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Hermeneutics of Slavery: A "Bible-Alone" Faith and the Problem of Human Enslavement

Not long ago, while driving on the freeway to Chicago, I noticed an old family van, the back door of which was plastered with all sorts of stickers bearing religious messages. One of these, prominently displayed at the center of the hatch, boldly stated: "The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!" It was obvious to me that the owner of the van took the Bible seriously and conscientiously adhered to its directives. Such devotion to the normative text of Christianity should certainly be applauded. After all, I myself am a devoted Christian who accepts the Bible as an inspired document, which is normative for Christianity. I read my Bible on a regular basis, accept its teachings, and attempt to live up to its standards. As I passed the van I looked at the driver and our eyes met. I wondered, if we ever had the chance to meet and talk, just the two of us, both committed to the Word of God, how much would we really agree on? Most likely, it would not be much. Apart from the general beliefs that all Christians share, such as that God exists, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, we would most likely find plenty to disagree on. Unfortunately, these disagreements could preclude our fellowshipping together as Christians, even though the Bible is at the core of our belief system.

The fact that my hypothetical meeting with the driver of the van would most likely result in various disagreements—perhaps even strong disagreements—shows the limitations of the truism: "The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!" While such a declaration may initially convey the impression of deep piety, it ultimately proves to be a hollow and selfish premise, which promises much but does not deliver. This is because a simplistic approach to Scripture does not take into consideration the very

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complex set of conditions and circumstances that guide the human encounter with the Word of God.

It is true that, on the one hand, the overall message of the Scriptures is simple and may be understood by all; namely, that God created the world, that sin disrupted the relationship of God with humanity, that through Jesus Christ God set in motion a plan of reconciliation, and that one day Jesus will come back to take his children home. This is not to say that Christians always agree on teachings of the Scripture that can be described as "plain." Some arrive at opposite conclusions, even on such plain scriptural truths as the Second Coming of Christ. A deeper and prayerful study may lead to a discovery of specific doctrinal precepts that may guide a community of believers into a greater knowledge of God and result in, for example, a Trinitarian confession of God. On the other hand, however, it must also be acknowledged that the Bible was written over a period of about 1,500 years and addressed a variety of peoples and cultures separated from our time by two or three millennia. As such, the Scriptures also contain pronouncements that are difficult to interpret. This, in turn, leads to divergent interpretations and strongly held opinions. It is these difficult-to-interpret concepts that cause disagreements among Christians and that would likely lead to disagreement between the driver of the van and myself. Thus, while the overall message of the Bible may be considered "simple," human interaction with the Word of God cannot be described as simplistic. "Very often, people confuse simple with simplistic. The nuance is lost on most" (Jensen 2012:12).

Encountering such issues, thoughtful Christians are forced to ask questions such as these: Why do I interpret a particular biblical passage in this way and my fellow pew dweller interprets it in another? How do I know that my interpretation of a particular, difficult passage is the correct one? What if what I think the text means actually means something different? To what extent am I reading my own ideas into the text? Such questions make the slogan "The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it" too simplistic to embrace.

Even a perfunctory examination of Christian history reveals that the problem I encountered on my way to Chicago constitutes a micro-representation of a historical phenomenon, which has occurred with increasing intensity among Christians since the death of the apostles. Christian history is littered with disagreements over the interpretation of the biblical message; disagreements that often led to schisms, persecutions, excommunications, wars (some of which lasted decades), much killing, and many other atrocities. It seems that most people involved in such conflicts would agree that they were basing their particular point of view on the teachings of Bible. One of the longest and most destructive

religio-political conflicts in European history was what became known as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), which resulted in millions of human casualties, famines, destruction of commerce and manufacturing, as well as stagnation of intellectual life. The ultimate result was that "religion was greatly maimed" (Walker 1970:389–396). Another example is the conflict that resulted in the soaking of American soil with millions of gallons of American blood, namely, the American Civil War (1861–1865), fought by both sides believing they were following the Bible.

Hermeneutical Foundations of the Pro-Slavery Position

It is well documented that the causes of the American Civil War are historically complex and cannot be easily reduced to a single phenomenon. Various reasons have be suggested that led to the Civil War, including deep distrust between North and South, as well as different economic and social situations; however, the major reason was slavery (Anderson 2004:5–8; see also Farmer 2008; Randall and Donald 1961). There appears to be little doubt, however, that religious concerns flowing from a particular way of reading the Bible were at the root of Southern Christianity's defense of slavery as a biblically and morally sanctioned practice that could not, and should not, be abolished. There were, no doubt, Southern Christians who defended slavery in an effort to be faithful to the Scriptures, even as there were others who simply found in the Bible a ready defense of their financial enterprise. Thus, at the beginning of a foundational Christian pro-slavery document, "A Southern Address to Christendom," which purposed to answer the question "Is slavery a sin?" are found these words:

> In answering this question, as a Church, let it be distinctly born in mind that the only rule of judgment is the written word of God. The Church knows nothing of the intuitions of reason or the deductions of philosophy, except those reproduced in the Sacred Canon. She has a positive constitution in the Holy Scriptures, and has no right to utter a single syllable upon any subject, except as the Lord puts words in her mouth. She is founded, in other words, upon express *revelation*. Her creed is an authoritative testimony of God, and not a speculation, and what she proclaims, she must proclaim with the infallible certitude of faith, and not with the hesitating assent of an opinion. (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206, emphasis in text)

This statement sets a hermeneutical foundation for the Southern way of reading the Bible. For the Southerners, the Scriptures were to be read in the plainest way possible, with the husks of human reason, culture, philosophy and all other influences peeled away. Accordingly, because the Bible never condemned slavey, the Southerners considered the

abolitionist cause unbiblical, and the fact that slavery was not practiced in the North a result of shifting cultural trends rather than a position founded on the Scriptures. James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862), a famous Southern Presbyterian minister, theologian, religious writer, and professor of theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, persuasively expressed this sentiment when he stated that Christian beliefs must be founded only upon the explicit Word of God "and *not a speculation*" (quoted in Noll 1998:64, emphasis in text). The abolitionist position was, for him, an example of such "speculation," based on culture rather than on the explicit teaching of the Scriptures. Thus, he did not hesitate to utter strong words of condemnation for the abolitionist cause:

> The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and Slaveholders; they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground. Christianity and Atheism the combatants, and progress of humanity is at stake. (Thornwell, in Genovese 1995:37)

Similarly, the influential Episcopal bishop Henry Hopkins argued that it was impossible to sustain an abolitionist cause without an extra-biblical appeal to modern cultural trends. The Bible, he asserted, "sanction[ed]" the practice of slavery, "so long as it [was] administered in accordance with the precepts laid down by the Apostles" (1864:5). Anti-slavery campaigners, he argued, were delusionary and engaged in "a willful or conscious opposition to the truth." These people, he charged, were seduced by "the feelings of a false philanthropy, which palliate[d], if it [could] not excuse, their dangerous error." The abolitionists, he believed, did not know how to study their Bibles or how to be faithful to its teachings. Consequently, they opened themselves to the influence of "the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine" (17). On the contrary, he argued, the teachings of Scripture on the matter of slavery are "plain," and "who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God, and . . . invent for ourselves a 'higher law' than those holy Scriptures which are given to us as 'a light to our feet and a lamp to our paths,' in the darkness of a sinful and a polluted world?" (16). "The teachings of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures are so plain, righteous, consistent, and palpable," argued John Bell Robinson, "that I cannot exercise a sufficient stretch of charity towards such men to believe them sincere. But infidelity is at the bottom of the whole scheme of abolitionism." Thus the anti-slavery ministers who "do not understand such plain teachings," he concluded emphatically, "are not fit for the Gospel ministry, and should be silenced for their ignorance" (1863:91, 96).

No less strong in his convictions was Charles B. Hodge (1797–1878) the most distinguished representative of the famous Princeton School of Theology, founded in 1812 as a protest against the encroachment of theological liberalism, which undermined the authority of Scripture (Cairns 1996:479). Charles B. Hodge[1], a deontologist who believed that being right in the eyes of God meant strict adherence to divinely established practices without consideration for outcomes or consequences. His support for slavery proceeded from the deeply held conviction that slave holding was in accordance with divine law (Torbett 2006:75). This conviction arose from his high regard for Scripture as the complete, infallible, and inerrant revelation of God. In his "Bible Argument on Slavery" article published in the monumental, 900-page, pro-slavery volume *Cotton Is King* he wrote: "We recognize no authoritative rule of truth and duty but the word of God" (Hodge 1857:480). Thus, anything that could only be established by some "abstract principles," such as the abolitionist cause, could not be "truth." "Men are too nearly upon a par to their powers of reasoning, and ability to discover truth," he wrote, "to make the conclusions of one mind an authoritative rule for others. It is our object, therefore, not to discuss the subject of slavery upon abstract principles, but to ascertain the scriptural rule of judgment and conduct in relation to it" (480). The abolitionist cause, he believed, was based on "mere impulse of feeling, and a blind imitation" of cultural trends, especially those coming from England, rather than on the Bible itself (Hodge 1860:842).

This brief review of the pro-slavery hermeneutical position makes it clear that Southerners viewed the abolitionist position as antithetical to the very Word of God and God's established order, influenced more by modern culture than the Bible. They claimed that "the only rule of judgment is the written word of God" (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206), and the only safe hermeneutic a conscientious adherence to the "the plain and obvious teachings, of both Old and New Testament," which "are given with such irresistible force as to carry conviction to every mind, except those wedded to the theory of a 'Higher Law' than the Law of God" (Elliott 1860:xiii). The "Higher Law," of course, was a reference to the abolitionists' conjecture that, while permitting the practice, the God of Scripture would, in essence, oppose slavery. For the pro-slavery group, such a belief was based on human philosophy rather than the Word of God. The only way to counter (and destroy) abolitionism, it was argued, was to strictly adhere to the plain teachings of Bible on the matter. Thus, the noted Presbyterian theologian, Robert Lewis Dabney, wrote: "Here is our policy, then, to push the Bible argument continually, to drive abolitionism to the wall, to compel it to assume an anti-Christian position. By doing so we compel the whole Christianity of the North to array itself on our side"

(in Johnson 1903:129). James Henley Thornwell agreed when he wrote that the "church is not at liberty to speculate [regarding slavery]. . . . When she speaks, it must be in the name of the Lord, and her only argument is *Thus it is written*" (1873:384, emphasis in text). James Stirling, a British scholar who visited the Southern states during the 1850s, puzzled over this. He wrote: "How those who adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and consider every direction contained in its pages as applicable at all times to all men, are to reconcile these facts with modern anti-slavery notions, it is, thank goodness, no business of mine to find out" (1857:120).

The Biblical Case for Slavery

Having established their hermeneutic as based on "the plain and obvious teachings" of the Bible, and rejecting all traces of human reasoning, philosophy, contemporary cultural trends and "abstract principles," Southern pro-slavery theologians proceeded to make a biblical case for slavery. They began by addressing the abolitionist argument that slavery was sinful. Their answer was simple: standing on the foundation of the written Word of God, they asserted that the Church had "no authority to declare Slavery to be sinful," as nowhere did the Bible, "either directly or indirectly, condemn the relation of master and servant as incompatible with the will of God." To argue the opposite was to hold in contempt the "naked testimony of God" (Thornwell, in Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:384). "Opposition to slavery," they argued, "has never been the offspring of the Bible" and thus slavery cannot be considered sinful (393; Hodge 1860:849).

In the earliest pages of the Scripture, they argued, God established human hierarchical order when he declared, through the inspired mouth of Noah, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers" (Gen 9:25). "May it not be said in truth," wrote E. N. Elliott, "that God decreed this institution before it existed; and has he not connected its existence with prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters? He is the same God now, that he was when he gave these views of his moral character to the world" (1860:463). We should not be surprised when pro-slavery theologians taught that the patriarchs, most notably Abraham, not only did not condemn slavery but actually owned slaves who were "purchased with his money" (Gen 17:13) (Hodge 1860:859). Did not Job, the man whom God said "there is no one on earth like him" also own slaves? (Job 1:3). Moreover, was not slave ownership codified in the Ten Commandments? By commanding slave-owners to give their slaves a day of rest, the fourth commandment indisputably supported the institution of slavery, as did the tenth, which commanded

against the coveting others' slaves. Joining the debate and offering a Jewish perspective, Rabbi M. J. Raphall argued that the tenth commandment places slaves:

> under the same protection as any other species of lawful property. . . . That the Ten Commandments are the word of God, and as such, of the very highest authority, is acknowledged by Christians as well as by Jews. . . . How dare you, in the face of the sanction and protection afforded to slave property in the Ten Commandments—how dare you denounce slaveholding as a sin? When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty conversed, with whose names he emphatically connects his own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of 'perfect, upright, fearing God and eschewing evil' . . . –that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy? (1859:28, 29)

If the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the moral law of God, endorsed slavery, how could Christians argue against it? Moreover, did not the Levitical law regulate rather than abolish slavery? In Lev 25:39–46, they asserted, Moses clearly implied that slave ownership was part of the human condition. All Israelites, including priests, were permitted to buy and own slaves (Lev 22:10–11; Num 31:25–26). While Israelites were never to be sold as slaves—they could only be treated as hired workers and released at the time of Jubilee—foreign slaves could be purchased and held for life. Furthermore, slave owners were not to "rule over fellow Israelites ruthlessly," suggesting that ruthless rulership over foreign slaves was not necessarily an evil practice (Lev 25:46).

From the New Testament, pro-slavery theologians observed that while Jesus had many opportunities to speak against slavery, he did not condemn it. In Matt 8:10, for example, Jesus never questioned the right of the centurion to own a slave. Instead, he healed the slave and commended the centurion for his faith: "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Furthermore, he often used slavery to illustrate his teachings. Many of his parables featured the theme of masters and servants. For example, "Suppose one of you has a slave (*doulos*) plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'?" (Luke 17:7). Considering this lack of condemnation of slavery from Jesus, it is not surprising that slave owners, believing that non-condemnation translated into approval, at times used Jesus' own teachings to instruct their slaves on obedience to their masters (Northup 1968:94).

Furthermore, pro-slavery theologians asserted that the apostles also did not condemn slavery. Did not Paul teach that each person "should

retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (1 Cor 7:17)? And did he not instruct slaves to not "let it trouble" them if they were slaves when "called" by God (v. 21)? Moreover, rather than being troubled by the plight of slaves, Paul appeared to emphasize spiritual equality among believers, asserting that all were "baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free" (1 Cor 12:13). Thus, Gal 3:28 did not refer to the social situation of slaves, but rather, to the salvation available to all. Accordingly, Paul instructed slaves to "obey [their] earthly masters . . . and serve them wholeheartedly" (Eph 6:5–9); to "consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered" (1 Tim 6:1–2); and to "be subject to their masters . . . so that in every way they [would] make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Titus 2:9–10).

These passages formed the foundation for the Southern theologian's opposition to abolitionism. While they conceded that Scripture regulated slavery, and thus slaves in Christian homes enjoyed special privileges, they did not believe that Scripture condemned slavery. Thus, they concluded, the owner-slave relationship was not dissolved in the New Testament, as was the case, for example, with polygamy. While God tolerated polygamy during Old Testament times, this changed in the New Testament. "That Christ did give a new law on this subject," argued Hodge, "is abundantly evident;" however, this certainly was not the case with slavery (1860:860). Similarly, Richard Furman, an influential Baptist minister who initially opposed slavery but was converted by the force of biblical arguments, stated:

> The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precepts and example. . . . Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian Church. . . . In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions. (in Roger 1985:277, 278–279)

What of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," proclaimed by Christ (Matt 7:12)? A conventional approach would suggest that such a principle would certainly advocate against slavery, as no human being would want to be treated as a slave. Not so for the pro-slavery theologians. In fact, these theologians advocated that, rather than abolishing slavery, the Golden Rule established it. Ending slavery, they argued, could harm the established religious, social, and economic order, and could potentially destroy society, especially as

slavery had been divinely instituted (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206). Thus Dabney wrote: "I cannot conceive of any duty arising from the command to love my neighbor as myself which compels me to inflict a ruinous injury on that neighbor, and such would be immediate freedom to the slave" (in Johnson 1903:68). Abolitionism would also be harmful to former slaves, who could not function in a civilized society and would most likely meet the fate of the Native Americans (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005:621). Furthermore, "the Golden Rule demands that free men ask themselves what they would consider reasonable and just if they were slaves" (621). Thornwell asserted: "We are not bound to render unto them what they might in fact desire. Such a rule would transmute morality into caprice." Instead, masters must grant their slaves that which is "just and equal," namely, to continue the master-slave relationship established by God (621).

Accordingly, pro-slavery theologians argued, slaves were to be grateful for their role in the grand scheme established by the "perfectly just God" (622). "The Africans of this country," stated William A. Smith, "in common with minors, imbeciles, and uncivilized persons, have a right to be governed and protected, and to such means of physical comfort and moral improvement as are necessary and compatible with their providential condition" (622). Considering the spiritual and social conditions of the "savages" in their homeland of Africa, the pro-slavery theologians asserted, "we cannot but accept it as a gracious Providence that they have been brought in such numbers to our shores, and redeemed from the bondage of barbarism and sin" (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:209). "We all know," wrote Kate Cumming, "that the negro is free and as a slave. In the latter capacity he is better, morally and physically, than in the former, and he is much more respected in his place. Who is it that can not relate story after story of the degradation of the negro in the North. . . . Why, slavery is heaven to it in comparison" (2015:158). While abuse of slaves certainly occurred, such situations were isolated and needed to be addressed; however, this was not a reason for war. Instead, Northern politicians would do much better to legislate "for the good of their country and all in it," including slaves (158, 176). Thus, for pro-slavery Southern theologians, slavery did not contradict the Golden Rule of Christ.

Considering their approach to Scripture, it is not surprising that pro-slavery theologians considered abolitionism to be a movement influenced by "the benumbing influences" of culture and human philosophy, which they considered "likely to pervert judgment," rather than on Scripture (Thornwell 1873:544). Ultimately, the abolitionist cause came to be equated with unfaithfulness to the Bible (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:177). As Hodge asserted, "We see no way of escape from the conclusion that

the conduct of the modern abolitionists, being directly opposed to that of the authors of our religion, must be wrong and ought to be modified or abandoned" (1860:849).

The biblical foundation for the pro-slavery position was elucidated in the quintessential document, "A Southern Address to Christendom," issued the same year the Civil War began (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206–210) with James Thornwell writing the first draft. "Nowhere in southern literature may one find the proslavery argument developed with greater force or lucidity" (206). While desirable, it is impossible to present the document here in its entirety and the reader is referred to the original source in the Works Cited section; however, it is important to present some of what it is found therein. The statement begins with a strong affirmation about its reliance on the Bible alone and follows with these words:

> The antagonism of Northern and Southern sentiment on the subject of slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the Federal Union, and involved us in the horrors of an unnatural war. . . . And here we may venture to lay before the Christian world our views as a Church, upon the subject of slavery. We beg a candid hearing.
>
> We have said enough to vindicate the position of the Southern Church. We have assumed no new attitude. We stand exactly where the Church of God has always stood – from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the Reformers, and from the Reformers to ourselves. We stand upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief cornerstone. Shall we be excluded from the fellowship of our brethren in other lands, because we dare not depart from the charter of our faith? Shall we be branded with the stigma of reproach, because we cannot consent to corrupt the Word of God to suit the intuitions of an infidel philosophy? Shall our names be cast out as evil, and the finger of scorn pointed at us, because we utterly refuse to break our communion with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, David and Isaiah, with Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs, with all the noble army of confessors who have gone to glory from slave-holding countries and from a slave-holding Church, without ever having dreamed that they were living in mortal sin, by conniving at slavery in the midst of them? If so, we shall take consolation in the cheering consciousness that the Master has accepted us. We may be denounced, despised and cast out of the Synagogues of our brethren.
>
> But while they are wrangling about the distinctions of men according to the flesh, we shall go forward in our Divine work, and confidently anticipate that, in the great day, as the consequence of our humble labors, we shall meet millions of glorified spirits, who have come up from the bondage of earth to a nobler freedom that human

> philosophy ever dreamed of. Others, if they please may spend their time in declaiming on the tyranny of earthly master; it will be our aim to resist the real tyrants which oppress the soul – Sin and Satan. These are the foes against whom we shall find it employment enough to wage a successful war. And to this holy war it is the purpose of our Church to devote itself with redoubled energy. We feel that the souls of our slaves are a solemn trust, and we shall strive to present them faultless and complete before the presence of God. (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:206–210)

It was feelings such as these that eventually led the Southern church to support the Civil War. God, they were convinced, was on their side. As Charles Hodge exclaimed, "If the present course of the abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles were wrong" (1860:849).

Hermeneutical Foundations of the Anti-Slavery Position

Abolitionism was a complex and multifaceted movement involving people of all walks of life (Newman 2002). There were many abolitionists who could hardly be considered Christians and whose behavior was questionable to Christian anti-slavery activists, even though they shared the same cause (Carden 2014:151). It cannot be denied, however, that, like the pro-slavery theologians, Christian theologians who fought against slavery found their inspiration in the Bible. The modern abolitionist movement emerged among English Quakers and other evangelical groups (Midgley 1992:15), and the first modern anti-slavery activists were unquestionably committed, Bible-believing Christians. The star of the British anti-slavery movement, William Wilberforce, was indubitably a born-again Christian (1897:178). His friend and mentor, John Newton, was a former slave ship captain who experienced conversion through the reading of Scripture, subsequently abandoning the slave trade and becoming a Christian minister (Phipps 2001).

In the United States, anti-slavery sentiments received a significant boost during the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical movement that swept throughout North America from the 1790s through to the early 1840s. While directed primarily towards spiritual awakening, this movement also focused on social and personal reform; it "aimed at perfecting both the social order and the individual so that the millennium could begin" (Knight 2000:36, 37; see also Bicknell 2015:19). Unlike the First Great Awakening (~1720–1750s), which was led predominantly by Calvinist thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, both of whom owned slaves (Kidd 2014:111), most of the leaders of the Second Great Awakening leaned toward Arminianism. In contrast to the Calvinist

emphasis on the sovereignty of God and predestination, Arminianism focused on love as the primary attribute of God, as well as human free will, and thus encouraged social transformation as an outgrowth of the Gospel message. This theological persuasion steered many toward the anti-slavery position (Hankins 2004:85–87; see also Noll 2016:208, 231).

Like the pro-slavery theologians, the anti-slavery movement, which grew out of the Second Great Awakening, also emphasized the centrality of Scriptures. "Now the Bible is my ultimate appeal in all matters of faith and practice," wrote Angelina Grimké in her 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, "and to this test I am anxious to bring the subject at issue between us" (1836, emphasis in text). Similarly, the authors of the *Annual Report* of the prominent Sheffield Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society insisted: "The Bible, and the Bible alone is the touch stone to which we would bring slavery." On the basis of their study of the Bible alone, they concluded: "Away with such things" (Sheffield Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, Annual Report 1827:11; quoted by Twells in Clapp and Jeffrey 2011:75).

While many Christian anti-slavery activists adopted the starting point of "the Bible and the Bible alone," their approach to the Bible was starkly different to that of the pro-slavery theologians. As evidenced above, pro-slavery theologians tended to concentrate on individual statements in Scripture, constructing a theology of societal order that was "applicable at all times to all men" (Stirling 1857:120). In contrast, anti-slavery Christians tended to focus on the grand themes of Scripture, such as the love of God, his moral law, creation in the image of God, freedom, equality, redemption and restoration. It was these grand Scriptural themes—or "abstract principles" (Hodge 1857:480) so reviled by pro-slavery theologians—that provided a hermeneutical lens for interpreting difficult passages of Scripture. Seen through this lens, slavery was an utterly repulsive instrument of satanic oppression. This hermeneutical lens was clearly evident in the 1818 report adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, which condemned slavery in the most blistering terms:

> We consider enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. . . . Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system—it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings, in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the Gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the

> endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbours [sic] and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity. Such are some of the consequences of slavery—consequences not imaginary—but which connect themselves with its very existence. (Smith, Handy, and Loetschner 1963:179, 180)

Thus, while adopting a "Bible and Bible alone" stance, anti-slavery Christian activists believed that universal, Bible-based "principles of humanity and religion" (180) applied to all human interactions; and that the difficult biblical passages regarding slavery should be interpreted through the lens of these universal principles. So what were some of the anti-slavery arguments used by Christian abolitionists?

The Biblical Case against Slavery

As outlined above, anti-slavery biblical arguments began with the concept of God as love. Anti-slavery theologians proclaimed that "God ha[d] no attribute in favor of slavery," and that a God of love and grace "can not love slavery" (Elliot 1857:121). As George Thompson wrote, "The religion of Christ is a *religion of love*," and thus "it never has, it never can, sanction for a moment, so foul, so inhuman, so impious, and murderous a system as that of . . . SLAVERY" (1836:18, emphasis in text). Furthermore, anti-slavery theologians emphasized the biblical teaching that all humans were created in the image of God, making "a compelling case that nothing [could] annul the birth-right charter, which God ha[d] bequeathed to every being upon which he ha[d] stamped his own image" (Kilner 2015:11). As Frederick Douglass wrote: "[Slavery] is an attempt to undo what God has done, to blot out the broad distinction instituted by the *Allwise* between men and things, and to change the image and superscription of the everliving God into a speechless piece of merchandise. Such a decision cannot stand. God will be true though every man be a liar" (in Kilner 2015:11, 12). Anti-slavery theologians argued that the creation of all humanity in the image of God negated racism, inequality and oppression of any kind (Grimké 1836:3); and that "all those created in God's image [should] be included in 'We the people'" (Wills 2009:13). Moreover, they asserted that while Adam and Eve received dominion over all creation, they were not given dominion over other human beings. "*Man* then, I assert *never* was put *under the feet of man*, by that first charter of human rights which was given by God . . . therefore this doctrine of equality is based on the Bible" (Grimké 1836:3).

Having established a foundation for Christian abolitionism in the biblical account of Creation, anti-slavery Christian activists moved to dismantle

the pro-slavery position point by point. Did Noah's curse established slavery? In his meticulously researched and written masterpiece, *The Bible and Slavery* (1837), prominent Christian pastor and abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld asserted that, first, the curse was a prediction rather than a normative declaration; second, the prophecy was fulfilled in Israel's subjection of the Canaanites some 900 years later, implying that the prophecy spoke to national rather than individual servitude; third, it was service, rather than slavery, that was prophesied; and that, finally, it could not be indubitably established that all Africans descended from Ham (1864:95–98). Accordingly, Weld maintained that this particular prophecy was not applicable to all men at all times. Indeed, Abraham owned slaves; however, their situation was nothing like that of the Southern slaves. For example, note that Abraham "though so great a man, [went] to the herd himself and fetch[ed] a calf from thence and serv[ed] it up with this own hands, for the entertainment of his guests." No aspect of biblical servitude, according to Christian abolitionists, resembled slavery practiced in the American South (Grimké 1836:4). Furthermore, while the law of Moses permitted slavery, it was subject to stringent regulations, and in no way established an antecedent for American slavery (Weld 1864:104–114).

The fact that Jesus and the apostles did not actively oppose the institution of slavery did not mean that they condoned it. Nineteenth-century writer Ellen G. White closed the door on this argument when she wrote:

> It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system. (1911:459, 460)

In this passage, White asserted three things: first, she suggested that it was not the role of the apostles, which would include their Master, to oppose the cultural conventions of the times in which they lived, as doing so would undermine the preaching of the gospel; second, she emphasized the overarching "principles," so reviled by pro-slavery theologians, which undermined human inequality and other unjust social practices; and third, White implied that the preaching of the gospel would inevitably result in social change. This was also pointed out by anti-slavery Christian writer W. E. Channing, who stated:

> Slavery, in the ages of the Apostle, had so penetrated society, was so intimately interwoven with it . . . that a religion, preaching freedom to the slave, would have shaken the social fabric to its foundation, and would have armed against itself the whole power of State. Paul

> did not then assail the institution. He *satisfied himself with spreading principles*, which, however slowly, could not but work its destruction. (1870:599, emphasis mine)

This brings us to the *Magna Carta* of the abolitionists movement, Paul's statement in Gal 3:28: "There is neither, Jew not Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Pro-slavery advocates believed that this passage referred only to the commonality of faith and the equal offer of salvation to all, regardless of their social standing (Holifield 2003:497). They believed that this social standing was established by God and thus could not be changed; and that Paul's inclusion of "slave" and "free" in the same sentence indicated that Paul's intent was not to abolish the master-slave relationship (Priest 1852:533, 534). After all, this same Paul wrote: "Slaves, obey your masters." Would not using Gal 3:28 as an anti-slavery passage force Paul to contradict himself? (Whitford 2009:30). Thus, pro-slavery theologians did not interpret this passage in terms of social justice; rather, they suggested that a Christian slave should not be discouraged by his bondage, "for by faith in Christ he is a freeman in the highest and best sense of the term, a brother and fellow-heir, with his believing master, of eternal glory in heaven. . . . All earthly distinctions and blessings vanish into utter insignificance when compared with the eternal realities of the kingdom of God" (Jones 1861:25; Killen 1859:124, 125). Accordingly, they asserted that Paul spoke only of equal access to salvation for all believers, leaving the divinely instituted distinction between "the bond and the free" intact (Armstrong 1857:65–70; Junkin 1843:50).

Christian abolitionists could not have read Gal 3:28 more differently. While they agreed that Paul spoke of the commonality of faith and equal availability of salvation for both "slave and free," and while they agreed that the passage did not explicitly abolish the institution of slavery, they were convinced that in proclaiming "neither bond nor free," Paul planted the seed for future abolitionism. How could a Christian, who had received salvation by the blood of Jesus, continue keeping others in slavery? Rather, they asserted that, if truly embraced, Paul's doctrine "would lead to universal emancipation. . . . If all masters and all slaves became Christians, slavery would at once cease" and no oppression of human by another human would continue (Barnes 1844:354). Thus, abolitionists viewed this passage not only as a proclamation of spiritual equality but also the seeds of social and racial equality. With reference to Gal 3:28 and similar passages, Goldwin Smith wrote:

> [They] do not inculcate social or political apathy; they do not pass, upon the Christian world a sentence of social or political despair. The

> faculties for social improvement, and the desire to redress inequality and injustice, which God had given us, the Son of God did not take away. On the contrary, He and His Apostles increased those faculties and that desire a thousand-fold by the principles of mutual affection and duty which they instilled into the heart of man, and by the new force of self-devotion which they added to his moral powers. (1863:84, 85)

Many black American slaves embraced this understanding of the Gospel of Christ, and the liberating hermeneutic of the "abstract principles" so reviled by pro-slavery theologians enthralled them. "The equality of all people before God" or "gospel equality" became the "hermeneutical key to understand[ing] both scripture and their social situation" (Williams 2004:103). Unsurprisingly, many slave owners endeavored to limit the religious education of their slaves, lest they imbibe such "abstract principles" and buy into the "liberating hermeneutic" of the Gospel of Christ (Horton and Horton 1997:19, 20). Opposing such educational practices, Charles Elliott wrote:

> If the relation of the master and slave is one recognized in the Bible, then the Bible is the right book to put into the hands of the slaves; and the slave should immediately be taught to read, that he may read the Bible, which, they say, sanctions slavery. If the Bible never speaks of slavery as *sinful*, then the best thing that could be done to support slavery would be to teach all the slaves to read it, that slavery may have the *sanction* of the Bible, as some pretend to affirm that it has. (1850:127, emphasis in text)

In addition to Gal 3:28, anti-slavery Christian activists explored a plethora of biblical passages that they saw as addressing the problem of slavery. They asserted that Moses' proclamations in Exod 21:16 and Deut 23:15–16 should "alone be sufficient to put an end to slavery." They declared that Jesus' mission of "preach[ing] good news to the poor" and "proclaim[ing] freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18) was incompatible with the institution of slavery (*Address to Christians* 1831:10, 11). To the argument that Onesimus was returned to his owner they countered that "christianity [sic], in this, as in many other cases, has provided, without express precepts, a sure and inoffensive corrective of all oppressive institutions, by the gradual influence of its liberal and benignant maxims; which did, in point of fact, dissolve the bonds of slavery in most parts of the Christian world" (12). They saw the principle of human equality of all humans in Paul's declaration that "From one man he made every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). This, they argued, was the foundation of the American Declaration of Independence (Noll 2006:41).

Having surveyed all the scriptural evidence, the authors of the *Address to Christians of All Denominations on the Inconsistency of Admitting Slaver-Holders to Communion and Church Membership* (1831) concluded that "the modern system of negro slavery finds no support in the scriptures, either of the Old or New Testament, and is directly at variance with the spirit and design of the gospel of Christ." "Slavery," they concluded, "will soon cease to be a curse upon our country, and a disgrace to our nation. Then will the blessing of him that was ready to perish, come upon us, and the soul of the emancipated slave will be made to sing for joy" (12, 19).

Analysis

Even a cursory perusal of Christian history shows that the Bible played a pivotal role in shaping its narrative. On the one hand, Christians consider this collection of ancient documents an inspired fount of knowledge about God, human origin, and destiny, as well as God's offer of salvation in Christ Jesus. This knowledge has been an enduring source of Christian comfort and hope, as well as a source of the moral code of countless societies. At the same time, however, the Christian Scriptures have been a source of intense disagreement. There has never been a period when Christian thinkers, scholars, and believers did not argue about the meaning of individual passages and words. At times, these disagreements have ended peacefully, with adherents of various interpretations willing to "agree to disagree" and live side by side in peace. At other times, these disagreements have led to war. From the early post-apostolic era, millions of human beings have lost their lives as a result of disagreeing scriptural interpretations.

Such disagreements were also a major factor during the American Civil War, in which, according to some estimates, over one million people lost their lives. Conflicts of such magnitude are usually caused by a variety of historical, geo-political, and social circumstances, which are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the reader is referred to the many volumes that explain the Civil War and its causes. The main reason for this paper is to bring attention to the fact that theologians and Christian activists on both sides of that conflict claimed to use the Bible alone to buttress their position on slavery. Both considered the Bible to be God's revelation and thus the only authoritative document for Christian doctrine and practice; both claimed adherence to its teachings and advocated reading it in a "plain" manner; and yet both arrived at dramatically different conclusions. How could this be?

The most probable answer to this question lies in the two related but divergent approaches to hermeneutics adopted by these two groups. At

the risk of oversimplification, but for the sake of clarity, I would like to label these two approaches as "static" and "dynamic" hermeneutics. A "static" hermeneutic stops at the level of the text, thus embracing a literalistic approach to controversial biblical passages. Such a reading of the text is then considered to transcend all cultural barriers, and its conclusions to be applicable "at all times to all people" (Stirling 1857:120). Before continuing, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms "literal" and "literalistic." Jiři Moskala offers this helpful explanation: "'Literal' means that one reads the biblical text in its context with its intended message meanwhile 'literalistic' reading means that the biblical text is taken in a very narrow dogmatic way without applying its contextual and larger theological considerations" (2013).

Similarly to a "static" hermeneutic, a "dynamic" hermeneutic affirms that the text can be read in a "plain" way but it also gives careful attention to the immediate and wider context of the passage. Furthermore, it endeavors to frame controversial passages within broader biblical "principles." Accordingly, overarching themes, such as "God is Love," "back to Creation narrative," "love your neighbor as yourself," "do unto others," "be holy because I am holy," etc., become part of the hermeneutical lens through which difficult scriptural passages are interpreted. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Christian anti-slavery movement.

The Scripture itself provides support for this kind of interpretative procedure. Ron du Preez in reviewing this paper prior to publication, pointing out a three-pronged interpretive approach (observation, interpretation, and application) as well as supporting passages. In Neh 8:8 the Levites read from the Book of the Law of God to the people and then interpreted it, or gave it "the meaning, so that the people understood what was being read." Once the people "understood" the Word of God, they were encouraged to put it into practice. The same three-step interpretative process is evident in Luke 10:25-37, where an expert in the law engaged Jesus in conversation. First, Jesus asked, "What is written in the law?"—a question that, on its own, would seem to support a literalistic approach; however, Jesus immediately moved on to ask, "How do you read it?"—a process that required interpretation in view of the context. Only in light of this second step, in which the meaning of the passage was understood, did Christ urge the expert to put his teaching into practice (v. 37). Finally, in Luke 24:13-35, Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Once again, the discussion began with a literalistic interpretation of the prophetic words and a cherished opinion. Jesus then admonished the disciples: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken! . . . And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he *explained* to them what was said in all the Scriptures

concerning himself" (v. 27, emphasis mine). Once the disciples' eyes were opened through Christ's contextual interpretation, they immediately put into practice what they heard. These passages point to a holistic way of interpreting difficult scriptural passages. First, one begins with the text; then "contextual and larger theological considerations" (Moskala 2013:10) such as overarching biblical themes are taken into account, giving the passage "meaning" (Neh 8:8); and finally, the message is applied. It is evident that pro-slavery theologians bypassed the second step, moving directly from a literalistic reading to application.

In contrast, while affirming that the text can be read in a "plain" or "literal" way, a "dynamic" hermeneutic tends to emphasize a "principled" reading of controversial biblical texts. Accordingly, those who apply a "dynamic" hermeneutic to the biblical text seek for overarching themes, such as "God is Love," "new Creation narrative," "love your neighbor as yourself," "do unto others," "be holy because I am holy," etc., and they use these themes as a hermeneutic lens to interpret difficult scriptural passages, such as those dealing with slavery.

Can a "dynamic" or "principled" interpretation lead to a more subjective way of interpreting Scripture? This cannot be denied. However, the foundation for such an approach to scriptural interpretation lies in the fact that, albeit inferior, our understanding of God's attributes is analogous to the way God understands them. Take, for example, the concept of "love." If we make a sharp, qualitative distinction between God's love and human love, then we make God incomprehensible, and statements such as "God is love" or "God is just" are meaningless. If such concepts are divorced from human experience, then knowledge of God becomes humanly impossible. The reason why God revealed himself in the Scriptures was to help humanity comprehend what *his* love and *his* justice are like. Furthermore, this revelation was given so that our damaged understanding of the moral principles of God's government could be corrected. It is such an approach to scriptural interpretation that provided the foundational framework for those Christians who opposed slavery. To suggest that God, who revealed himself in the Scriptures through the life and death of Jesus Christ, condoned the atrocity of American slavery was, for them, tantamount to blasphemy. It was this cognitive dissonance that pro-slavery theologians were willing to live with, whereas besmirching the character of God was a risk that abolitionist Christians were not willing to take.

As I have reflected on this subject, a question kept returning to my mind: "What makes readers of the Bible choose one hermeneutical approach over another?" Before attempting to answer this question, I need to make an observation. In my 26 years of Christian ministry, as a local church pastor, missionary, and academic, I am yet to meet a believer who uses only one hermeneutical approach consistently. This is also my own

experience. Shifting back and forth between hermeneutics is not necessarily undesirable. A hermeneutically "static" approach to some scriptural passages may be appropriate, whereas a "dynamic" approach may add a new dimension to our understanding of certain texts. After all, God created us to use both reason and experience when interacting with external data. Furthermore, none of us have complete knowledge of all things and we continue to grow in our understanding. Thus, consciously choosing a consistent hermeneutical approach might not be possible or desirable. Otherwise, how could anyone ever experience a phenomenon of "changing of one's mind"? But I have also observed that much of our intra-denominational conflict is caused by diverse hermeneutical approaches to the same scriptural passage. Thus, we return to the question posed above: What is it that makes us choose a particular hermeneutical approach over another when approaching a difficult passage of the Bible?

The answer that makes most sense to me is that it is our worldview, based on a variety of presuppositions, which tends to make one choose a particular hermeneutical approach. However we might deny it, it is incontrovertible that we bring ourselves into the reading of the text. Once again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, having a worldview is necessary if we want to approach Scripture in a meaningful way. For example, a person who believes that the Bible is the Word of God will approach the text in a different way than one who espouses atheism. We also bring ourselves into the reading of the text when we think of God's attributes, such as his love. When I encounter the word "love" in the New Testament, I subconsciously assume that what the author had in mind matches my own concept of love. This, however, may not necessarily be true. After all, my twenty-first century understanding of the concept of "love" may be different from the original author's concept of "love." And not only is the English word "love" used to translate several different Greek words, but different cultures, families, and religious traditions, such as Calvinism and Arminianism, can understand the concept of "love" in diverse ways.[2] The same applies to other attributes of God, such as his "justice," "goodness," "sovereignty," etc. The bottom line is that we are not usually conscious of the fact that we bring our worldview, or cultural presuppositions with us when we approach the text of the Bible. I believe that this is the key to understanding what happened in American society prior to the Civil War.

While researching material for this paper, I was astounded to find so many biblical passages relating to slavery. If considered in their entirety, and in isolation from the "abstract principles" of the Bible, these passages establish a powerful pro-slavery argument. While I knew that these passages existed, I had always subconsciously applied a "dynamic" hermeneutic to them, deeming them irrelevant to my life and the

society I was a part of. This was because the worldview I grew up with provided the subconscious presupposition that slavery was an abhorrent and inhumane practice. Interestingly, this presupposition did not come from the church, but rather, from public education in communist Poland where I grew up. The theme of slavery was so distant and so irrelevant to my Christian life that I do not ever remember discussing it with fellow believers. It was my atheist teachers who instilled in me repugnance for slavery. Later, my maturing Christian worldview aligned with what I had been taught by my cultural environment. Similarly, in modern America people are taught from childhood, at home, school, and church, through "the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine" (Hopkins 1864:5, 17), that any form of slavery is evil. It is not surprising, therefore, that when we read the biblical passages on slavery, we subconsciously choose a "dynamic" or "principled" hermeneutic.

Not so with the youth of the antebellum South, who grew up accustomed to slavery. Surrounded by slave nannies, slave cooks, slave housekeepers, and slave plantation workers, children were taught that slavery was an inherent part of the economy, that their wellbeing depended on slave labor, and that God had ordained it this way. They also grew up believing that slavery benefited their slaves; that because slaves were a different category of human beings, a "permanently inferior and brutish separate human species" (Martin 1984:231), they needed bondage to bring out the best in them (Cumming 2015:158). Thomas Jefferson, one of America's Founding Fathers, believed that "blacks ability to reason was much inferior to the whites, while in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous and inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind" (Finkelman 2014:197). For Jefferson, "the equality of mankind" could only be achieved "by excluding blacks" (197). As a result, many Southern Christians viewed Abraham Lincoln as an uncontrollable, hypocritical, anti-Christian villain who started an "unnatural war" that would destroy the divinely established social order, rather than as a hero (Cumming 2015:14, 15, 158, 159, 174–176). They also viewed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "powerful propaganda weapon for the North," rather than as a literary masterpiece (175) and abolitionism as an ideology that struck at the heart of their Christian worldview. This was what the children of the antebellum South were taught at home, school, and church, through "the newspapers, the novel, and the magazine." This shaped their adult worldview, their "normal," the lens through which they read their Bibles.

Conclusion

In AD 495 the Roman writer Plautus uttered the famous words *Homo homini lupus*, that is, "Man is wolf to man." Since that time, this phrase

has been used to describe the various atrocities committed by humans against other humans. Throughout Christian history, many such atrocities were committed in the name of Scripture. The modern slave trade, which took millions of human beings from their African homeland to slavery in the Americas and Europe, was one such atrocity; the horrific treatment of slaves by their Southern masters was another. Even those who might be considered "good" masters believed slavery to be divinely sanctioned. While they agreed that slaves should not be mistreated, they believed that these "isolated" incidents could be dealt with locally and did not warrant a war.

It is important to keep in mind that, in terms of human cruelty, American slavery was on a par with other atrocities such as the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, or the genocide in Rwanda. Not one of the modern, intra-church disagreements even comes close to the inhumanity of those conflicts. In the case of Southern slavery, however, most slave owners were Christians who justified their practices by what they believed were the "plain" teachings of the Bible. Thus, while underestimating the inhumanity of Southern slavery and embracing the *a-priori* position that modern slavery is incompatible with the grand biblical principle of God's love, it is important for us to draw some lessons for today. Otherwise, we could be in danger of fulfilling George Santayana's aphorism: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

So what can be learned from this investigation? Most importantly, it should be recognized that everyone approaches Scripture with a variety of presuppositions, which are shaped by a person's prenatal and childhood experiences, their personalities, their interactions with families and friends, their education and by the media. As a result, every person approaches Scripture with a different set of intellectual tools. I am convinced that there are no two individuals who are perfectly hermeneutically aligned. This is what I consider "hermeneutical misalignment," a concept that there are too many variables in our individual development for Christians to all arrive at identical understandings of controversial biblical passages. Even Ellen White suggested that "all cannot see in the same line of vision" (1979:14). While a group of believers should agree on the grand themes of the Bible and arrive at a set of fundamental teachings of Scriptures based on these themes, and while it is reasonable to expect that all who belong to a group or denomination agree with its fundamental beliefs, it is both futile and harmful to the community to expect that everyone agree on the interpretation of all Scriptural passages. "We cannot then take a position," wrote Ellen White, "that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of the Scripture in the very same shade of light" (1993:150).[3]

Within the unifying boundaries of agreement on fundamental Christian doctrines, hermeneutical misalignment is a good and desired phenomenon.

It is, after all, a result of God's design for human individuality. Thus, Christians functioning in an environment characterized by the grand themes of God's love for humanity and human love for God and for one another (John 3:16; Matt 22:37–39) should celebrate hermeneutical misalignment.[4] Within such an environment, believers can be encouraged to recognize the reality of its existence and to explore its benefits, including mutual understanding, possible adjustment of one's presuppositions, constructive conflict, theological development, and the joy of belonging to a community of diverse people who believe in the concept of "present truth."

While necessary and beneficial, hermeneutical misalignment can also produce unhealthy conflict. This occurs when the overarching principles of God's love towards humanity and human love towards one another are neglected within the community. Unhealthy conflict also occurs when individual believers or small group of believers within a denomination, become locked up within the prison of their own worldview, at times even denying that they approach Scripture from within a particular worldview. Under such circumstances, dogmatism trumps other values; the aphorism "my way or the highway" becomes a reality, personal and communal growth is stifled, theological development suffers, and the concept of diversity becomes anathema. Ultimately, such communities tear themselves apart, all for the sake of an ideology. A lonely driver with a sticker on his hatch door proclaiming "The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!" becomes just that—a lonely driver on the highway of his or her own presuppositions.

Second, considering the reasons outlined above, it behooves us to prayerfully acknowledge the fact that none of us approaches the biblical text with a blank slate. We must each ask for the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize, understand, and, if necessary, give us strength to align our presuppositions according to God's will (White 1913:463). Recognizing that our worldview, as well as the worldview of those who oppose our positions, influences the reading of the Scripture may help with healing wounds and moving forward.

Third, we must always be aware that *Eisegesis* is an ever-present danger for all students of the Bible. Like the Christians of the antebellum South, all who study the Scriptures face the temptation to "bring certain Scriptures together, and interpret passages of the Bible, so as to give coloring to [our] views." We must thus be careful not to engage in "wresting the Scriptures to make them appear to say that which they do not say" (White 1946:153).

And finally, we must humbly acknowledge that God might choose culture to provide a wake-up call for Christians. It is not always a one-way street. Christians are continually admonished not to "conform to

the patterns of this world" (Rom 12:2) and to reject the practices that are *clearly* contrary to the Word of God. At the same time, however, we must be aware that God can use culture to nudge Christians to carefully re-examine their "cherished opinions" (White 1900:91) in the light of Scripture. This is what happened during the Second Great Awakening. The Northern culture of anti-slavery, whether influenced by the Bible or secular humanism, ultimately prevailed in the South and throughout the Western world. A testimony to this fact is that, today, atheists and Christians alike agree that slavery was an inhumane institution and a stain upon the fabric of the American nation.

Notes

[1]Charles B. Hodge was a staunchly Calvinist scholar who is widely regarded today as one of the fathers of modern American fundamentalism. He is known as a systematician of Princeton theology, who defended the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures (Olson 1999:558, 559; Hodge 1940:155–171). At this point it must be clarified that verbal inspiration and inerrancy does not necessarily correlate with support for slavery. During Hodge's own time, and later, many conservative theologians supported verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures but strongly objected to slavery.

[2]John Peckham deals with this phenomenon in depth in his masterful study of God's love. *The Love of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[3]For an excellent exposition of Ellen G. White's views on Scriptural interpretation, as well as the issues of unity and diversity, see Jerry Moon's article "Unity in Diversity" in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. by Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 1241–1244.

[4]Ellen White wrote: "One man may be conversant with the Scriptures, and some particular portion of the Scripture is especially appreciated by him because he has seen it in a certain striking light; another sees another portion as very important; and thus one and another presents the very points to the people that appear of highest value. *This is all in the order of God*" (White 1993:149–150, emphasis supplied).

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