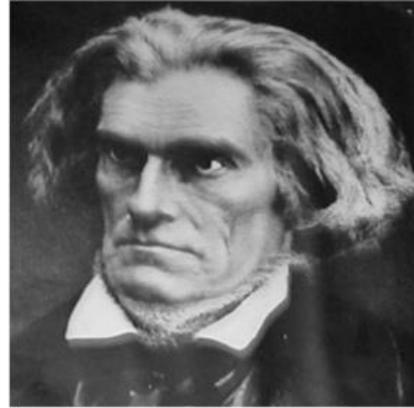


## Don't blame Jesus Christ or Christianity for the view in America's antebellum South that racial enslavement was a fundamental good

### Pro-Slavery Ideology

- \* In the 30 years before the outbreak of the Civil War, even as Northern criticism of the "peculiar institution" began to deepen, pro-slavery thought came to dominate Southern public life
- \* Fewer and fewer white Southerners shared the view, common among the Founding Fathers, that slavery was, at best, "a necessary evil."
- \* Rather they viewed it as a "positive good."



1837: John C. Calhoun:

"Many in the South once believed that slavery was a moral and political evil... That folly and delusion are gone; we see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world."

As a Bible-believing Christian evangelical, it pains me to see the love, grace, truth, and beauty that Christianity offers become bastardized by our culture. In these articles, I have noted ten periods in human history when socio-economic-political (SEP) influences have adulterated the beautiful truths of Christianity. These truths include the fact that every person, regardless of SEP factors, possesses eternal dignity—so much so that God became incarnate and died on the Cross for every person (Jn 1:29; 1 John 2:2). Every person, without exception, has eternal worth before God.

History provides an excellent guide to understanding SEP influences. Not only is this noted by the philosopher George Santayana ("Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"), the writer Mark Twain ("History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme"), but God's Word as well (cf., Psalm 106; Acts 7).

In previous articles, I have outline ten socio-economic-politico (SEP) hijackings of Christianity: (1) by Rome/Constantine (313), (2) by the crusades (1100-1300), (3) by the inquisitions (1231-1834), (4) by colonialism (1400-1800), (5) by antebellum America (1650-1863), (6) by reconstruction (1863-1877), (7) by Jim Crow South (1877-1960), (8) by Nazi Germany (1930-1940), (9) by consumer/prosperity Gospel (1950-2018), and (10) by modern political Christianity on the Right and the Left (1950-2018).

In the last article, I touched on (5) above. I noted that although Southerners in antebellum America were Bible-believers, their basic ethics were taken from Greco-Roman culture. As far as the view of society and others, they were more Greek and Roman than Christian even though

the regularly read their bibles and were faithful church attendees. Without philosophical realism, with its orientation to reality as such, history has shown that even the most committed Christian will interpret the Bible according to his SEP leanings. This problem continues to plague evangelicalism to this day.

In the last article, I pointed out how the Bible-saturated South was also saturated with Greco-Roman architecture (mansions, government buildings, schools, colleges, memorials and even churches), testifying to the influence and preference of these ancient ideas (aristocracy and subjugation) over the Christian ideals (humility and love). Although antebellum South has been called “the Bible belt,” meaning that the Bible and Christ held everything together the way a belt does, the Bible was more like a shawl to give cover to a Southern culture that in some ways were more Greek in its essence than Christian.

Of course, the Greco-Roman architecture that dotted the South is not in itself evidence that these pagan influences were overwhelming for Bible-believing Christians of the antebellum South. More evidence is needed. This article provides such evidence. The first line of evidence is Roman, with its Stoic emphasis on landed aristocracy, nobility, lack of emotion, and dignified generosity to natural inferiors. Instead of the Christian ethic of agape toward one’s neighbor, the Roman “noble” ethic that was accepted by the vast majority was “noblesse oblige” (“nobility obliges”). Basically, this ethic means that one must act with the nobility of his social status and his birth and must act with honor, dignity, and kindness toward those of a lesser status.

This ethic does not confer worth upon the person receiving kind treatment, but rather focuses on the duty of the person of the higher social status to act benevolently toward those oppressed or in need because it is appropriate for him to do so, and to act inappropriately is shameful. The focus is on acting honorably rather than seeking justice in society. Instead of loving others and giving others dignity, the focus was on the superior acting in a very dignified manner. In essence, this may look dignified, but it is nothing short of self-love of one’s own honor.

The second line of evidence is in Greek culture. The Greeks taught that slavery was expedient, right, and natural. Greeks taught that from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection and others for rule. Moreover, this ruling principle originated in the constitution of the universe. According to the ancient Greek way of thinking, man was divided into two classes, a small one of masters and a numerous one of slaves.

In making the link between ancient Greeks and the culture of antebellum South, John Stuart Mill notes, “Did not the slaveowners of Southern United States maintain the same doctrine, with all of fanaticism with which men cling to the theories that justify their passions and legitimate their personal interests? Did they not call heaven and earth to witness that the dominion of the white man over the black is natural, that the black race is by nature incapable of freedom, and marked out for slavery? some even going so far as to say that freedom of manual laborers is an unnatural order of things anywhere” (“The Subjection of Women,” *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*). What a radical contrast to the views of Christ and Christian morality! And it is called out by a non-Christian, and rightly so.

Lest one think that the above was a minor view in the South, consider the words of John C. Calhoun in a speech from the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1837 as it echoes the Greek natural slavery argument when he declared the “positive good” of slavery:

"I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding states between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.”

He would go on to say that it was not only a “positive good” within the natural order but also a benefit to the slave. This is nothing short of a self-justifying argument that race-based African slavery was a moral, positive good because it raises the level of prosperity of the slaves by bringing them to America, introducing them to Christianity, and caring for their health and well-being.

Many White Southerners believed that Christ wanted them to subjugate blacks for their own economic benefit and also for the uplifting of an inferior race. This travesty is what happens when one marries Christianity to the world’s SEP concerns. Moreover, it was this Christian/pagan mix that provided the basic guiding hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible, as evidenced by how the Word of God was cited to support such unChristian teachings as race-based slavery.

Let us learn from the past, let us strive to keep the grace, love, and ethics of Jesus Christ pure without any admixture of paganism. Let us strive to bring Christ’s salt and light to our ailing Wonderful Republic. Let us show the world the love and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for all.

In His Matchless Grace,

Pastor Don Hargrove