealistic as they looked for some glorious future state. South Carolinian John Adger, who served as a missionary to slaves, even maintained that bondage could be perpetual once abolitionists admitted their errors and embraced theological and social orthodoxy. As late as 1860, in the midst of the most heated and perilous presidential election campaign in American history, discussion of religious instruction for slaves led a North Carolina editor to welcome the “signs of progress in our Southern Zion.” Americans, as Abraham Lincoln later observed with such poignant irony, prayed to the same God and read the same Bible. They also spoke a common religious language, and Christianity proved both appealing and ambivalent enough to accommodate slaves, slaveholders, abolitionists, and those who cared little about slavery one way or another.³⁷

That was the problem. Religious faith offered no solution to these issues, or at least no solution that could win support across racial and sectional lines. Everyone seemed to agree that the souls of the churches (and their parishioners) were in mortal danger whether from slaveholders, abolitionists, or the morally indifferent. But saving the churches or the nation for that matter required more than heated debate in which people talked past each other.

Rather than the word becoming flesh, it seemed as if the flesh — of northerners and southerners, of blacks and whites — had become words, an endless stream of words. There was in this flood of rhetoric a failure of moral imagination all around. Slaveholders could not put themselves in their slaves' ragged shoes; abolitionists could not imagine themselves as slaveholders, or as slaves for that matter. The morally indifferent could not understand the morally committed and vice versa. African American religion developed a language of freedom yet could not point the way for the nation to escape the twin curses of slavery and caste.

Abraham Lincoln perhaps came closest to overcoming his contemporaries' all too narrow vision. During a speech at Peoria, Illinois, in the aftermath of the political firestorm over the notorious Kansas-Nebraska Act, he somehow rose above the passions and the self-righteousness that afflicted so many Americans. "I have no prejudice against the southern people," he declared. "They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up." Lincoln could almost allow that in similar circumstances he might have owned slaves. He conceded that slavery would be difficult to abolish and refused to criticize southerners for "not doing what I should not know how to do myself." But here his moral imagination faltered because Lincoln paid much more attention to the effects of slavery on white people and on free labor than to the injustices suffered by the slaves. He dreamed of freeing all the slaves and sending them to Liberia because he did not see how blacks could live among whites as political and social equals.³⁸ Lincoln himself had never joined a church and professed no creeds aside from love of God and love of neighbor, though he surely realized that his Christian neighbors, not to mention devout Americans of various faiths, had failed to live up to the standards of the golden rule. The churches and the ministers could not escape their fathers' sins or their own. Slavery and racism appeared to be irreducible realities and insoluble problems; ultimately the entire nation would have to pay the wages of sin.

Although John Wesley had decried slavery as evil and Thomas Coke had favored denying communion to slaveholders, American Methodists had steadily diluted their antislavery witness. Yet, by the 1840s, the departure of outraged abolitionists from northern Methodist churches made many ministers and congregations reluctant to make further concessions to slavery. New Englanders grew bolder in denouncing slavery, and there was even talk of expelling slaveholders from the church.³⁹

What in hindsight appeared to be an inevitable explosion occurred at the 1844 General Conference. Crowding into New York's Green Street Church on May 1, the delegates could no longer evade the question that threatened to tear the evangelical churches and the political parties, if not the nation, apart. Since 1832 James Osgood Andrew had been a Methodist bishop. He had recently married a widow who owned several slaves, though he hardly expected that to become a problem, especially because he could not emancipate them under Georgia law. However, a resolution was introduced calling on Andrew to resign from the episcopacy, and the Georgian was inclined to do so because he had little stomach for controversy, but his fellow southerners would not hear of it. After a heated debate, and by a vote of 111–69, the conference adopted a motion calling for Andrew to “desist from the exercise of his office so long as the impediment [ownership of slaves] remains.”⁴⁰

In the end, the General Conference voted overwhelmingly to separate the church into two general conferences and to divide the proceeds of the publishing house. Both sides pretended that the divorce was amicable. Ironically, the next two General Conferences of the northern church paid little attention to slavery and the Methodist press also fell silent. Engaging in his usual invective, William Lloyd Garrison blasted the church for attempting “so to serve God as not to offend the devil.” The abolitionist firebrand had a point because whatever their personal abhorrence of slavery, all too often northern clergy and laity sought peace above all else.⁴¹

With three bishops present and thirteen annual conferences represented at Louisville in May 1845, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was born. The following year southern Methodists resolved that slavery “is not a proper subject of ecclesiastical legislation.” The real battle was joined in the border states where it was easy to brand northern Methodists abolitionist incendiaries; the all too predictable countercharge was that the southern church had become a tool of slaveholders. Attempts to maintain what was euphemistically termed “fraternal relations” between the two branches of Methodism foundered.⁴² Southern Methodists largely won the contest for the border conferences without ever quite vanquishing the northern branch.

Despite their congregational polity and traditional commitment to liberty of conscience, Baptists followed a similar path to disunion. Indeed, northern Baptists proved no more eager than northern Methodists to tackle the slavery question. At Brown University in 1835, President Francis Wayland barred any discussion of the subject in the classroom. Wayland himself was moderately antislavery and considered the institution sinful but always thought that saving souls took precedence over saving society. Like an erudite Pres-

byterian, Wayland condemned slavery as a moral evil and violation of human rights while maintaining that the mere holding of slaves—so long as they received religious instruction—did not necessarily entail moral guilt.⁴³

Yet even the cautious Wayland would not concede the right of slaveholders to receive assignments from national mission boards, and though the Home Missionary Society in 1844 still declared itself neutral on slavery, papering over sectional differences had become impossible. The middle ground was disappearing even in the nation's most highly decentralized religious body. In late 1844 the Home Missionary Society and the Foreign Missionary Board refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries. In May 1845, 293 delegates met in Augusta, Georgia, to form the Southern Baptist Convention.⁴⁴

Like their Methodist brethren, southern Baptists might not embrace positive good arguments for slavery and might even favor mild reforms, but any serious discussion with northern religious bodies and leaders had largely been cut off. According to John C. Calhoun, "ecclesiastical" ties had been the strongest cord binding the Union, and that cord had been snapped. Henry Clay, who had clashed with his Senate colleague on so many issues, agreed that this "sundering of religious ties" was the "greatest source of danger to our country." As it turned out, the painful ruptures in the churches, much like the growing fissures in the political parties, undercut moderation. This is not to say that moderate Methodists, Baptists, or Presbyterians for that matter might have forged some workable solution. Most never tried, and for all the rhetoric on both sides of the question, the typical pastor delivered few if any sermons on slavery, and most of the laity preferred gospel preaching to political preaching.⁴⁵

And in any case, the slavery question like all other matters remained in the Lord's hands. Believers' powerful and sustained faith in divine providence could at times become a fatalistic attitude toward both ordinary and extraordinary events. "It was God who sent you children, made the potatoes turn out well, put the blight on the orchard trees, and caused the roan mare to sicken and die," ran one representative description of popular belief. God remained in control of human life down to the smallest details. Providence could be benevolent or destructive, but human beings still had to take responsibility for their actions and muddle through life. In the end, all people died, so resignation and submission seemed advisable.⁴⁶

Such attitudes would encourage people to avoid wrestling with slavery altogether—at least for a time. Ignoring such a vital moral and political question came at a price, but for those who believed that the church's mission was

strictly evangelical, that price seemed reasonable. Such an evasion, however, proved both elusive and short-lived. The vision of religion transforming society might at times fall into abeyance, yet the slavery question itself would not go away. And to bring the argument back full circle, for those with a providential turn of mind, this too represented God's will.

So however hard they might try, pious Americans could not escape the political turmoil of the 1840s and 1850s. In terms of sheer numbers, believers were bound to wield enormous influence in public life. In point of fact, the public obsession with politics in the United States, especially during the heyday of the second American party system, inevitably drew the devout into the fray.⁴⁷ As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, Christianity in America (and Judaism for that matter) often embodied a fervent faith in republican government. Religious ferment, if anything, reinforced a democratic belief in the wisdom and judgment of everyday people. For their part, theologians, ministers, and many ordinary believers often spoke in the language of republicanism.⁴⁸

From at least the late eighteenth century on, religious life had become increasingly entwined with soaring hopes for the United States. Religion provided moral standards and a social structure that might otherwise have been lacking in a democratic era. Religion served as a counterweight in an ever-changing political environment. But in the absence of any central religious authority, the churches themselves became part of the great American experiment in representative government, and they certainly had to compete in the marketplace of ideas. A republican government placed considerable responsibility on its citizens and at the same time subtly undermined belief in human depravity and divine sovereignty. Yet this did not necessarily bring about a clash between democratic and religious impulses. According to Tocqueville, a human mind naturally tried to "harmonize the state in which he lives upon earth, with the state which he believes to await him in heaven." In the early American republic, political and religious freedom had fit together as easily as a tongue and groove joint, though how long they would stay in place remained doubtful. The overlapping of faith and polity usually held up despite lesser or greater amounts of theological, denominational, and sectional stress. The millennial hopes that had become so commonplace in American religious life made this entire structure of spiritual and political liberty quite appealing, at least until slavery literally threatened to pull apart the republican house.⁴⁹

Believers naturally could not place too much faith in human wisdom and institutions. Indeed, the absence of clear-cut religious patterns in voting reflected a welter of factors that shaped political behavior and revealed great ambivalence about political parties and the political process itself. Prominent

ministers such as Charles G. Finney and Henry Ward Beecher defended their interest in politics and the introduction of political topics in the pulpit, but other preachers roundly condemned any discussion of secular matters in a sacred setting. That exemplar of conservative Presbyterianism, Charles Hodge pointedly observed that Christianity offered “not worldly prosperity . . . not dominion over nations, but the forgiveness of sin, the renewal of the heart, reconciliation with God, and eternal life.” Some ministers even doubted whether God showed any special favor toward America or toward democracy. And many clergy drew a sharp line between preaching on public questions and involvement in partisan politics, worrying that raucous campaigns and close elections were becoming dangerous distractions.⁵⁰

Such theological reservations were both philosophical and practical. The rise of political parties had helped reduce clerical influence in public life, and it became increasingly difficult to fix one’s attention on saving souls amid the political excitement that periodically gripped communities, states, and nation. Not surprisingly, evangelical ministers solemnly warned against partisanship and corruption, not to mention the drinking and gambling that accompanied many a hot canvass.⁵¹ Whatever the ministers thought about the politicians, the politicians understood that many of their constituents were deeply religious people who voted accordingly.

By the 1840s, the slavery question intensified partisan jockeying for religious voters. As a result of the Mexican War, the possible expansion of slavery became *the* issue in American politics for more than a decade, severely testing the political parties and polarizing the country. For a time, the so-called Compromise of 1850 calmed the waters, but the question then became whether the moral price—especially the enactment of a tougher fugitive slave law—was too high. To Christian abolitionists, it was. Theodore Parker, George Cheever, James Freeman Clarke, the once moderate Leonard Bacon, and black ministers such as Robert Purvis and Alexander Crummell called on Americans to obey God’s “higher law” by disobeying an unjust human law. By aiding and, if necessary, rescuing fugitive slaves from pursuing slaveholders and federal marshals, Christians could truly love their neighbors as themselves.⁵² To devout Unionists, however, “higher law” doctrine simply meant anarchy and ultimately civil war. In a sermon printed as a Whig campaign document, Presbyterian John C. Lord began with the famous “render unto Caesar” text from Matthew to emphasize the Christian’s duty to obey the powers that be.⁵³

Southern ministers repeatedly exposed their own ambivalence and confusion by hewing to familiar arguments and presenting no real solutions. After calling John C. Calhoun “our Moses,” South Carolina Methodist Whitefoord

Smith charged that abolitionists who had abandoned the Bible for a higher law “fight not against us but against God.” At the same time southern clergy remained staunchly Unionist, and a prominent Virginia Presbyterian wrote to a friend, “I just wish Old Hickory was alive.” Few ministers joined Southern Rights politicians in condemning the Compromise of 1850; in fact, echoing the fears of northern conservatives, Thornwell and others deplored talk of disunion.⁵⁴ The division of the churches, however, had encouraged southern Christians to more closely identify with their section, so religious opinion was still up for grabs.

In the northern states, the picture was even more mixed. Just as Democrats and Whigs generally supported the Compromise of 1850, so many northern church leaders sought to defuse the slavery debate. At the Methodist General Conference in 1852, where there was little discussion of slavery, one delegate blandly remarked that the northern church welcomed slaveholders and slaves alike. With great force but less logic, Matthew Simpson maintained that Methodists had always been both an antislavery and a slaveholding church. Even the New School Presbyterians—supposedly more antislavery than their Old School brethren—nimble dodged the question. Their General Assembly broadly condemned slavery but allowed lower judicatory bodies to deal with stickier specific issues. Old School Presbyterians along with Catholics, Episcopalians, Unitarians, Lutherans, and the Disciples of Christ proved equally reticent.⁵⁵

For the churches as for the politicians, the Kansas-Nebraska bill marked a sea change. Potentially opening a large area of the old Louisiana Purchase to slavery on the basis of popular sovereignty not only enraged many northern politicians and voters but also riled clergy from Maine to the Midwest. Congregationalist editor Joseph Thompson subtitled his published sermon *The Voice of God against National Crime*. More than three thousand New England ministers petitioned Congress to reject the measure, and its sponsor, Stephen A. Douglas, furiously condemned clerical meddling in politics. Douglas had good reason to worry because the protest reflected widespread outrage, and this was only the beginning. Indeed, Douglas’s criticism only rekindled the preachers’ fury and led to charges that the “slave power” was trying to silence the churches.⁵⁶

Even as the Kansas-Nebraska Act shocked Abraham Lincoln out of his political doldrums, so too it stirred up ministers who had once expressed only the mildest antislavery sentiments. Francis Wayland still refused to denounce southern slaveholders but believed that this legislation would inevitably lead to the expansion of slavery. When this essentially moderate Baptist spoke

about proclaiming liberty to the captives and declared both Africans and Indians to be Christian brothers, it did indeed seem that a great shift in opinion was taking place. Horace Bushnell, who had long steered a moderate course, now decided that the slave power posed a far greater danger to the nation than the abolitionists. Leading Unitarian Ezra Stiles Gannett hesitated to condemn southerners, considered Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a "narrative of exceptional cases," and doubted the government's constitutional authority to interfere with slavery in the states. But for Gannett the time for compromise had passed; he now opposed any extension of slavery and decided that preserving the Union "may cost us too much."⁵⁷ Such strong statements from such unexpected sources should have worried Douglas, who faced both a political and a religious firestorm.

In all the uproar over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a growing number of Protestants identified another familiar threat to religious liberty. Congregationalist Eden Burroughs Foster wildly charged that slaveholders had allied themselves with the Catholic Church.⁵⁸ This accusation seemed especially ironic because, despite dramatic growth (the number of Catholics in the United States was nearing the two million mark), priests seldom engaged the issues of the day, and the slavery question was a case in point. Like conservative Presbyterians, Catholics did not believe that the Bible condemned slavery and accepted it as part of man's fallen nature. Even Archbishop John Hughes, who went as far as any leading Catholic during the 1850s in criticizing slavery as an "evil," denied that the institution was "an absolute or unmitigated evil." Having little faith in any reform outside the church, Catholic leaders viewed emancipation as a dangerously utopian idea. Catholic thinkers readily linked abolitionism to rationalism and humanism, and of course to anti-Catholicism.⁵⁹

Nor could anyone accuse Catholics of fanning the flames of sectional hatred. Their priests did not petition Congress or deliver political sermons; nor did they declare God's hand at work in all the bitter disputes over slavery. "Every Catholic has a right to be Abolitionist, Republican, Freesoiler or Democrat," a Pittsburgh editor declared, "but not to make his opinion to be the opinion and teaching of the church." And if Protestant ministers sometimes linked the Catholic Church to the slave power, Catholics in turn criticized the supposed alliance between radical abolitionists and religious bigots. Above all else, the Catholic hierarchy—North and South—strove to avoid divisions that would weaken the church when it was both prospering and facing ever more intense Protestant hostility. As the political skies darkened, American Catholics took comfort and no little pride in their own unity.⁶⁰

When the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant American (Know Nothing)

Party burst upon the political scene and vied to replace the dying Whigs, many evangelicals remained attached to the Democrats or would have nothing to do with this new party's secrecy, violence, and bigotry. In the summer of 1854, Archbishop Hughes predicted that political nativism would not last, and the sudden collapse of the Know Nothings proved him at least partly right.⁶¹ The crosscurrents of opinion bespoke confusion and reflected the political turmoil coming in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the violent struggles along the Kansas-Missouri border.

After South Carolina fire-eater Preston Brooks caned Massachusetts radical Charles Sumner on the Senate floor, bleeding Kansas and bleeding Sumner became religious as well as political rallying cries. Preaching from Genesis 4:10, New Jersey Baptist Henry Clay Fish declared that the blood of the fallen brother cried out for justice. The attack on Sumner marked the "beginning of the code of blood and the reign of brute force," a part of a great "conspiracy" to protect and expand slavery. The problem was not simply sectional, one Massachusetts Unitarian asserted, but rather "a question between civilization and barbarism; between Christianity and heathenism; between light and darkness." To portray the conflict in such stark terms placed a premium on demonizing the other side. Methodist Gilbert Haven even compared the caning of Sumner to the flailing of Jesus, and bloodguilt became a powerful theme in his preaching.⁶²

Harsh denunciations and apocalyptic images especially alarmed northern moderates, who shrank from joining the sectional fray. Despite his growing antislavery convictions, Unitarian Ezra Stiles Gannett dreaded dissolution of the Union and especially regretted seeing religious people drawn into the conflict: "I read with sadness the language of Christian men and Christian ministers, whose brave words, if they be well considered, are bloody words. To me the musket and the Bible do not seem twin implements of civilization." This unmistakable swipe at Henry Ward Beecher reflected a great fear among men who still hoped that reasonable Christians could find a peaceable solution to sectional troubles.⁶³

Such an outcome became increasingly unlikely as many northern Presbyterians along with Congregationalists (including Beecher) and significant numbers of Methodists and Baptists flocked to the new antislavery Republican Party. Although some evangelicals preferred the Know Nothings, supposed connections between the slave power, the Catholic Church, and the liquor interests drew others to the Republicans. In response, Catholic priests predicted that the new party would inevitably turn to anti-Catholicism once the slavery controversy had subsided. Not surprisingly, leading Democrats and

their clerical allies defended religious liberty, or what conservative Pennsylvania jurist Jeremiah Black termed a “state without religion, and a Church without politics.”⁶⁴ These words showed how Jeffersonian attitudes survived even as religious expansion and the sectional conflict itself had at times lowered the barriers between church and state.

That slavery roiled the religious and political waters should have caused no great surprise, but there were several ironies. Northerners portrayed the slave power as an aggressive force hell-bent on stamping out civil and religious liberty—a mirror image of southern diatribes against Yankee political preachers. Extremism quite literally bred extremism, even though southern believers were largely Unionist albeit proslavery, while many of their northern brethren were at least mildly antislavery but remained skeptical of abolitionists and equally Unionist.⁶⁵

Congressional debates—and even the violence on the Kansas frontier—all had abstract and philosophical qualities that aroused passions and unleashed recrimination but somehow seemed remote from daily life. But then, in October 1859, John Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and apparent attempt to spark a slave insurrection suddenly made the whole sectional controversy much more tangible. The threat to southern homes and the emotional reaction to Brown’s execution in many northern households created a whirlwind of fear, outrage, and admiration. To Christian abolitionist George Cheever, God’s word had forced Brown to strike a blow against slavery. Brown would have been everywhere lauded as a hero, the *Independent* tartly noted, had he set out to liberate white men.⁶⁶

At the same time, John Brown’s apocalyptic visions and muddled plans placed many northern ministers and their congregations in a dicey position. Their antislavery words seemed to pale beside Brown’s antislavery deeds. Henry Ward Beecher had been a leading, indeed notorious supporter of the Free State Party in Kansas, but Harpers Ferry clearly frightened him. “I disapprove of his mad and feeble schemes,” Beecher informed his Brooklyn flock two weeks after Brown’s capture. The most famous clergyman of his day would not shed blood to free slaves, or incite them to insurrection, or even encourage them to run away.⁶⁷

To many northerners John Brown embodied the dangers of “higher law” fanaticism. For New Yorker George Templeton Strong, an eminently respectable Episcopalian, it was time to “assert the claims of the church as a conservative, law-abiding institution against Calvinism and the ultra Protestantism that it has produced.” Union men must rally around a faith that would “define

the limits of authority and private judgment in political ethics.” Catholic editors agreed that Brown and his supporters embodied “irrepressible conflict” radicalism, and they typically denounced extremists North and South.⁶⁸

Southern ministers might boldly assert that John Brown represented the logical culmination of northern infidelity, but they were truly stunned when so many pious northerners appeared sympathetic to Brown and positively apoplectic when some ministers compared him to Jesus Christ. Writing to a northern colleague, Episcopal rector William Nelson Pendleton of Virginia insisted that Yankee preachers offer reassurances to their southern brethren or face disunion and war. Nearly three months after Brown’s execution, a Virginia Presbyterian editor surveyed the religious landscape and assessed the damage. He concluded that the promise of an American republic founded on religious liberty had not been fulfilled. Even the building of railroads and other sweeping economic changes had failed to bind the nation together. Harsh attacks on southern institutions and on southerners rang out from northern pulpits, and now antislavery zealots were inciting slaves to bloody revolution.⁶⁹

Aside from the sectional special pleading, this editorial offered a fair summary of how religion had become intricately connected to the greatest crisis in American history. Having failed to find a solution to the slavery question and having made far too many statements about how divine providence would make all things right, the churches could not tamp down the fires of sectionalism. Political preaching had raised a good deal of heat, but those Americans embracing a religious faith presumably divorced from politics had proved just as ineffectual. Disputes over slavery expansion had weakened the political system and now threatened to further divide the churches and tear the nation apart. From northern abolitionists to southern fire-eaters, the attempts to score debating points had loomed more important than efforts to find a resolution to a deepening crisis. For their part, moderates had shown neither much courage nor judgment; the middle ground remained elusive and all other ground fraught with peril. A vast outpouring of political sermons and religious editorials had been just so many words—but words that in some cases only made matters worse. Moral posturing, along with a large dose of millennialism, made any possible compromises all that much harder to swallow.

Territorial expansion, partisan politics, and political nativism had all tugged the faithful this way and that, inevitably raising questions about the proper role of clergy and laity alike. Each new flash point from the Compromise of 1850 to Kansas-Nebraska to John Brown had shaken the churches,

while producing new fissures along sectional, party, racial, and theological lines. Pious folk had struggled to escape the tremors convulsing both church and state, but there were few safe havens. The danger was that “irrepressible conflict” would no longer simply be a political catchphrase but instead would become an all too accurate description of the looming disasters facing what Lincoln would famously term an “almost chosen people.”⁷⁰