

Presbyterian Attitudes Towards Abolitionists (1860)

The Presbyterian Church in the United States, like the country, itself, was divided over the issue of slavery. Well known Presbyterian ministers such as Charles Finney, John Rankin, and Albert Barnes publicly opposed slavery and advocated for abolition, while other ministers and church leaders such as Henry Van Dyke, Benjamin Morgan Palmer and James Henley Thornwell defended slavery, claiming the institution was sanctioned by their faith and by God.

Most white American Presbyterians were of Scotch-Irish heritage, settling in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Of these early American Presbyterians, many lived among slaveholders and likewise, owned, traded, or were overseers of enslaved African Americans. Opposition to slavery, however, was not uncommon among Presbyterians. As early as 1787, the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia declared its support for abolition, and in 1818, the General Assembly of the church condemned slavery as going against moral correctness and the laws of God.

Although the schism of 1837 that divided the Presbyterian Church into the Old School and New School principally came about due to doctrinal differences and conflicts over religious revivalism, the issue of slavery also played a role. Old School Presbyterian, Henry Van Dyke of Brooklyn, (author of Document 2 in this set) was not only sympathetic to slaveholders, but was staunchly anti-abolition, claiming that abolitionists were divisive and unchristian in their methods. On the other hand, renowned revivalist Presbyterian, Charles Finney, and other New School Presbyterians such as Albert Barnes and Lyman Beecher (the father of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author, Harriet Beecher Stowe) were adamantly opposed to slavery and supported the cause of abolitionism. African American Presbyterian ministers such as Henry Highland Garnet, James W.C. Pennington, and Theodore Wright all spoke to their congregations about the evils of slavery and the need to reach out and help their enslaved brethren.

After the start of the Civil War, the Presbyterian Church would split again, this time, between the North and the South. But as of 1860, Presbyterian attitudes toward slavery did not divide neatly along the Mason-Dixon Line. The Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 had all increased tension between pro-slavery Americans and abolitionists. Also, radical abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 seized the attention of the nation and foreshadowed the bloody civil war that would begin less than two years later. As with many other Protestant denominations in the United States, the Presbyterian Church did not have a unified perspective on the issue of slavery, and individual ministers and parishioners grappled with the issue in their own ways.

Document 1: Daniel Rice Sermon on Harper's Ferry

Rice, Daniel. *Harper's Ferry ... Its Lessons: A Sermon Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church, Lafayette, Indiana, Dec. 11, 1859* (Lafayette, IN: Luse & Wilson's Steam Book and Job Printing, 1860).

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**See especially pages 15-18. This sermon was preached at a New School congregation in support of John Brown and his cause (although the minister does not condone the attack on Harper's Ferry).*

Source note: Daniel Rice (1816-1889) was a Presbyterian minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Lafayette, Indiana at the time he gave this sermon. Born in Conway, Massachusetts, Rice attended Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts and was ordained in 1842. After 14 years as a minister in Lafayette, Rice moved on to Minnesota, where he was a professor, college president, and pastor.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Who is his audience? What attitudes towards the raid on Harper's Ferry might the author's audience have?
2. What are the two greatest lessons of Harper's Ferry, according to Rice (page 15)?
3. Which of John Brown's character traits does Rice point to as demonstrating "that in his bosom there beat a noble Christian heart" (page 16)? Why might Rice want to paint Brown as a good Christian in his sermon?
4. What is John Brown's message in this passage that Rice quoted from a letter Brown wrote just before his execution: "I cannot remember of a night so dark as to hinder the coming of day; nor a storm so furious or dreadful as to prevent the return of warm sunshine and a cloudless sky" (page 16)?
5. What is Rice's opinion about the methods John Brown used at Harper's Ferry to try to bring about abolition (pages 17-18)?
6. Why was the raid on Harper's Ferry, carried out by just 22 men, so terrifying for slaveholders in the south, according to Rice (page 18)?
7. Near the end of his sermon, Rice says that Americans must "SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE,—and slavery shall end in peace, and not in blood (page 18)." How likely is it that Rice's congregation expected a peaceful end to slavery in the United States, at the end of 1859 when they heard this sermon?

Document 2: Henry Van Dyke Sermon on Abolitionism

Van Dyke, Henry Jackson. *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism: a Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn, on Sabbath Evening, Dec. 9th, 1860* (New York: G.F. Nesbit & Co., 1860).
PHS Call number: PAM E 449 .V242 1860

**See especially pages 20-21, 23, 30-34, and 36.*

Source note: The zealous language and seemingly extreme tactics of some abolitionists brought about criticism from many Americans in the early to mid-19th century, including some Protestant ministers. Henry Van Dyke (1822-1891) was a Presbyterian minister of the Old School branch. In this 1860 sermon, he states that slavery was a necessary step in bringing Africans towards Christianity and that abolitionists were dividing the country. Educated at Princeton Theological Seminary, Van Dyke spent most of his career in Brooklyn, New York. His anti-abolitionist stance was not uncommon in the north—a reminder that division over the institution of slavery did not fall neatly along the Mason-Dixon line.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Who is his audience? How might his audience differ from that of Document 1's author, Daniel Rice?
2. Under what conditions, according to Van Dyke, is slavery "permitted and regulated by the Divine law, under both the Jewish and Christian dispensations (page 20)"?
3. What common and long-used apology for the institution of slavery does Van Dyke use in his sermon, on page 20? How do you think this argument was received in his Brooklyn, NY church?
4. Why does Van Dyke sympathize with the pro-secession ministers Dr. Thornwell of South Carolina, and Dr. Palmer of New Orleans (page 21)?
5. What rebuttal does Van Dyke offer to the abolitionist's argument that "the idea of property in man blots out his manhood, and degrades him to the level of a brute or a stone (page 23)"?
6. What purpose might Van Dyke have in claiming "the States in which Abolitionism has achieved its most signal triumphs, are at the same time the great strongholds of infidelity in the land (page 30)"? How does this point support his larger argument about the evils of abolitionism?
7. Van Dyke quotes from an article in the Princeton Review that foretells a violent clash over the issue of slavery, a conflict that will tear the country apart. How does Van Dyke's opinion on this subject differ from Rice's? How important is the timing of Van Dyke's sermon, versus the timing of Rice's to the writer's attitudes about how the end of slavery will come about (page 33)?
8. Why, according to Van Dyke, is the issue of slavery "a conflict that will run the ploughshare of division through every state and neighborhood in the land (page 36)"?

Document 3: W.E.B. Du Bois Secondary Source

Du Bois, W.E.B., “The Legacy of John Brown,” in *John Brown*. (published 1909)

Source note: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) was a civil rights leader as well as a sociologist, writer, and editor. Du Bois was born in Massachusetts to a Haitian-born Bahamian father and a mother who traced her lineage to an African freedman who fought in the Revolutionary War. Du Bois was the first African American student to graduate from his racially integrated public high school, and went on to get his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. (in history) from Harvard University. Du Bois wrote beautifully, effectively, and powerfully about the life of African Americans in America, and about the wide-ranging effects of racism that pervade the African American experience. Du Bois was a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and his works are still widely read and studied today.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author, and when did the author write the document? What was his purpose for writing the document?
2. Why did John Brown’s imprisonment and writings while in prison do “more to shake the foundations of slavery than any single thing that ever happened in America (page 365)”?
3. According to Du Bois, what is John Brown’s attitude toward clergymen (like the author of Document 2, Van Dyke) who support or make excuses for slavery (pages 372-373)?
4. How did “the splendid scientific work of Darwin, Weissman, Galton and others” increase and justify American racism in the mid-19th century (pages 375-376)?
5. What societal tensions arise from the white supremacist impulse to “keep these black people in their places” (pages 376-377)?
6. According to Du Bois, philanthropists at the time of the Civil War predicted that formerly enslaved African Americans would arrive in the middle class within 40 years, while slaveholders smugly predicted that former slaves would “retrograde and die.” What, according to Du Bois, actually happened to African Americans after emancipation (page 377)?
7. How does Du Bois explain the differences in cultural attainment between racially and geographically diverse groups of people (pages 378-379)? How is this similar to the ways we view different cultures today? How is it different?
8. Du Bois points out that the Emancipation Proclamation was just the first step in freeing America’s enslaved people. What were the other steps taken toward this goal (page 386)?
9. Near the end of the document, Du Bois writes that “the effort was great and the determination of the south to pay no single cent or deed for past error save by force, led in the revolution of 1876 to the triumph of reaction.” What historical events is Du Bois pointing to, and how do they relate to John Brown’s efforts to abolish slavery (pages 386-387)?