
CHURCH HISTORY

“Now these things took place as examples for us...”

Slavery in the U.S.

- The first states to outlaw slavery were Pennsylvania in 1780 and Massachusetts in 1783.
- In 1800 there were significant slave populations in New York, New Jersey and Delaware, with little or no slaves in the other northern states.
- At the start of the Civil War in 1860, there were 4,000,000 slaves in the US with essentially all residing in the southern states or new territories.
- The total population in the 1860 census was about 31,000,000. The slaves were counted in the census.
- For purpose of taxation and congressional representation, a slave was counted as 3/5 person in the total.
- Of the states that seceded from the Union, 32% of households owned slaves.

The Civil War and the Church

Lesson 20

The church in the 1800's saw great growth but also faced one of its greatest challenges. So did the nation. The Civil War (1860-1865) could be described as our nation's darkest hour. It tested every part of a nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Abraham Lincoln further stated in his famous Gettysburg Address that this great Civil War was "testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." As the nation was ripped apart by the conflict, the church did not escape the same bloodshed, bitterness and divisiveness.

Historical accounts of the Restoration Movement often minimize the effect of the conflict upon the Lord's church during this time, concluding the conflict was survived without major division. But historians like Dr. David E. Harrell conclude the wounds were much deeper and many endured far past the war. (I depend heavily on his book, [Quest For A Christian America](#) for material on this topic.)

When this period of Restoration History is written about, the two great dividing issues usually emphasized are the American Missionary Society (formed in 1849) and instrumental music. They are at the forefront of divisive issues and rightly placed there. But the war must not be neglected for its damage to the movement and the issues the churches were forced to face. Two main issues arise in the mid-18th century directly related to the conflict. Let's examine them.

Slavery

Though a part of the nation from the very beginning, slavery is not dealt with early on. There were people on both sides of the issue but it is not brought to a head for 75 years.

When the Restoration movement began, social issues were not really addressed. Their fervor was centered upon proclaiming the need for unity among Christians, the fight against the creeds of men, and the commitment to the Bible as the final authority. As Harrell observes the church simply "gulped down slavery, along

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Arguments Brethren Made for Slavery

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As the slavery issue became more intense there were attempts made by brethren on both sides to appeal to scripture to defend their positions. Some of the specious arguments made in favor of slavery included:

- Slavery existed in both Old and New Testaments without condemnation. Instructions are even included on how slaves should be treated. A frustrated Benjamin Franklin wrote if neither Jesus or Paul had ever stated whether slavery was right or wrong, who was he to do something they didn't?
- Slavery had existed throughout human history and was the natural state of mankind.
- A black slave was not considered capable of caring for himself or his family. Thus, servitude under a benevolent and Christian master was best for a slave.
- Slavery had resulted on more Africans becoming Christians than any time in history.
- The Supreme Court Dred Scott decision had ruled that blacks had no legal standing in courts and were property of their masters. Thus the government had ruled on the matter.

with every other social problem in the exuberant and youthful society, to be digested later - when there was time.

Evolving Views

In the beginning, slavery was abhorred and rejected by most leaders of the Restoration Movement. Barton Stone had a few slaves early in his life but soon released them. Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell did the same. All three wrote extensively about the inhumanity of the practice and its inconsistency with Christian principles. The same attitude was seen among a great number of Christians during that time, but far from all. One survey of churches in the period showed Disciples numbered among the churches with the highest numbers of slaves. Most Christians of the period would have contended for the equality of all men. But there was little doubt they considered the black man a second class citizen.

There were black churches during this time, but the more common practice was that all worshipped together. However, a separate area, often an upper gallery, was provided for slaves. The solution which many of the movement desired was freedom and colonization. This involved a gradual emancipation of the slave population to limit damage to the economy, and returning the slaves to a free colony in Africa. Liberia had been established as such a colony on the west coast of Africa by America. Its capital, Monrovia, was named for President James Monroe. This solution actually had wide appeal in the country but never proved very successful. What brought the issue to a head was the work of the abolitionists.

Abolitionists pressed for the immediate freedom of all slaves. The nation had tried to compromise on the issue by balancing the number of newly admitted states between slave and free. But the pressure from the abolitionists and even violent attempts to force the issue (ex. John Brown and the Harper's Ferry incident) began to make it clear compromise would not be possible.

The differing views on the topic in the churches will eventually divide every leading denomination by the beginning of the war. Among the Disciples leadership, the concern was trying to find a way to keep the church from being ripped apart. Their efforts at compromise caused many of them to nominally accept slavery and try to put the subject in the realm of political, not religious issues. Then each could practice his own belief and keep the church united. But there were radical preachers who openly defended slavery (where masters would be benevolent in their treatment of their slaves) as being good for both white and black. These preachers also became quite adamant in condemning the abolitionists as dividers in the church who should be rejected for their disruptive actions.

Just like the nation as a whole, the two radical extremes led to bitter acrimony in the church and divisions became inevitable.

Brother Against Brother

When the war came, even preachers fought on both sides. There was more at work in some minds than slavery. Many on both sides believed they fought to defend their homes and families from invading armies. It was a matter of self preservation.

Many preachers enlisted, some as chaplains, but others as officers leading regiments. Many were killed.

Ed Harrell's summation of this horrible time is poignant:

"In sum, the disciples behaved little different from most other religious groups during the Civil War. Christians North and Christians South prayed as they fought. They shared the hates and hopes and hardships and labors of their kinsmen and neighbors. In the heat of human passion Disciples killed their brethren."

The divisions were mostly regional and would become obvious after the war by the directions the two sides took. The horrible aftermath of the war, particularly in the south, would only cause greater acrimony between regions and separations between churches in the Restoration movement. But the same was happening in most denominations, also.

Pacifism

The second issue forced upon the church by the war was the Christian's relationship to government especially serving in the military. Pacifism was actually raised as an issue by the War of 1812. A national movement was led by a newly established American Peace Society, whose articles Campbell occasionally printed in his paper, *The Millennial Harbinger*. Stone wrote that the war and slavery were the "greatest evils in the world." The topic became heated again during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).

The prevailing view among the movements leaders in the early 19th century was pacifism. They believed taking up arms clearly conflicted with the principles of New Testament Christianity. Not all believed the Christian should reject any role in government (Alexander Campbell served as a delegate to Virginia's Constitutional Convention). But, clearly, the divisive issue was whether a Christian could serve in the military.

Just like with slavery, as the conflict drew nearer the lines became drawn, testing the unity of the brethren. Many journals became more acrimonious about the topic. But most of the leaders in the movement were moderate pacifists, not wanting to make the issue divisive. But the more radical elements in the country, on both sides of the issue, gained the upper hand and war became inevitable.

Like the nation, the church was split on the issue by region for obvious reasons. Staunch defense of the right to own slaves was mainly found in the south. The strength of the anti-slavery movement was in the North, where there were few slaves. There were brethren on each side of the issue who defended either "forcible preservation" of the union, or the right to forcibly secede to preserve their right to decide for themselves on slavery. There was going to be no peaceful solution.

In the end the neutrals lost out on both sides of the topic. The war came and many churches ceased to fellowship one another, again basically along regional lines.

The effect of these two issues would continue after the war. Churches in the two regions began to go in different directions. The southern churches continued in a tradition of strict adherence to the scriptures. The northern churches began to drift toward an emphasis on social issues and less on strict biblical authority. This consequence of the war will play a major

role in the issues that will clearly divide the church by the end of the century.

The pressure of the culture can sometimes lead churches to drift from biblical principles. Such enormous social issues like those discussed in this lesson illustrate that point. It also illustrates the great importance of every generation being willing to patiently, diligently and lovingly study divisive issues with a desire to practice what the scriptures teach and work to achieve Jesus' desire "that they may all be one." I pray our generation will be able to do the same.