

## CHAPTER 4

# The Three Imperfect Solutions

In the 1850s, advanced proslavery sophisticates based their arguments on three conceptions of human inferiority. Virginia's George Fitzhugh emphasized economic helplessness. He sought colorblind protection of all lower-class laborers, white or black. Alabama's Dr. Josiah Nott stressed racial incapacity. He urged protective dominion over all blacks, slave or free. South Carolina's Reverend James Henley Thornwell underlined Christian depravity. He craved evangelical cleansing of all sinners, masters or slaves. Late antebellum Southerners thus enjoyed several soothing reconciliations of despotic government over inferiors and democratic government for equals. But all arguments fell frustratingly short of compelling universal proslavery belief.

– 1 –

To the delight of southern warriors who loved to defend by attacking, colorblind proslavery theorists decried Yankee free labor as economically exploitative and politically disastrous. By giving laborers the ballot but no other protection against exploitation, Northerners invited an electoral revolution against the exploiters. After the revolution of the rabble would come the lawlessness of the mob.

Yet this satisfying assault on northern sins remained forbidden fruit. The majority of southern citizens, nonslaveholding lovers of egalitarianism and dispersers of blacks, would never vote to reduce themselves to black slavery. Only in the oldest and crustiest South, in coastal South Carolina and in pockets of tidewater Virginia, did the colorblind natural outcome of slaveholding hauteur (and unnaturally nonracist way to rally all whites) dominate the climactic proslavery argument—and usually only in a few sentences or in a short pamphlet. Only tidewater Virginia's George Fitzhugh wrote book-length pleas for enslaving all lower classes.<sup>1</sup>

Fitzhugh could not have been a more merry or a more savage polemicist.

The Virginian tore into abolitionists (alias “communists”) and capitalists (alias “cannibals”). He then invited his insulted foes to be his amused correspondents.

A ferocious fanatic, to be so amiable, needed serenity about his superiority. Fitzhugh cockily belonged. He was after all a Fitzhugh, that great name in the oldest Virginia. This latest offspring of two centuries of bluebloods lived “in a rickety old mansion, situated on the fag-end of a once noble estate.”<sup>2</sup> His slim form, slicked-back hair, Roman nose, and patriarchal profile seemed at odds with his well-used apparel.<sup>3</sup> But nothing was shabby about his link to a First Family or his pride in eastern Virginia’s ancient patriarchy. George Fitzhugh confidently challenged northern rich men to ignore his case for enslaving poor men, urging them even to cherish his delightful (of if you will, horrifying) colorblind slogans.

Fitzhugh’s were the eye-catching slogans of the journalist. Because he had inherited everything except cash, he struggled to keep his fag-end of the old estate. To scrape for dollars, he practiced freelance political journalism and its nineteenth-century Siamese twin, chasing political patronage. To sell occasional pieces, he wrote explosive prose. Thereafter, he collected his zany explosions in a book, usually without revision, even when his verbal strikes devastated each other. The amusement of reading his fireworks in the newspapers evolved into the sport of reading his roller-coaster books—and the fun of imagining George Fitzhugh chuckling at his own daffy somersaults on colorblind slavery.

George Fitzhugh’s very title pages assaulted free labor capitalism with soundbites. *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (1854) was followed by *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* (1857). The titles announced that defense of “mere negro slavery” was mankind’s “most absurdly untenable proposition.”<sup>4</sup> If only blacks should be enslaved, why did Southerners enslave whites? According to southern law, masters owned their female slaves’ children. According to southern practice, generation after generation of enslaved women, after sleeping with white men, produced whiter and whiter offspring, still legally enslaved. “Men with as white skins as any of us” were “held in slavery in every state of the South.”<sup>5</sup>

White-skinned slaves also pervaded Scripture. If only blacks should be bondsmen, God was a sinner. By His “express command,” Hebrews enslaved whites. Greeks and Romans also enslaved whites. Fitzhugh would rather chuck “the negroes than the Bible” and the ancients.<sup>6</sup>

The Virginian would also rather chuck the Negro than abandon the colorblind principle of slavery: “The will of the superior controls and directs the will and action of the inferior.” Superiors’ controlling willpower, Fitzhugh claimed, made slavery peculiar not to the mere South or the mere Negro but universal, in every nation, in every family, in every factory. “Nine tenths of government was slavery, even in (so called) free societies. Married women, children, sailors, soldiers, wards, apprentices, etc., are not governed by law, but by the will of superiors.”<sup>7</sup>

Fitzhugh contrasted the universality of superiors' overweening willfulness, alias slavery, with the rarity of responsible dominators, alias southern slaveholders. Northern employers, unlike southern masters, felt obligated only to protect their profits. The resulting dreadful wages and horrendous unemployment showed that "man, isolated and individualized, is a devil."<sup>8</sup>

Satanic Yankees considered slavery the ultimate restraint on their beloved individualism. But attacks on the ultimate restraint would widen into attacks on all restraints. If slaves should be free of protective masters, wives should be free of protective husbands, children free of protective parents, parishioners free of protective preachers, and the governed free of protective governors.

Then all superiors would be free to savage all inferiors. Previously protected inferiors would also be free today, before tomorrow succumbing to a nonprotective exploiter. "A social revolution certainly impends throughout free society, and that revolution, directed at first against negro slavery, now proposes to destroy" all protectors, "all religion, all government, and all private property."<sup>9</sup>

Fitzhugh satirized proponents of abolishing slavery, alias proponents of abolishing all protective hierarchies, as a "small squad" of "half-starved, half-naked Frenchmen, and Infidel Germans, flanked by a crowd of unsexed women and free negroes," screaming "give us liberty or give us death!" Only an individual's liberty to be selfish is "recognized by philosophers, abolitionists, wise women, free lovers, geologists, free negroes, agrarians, anarchists, Jeffersonians, spiritualists, Millerites, Mormons, Chartists, fish-women, proletariats, cannibals, sans culottes, red republicans, black ditto, and Yankees!" The "real abolitionists" are "socialists of the darkest dye, . . . anti-marriage . . . anti-chastity. . . . Indeed sir, half the North is partially insane, worse than France during the Reign of Terror."<sup>10</sup>

Fitzhugh pitted the mercies of southern hierarchies against the mendacities of northern individualism. Especially in the southern family, self-serving patriarchs promoted "their own well-being, by kindness to their inferiors." Wife and children, when happy, made the head of the family merrier. Selfishness also made the merry protector lovingly kind "to his horse and his cattle, which are useful to him," and to "his dog, which is of no use. He loves them because they are his."<sup>11</sup>

Slaves were also his. The domestic "affection which all men feel for what belongs to them, and for what is dependent on them," thus became "nature's magna carta, which shields, protects, and provides for wives, children, and slaves."<sup>12</sup> This slaveholding mentality fostered layer upon hierarchical layer of southern schools, churches, families, and governments, all featuring beneficent protection of grateful dependents. In the antihierarchical North, in contrast, the supposedly "free" laborer now—and soon the wife and the child—stood shiveringly liberated from protectors.

The question was thus stark: Should inferiors be liberated to be crushed? Or should superiors be enshrined to protect inferiors? "One set of ideas,"

soared Fitzhugh, “will govern . . . the civilized world. Slavery will everywhere be abolished or everywhere reinstated.” He was “quite as intent on abolishing Free Society,” he told the abolitionists, “as you are on abolishing slavery.”<sup>13</sup>

So was Fitzhugh intent on enslaving all American laborers, North and South, black and white? The Virginian ever renounced that inescapable—and inescapably politically disastrous—outcome of his flight beyond the mere Negro. Again and again, he sped right back to merely Negro slavery—in *America*.

In crowded Europe, Fitzhugh explained, factory workers found starvation wages inescapable. But in underpopulated America, starving laborers could “escape to the West, and become proprietors.”<sup>14</sup> Fitzhugh here anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner’s “safety valve” argument. Turner, the renowned late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historian of the frontier, would declare that virgin western lands freed the New World from Old World exploitation, economic and political.

Fitzhugh, a half century before Turner, cheered that the poorest Americans, when “out of employment or starving,” could “emigrate to the great West,” there to become well-fed farmers. By making oppression intolerable, eastern capitalists “drive population westward, prevent its excessive accumulation on the Atlantic, . . . and open up the desert spots of the earth for the residences of man.” In “very new and sparsely settled countries” such as America, wage slavery would remain “the greatest of human blessings, . . . until the Northwest is peopled.”<sup>15</sup>

But how long *until* the Northwest would be crowded and the Northeast enslaved? In his first book, Fitzhugh declared that “until” meant “soon.” The flood of immigrants to the North, he wrote in *Sociology for the South*, made “the situation of the laborer at the North as precarious as in Europe.”<sup>16</sup> But later, in *Cannibals All*, Fitzhugh declared that since America had “vast unsettled territories, . . . many centuries may elapse” before nature’s nation would need to abolish free labor. The more Fitzhugh thought about it, the more the centuries multiplied. “Thousands of years may elapse,” he declared in *De Bow’s Review*, before all lands “between the Atlantic and Pacific are settled and monopolized, and a refluent population is pouring back on the East.” Why “anticipate evils that may never happen?” The North’s situation, applauded the North’s severest critic, was “natural, healthful, and progressive.”<sup>17</sup>

That stunning admission apparently made southern slavery indefensible. If no black should be enslaved merely because he was a Negro, and if no dependent laborer should be enslaved when he could become an independent farmer, black laborers should be freed to light out for the territories. In the vast, sparsely peopled southwestern domain of Texas, Arkansas, and Mississippi, free blacks could be productive pioneers.

To escape that colorblind heresy, Fitzhugh clutched color-infested orthodoxy. In *Sociology for the South*, the Virginian called blacks’ “freedom but

the wild and vicious license of the fox, the wolf, or the hawk.” Peculiarly “negro slavery would be changed immediately to some form of peonage, serfdom, or villenage, if the negroes were sufficiently intelligent and provident to manage a farm.” But the Negro was “a child, and must be governed as a child.”<sup>18</sup>

Fitzhugh reiterated in *Cannibals All* that “the negro has neither energy nor enterprise.” His “improvident habits” turn “liberty” into “a curse to himself, and a greater curse to the society around him.” As Fitzhugh summed up his surrender to merely black slavery, “no sane man in America proposes to make slaves of white men.” But “as well send monkeys to settle, reclaim and cultivate the far West, as free negroes. . . . Even in America, negroes should be slaves.”<sup>19</sup>

With this journey straight away and then straight back to mere Negro slavery, Fitzhugh completed a rollicking Grand Tour. His passage away from racist slavery exposed northern capitalism’s colorblind inequities, to the delight of Yankee-hating southern reactionaries. His pilgrimage back to racial enslavement exposed American freedom’s color-infested qualifications, to the delight of black-hating southern rednecks. Yet Fitzhugh, like James Hammond, came back to the saving racial bunker without proving the racial inferiority. With that omission, Fitzhugh’s wild ride through the intellectual universe shot past its tracks. Only proslavery racists could produce that prayed-for universal southern belief, and only if their biological proof could prevent the colorblind conclusion that blacks should go west, young man, go west, in order to share the American individualistic glory.

– 2 –

With his famed “cornerstone” speech, Alexander Stephens displayed how superficially easily race-based theory could stop Fitzhugh’s class-based spin. The “foundation” and “cornerstone” of our Southern Confederacy, declared Stephens shortly after assuming the new nation’s vice presidency in 1861, “rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural or normal condition.” Our master “idea,” added William L. Yancey, is that every “white man is the equal of every other white man. The second idea is that the negro is the inferior race.”<sup>20</sup>

Exponents of the master idea often concurred with George Fitzhugh that Yankee employers ruthlessly exploited white employees. Then they insisted that no white should be owned or employed. Only blacks should be dependent laborers. Only the South allegedly spared whites from menial labor.

James Henry Hammond made the point famously in his “mudsill” outburst to the U.S. Senate on March 4, 1858. As architects use the words, “sill” denotes a structure’s lowest part. A “mudsill” bottom portion sinks into the mud. As Hammond used housing structure to illuminate social structure, a “mudsill” class must “do the menial duties” and “perform the drudgery of

life.” By turning whites into mudsills, Northerners have abolished only the “*name*” slavery. “Your whole hireling class of manual laborers” is indeed free—free to beg on your streets. Our enslaved black mudsills, in contrast, display “no starving, no begging, no want of employment.”

Having crept up Fitzhugh’s path, the Hammond of the late 1850s seemed poised to leap to higher ground: to argue that since employed mudsills suffered more than owned mudsills, white employees should be owned. Hammond instead glided down the racial path in the next sentence: “We do not think that whites should be slaves either by law or necessity.” No white should do mudsill work, whether as an employee or as a slave. All mudsills should be “black, of another and inferior race”—and enslaved. Otherwise, Hammond warned Northerners, your white mudsills, turning on exploitative employers, will leave “your society . . . reconstituted, your government overthrown, your property divided.”<sup>21</sup>

South Carolina’s Congressman Laurence Keitt reinforced Senator Hammond’s warning. “In every quarter of the world, save in the South,” declared Representative Keitt, exploited and exploiters are of the same race. Demagogues then enflame the downtrodden. In the South’s saving version of republican government, however, the distinction is “between races, and not classes.” Here “the superior race” rules an “inferior” race of noncitizens, “content with its position and destiny.” “The destruction of African slavery,” soared Laurence Keitt, “would be the destruction of republicanism.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet Keitt knew as well as Fitzhugh and Hammond that white menials pervaded the southern as well as the northern social structure and everywhere could vote. The ideological strain yielded the most absurd element in the proslavery argument. The scorching southern sun, so the nonsense ran, prevented whites from manual labor! “The white man cannot stand the climate,” William L. Yancey exclaimed, but “the negro can.” While overseers “seek shelter under a tree or an umbrella,” blacks “look the sun in the eye without flinching.” James De Bow added that “outside the tropics, the negro will not and cannot labor. Inside of them, the white man perishes if he attempts it. White field labor does exist in parts of the South, it is true, but so is cotton grown in Boston green-houses!”<sup>23</sup>

Whites laboring under the southern sun as rare as cotton grown in Boston! Instead of that preposterous version of racism, racial proslavery required evidence of blacks’ inferiority. Physicians claimed special expertise in blacks’ supposed biological depravity. Louisiana’s Samuel Cartwright, for example, asserted that his black patients’ brains were a ninth or tenth the size of his white patients’. Since all men had equal quantities of nerves, fewer nerves in undersized brains meant more nerves “to the senses.” Thus blacks cherished “sensuality, at the expense of intellectuality.”

Blacks’ “profuse distribution of nervous matter to the stomach, liver, and genital organs would make the Ethiopian race entirely unmanageable,” continued Dr. Cartwright, except that their profuse chest nerves crowded out their lung tissue. Blacks’ insufficient lungs consumed insufficient oxygen.

This “defective hematosis,” plus “a deficiency of cerebral matter,” caused “indolence and apathy,” along with “that debasement of mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves.”

Blacks’ biological diseases, Dr. Cartwright diagnosed, included both “Drapetomania,” an unquenchable propensity toward fleeing, and “Dysaesthesia,” an insatiable appetite for sloth. To cure the maladies, masters must lash and lash, so blacks’ “molasses-like” blood would move less sluggishly and pick up more oxygen.<sup>24</sup> In this popular rendition, Dr. Cartwright turned physical coercion into a physician’s miracle drug.

While Cartwright’s provincial cure satisfied snickering rednecks, sophisticates preferred Josiah Nott’s cosmopolitan theory. The Notts had long been among America’s most cultivated families. Josiah Nott’s father, Abraham Nott, was of a First Family of Connecticut. Both father and son, like ancestors for a century, had been educated at Yale. But where previous Notts became scholarly New England preachers after graduation, Abraham Nott became a scholarly South Carolina lawyer, a large slaveholder, and chief judge of his adopted state’s highest court.

His son Josiah brought the family’s ancestral love of scholarship to the services of southern slavery. After graduating from South Carolina College, Josiah Nott studied medicine in New York, Philadelphia, and Paris before marrying a South Carolina blueblood and migrating to Mobile, Alabama. There he settled down to his life’s work: using advanced science to improve worldwide medical practice, to cure southern patients, and to defend the slavocracy.<sup>25</sup>

Nott’s rumpled clothes and long beard suggested a detached scholar. His warm smile suggested that his scholarship had been pursued for his patients’ benefit. His research benefited patients far beyond his own. His first publication translated a French physician’s book. His subsequent essays publicized his discoveries of needles to remove eye cataracts, splints to cure compound fractures, and gorgets for bladder surgery.

But this cosmopolitan physician’s inventive gadgetry and international theory could not cure the local scourge, yellow fever. That plague decimated New Orleans and Mobile, brutally in the 1840s, then horrendously in 1853, when half of the two Gulf cities’ population sickened and a fifth of the afflicted perished.<sup>26</sup> According to local lore, yellow fever came from a miasma in the air. But those who breathed the air inside sickrooms, Nott noticed, remained as healthy as those outside. Nor could Nott abide the conventional sickroom cure: draining supposedly miasmatic blood from weak patients.

One day, while despairing over his futility, this seeker exploded that “I’m damned if I don’t believe it’s bugs.”<sup>27</sup> Had Nott guessed that mosquitoes were the murderous bugs, he would have gained fame as a magnificent healer rather than as a frustrated racist. But instead of mosquitoes, he speculated that almost invisible bugs spread the pestilence.

At this moment of his almost breakthrough, mosquitoes swarmed over his sleeping children. In the summer of 1853, one of his offspring caught

yellow fever, then two, three, four. All suffered through the killing cycle: first raging temperatures, then icy, yellowed skin, then expelling crystal clear vomit, then emitting blackened fluids. Within seven days, a quartet of Josiah Nott's beloved children expired. Having failed to protect his dependents, the anguished scientist covered their graves with a cast-iron replica of the family's watchdog.

The hapless watchman, having known too agonizingly little to secure his children's survival, clung the harder to what he thought he knew best: the biological requirements for southern survival. The grief-stricken workaholic labored day and night to demonstrate that the diseased Negro had been created unequal and must be kept separate. Otherwise, plagues more lethal than yellow fever would exterminate more southern families than his own.

Nott's first article on the subject flourished a Fitzhugh-like soundbite of a title: "The Mulatto a Hybrid—probable extermination of the two races if the Whites and Blacks are allowed to intermarry." In arguing for total biological separation, Nott wielded the newest rage among advanced biological scientists, the doctrine of polygenesis. Polygenesists held that, the Book of Genesis to the contrary, separate races did not spring from a single pair of humans, residing in the Garden of Eden. Instead, separate races originated in separate areas. The tale of Adam and Eve was a nonscientific myth. Scientific truth demanded that slavery ensure permanent separation of separately created races.

Nott the polygenesist, like Nott the physician, worked within a transatlantic community of empiricists. Samuel G. Morton, a Philadelphia physician and the polygenesis movement's leader, possessed the world's most famous collection of skulls. In his masterpiece, *Crania Americana* (1839), Morton argued that blacks' skulls displayed smaller brain areas.<sup>28</sup>

Morton's followers included not only Josiah Nott but also George Gliddon, an English-born expert on ancient Egypt, E. G. Squire, a New York specialist on ancient Indians, and Louis Agassiz, a Swiss native and Harvard professor who compared human environments. These scholars separately concluded that immense differences in skull types, climatic zones, and ancient civilizations must have evolved in more than a mere 6000 years (the time then assumed to have transpired since Adam and Eve). God may have created a single human pair many more than 6000 years ago. More likely, God created pairs of humans, at different times and in different places.

In the four years after his children's decimation, Nott, the only Southerner in the international group, labored feverishly to publish two collaborative, gorgeously illustrated polygenesist tomes, *Types of Mankind* (1854) and *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (1857). In addition to the exhausting task of editing these two volumes, Nott wearily expanded his studies of mulattoes. The physician grew ever more persuaded that his brown patients, compared to whites and blacks, sickened more easily and reproduced less successfully. Just as horse and ass mated to produce the sterile mule, he argued, so a white

and black union yielded the less fertile mulatto. Put “a hundred white men and one hundred black women” on an isolated island, Nott predicted, and “they would in time become extinct.” Thus to prevent the suicide of both races, slavery must ensure separation of whites and blacks.<sup>29</sup>

Yet by bolstering the proslavery argument with anti-Genesis science, Nott seemed blasphemous to many proslavery Christians. Most southern Christians believed that the Word alone must command. To interpret Genesis was to tamper with God. Polygenesisists especially tampered with the Word, for they disputed God’s account of His creation.

Nott’s writings spread infidelity about more than Genesis. The physician saw “no evidence” that “any influence of civilization” could uplift inferior races’ “physical” and “consequently their moral character.” Masters or reverends, when preaching Christian salvation to slaves, wasted their time. Africans, because cursed with fewer brains, could never comprehend the white man’s cultivated religion.<sup>30</sup>

In Nott’s hands, blacks’ biological inferiority, supposedly the reason why the unfortunates needed paternalistic direction, instead made paternalism impossible. Nott’s cultivated drift, no less than Cartright’s crude sneers, invited contempt for blacks, barbaric lashing rather than Christian instruction, contemptuous willingness to break up families of blacks who were supposedly too brutish to care. The “predominance of the animal propensity,” declared George Sawyer, “predisposes” blacks to “moral insensibility, intellectual stupidity, indolence, and gluttony.” A black aspires “to satiate his appetite, then to lounge, sleep, sweat, and steam in the sun, like the moping alligator upon his log.” Blacks would like nothing better, claimed Daniel R. Hundley, than to resort “again to toad-eating and cannibalism,” reproducing “on the shores of the New World, a second Africa, all except the lions and elephants.”<sup>31</sup>

Josiah Nott shuddered at such crudity. But his vision of slavery was itself shuddering. He clung to the horror of enslavement of black barbarians only to avoid the greater horror of biological suicide, just as he worked himself to exhaustion with his polygenesis obsession lest he go mad over his children’s deaths. This grieving physician understandably told an English visitor that “he detests slavery, but he does not see what could be done.”<sup>32</sup> With that admission, Nott’s proslavery racism looked as trapped as Fitzhugh’s colorblind theory.

George Fitzhugh saw that his own escape required overturning Josiah Nott’s form of racism. “You must not think I consider our form of society perfect,” he wrote with his usual astonishing private candor to his arch public enemy, William Lloyd Garrison. Southern servitude “might be the best practical form, if the negroes were only white and straight haired, for then domestic affection would come into full play to correct those evils, which difference of race and that diabolical theory of the Types of Mankind, seem only to aggravate.”<sup>33</sup> Just as Fitzhugh needed the “mere negro” to dodge his admission that American lower classes need not be enslaved, so racists needed a humane

Christianity to escape Nott's admission that blacks remained too disgusting to be uplifted and slavery too repulsive to be cherished.

– 3 –

John Bachman, a Lutheran minister and professor of natural history at South Carolina's College of Charleston led the evangelical detour around Nott and the polygenesisists. Bachman's masterpiece, *The Unity of the Human Race* (1850), reconciled science and Genesis by urging that a single human creation eventually spawned multiple races. Instead of degrading blacks into "a different species, incapable of receiving the truths of Christianity," paternalists must take "a race of men, stamped with inferiority," and "elevate their moral characters, instruct them in the duties they owe to their Creator, and give them the consolations and hopes of a future life." Then these "members of our household" and "playmates of our family" will be seen not as small-skulled barbarians but as members of "the whole human family," bound in "universal dependence and brotherhood" to Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

To transform slavery into a brotherhood of Christ, evangelists had to convince not only polygenesisists to accept the brotherhood of man but also unlimited masters to accept Christian limits. Proslavery preachers, who wrote more defenses of slavery than secular Southerners, joined antislavery polemicists in describing masters as screaming too much, lashing too hard, smashing slave marriages too often, and barring too many slaves from hearing or reading the Gospel. Yet such anti-Christian absolutism, proslavery preachers shot back at abolitionists, hardly required that unlimited power be abolished. Instead, absolutists must be taught to use their absolute power to fulfill the Christian spirit.

South Carolina's James Henley Thornwell, leader of this movement to reform and thus better defend the upper class, was to the lower class born.<sup>35</sup> His impoverished father died when Thornwell was eight. The frightened son, standing over his father's corpse, wondered aloud, "*What will mother do? What will become of us?*"<sup>36</sup> The tableau paralleled the scene of Josiah Nott standing over his children's corpses, despairing that southern health would further sicken unless masters clung to racial barricades. Thornwell's forebodings also prefigured the stance of George Fitzhugh standing before his dilapidated ancestral mansion, fearing that Yankee individualists would smash ancient hierarchies.

All three intellectuals feared a world of predators and victims, with weaker individuals slaughtered in the chaos. That would remain Thornwell's image of England and the North. But the fatherless boy found South Carolina to be something mercifully else: a society of hierarchy, of roles and responsibilities, of the strong protecting the weak. The family provided the first southern defense against savage individualism. Thornwell's first protector, a cousin, epitomized the ideal. He provided the bereaved clan with a nearby cabin.

The southern hierarchy for protecting orphans radiated out from the

family to the school. A teacher replaced the cousin as the boy's provider. Then Thornwell's teenage reputation as a prodigy captured the attention of a prominent attorney, William H. Robbins. Robbins unofficially adopted Thornwell, treated the adolescent as a younger brother, and moved his ward's spare bed to the foot of his commodious bedstead.

The ensuing familial drama prefigured Thornwell's lifelong crusade to transform unjustifiable secular tyranny into sanctified Christian slavery. Robbins wanted Thornwell to become a lawyer—to become just like him. The teenager instead aspired to be a clergyman. The patriarch, conceived the dependent, used overwhelming power unconscionably, preventing a powerless ward from spreading the Word.

Thornwell, trembling to confront his erring patriarch, wrote a letter. Robbins found the epistle under his plate at tea. "I am incapable of speaking to you on the delicate subject without tears," the paternalist read. Why must the ward "bid farewell, with great heaviness of heart, to a beloved patron, who kindly clothed me when naked, fed me when hungry, and, above all, has much labored to dispel ignorance from my mind"? Because Thornwell could not "reconcile my conscience to the practice of the Law." He must become a theologian, for "the glory of God and the good of men."<sup>37</sup>

Robbins found Thornwell huddled on the porch, weeping. Embracing the would-be cleric, the guardian agreed that the ward must become a minister. Thornwell had passed the critical moment in his journey away from dependence. He now strode toward the independence of the evangelist who would teach wayward masters how to be benevolent Christians.

South Carolina's institutions propelled the ex-orphan upward to instruct the slaveholders. After undergraduate triumphs at South Carolina College, Thornwell taught at Cheraw Preparatory Academy, then trained for the Presbyterian ministry. After serving remote South Carolina upcountry congregations, he accepted prominent pulpits in Columbia and Charleston, then the presidency of South Carolina College, and then his favorite post, a chair at the Columbia (South Carolina) Theological Seminary. His rise showed that rich planters embraced poor nonslaveholders who espoused slaveholder convictions. Thornwell aspired for more. He would improve slaveholders' convictions. *If* he could reform all patriarchs the way he had reformed William Robbins, slavery would become a road to Christ for all races and all classes.

By emphasizing that *if*, Thornwell demonstrated that the biblical facts did not alone make slavery universally justifiable. Southern preachers endlessly pointed out that in the Old Testament, many Hebrews held slaves; and in the New Testament, Christ and His disciples never cried shame. Since man must follow the Word literally, biblical history's literal facts apparently sanctified subsequent slavery.

But abolitionists emphasized that the Word handed down more than a past history. Scripture also provided a guide to how present life ought to be lived. No matter how many pre-Christians or early Christians practiced slavery, modern slavery must exude the spirit of Christianity.

Thornwell and fellow preachers agreed. The spirit-of-Christianity issue, they also concurred, hinged on the Golden Rule and on the ethic of sanctified masters: "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in Heaven." As abolitionists parsed that biblical injunction, masters must give slaves the same equality and justice that slaveholders would want, if they were enslaved. Masters, if slaves, would want to be free. This abolitionist reading of the Golden Rule could lead to the abolition not just of slavery but of all distinctions between mankind, all hierarchies, all institutions. All inferiors, after all, would prefer to be equals.

Proslavery preachers answered that God created inferiors, superiors, and hierarchies because He hardly wished all humankind to be the same. His Golden Rule scarcely insisted that unless masters wished to be slaves, they must abolish slavery. The Word instead instructed us to "treat our slaves as we should" wish to "be treated, if we were slaves" and if we were inferior in intelligence and willpower.<sup>38</sup> God would then not want us to be freed, to compete against our superiors. He would want His superiors to guarantee our "just and equal" material sustenance and access to Christ.

Thornwell prized spiritual access more than material sustenance. The injustice of denying slaves their daily bread "is nothing to the injustice of defrauding them of that bread which cometh down from Heaven." Slaveholders defrauded blacks when they barred evangelicals from bringing Christianity to the quarters. Masters also debased bondsmen when their slave sales divided Christian families. After such anti-Christian travesties, slavery lost its divine sanction as "the state in which the African is most effectively trained to the moral end of his being."

Christian paternalists, emphasized Thornwell, must ensure that ex-Africans learned and practiced Christianity. Then slavery, although a "natural evil" and sprung "from the nature of man as sinful and the nature of society as disordered," would provide effective "punishment" for Adam's "crime." Considering "the diversities in moral position, which sin has been the means of entailing upon the [black] race," ran Thornwell's revealingly guarded conclusion, "we may be justified in affirming that, relatively to some persons and to some times, slavery may be a good, or to speak more accurately, a condition, though founded in a curse, from which the Providence of God extracts a blessing."

Thornwell did not here win the biblical argument for the slaveholders, any more than he won the argument by showing that Hebrews held slaves. Rather, he showed slaveholders how to win the spirit-of-Christianity argument. When masters failed to be Christian paternalists—when they whipped harshly or severed black marriages or barred the Word from the quarters—when they, in short, used absolute power to defy Christ's injunctions, they failed to give their servants that which is just and equal. Then southern preachers must condemn sinning absolutists. When too many masters sinned, preachers must condemn slavery itself. But when masters dispensed mild punishment and kept black families intact and suffused the quarters with the Word, they would rout the abolitionists as exemplars of the Christian spirit.

Fortunately for proslavery preachers' equanimity, ever more masters during the 1845–60 period treated their slaves as Christian paternalists should. Revivalists converted ever more blacks, as masters allowed ever more preachers into the quarters. But had revivalists converted enough masters and slaves to prove that absolute power served the spirit of Christianity? Or did too many masters still sell slave mates from each other and prevent too many slaves from hearing or reading the Word?

The queries tortured James Henley Thornwell. For all his worldly success, this thin, frail, retiring scholar, with his drooping eye, ever present cigar, and violent coughs, exuded a haunted air, akin to Josiah Nott's. Just as Alabama's medical leader dwelled on children who perished without protection from yellow fever, so South Carolina's theological leader dwelled on blacks who perished without inspiration from the Word. To forsake the hapless slave who shuddered at the unchristian master would be to betray his own defining moment, when he had been the hapless orphan who shuddered to confront his unchristian patron.

Whenever trouble beset the South, Thornwell conceived that God signaled His anger with slavery's unchristian shortcomings. On the eve of the Civil War, Thornwell, fearing chaos and anarchy, momentarily felt that slavery must be at least partially abolished, before God devastated His unholy people. As Thornwell summed up the conditional that put his nerves on edge, the Bible provided "*the true impregnable position of the Christian Slaveholder*," but "only when he obeys its directions as well as employs its sanctions. Our rights are there established, but it is always in connection with our duties; if we neglect the one, we cannot make good the other."<sup>39</sup>

*If.* Once again those two little letters performed the big work in reconciling unlimited absolute power with limited republican power. Just as colorblind theorists required rescue from George Fitzhugh's exaltation that no U.S. mudsills need be enslaved, and just as racist theorists required redemption from Josiah Nott's exclamation that no black could be saved, so preachers required delivery from sinning masters who defiled the spirit of Christianity.