

Stuart Robinson: A Pro-slavery Presbyterian in Canada West¹

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On a February Sunday evening, a crowd of men and women crammed into a meeting-hall to hear a stocky, balding, square-jawed man² preach from Leviticus 25:

Both thy bondmen and thy bondmaids shall be of the heathen which are round about you: of them shall ye BUY BONDMEN and bondmaids. And they shall be your POSSESSION (property), and ye shall take them as AN INHERITANCE for your children after you to INHERIT THEM FOR A POSSESSION; they shall be your bondmen forever.³

It was a perfect text for a congregation of planters in antebellum South Carolina. But the scene unfolding in the crowded building was far removed from that slave-holding Southern state. Many in the audience were students at the University of Toronto. The meeting-hall stood in Canada West's premier city. The year was 1864.

The pro-slavery preacher on the platform was Reverend Stuart Robinson, a Presbyterian from the border state of Kentucky. Robinson had fled his home state in 1862. Shortly after his arrival to Toronto, a former student had rented the "Mechanics Institute Hall" and had invited his mentor to preach there on Sundays. The quasi-church soon boasted an organized choir, and on several occasions the auditorium was filled to overflowing. Some of those in attendance were Southern exiles. Many, how-

ever, were British North Americans.

Anti-slavery activists were less welcoming. Speaking from the pulpit of Toronto's Wesleyan Methodist Church, Reverend W.F. Clarke ridiculed Robinson's biblical defense of slavery, then ruminated that he had "little patience and charity for people trained in a free land, and instructed in a gospel of liberty, who leave their own pastors and churches to sit under the ministrations of one who is an avowed slaveholder." Letters to the *Toronto Globe* echoed Reverend Clarke's consternation. According to one concerned Torontonians, Robinson was "undermining the principles of our young men . . . and poisoning our youth."⁴

Controversy was nothing new for Robinson – it was almost a constant in his career as a Presbyterian minister. But Robinson's story is interesting for other reasons. A study of his life provides a partial understanding of the way in which some Protestants portrayed God as an advocate for the bondage of a people. Robinson's success in Toronto also indicates that a mix of biblically fundamentalist Calvinism and pro-slavery resonated with some citizens of Canada West. Despite their instruction in a "gospel of liberty," Torontonians left their own ministers for a preacher who endorsed slavery. The theology that drew them was not original. Robinson's views followed those of the American South's foremost theologian, James Henley Thornwell. His scholastic, biblically fundamentalist version of Presbyterian Calvinism pervaded the American slave states. But this theology, and its promoters, did not go unopposed. A fellow Presbyterian, Robert Breckinridge, argued forcefully with Robinson, and declared that emancipation was more in keeping with the Scriptures. As a result of their quarrel, Robinson left his home in Kentucky for temporary refuge in Toronto. To his surprise, he found a welcoming audience for his views. Evidently, some mid-nineteenth-century Canadians held much in common with some Americans in general, and Southerners in particular.⁵

Looking back from the late-twentieth century, it is difficult to comprehend how clergy could defend the enslavement of a people. Scholars have provided several explanations regarding the motivation of pro-slavery preachers. Some have posited that "personal greed" was the reason. Others have referred to "hegemony," portraying pro-slavery ministers as "servants of the social order" who simply followed the dictates of the planters in their congregation. But recently these facile explanations have been shown to be simply wrong. According to historian Larry Tise, personal avarice and the influence of wealthy slaveowners were negligible factors in

determining whether ministers would pen formal defenses of slavery.⁶

At the same time it is difficult to deny that pro-slavery clergy were influenced by their culture. Taking this into account historian James Oscar Farmer has elucidated a middle way between cultural and religious explanations. In *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, an award-winning study of the renowned pro-slavery Presbyterian professor and preacher James Henley Thornwell, Farmer contends that “Southern theology in the nineteenth century was the product of a dual impulse: it reflected both intellectual commitments and social compulsions.”⁷

Thornwell was the South’s foremost pro-slavery apologist, and the theology he articulated had a tremendous influence on ministers like Stuart Robinson. As Farmer points out, Thornwell helped develop methods by which Calvinist pro-slavery clergy, following the dictates of their scriptures, argued against egalitarianism and attempted to prove that hierarchical society had been the historical norm. Thornwell called for trust in the biblical revelation that approved of slavery, and decried faulty human reasoning against the institution.

Central to Thornwell’s theology were the writings of John Calvin. In fact, claims Farmer, “the view of Thornwell as the nineteenth-century’s Calvin is not unreasonable.” He notes that “his identification with the Great Reformer of Geneva was recognized both by himself and by his colleagues, all of whom were Calvinists.” It was not lost on his pupils either. Leaving one of the professor’s lectures, an exasperated student was overheard complaining, “that man, Jimmie Thornwell, finds in Calvin’s *Institutes* what John Calvin himself never thought of.”

The remark reminds historians that Thornwell’s theology was a distinctly nineteenth-century Presbyterian interpretation of the thought of John Calvin and the reformed ministers of Geneva. It also incorporated the writings of the Scottish and Westminster divines, and as a result, was informed by Baconianism and Common Sense philosophy, though these were mitigated by his recognition of the Bible as ultimate truth. But what, present-day observers might ask, made Thornwell’s contemporaries view him as the nineteenth-century successor to the sixteenth-century Reformer?

According to Farmer, the “world was, for Thornwell as for Calvin, an evil place.” The theologian placed little faith in humanity’s “goodness,” and less in its reasoning. Disregarding the Enlightenment emphasis on humankind’s capacity for knowledge, Thornwell believed that the “mysteries of God’s providence would . . . remain mysterious to fallen

man.” Of course, humanity still had an obligation to search for truth. But for Thornwell this journey was less a voyage of future discovery than an excavation of the past. As Farmer notes, he “was a Calvinist in his attitude toward theological study. He had a conservative’s reverence for the great minds of the past and recognized the importance of grounding modern scholarship on their foundations.” As a result, Thornwell indicted contemporaries who in his opinion, “made the error of bringing to theology a preconceived system and trying to harmonize the Scriptures with it.” His guide, he maintained, was that of the Reformers: Scripture alone.⁸

Farmer is virtually alone in his implicit emphasis on the importance of scholastic, biblically fundamentalist Calvinism to pro-slavery theology. In general, historians have failed to note the connection. For instance, when Larry Tise compiled and analyzed the writings, formal defenses, and sermons of 275 pro-slavery ministers in the North and South, he concluded that there was “exceedingly little that even a majority of the ministers who published defenses of slavery held in common.” He appears to have overlooked the theology of the American Presbyterian church, one of the most Calvinistic of American denominations. Tise alluded to “the continuing predominance of northern Presbyterian seminaries” in educating pro-slavery clergymen, and considered “the presence of so many [pro-slavery] Presbyterians” strange, but he did not attempt to account for their strong showing. It is notable that, despite their limited population, Presbyterians boasted a disproportionate number of pro-slavery ministers. Furthermore, when pro-slavery clergy are listed by denomination, Presbyterian churches have the dubious distinction of placing first on the roster.⁹

Of course, this does not prove that nineteenth-century Presbyterian Calvinism was the sole reason motivating theologians and clergy to defend slavery. After all, ministers of Arminian persuasion, like Methodists, were equally adept at employing Christianity in their defenses of the South’s “peculiar institution.” And a small number of committed Calvinist clergy were devoted to emancipation. Furthermore, Presbyterians were divided on the issue, and the official policy of the denomination changed with the intellectual environment. For instance, at the end of the eighteenth century, ideology influenced the Presbyterian attitude to slavery. Immediately after the American Revolution, the vast majority held abolitionist views. But by the 1830s the Presbyterian Church’s support for anti-slavery societies had dwindled. Among those challenging the church’s role in the abolitionist

movement was Thornwell who argued that operating the societies was clearly outside the church's mandate because they were not prescribed in the Bible. Opponents of Thornwell and company disagreed, and pushed the Presbyterian church to support further the abolitionist movement and benevolent societies in general. Convinced that these "liberal" Presbyterians were too corrupted to save, northern conservatives engineered a split from their New School brothers and sisters, and many southerners joined them in the formation of the "Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Old School)."¹⁰

However, some Presbyterians with anti-slavery sympathies remained in the Calvinist Old School. Robert Jefferson Breckinridge was one. An occasional anti-slavery activist, he would prove to be Stuart Robinson's nemesis. The son of John Breckinridge, a Jeffersonian of national stature, Robert was a member of the Kentucky legislature before an intense religious experience in 1832 led him to set free his slaves and enter the Presbyterian ministry. According to historian Louis Weeks, Breckinridge soon became, "without doubt the most important pastor during the period." At the same time, however, "he also proved the most irascible, the most frequent party leader in whatever fight divided Kentucky Presbyterians." His position on slavery afforded him ample opportunity for conflict. He became a spokesman for the American Colonization Society, but decided to abandon the sinking colonization ship when it foundered in the 1830s. From this time after he "vociferously advocated" what Weeks describes as "a rather moderate, anti-slavery position."¹¹ But, like many who opposed slavery, Breckinridge appears to have been more concerned with the corrupting influence of the institution on white Americans than with the injustices suffered by the slaves.¹²

In Kentucky abolitionism was a difficult principle to defend on any grounds. Although inhabitants of a border state, and home to a vocal anti-slavery minority, the vast majority of Kentuckians were pro-slavery and anti-abolitionist in sentiment. They followed the leaders of the third largest slave-owning population in the nation, and this group dominated Kentucky politics. However, while sympathetic to slavery the citizens of the border state were also committed to the Union, and their sentiments were properly reflected in the congressional election of 1861 that ensured that Kentucky would remain in the United States of America. But this decision could not close the rift that had grown among the border state's citizens. The issues leading to the Civil War and the war itself were perhaps more disruptive

there than in any other state. Cities, villages, churches and families were divided.¹³

Kentucky's Presbyterians could not avoid being torn in two. Breckinridge was central to this rending. Obtaining a position at Louisville's Danville Seminary, he remained active in Kentucky society. But his penchant for speaking out on political issues quickly brought him into conflict with those who emphasized the separation of church and state including his colleague at Danville, Stuart Robinson. Their personal battle typified the struggle in the border church, and the nation. Their clashing personalities proved to be a major source of the tension. According to Weeks, "both men were long on dedication and certain of their points of view, both short on tolerance of divergent views and open-mindedness."¹⁴ As a result, the common ground was lost and their ideological positions hardened. Firmly anti-slavery, Breckinridge attempted to ally Kentucky Presbyterians with the Union, and a continuation of (the original) Old School affiliation. Resolutely pro-slavery, Robinson sought to lead them in a neutral position through the Civil War, and into the Southern Church afterward.

Born in Strabane, County Tyrone, Ireland, in 1814, Robinson emigrated as a child to the United States, and grew up the son of a parson in the Valley of Virginia. He was introduced to the slavery debate at an early age, witnessing confrontations between abolitionists and conservatives while studying at a northern school. After graduating from Amherst he attended Union Seminary in Hampden Sidney, Virginia. In his initial pastorates, observes Weeks, "he quickly established himself as a community leader as well as a powerful preacher." He also proved to be a noted author.¹⁵

In 1858 Robinson took a position as professor of "church government and pastoral theology" at Danville. Here he published his first book, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*. Following Calvin, he viewed the "church" not as a human institution but as representative of God's covenant with humanity. Tracing the contemporary church back to antiquity, he portrayed it as the extension of the Old Testament nation of Israel and the New Testament Christian community. While Robinson appraised optimistically the American prospect for the future of the church, its separation from the secular state was of central importance. "They are the two great powers that be," he noted, "and are ordained of God to serve two distinct ends in the great scheme devised for man as

fallen.” He did not let this point rest. With the increasing conflict between the North and South undoubtedly on his mind he urged church leaders to stay clear of the fray. Concluding, he reiterated Jesus’ command to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s distinct from rendering to God the things that are God’s.”¹⁶

Breckinridge’s vision for the church was quite contrary, of course, and when the war began the two professor-pastors’ differences reached a zenith. Their battle had dissipated with Robinson’s move in 1858 to the pastorate of Louisville’s Second Presbyterian church. But the truce proved short-lived. The tension was exacerbated by Breckinridge’s Lexington speech delivered on the National Fast Day in January 1861. He declared that the duty of Kentucky was “First, To stand by the Constitution and the Union of the country, to the last extremity. Second. To prevent . . . all attempts to terrify her, into taking of any step inconsistent with her own constitution and laws.” The following year he monopolized the meeting of the Old School Assembly with his proposal that it adopt his paper “On the State of the Church and the Country.” Robinson could contain his anger no longer. Breckinridge’s staunch Unionism had no place in the Presbyterian Church, he charged, accusing his nemesis of taking “advantage of the pulpit or theological chair as a politician.” The Assembly, however, sided with Breckinridge, asking that he withdraw his proffered resignation and continue as a seminary professor.¹⁷ Temporarily defeated, Robinson returned to Louisville and penned his observations of the Assembly in his journal, insolently titled the *True Presbyterian*. Soon after, copies found their way into the hands of Federal troops. Within a matter of days, Robinson wisely decided to depart for Toronto, ostensibly to visit his invalid brother. Friends warned him that should he return to Louisville, he might be incarcerated for sedition. He would remain in exile for three years.

In Toronto, he preached from the pulpit of his quasi-church and published two books, *Slavery, As Recognized in the Mosaic Civil Law*, and *Discourses of Redemption as Revealed at Sundry Times and in Diverse Manners*. The latter work became widely read and much-quoted in the Presbyterian Church.¹⁸ The book was a compilation of lectures that had proved “profitable to hearers;” apparently they appreciated “the benefits which they considered themselves to have received from the exposition of the gospel in the order of the successive revelations, under the several covenants in the history of redemption.” According to Robinson, the themes examined were “destined to be the great questions of the next ten

years both in the British and American Churches.”

Perhaps the greatest question of all, at least to Robinson, was the place of the Bible in the Protestant church. His answer was concise, Calvinist and conservative. Echoing theologians like Thornwell, he contended that the Scriptures were “the only source of saving knowledge.” Echoing his previous work, he emphasized the importance of God’s covenants as the foundation of the Bible. Understanding those covenants was of the utmost importance, and for this reason he argued that the Old Testament was the key to the New. The central figure of the Old Testament was Abraham, and the central event was God’s “covenant with his Church [at Mt. Sinai] as a *representative* body, standing for the Church of all succeeding ages.” Delivering this charter was God’s first act of revelation and redemption. Robinson contended that from that time until the arrival of Christ, God slowly unveiled his heavenly plan for humanity by progressive revelation.¹⁹ Redemption through Christ marked the final covenant.

If *Discourses of Redemption* brought Robinson respect, *Slavery* brought him notoriety. It was published in Toronto by “Rollo and Adam” in March of 1865, one month before the end of the Civil War. According to Robinson, *Slavery* was inspired by the letters of “a large number of intelligent Canadian gentlemen” who had appreciated his “admirable discourses on slavery” and requested that they be distributed “in a form that would reach the mass of the people in the province and abroad.” Remarkably, the lifelong pro-slavery crusader had never considered this option before. In his preface, he attempted to convince his readers that, “though not thus coming before the public by any design or forethought of his own, it seems to the author that he should have been called upon, just at this time, to show the people ‘what saith the Scriptures’ concerning the relation of master and slave.”²⁰

“Just at this time” was a rather unusual moment to publish pro-slavery material. While the lectures were undoubtedly the result of work that Robinson had completed long before the tide of the war had turned against the Confederacy, his decision to go ahead with their publication just days before Lee’s April 9 surrender at Appomattox is remarkable. Robinson must have realized that the institution of slavery was finished in the border states and the South. His book was thus a stubborn rebuttal of the events as they had unfolded. It was a vow: political defeat would not dissuade him from declaring what was right.

As Robinson saw it, this was his duty to God: to preach the truth re-

ardless of the consequences. Like a persecuted prophet who stood steadfast to his message, he self-righteously vowed not to allow “the consideration that I must here run counter to the almost universal popular prejudices of the country so to restrain me that I should shun to declare the whole counsel of God.” That “counsel” was wholly contained in Scripture, “the infallible word of God.”²¹ It was not Robinson’s purpose to consider the “ethical justice” of the institution, nor to list all the other arguments that might support American slavery. He was not oblivious to these explanations – he often alluded to them in passing. But as a committed Calvinist, he would not proclaim doctrines based on philosophy or science that only appeared to be true. As far as Stuart Robinson was concerned, Scripture embodied the only plenary rule for humanity.

Robinson’s method, in his view, was essentially scientific. He gleaned the pro-slavery “facts” from the Bible, compiled the data, and rationally presented his argument. His plea for the supremacy of Scripture in all questions might have been self-serving, but it was consistent. In his *Discourses of Redemption* he referred to the Bible as “the religion of Protestants,”²² made it the central focus of his analysis, and defended its unique authority in the church. The Bible, he speculated, was making a steady come-back, despite the resistance of those who found their inspiration in contemporary philosophies. For several years its principles had languished in neglect. But the times were changing. Robinson rejoiced in “the sober second thought of Christian people,” who were, he observed,

beginning to suspect the dogmas of the noisy, canting, infidel philanthropism whose prophets have seduced them temporarily to follow the pretended revelations of natural reason, “spiritual insight,” and “universal love,” instead of Jehovah’s prophets whom their fathers followed.²³

For Robinson, as for Thornwell²⁴ and pro-slavery clergymen in general, the conflict between the anti-slavery school and the pro-slavery theorists reduced itself to a clash between those who accepted the Bible as absolute truth, and those who followed the rationalism of the age. The latter’s declamations about a “‘purer and higher’ ethical law of the gospel” warned Robinson, are “practically, a preparation of the soil for receiving the germinal seeds of infidelity from the first plausible apostate who may rise up, ambitious of a distinction in destroying the church, which he

cannot obtain by faithful toil in edifying it.”²⁵

Robinson’s mission was thus to defend his interpretation of the word of God and thereby preserve true Christianity in America. His chances of saving Protestantism were slim, but he persevered nonetheless. He had witnessed first-hand the chaos the “apostasy” had apparently wrought, dividing his once peaceful state and many of its families, exiling him to Canada, inciting war. He now embraced his task with a zealot’s intensity and devotion. He realized, of course, that God’s ways were not always the ways of humanity, and God’s thoughts not always the thoughts of humanity. To those who doubted his divinely-ordained dictates on slavery, Robinson had a simple answer: even when God’s judgements seemed unfair, they were to be followed. Following Calvin closely, he maintained that the mysteries of God’s providence would remain mysterious to fallen humanity. Robinson expressly stated:

it is the part of a sincere and truly rational Christian man to bow reverently to the plain teaching of God’s holy word. And even though these judgements given by Moses and Jesus seem to him “past finding out,” and occasionally repugnant to the teachings of his natural heart, he but applies to Moses and Jesus the admired maxim of Coleridge concerning Plato, “When I cannot understand his ignorance I confess myself ignorant of his understanding.”²⁶

But Robinson had no intention of languishing in ignorance. To augment his understanding and bolster his arguments, he followed “not only the ancient critics, but also the best and most generally accepted British and Continental biblical scholars of the new anti-slavery era, who cannot be suspected of partiality to my theories.” Like Thornwell and other conservative Calvinists, he looked to the past for inspiration and direction. And just as those scholars viewed all scripture as “inspired by God,” so Robinson determined to treat both the Old and New Testaments equally. “I believe that all Scripture,” he stated, “Moses just as much as Jesus – David just as much as John – Isaiah just as much as Paul – is the inspiration of God.”²⁷

According to Robinson it was the emphasis on Jesus’ ethics at the expense of Old Testament mandates that had led many abolitionists to declare that the Bible supported the anti-slavery cause. Robinson contended that “nothing has tended to obscure and confuse the views of Christians on

this whole subject more than the current fashion of partial examinations of the Scriptures – the Old Testament without reference to the New, or the New Testament without reference to the Old.”²⁸ Robinson’s emphasis on the equality of all Scripture would prove to be the linchpin to his pro-slavery argument.

With his Bible at hand, his enemy identified, his methods justified and his purpose clear, Robinson went on to point out, in eight chapters, how God had ordained slavery through his “spoken word.” Beginning with God’s covenant with Noah, Robinson contended that “it was a purpose of God, revealed at the very origin of the present race of men, that one portion of the race should be doomed to servitude.” In subsequent “revelations” God reiterated his initial purpose. Through Abraham, a slaveholder, God set apart the Church as a separate society. Second to Abraham in importance was Moses, who organized “the Hebrew patriarchy into a free, constitutional commonwealth,” according to the legal code dictated by God, and recorded in the Old Testament book Leviticus. As Robinson explained it, this “code” contained certain germinal principles, one of which was the right to hold slaves. He contended that “almost all of its fundamental points are precisely the same with the slave-codes of the American Southern States.” Thus the constitution of the Confederacy was simply a reincarnation of God’s own charter given to Moses. As Robinson declared, “there was in the civil code of Moses the recognition of a system of perpetual servitude, just as clearly and distinctly, though in less detail, as in the laws of Virginia, or Kentucky, or South Carolina.” As if this was not proof enough, Robinson pointed out that the fourth and tenth commandment mentioned slavery, and therefore “recognized the propriety of the relation of master and slave within the church itself.” Remaining with Moses, he reached what may have been the climax to his argument. Robinson cited Numbers 31:28, in which “Moses, by special command of Jehovah, took three hundred and fifty-two of the ‘persons,’ [slaves captured in a battle] and turned them over to Eliezer, the High Priest, as the ‘Lord’s tribute.’” For Robinson, there was no better justification of slavery than that in taking slaves as a payment to his temple, God himself had become a slave-owner.²⁹

Moving to the New Testament, Robinson showed that Jesus Christ (conducting himself as the son of a slave-owner should) “did not anywhere, in like manner, expressly and specifically repeal the toleration of slavery.” Following a notion initially advanced by pro-slavery theorist

Richard Fuller, Robinson considered the Old Testament sanction of slavery valid given the absence of any New Testament condemnation. Therefore, he noted, “slavery is left in the New Testament precisely as it stood in the Old.”³⁰ There remained, however, Jesus’ “Golden Rule,” the foundation of the abolitionist critique. Robinson dispatched of it handily. When Jesus uttered “the great law of Love – ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself,’” he was but quoting “the sum of duty to God thrice repeated in the law of Moses,” in which slavery “was distinctly recognized and allowed.” Jesus’ words were in fact Moses’ words, and were contained within God’s law, a constitution that had specifically recognized slavery.³¹

Robinson’s goal was the modelling of the United States after the hierarchically ordered society of the Old and New Testament. Each person had a station and a calling, and it was their duty before God to accept it with joy. Slaveholders would think, slaves would work. This did not mean that slaves could be treated with contempt. They were, after all, human beings.³² But to say that slavery was wrong and slaveholding a sin made no sense to Robinson. Had not the Apostle Paul, in his letter to Philemon, fully recognized his rights over his runaway slave Onesimus? In general in the early church, he pointed out, “the Apostles not only admitted slaveholders and their slaves together into the church, but enjoined the Christian duties of masters and slaves, precisely in the same manner as the duties of ruler and subject, husband and wife, parent and child.”³³

To be sure, many of Robinson’s unoriginal interpretive assumptions were questionable. In the decade preceding the Civil War, anti-slavery apologists, including Presbyterians like Albert Barnes and John Rankin, had exposed leaks in the pro-slavery advocates’ allegedly water-tight biblical defense. They pointed out that the words “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9:25) were uttered by a drunken Noah, not God, and were a prediction, not a decree. Turning to Abraham, they pointed out that if Abraham’s “servants” were slaves, then his wife, Sarah, and his nephew Lot must also be his slaves, because they too appeared on his property list. Regardless, they continued, patriarchal morality was no example for mid-nineteenth-century Americans, because Abraham also lied and practiced polygamy.³⁴

Focusing on the New Testament, commentators challenged the pro-slavery argument that Jesus’ silence in condemning slavery proved his support for the institution. Pointing out the fallacy of this logic, one theologian

noted that “as we have no account whatever of any public preaching by Christ and the apostles against forgery, arson, piracy, counterfeiting . . . we are to presume from this supposed approving silence . . . that the whole of those crimes are morally approbated and licensed in the New Testament.”³⁵

Robinson obviously remained unmoved by this reasoning. Nearing the end of his text, he summarized his defense:

If therefore this argument, laying its foundations in the great covenant of God, which organized a Church visible as a separate society on earth, and woven out of the successive revelations made to that Church, age after age, through Moses and the Prophets, Jesus and the Apostles – accumulating at every step – and crowned at last by the solemn denunciations of an inspired Apostle, against all who pretend to find a contrary argument and doctrine in the Scriptures, as unworth the fellowship of Christ’s true ministers – then it is my bounden duty – a duty laid upon me by the solemn responsibilities of my office, to warn the people of God against approaching unbelief and apostasy in the Church.³⁶

The church was going to hell if it remained on its present course. Of this Robinson was sure. He closed with a plea to others of similar mind: “let those who have made the oracles of God their guide and their study, instead of the ‘glittering generalities’ of modern ‘illuminati,’ speak to the people the word of truth and soberness, and with God’s blessing they may return from their backsliding and be healed.”³⁷ If those who shared his beliefs could only take courage, and speak the truth, the church might be rescued.

Of course his pleas for help fell on deaf ears. No evidence exists to show that any of his listeners in Toronto took up his cause. Those Southern exiles who agreed with Robinson and who held influence in the United or Confederate States were powerless to effect change. The South capitulated a month after his words were published, and slavery was destroyed. For Robinson, this was a tragedy. Americans, he believed, had made a colossal error in turning their back on an institution sanctified by God himself. At no point, it appears, did he recognize that he may have been in error. In his defense of slavery, he had contradicted himself on at least two counts. First, he had damned the likes of Breckinridge for using the pulpit for political purposes, only to spend his Sundays in Toronto defending slavery to hundreds of listeners. Second, while he castigated anti-slavery Chris-

tians for reading their theology through abolitionist glasses, he had interpreted the Bible through a pro-slavery lens. He refused to see that the Scriptures gave mixed signals on the issue of slavery, and discarded anything that might abrogate his interpretation.

All the while he insisted that he was considering the Bible, and only the Bible. His scholastic, biblically fundamentalist Calvinism seemed to justify this approach. Robinson turned this theology into an ideology that buttressed his defense of slavery. The process was not inevitable of course. After all, Breckinridge remained loyal to both the Calvinistic Old School and abolitionism. But for those who took offense at the militancy of the abolitionist movement, or worried about the instability free slaves might cause, or who had much to lose with emancipation, the theological foundation was there. It is important to reiterate that Robinson's method of justification was in no way novel. According to James Henley Thornwell's biographer, "the mind" of the South's foremost pro-slavery professor and preacher "epitomized the Calvinist outlook . . . of his region."³⁸

Robinson may have felt more comfortable in Toronto than in his own region in 1865. While many pro-slavery ministers were able to quietly reestablish themselves at the conclusion of the war, peace provided no rest for Robinson. In a military court in Washington, DC, he was accused of plotting and supporting a conspiracy to infect the Capital and several Northern cities with yellow fever.³⁹ Soon the alleged conspiracy was confused with another – the plot to kill Lincoln.⁴⁰ The tale may have been spun by Breckinridge who once again had managed to establish himself among the powerful. After Robinson was forced to leave Kentucky in 1862, Breckinridge retained his staunch commitment to the Union. Though he had lamented the election of Lincoln and the secession of the six cotton states in his journal, *The Danville Quarterly Review*, he quickly changed his opinion of the President. Ascending rapidly the ranks of power in the Republican party he became, according to one appraisal, "Lincoln's chief counsellor and advisor in Kentucky."⁴¹ At the same time, he maintained his influence in Danville Seminary and in Kentucky Presbyterianism.

When the mists of confusion surrounding Robinson's trial finally cleared in April 1866, he returned to Louisville a hero and a "martyr" to many Kentucky Presbyterians. He started where he had left off delving into controversy with a zealot's intensity, this time refusing to state his loyalty to the Federal Government in bold defiance of the General Assembly. Elected to the General Assembly meeting of 1866, Robinson was

confronted by Breckinridge's supporters, who were determined to punish him. Robinson and all who had defied the Assembly were denied their seats. In response, Robinson's Louisville Presbytery renounced the authority of the Assembly, and formed its own Synod. Kentucky Presbyterians divided again. The vast majority followed Robinson and his presbytery into the Southern Assembly, and it gradually increased its territory beyond the original states of the late Confederacy.⁴²

Robinson was reinstated as one of Kentucky's foremost Presbyterians, in a part of the Republic where support for a biblical defense of slavery was widely acknowledged. But Robinson's biblically fundamentalist Calvinist theology was embraced by many outside the South and border states, garnering support in the North, and in Canada West as well. According to both Robinson and his critics he had found a "welcoming" audience among students and professionals who chose to leave their own churches to sit under Robinson's make-shift pulpit.⁴³ Indeed, in Canada West too were some Protestants who held a hierarchical view of society, were predisposed to Calvinist theology, believed in an arbitrary God and were alarmed that the Bible was not being read literally or taken seriously. They also supported the notion that God was an advocate for the bondage of a people.⁴⁴ However much Canadians emphasize differences with Americans common Anglo-American cultural assumptions stand out as well. In the era of the Civil War and confederation Canada was not just the God-ordained terminus of the underground railroad, it was also a land that shared theology and ideology with the slave-holding South.

Endnotes

1. This paper was written with the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am also indebted to William Katerberg and Gary Miedema, whose suggestions helped improve this essay.
2. See the picture of the Reverend Stuart Robinson in Louis B. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 78.
3. Reverend Stuart Robinson, *Slavery, As Recognized in the Mosaic Civil Law* (Toronto: Rollo & Adam, 1865), 23.
4. Toronto *Globe*, 6 March 1865; 29 February 1865.

5. In the last twenty-five years, historians have laid to rest the myth that Canada was a prejudice-free haven that welcomed slavery's victims. In *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1971), Robin Winks presented a catalogue of racism in British North America. In *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865* (Millwood: Associated Faculty Press, 1985), Jason Silverman showed that racism in mid-nineteenth century Canada was comparable to that in the northern United States. In *The Light of Nature and the Law of God* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1992), Allen Stouffer drew on an analysis of church periodicals to point out that many Canadian churches responded to the antislavery cause with silence. Yet, while the racism of many Canadians has been acknowledged, little attention has been given to Canadian support for slavery, and none to how religion was used to justify the so-called "peculiar institution" north of the border.
6. See Larry Tise, *Proslavery, A History of the Defense of Slavery in America* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1987), 172-177.
7. James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy, James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1986), 124.
8. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 131, 126, 134.
9. Tise, *Proslavery*, 177, 144, 134.
10. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 185. It is clear that the issue of abolition was not the only question dividing the Old School from the New. As George Marsden points out in *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), Northern Old School Presbyterians viewed abolition as only one of the New School's many digressions from true Presbyterianism. The New School, for its part, was far from united in its support of emancipation. Indeed, not wanting to offend slaveholders in the South while avoiding the loss of the more liberal (anti-slavery) members to the Congregationalists, the New School decided to remain neutral in 1837, giving power to local judicatories to decide the issue and not to the Assembly (see Eugene Genovese, *The Slaveholder's Dilemma* [Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1992], 35, 36, and Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 97). A synopsis of the causes of the division can be found in Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 66-87. New School Presbyterians experienced their own schism in 1858, when southern New School churches withdrew to form the "United Synod of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A."
11. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 59-61.

12. Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro – A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966), 80, 81.
13. Fred J. Hood, “Kentucky,” in *Religion in the Southern States* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1983), ed. Samuel S. Hill, 114.
14. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 66.
15. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 84.
16. Quoted in Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 85.
17. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 83-86.
18. According to Weeks, “numerous reviews give evidence that the book received good publicity,” in *Kentucky (Kentucky Presbyterians)*, 173, note 39).
19. Reverend Stuart Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption as Revealed at Sundry Times and in Diverse Manners* (Toronto: Rollo and Adam), v, vi, 37-56, 125.
20. Robinson, *Slavery*, iii-v.
21. Robinson, *Slavery*, 4, viii.
22. Robinson, *Discourses*, iii.
23. Robinson, *Slavery*, v.
24. Bringing to theology a pre-conceived system and trying to harmonize the Scriptures with it was, for Thornwell, the error of the “New England theologians.” As the theologian put it: “they have made it an appendix to their shallow and sophistical psychology, and to their still shallower and more sophistical ethics” (Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 134).
25. Robinson, *Slavery*, 43.
26. Robinson, *Slavery*, 42.
27. Robinson, *Slavery*, 5, 71.
28. Robinson, *Slavery*, 14.
29. Robinson, *Slavery*, 8, 15, 24, 22, 13, 28.
30. Robinson, *Slavery*, 41. “WHAT GOD SANCTIONED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, AND PERMITTED IN THE NEW,” Fuller instructed Brown University president Francis Wayland, “CANNOT BE SIN” (quoted in H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . , Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1972], 133).

31. Robinson, *Slavery*, 37, 38.
32. Robinson, like many of his colleagues, saw no contradiction here. As Joyce E. Chaplin has pointed out, the principle of humanity “in this era, was perfectly compatible with social control and exploitation.” This principle, defined in Southern slave-holding terms, “stated that all persons were similar in terms of their common needs, but were not *equal* in terms of social or political rights” (“Slavery and the Principle of Humanity: A Modern Idea in the Early Lower South,” *Journal of Social History* 24 [1990]: 300, 301).
33. Robinson, *Slavery*, 44-52.
34. See John Rankin, “Letter XI,” in *The Antislavery Argument*, eds. William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1965), 120; and Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women, Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*, (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1983), 40.
35. Quoted in Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, 44.
36. Robinson, *Slavery*, 61, 62.
37. Robinson, *Slavery*, 88.
38. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 6.
39. Reverend Stuart Robinson, *The Infamous Perjuries of the “Bureau of Military Justice”* (Toronto: s.n., 1865), 2.
40. *Reverend Stuart Robinson to President Lincoln* (S.l.: s.n., 1865).
41. Quoted in Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 86.
42. Weeks, *Kentucky Presbyterians*, 91, 98, 99.
43. They came from a variety of different denominations. Many were probably adherents to Wesleyan Methodist, High Church Anglican, and Kirk Presbyterian churches, which generally espoused conservative political and social opinions (see Stouffer, *The Light of Nature and the Law of God*, 142-170). Robinson’s biblical defense of slavery might have meshed with their view of society.
44. Winks has concluded that there was relatively little prejudice in Toronto during the war, compared to the Western part of the province, because Toronto was prosperous and there was little competition between the blacks and Irish immigrants for labour (*Blacks in Canada*, 251). This point needs to be qualified for two reasons. First, Robinson’s acceptance by some Torontonians indicates the prevalence of racism. Second, the racism existed not only

amongst the poorest of the city but also amongst its educated and established.

