

Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson, "Southern Slavery As It Was" (1996)

Introduction

The South has long carried the stigma of racism and bigotry. The fact that slavery ended abruptly because the South lost the War serves to reinforce this common stereotype. For this reason, most Southerners take little pride in their nation's role in the War Between the States. The only thing they can boast about is how well they fought — but they are not allowed to defend the cause itself. They have been told that they cannot talk of principle or speak of righteousness. The institution of slavery has so blackened the Southern position that nothing about the South can be viewed as good or right. Slavery is considered to be such a wicked practice that it alone is sufficient to answer the question of which side was right in that unfortunate war. The fact that the South practiced slavery is enough to cause many moderns to feel they do not even have to listen to the various biblical and constitutional arguments that swirled around that controversy....

How could men have supported slavery? The question is especially difficult when we consider that these were men who lived in a pervasively Christian culture. We have all heard of the heartlessness — the brutalities, immoralities, and cruelties — that were supposedly inherent in the system of slavery. We have heard how slave families were broken up, of the forcible rape of slave women, of the brutal beatings that were a commonplace, about the horrible living conditions, and of the unrelenting work schedule and back-breaking routine — all of which go together to form our impression of the crushing oppression which was slavery in the South. The truthfulness of this description has seldom been challenged.

The point of this small booklet is to establish that this impression is largely false. It is important to note, however, that the impression is not *entirely* false. The truth is, Southern slavery is open to criticism because it did not follow the biblical pattern at every point. Some of the state laws regulating slavery could not be defended biblically (the laws forbidding the teaching of reading and writing, for example). One cannot defend the abuse some slaves had to endure. None can excuse the immorality some masters and overseers indulged in with some slave women. The separation of families that sometimes occurred was deplorable. These were sad realities in the Southern system. Our purpose here is *not* to defend any such practices — where and when they occurred.... But the question still needs to be asked, "How *widespread* were these instances of unbiblical and ungodly treatment on the part of Southern slave holders?" We have condemned such abuses, but were they commonplace or exceptional?... There has been a great deal of falsehood paraded about in the pretense of truth. The South has been stigmatized and slandered, and generations have been misled over the true nature of the "peculiar institution" and, as a consequence, they have not understood the true nature of the South in general. We must know the truth about slavery.

The True Nature of Slavery in the South

If slavery had been as bad as the abolitionists maintained that it was, and as we have been reminded countless times on supposedly good authority, then why were there not thousands of rabid abolitionists demanding an end to the evil? Or, even more to the point, why were there not hundreds of slave rebellions?... The answer would shock and dismay the vast majority of our nation who have been carefully schooled in abolitionist propaganda.... Judge George L. Christian observed, "In the first place slavery, as it existed in the South, was patriarchal in its character; the slaves (servants, as we called them) were regarded and treated as members of the families to which they severally belonged; with rare exceptions, they were treated with kindness and consideration, and frequently the relations between the slave and his owner, were those of real affection and confidence"¹....

There were specific roles for blacks and whites, and each "knew their place" as it were, but what is often overlooked is the high level of interaction between the races which was a common and everyday experience. Slavery as it existed in the South was not an adversarial relationship with pervasive racial animosity. Because of its dominantly patriarchal character, it was a relationship based upon mutual affection and confidence. There has never been a multi-racial society which has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world. The credit for this must go to the predominance of Christianity. The gospel enabled men who were distinct in nearly every way, to live and work together, to be friends and often intimates. This happened to such an extent that moderns indoctrinated on "civil rights" propaganda would be thunderstruck to know the half of it....

The [Works Progress Administration] *Narratives* consistently portray an amazingly benign picture of Southern plantation life. Affection for former masters and mistresses is expressed in terms of unmistakable devotion. Testimony to the good treatment, kindness, and gentleness of many so-called "heartless slave holders" abounds. Many of the old slaves express a wistful desire to be back at the plantation. Slave life was to them a life of plenty, of simple pleasures, of food, clothes, and good medical care. In the narratives taken as a whole, there is no pervasive cry of rage and anguish. We see no general expression of bitterness and outrage....

R.L. Dabney, William S. White, Charles Colcock Jones, and many other defenders of the South had long acknowledged the existence of mistreatment and wickedness among some slave holders. But they nevertheless maintained that these instances were relatively rare and infrequent. Dabney is careful to note: "Now, while we freely admit

¹ Judge George L. Christian, "Report of the History Committee of the U.C.V, Made to the Reunion of Confederate Veterans, held at Richmond, VA, May 30th–June 3rd, 1907."

that there were in the South, instances of criminal barbarity in corporal punishments, they were very infrequent, and were sternly reprobated by public opinion."²

[I]t is not surprising that most southern blacks (both free and slave) *supported the Southern war effort*.... [M]any Southern blacks supported the South because of long established bonds of affection and trust that had been forged over generations with their white masters and friends. They gladly supported the war effort with food, labor, and sometimes fighting. Their loyalty to the principles of the South rivaled and was sometimes even greater than that of some whites. For example, a slave named Robin was captured with his master during Morgan's raid into Ohio. He was separated from his master in prison, and was offered his liberty several times in exchange for taking an Oath of Loyalty to the Union. He refused saying, "I will never disgrace my family by such an oath."³ Remember, his "family" was his master's family. A number of servants captured at Vicksburg were offered their freedom with Federal protection but refused, choosing rather to be sent to Northern prisons to suffer with their fellow (white) soldiers.⁴ After their capture, a group of white Virginia slave owners and their slaves were asked if they would take the loyalty oath in exchange for their freedom. A free black among them stated indignantly, "I can't take no such oath. I'm a secesh Negro."⁵ These facts, and countless others, refuse to conform to modern abolitionists' myth of a harshly oppressed people who constantly seethed with resentment. The fact that there were very few slave uprisings in the South further confirms the fact that slaves were well-treated and often had a deep loyalty to, and affection for, their masters.

Unexpected Blessings

Slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the War or since. Whatever its failures, slavery produced in the South a degree of mutual affection between the races which will never be achieved through any federally-mandated efforts. Listen to a few examples:

George Fleming of Laurens, South Carolina said: "I longed to see Marse Sam Fleming. Lawd, chile, dat's de best white man what ever breathed de good air. I still goes to see whar he buried every time I gits a chance to venture t'wards Laurens. As old as I is, I still draps a tear when I sees his grave, fer he sho' was good to me and all his other niggers."⁶ And, with this use of the word *nigger*, it is important for us to remember the mutable

² Judge George L. Christian, "Report of the History Committee of the U.C.V, Made to the Reunion of Confederate Veterans, held at Richmond, VA, May 30th–June 3rd, 1907," p. 221.

³ Richard Rollins, "Black Southerners in Grey," *Journal of Confederate History* (Murfreesboro, TN: Southern Heritage Press, 1994), vol. XI, p. 7.

⁴ Richard Rollins, "Black Southerners in Grey," *Journal of Confederate History* (Murfreesboro, TN: Southern Heritage Press, 1994), vol. XI, p. 12.

⁵ Richard Rollins, "Black Southerners in Grey," *Journal of Confederate History* (Murfreesboro, TN: Southern Heritage Press, 1994), vol. XI, p. 12.

⁶ James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days* (New York, NY Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988) p. 253.

nature of human language. What today constitutes a gross insult did not have the same connotations a century ago.

Clara Davis of Alabama said this: "Dem was de good ole days. How I longs to be back dar wid my ole folks an' a playin' wid de chillun down by de creek. 'Taint nothin' lak it today, nawzuh. . . . Dey tells me dat when a pusson crosses dat ribber, de Lawd gives him whut he wants. I done tol' de Lawd I don't want nothin' much . . . only my home, white folks. I don't think dats much to ax' for. I suppose he'll send me back dar. I been a-waitin' for him to call."⁷

Adeline Johnson, Winnsboro, South Carolina: "I hope and prays to get to heaven. I'll be satisfied to see my Savior that my old marster worshiped and my husband preached about. I want to be in heaven with all my white folks, just to wait on them, and love them, and serve them, sorta like I did in slavery time. That will be enough heaven for Adeline."⁸

There is a nobility to these old servants that humbles us: Nicey Pugh says, "I was born a slave but I ain't neber been one. I've been a worker for good peoples. You wouldn't calls dat bein' a slave would you, white folks?"⁹

Conclusion

None need lament the passing of slavery. But who cannot but lament the damage to both white and black that has occurred as a consequence of the *way* it was abolished? We are forced to say that, in many ways, the remedy which has been applied has been far worse than the disease ever was. The issue of slavery was used to provoke a revolution in 1861. That revolution has continued to this day, and slavery has *increased* in our land as a result. It is time for us to stand and declare the truth about slavery and to expose the failures of the abolitionist worldview. Having done this, we must go on to proclaim the only truth which can set all men truly free from slavery—the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Source

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⁷ *Alabama Narratives*, pp. 109, 110.

⁸ Belinda Harmence, *Before Freedom* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1989), p. 56.

⁹ *Alabama Narratives*, p. 325.