Has Ms. Spaulding Been Addressed?

Christopher Morse. **Anglican Theological Review**. Evanston: Summer 2008. Vol. 90, Iss. 3

The comment reported of the Virginia parish member with which my late and much respected colleague introduces his "Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality and the Place of Homosexuals in the Church" prompts him to require of both self-styled "liberals" and "conservatives" on the subject that they now publicly acknowledge the reasoning informing their opposing judgments. This demand for a more explicit accountability, it may be noted, represents something of a shift for Richard Norris, who earlier on occasion was known to express a characteristic preference for "muddling through" some of these more contentious matters in good Anglican fashion by steadfastly maintaining a faithful focus upon the eucharistic reality of the Christian community, rather than for the pronouncement of explicit confessional declarations. Obviously, there is a time to speak and a time not to speak, and in light of what he sees as the outrage and possible schism currently confronting the church over sexual matters the time for a more explicit accounting of disputed positions Norris here finds to be upon us. To attempt such an accounting he suggests that consideration be given to (1) what one "takes the issues to be," and (2) "in what direction" one "takes the solution to lie." This, he admits, is not an easy task, but one that "Ms. Spaulding and others like her have, whether deliberately or not, pressed . . . upon us" (A. 1.4). I will thus direct my comments to these two points and then ask to what extent Ms. Spaulding has thereby been addressed.

What One "Takes" the Issues and Solution to Be

In Norris's view the primary issue raised by Ms. Spaulding's reference to "a lot of gays in our parish" as "nice people," but "living in sin," has to do with how we go about judging what is good and bad, right and wrong. While a distinction may be made between homosexual inclinations and acts, it is still the fundamental question of moral judgment that is at the heart of the dispute. The basic contention, therefore, Norris takes to be a matter of ethics, and the direction, as he puts it, in which he takes the solution to lie, so his "Notes" demonstrate, is that of moral philosophy. By framing the call for accountability in this instance in terms of the analysis of moral judgment, Norris thus sets the parameters for his own response to Ms. Spaulding. Though incomplete at the time of his death, it is, as those of us who have known him would expect, an admirably learned response of impressively articulated depth and clarity.

Concentrating upon the arguments of those in the church who take the position that homosexual behavior is *ipso facto* bad and wrong, Norris excavates their alleged grounds for doing so. Without claiming originality in an area where much has now been written, his analysis probes these logics with an eye to the inherent self-contradictions they pose to the warranting of their own negative case. In line with the traditional axiom since Augustine that, while reasoning cannot prove the truth of Christian faith, it can disprove the claims of its deniers, Norris essentially deploys what he calls "moral argument" not so much to settle the case for homosexual acceptance as to unsettle and dismantle the case against it. This analysis I find to be his major – and major it is! – contribution.

There are, as he presents them, broadly speaking, two ways of attempting to justify the negative case requiring examination that have been most influential in the church historically.

First, and most often heard, are appeals to "what the Bible says" about homosexuality, that is, that the Bible condemns it. In Norris's consideration this form of argument boils down to the construal of the five usually cited texts of Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians

6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10 as offering universal commands stipulating right and wrong that are context invariant. Such appeals to scriptural authority fail to recognize other factors that come into play, such as the degree to which "apparent" or surface meanings of discrete texts are being taken for granted that do not align with a more comprehensive canonical scriptural import, or how a preconscious "local cultural tradition" affects which texts are given prominence in a particular community, and how interpretations both within the Scriptures themselves, as well as within their subsequent history of usage, become "relativized "and "revised" over time. These are familiar points of scholarly hermeneutics that Norris emphasizes by illustration in Section B to lead, in sum, to the nonetheless still largely unfamiliar recognition that the modern word "homosexuality" in fact has no exact antecedents in biblical Hebrew or Greek (B.4.3.1). *Sola scriptum* as a proffered sufficient basis for the church's condemnation of homosexuality by these counts is thus shown not to be so.

Norris next turns to the appeal to Western philosophical traditions of judging right and wrong in terms of what is taken to be "natural" and "unnatural." Here Aristotle, the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant figure most prominently. In this second instance as well, his analysis details how this sort of case exhibits its own complexities and finally also fails by its own logic to validate its use in defense of the judgment that all homosexual behavior is by definition *contra naturam*, and hence bad. The bulk of Norris's analysis in sections C through G is devoted to this logic of what he calls "the moral argument," and the greater attention he gives to it reflects his preference for this direction of inquiry into what qualifies as "natural" and "unnatural" as offering a more promising way ahead. Noting the distinctions between Aristotelian and Stoic conceptions of "nature," and their implications for the understandings of "natural law" that inform the influential teaching of Aquinas on the *telos* or intended good of human nature, Norris questions how logically consistent, precisely in its own terms, Thomas's reasons are for judging homosexual relations to be immoral because they exhibit an undue preoccupation with pleasure and do not result in procreation. If human "nature," according to Aristotle's theory, is not automatically determined by instinct the way other animal nature is, but is said to be able voluntarily to contribute to its intended good, then a "good" other than procreation may also in principle be held to inform sexual morality. And this, as Norris observes, the church today by and large has come to acknowledge. The voluntary and habitual disposition toward one's intended end, which Aristotle defines as "virtue," gets to the heart of Ms. Spaulding's comment, Norris implies, by raising the question of whether "the gays" referred to in her parish might not also be disposed, or "virtuous," in regard to their human well-being.

In his final Section G, Norris continues along this trajectory and enlarges the prospects of appeal to moral philosophy by discussing the Kantian deontological approach to the self-determination of good and bad acts by asking what the law of the self's autonomy demands as duty, in contrast to the Aristotelian teleological perspective of asking of what contributes to the result of human nature's flourishing and excellence. Norris's meticulous but unfinished "Notes" stop at this point of observing that the Kantian categorical imperative to will no other end than to do what selfhood requires entails understanding the "good" to involve acting at all times toward not only one's own self, but also that of others, as an inviolable "end" in a community or "kingdom of ends," and never as a usable "means" for some other purpose. The reader is left to surmise that, in keeping with this logic as well, a "moral argument" case against homosexual relations is not supportable in Kantian terms.

It is likely that Richard Norris would have had more to say on this subject, with his usual thoroughness and precision, but what he has said within his selected parameters of moral

reasoning in bringing to light the invalidity in the logics used to defend church condemnations of homosexual relationships cannot, in my judgment, be too highly appreciated.

Addressing Ms. Spaulding

To return now more directly to Ms. Spaulding's comment, it is important to notice that she speaks of those who are "in our parish." This means that her reference is to persons who like herself together have evidently heard themselves addressed as to who in God's sight they are. Among what they have heard by being in church would have been some things that they could never have told themselves or each other. These include the claims that they have been created by God and destined to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, with bodies that are temples of the Holy Spirit. The threefold referentiality of the gospel testimonies proclaimed to them and expressed in their worship has testified to a God whose way of being is, so to speak, that of being one with another in a unity of spirit – a way said to be none other than that of love and freedom. In such an image, so they have heard, their lives have been created and called forth to live not alone, but in a covenant fidelity of love and freedom as one with another in a unity of spirit. Among the variety of ways in which this call to faithful covenant relation of being one with another is lived out, so the message to them has been, is clearly that of husband and wife, but not only that, for with explicit reference to sexual relationships the word to them has been that "each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Cor. 7:7). In thus having heard who they are in God's sight, they have had an ancient word regarding their creation addressed to them that "it is not good that a human being (adam) should be alone" (Gen. 2:18).1

For those within such a worshipping context there would be factors bearing upon their moral judgments that need to be taken into account. I will mention three.

Foremost is the fact that such judgment and its attendant reasoning would not be autonomous but would be a derivative of thanksgiving. This is but a simple way of saying that the church is most basically identified not by its morality but by its thankfulness (*eucharistia*). While not the topic of Norris's particular "Notes" here being considered, his own acute reasoning as priest and pastor as well as scholar was notably inseparable precisely from this eucharistic life of the church. Approached from this direction the current debate over homosexuality and homosexual persons in the church, or "gays in the parish" whether viewed as "nice people" or not, it seems to me, is in the first instance a debate not over the practice of sex but over the practice of prayer, and more specifically over whose prayers of thanksgiving are being included in the common prayer of the church. Addressing the issues triggered and pressed upon us by Ms. Spaulding's comment requires that moral considerations be addressed in a more comprehensive frame of reference.

From this perspective, what is recognized as good and not to be rejected as God's creation by those who believe and know the truth is that which is received with thanksgiving (1 Tim, 4:3-4). What is happening today is that the ancient test of Christian faith and practice traditionally expressed since the fifth century as *lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action) is currently being rendered inoperative with respect to "gays in the parish." Their no-longer-denied and -deniable thankfulness for being one with another according to their "particular gift from God," as the Apostle puts it (1 Cor. 7:7), is not seen to be the occasion for communal thanksgiving. That I take to be the real issue to which all considerations of ethics and morality are subordinate. Reconfigured within the parameters of this more comprehensive framework, undoubtedly the moral and ethical questions that Norris so ably

examines will need to be faced. One can, for example, anticipate the objection that at our most perverse we can be thankful for sin. But that, it seems to me, is to mistake and trivialize the reality of the eucharistic context where sin and grace are not reducible to moral categories. When a time comes in the life of any community identified by *eucharistia* that there are those in its body who have been given the gift of a love for which, in faith, they can do no other but express their thankfulness to God, and that thanksgiving is excluded from the common prayer of the community, there occurs what most truly can be called a crisis "of biblical proportions." This I take to be the current situation. Has it not been so from the pages of the New Testament itself throughout the church's history?

A second factor involves a different understanding of virtue in such a eucharistic context. It was precisely within a frame of eucharistic reference that John Calvin in the sixteenth century distinguished between virtue as the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit in making the ascended Christ in heaven truly present in the Lord's Supper, and virtue as within the power of human disposition, "up to us and voluntary," as Aristotle characterizes it. Within such a eucharistic frame of reference, virtue is not seen as a natural capacity but as a gift. How this logic comes to bear more concretely upon issues of sexuality is evidenced by Calvin's rejection of clerical celibacy as a mandate for all rather than as a particular gift to some: "But this is to tempt God: to strive against the nature imparted by him, and to despise his present gifts as if they did not belong to us at all."

Calvin's redefining of virtue theologically, in contrast to anthropologically or morally, calls to mind a third distinguishing factor that figures into moral judgments made in a eucharistic context. It is the factor of heaven. By the virtue of God's Spirit, Calvin argued, and not by our own powers, the heavenly presence of Christ is confessed to be known in the Lord's Supper. For communities that pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," ethics cannot be oblivious to a heavenly doing, nor can moral judgment take its bearings except from a righteousness that is apocalypsed (Rom. 1:17).

The fact that women, children, and household slaves were not only present but addressed in some of the earliest Christian congregations provided the necessary occasion for the master to be addressed in relation to them before God as having "the same Master in heaven," with whom "there is no partiality" (Eph. 6:9). Thus, social mores reflective of the household codes prevalent in the prevailing culture had the seeds of their undoing sown by the address of the gospel, though not, as Norris rightly explains, when construed noncontextually as abstract moral admonitions.

When a shared thanksgiving for all God's gifts becomes the sexual orientation that most identifies a community, the members of Ms. Spaulding's parish, as well as every other, will all know themselves addressed and welcomed home in righteousness as "sinners of God's own redeeming."

End game

Anonymous. **The Christian Century**. Chicago: Nov 14, 2006. Vol. 123, Iss. 23

In her 2004 book “The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation” (Westview), Barbara R. Rossing challenged notions about the rapture and the end-times destruction of the earth that are popular in evangelical Christian circles and are elaborated in the “Left Behind” series of novels. She has since had a number of opportunities to engage in public discussions on end-times theology and the interpretation of Revelation. A professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Rossing did her Ph.D. work on Revelation and ecology. The CENTURY spoke to her about her research and about the meaning of the end in Christian belief.

Did you grow up hearing about "the rapture"?

I grew up Lutheran, so I never encountered premillennial dispensationalist theology. My first exposure to it came in college, where I was intimidated by the people who referred to Hal Lindsey's “The Late Great Planet Earth”. I didn't know how to respond to the Christians who were saying, "If you don't believe this you're going to get left behind."

So how did you get into studying the Bible and the end times?

Environmental interests were what first drew me to study Revelation. I was a geology major in college, and during my first year at Yale Divinity School I was still thinking of taking courses at Yale's School of Forestry. During seminary I worked summers as a park ranger at Mesa Verde National Park, and I loved being in the mountains. After I became a pastor I didn't do any more academic study of environmental issues, but that was always my passion.

A key moment during doctoral studies at Harvard was when my adviser, Helmut Koester, asked me what I wanted to write my dissertation on. When I told him I was interested in ecology he suggested that I work on the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book of Revelation. It's terrible to admit now, but I asked, "What's that?" I had thought that the New Jerusalem was just a vision of heaven. It's a vision of God coming down to earth, and it includes a river of life and the wondrous tree of life. That sent me to work on the intersection between ecology and the Bible.

I was horrified when I heard about the “Left Behind” novels, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and about their idea that we are called to escape from the earth, that God has a different place for us. The novels' graphic fixation on plagues, war, rapture and end-times violence can too easily lead to the escapist idea that we could trash this planet.

Since your book was published, have you had any discussion with proponents of the rapture theory?

Yes, but not with LaHaye or Jenkins. Probably the most significant discussion I had was on a radio show in Chicago with a professor from Moody Bible Institute, who said we should not judge dispensational theology by the novelists' version of it – a valid point. But most people get their dispensationalist theology through popularized versions of it, like the novels.

What should Christians be saying about eschatology and what should ministers be teaching?

There is a sense of an end in the New Testament. I don't think the New Testament affirms a world without end. To the extent that that notion has crept into our hymnody it's a mistake. Nonetheless, our job is to care for the world and to believe that this physical earth is not about to be destroyed.

What is it that is coming to an end? That's the question. In Revelation what is described as coming to an end is primarily the *oikoumene*, which I translate as "imperial world," the world under Roman rule. Rome laid claim to the whole *oikoumene* – the lands and the seas, world without end. It's the word that's used in the Gospel of Luke's Christmas story, for example, in which Caesar Augustus decrees that the whole world should be enrolled in a census. Revelation proclaims that this imperial world must come to an end.

If we translate *oikoumene* as "imperial world" in a verse such as Revelation 3:10, then the "hour of trial that is coming upon the whole *oikoumene*" is not at all what rapture proponents claim – a general end-times tribulation that God will inflict during the earth's final seven years – but rather a courtroom scene in which God puts the empire on trial.

Two other Greek words, for earth (*ge*) and world (*kosmos*), are used more positively in the New Testament. A key verse is Revelation 11:18 in which God says, "I'm going to destroy the destroyers of the earth," not "I'm going to destroy the earth." The word for earth there is *ge*, which is used some 5O times in Revelation, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. God created the earth and still loves it, even though it also falls under judgment. The passages that refer to *oikoumene* in the New Testament are all negative. That is not case with *ge* or *kosmos*.

We are facing an end right now in our culture. Christians need to address that sense of an end. Very likely the supply of oil is going to end in my lifetime. And because of global warming we face an end to glaciers and much else in the world as we know and love it. The New Testament proclaims that there's a hope and a future beyond the end of *oikoumene*, beyond the end of empire. What may be ending today is our unsustainable way of life, but not the earth itself.

We have to help churches see that we don't have to tie ourselves to dependency on oil. The Christian vision is one of abundant life beyond the trappings of culture and whatever the empire promises. Though I say that the world is going to end, I think we need to proclaim a different understanding of that end. And we need to assure people that we have a future hope and relationship with God in Christ no matter what happens.

<u>On “60 Minutes”, LaHaye referred to your Jesus as a "wimpy Jesus."</u>

If a loving Jesus means a wimpy Jesus, then Christianity is in trouble. But I don't think it does. We have to refute those who equate a loving Jesus with wimpiness. The Jesus in Revelation is very powerful, but he conquers in a different way – not by killing people but by being killed, by giving his own life.

I borrow the term "lamb power" from Ward Ewing at General Theological Seminary in New York. Lamb power is the power of suffering, the power of nonviolent love to change the world. So when dispensationalist pastors call for violence and war – a U.S. attack on Iran, for example, as John Hagee is advocating – we need to say that violent conquering is not the vision of power that the Bible and Revelation give us.

Part of the appeal of the “Left Behind” series seems to be the way it draws on the New Testament's language about judgment. How should that scriptural tradition be articulated?

Revelation has at least two judgment scenes, and their purpose is exhortation, not prediction. Chapter 20 depicts the judgment of individuals before the great white throne: those who have done good works go to heaven, while those who haven't are thrown into a lake of fire. That judgment scene was a favorite in medieval cathedrals and is pictured in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

The other scene of judgment may be more important today. It's the judgment of the empire, the "whore of Babylon," in chapters 17 and 18. The figure starts out as a woman in chapter 17 but then shifts to the empire. God says to the empire, "Because you shed the blood of prophets, saints, and all the people of the earth, you're going to be judged."

Revelation warns that the unsustainable, unjust practices of the empire will lead to its end. It's not so much a punishment as the consequences and logical end of its actions. The angel of the rivers cries out that this result is "axiomatic."

That axiom of judgment can serve as a warning, a wake-up call, for us to see the consequences of our actions, to get us on the path that God wants for us. The Bible's threats of judgment are meant to lead to repentance, not to a kind of predictive gloating by which one plans to escape and then watch the torments of others. That kind of voyeuristic violence is one of the worst features of the “Left Behind” series. The adherents of that view plan to watch the judgment, but they believe they're not going to suffer it.

By empire you mean not just the official powers that subdue the planet and people, but all of us who participate in that?

We're all part of it. Revelation calls us to come out of empire. Some of us do participate in it more than others. I'm interested in how Christian communities in the first century lived according to the gospel as an alternative way of life, a life starting from "the smallest of all seeds" that Jesus talks about sowing. That's what Revelation means by coming out of empire.

What are the political implications of your reading of Revelation?

My colleague David Rhoads asks, “What if we used the New Testament as a manual for life at the end of the world?” That's probably what it was for first-century Christians. We are called to create a new world without waiting for leaders of the nation to lead the way. We need to start living joyfully, downsizing, sharing with the poor, preaching good news. Abundant life doesn't mean acquiring more and more. In John's Gospel, it's something other than that. We should work on being communities that follow the calling of Jesus counter-culturally as we face the possibility of the end.

In “Power Down: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World”, Richard Heinberg describes four possible scenarios for facing the end of oil. The first one is the path of competition over remaining resources. The U.S. seems to be engaged in that – just trying to win the race for resources. Another is waiting for a magic elixir and indulging in wishful thinking, false hopes and denial. Heinberg describes two paths that we can use as Christians. One is called "power down": it involves conservation, sharing, and deciding that you don't have to use up all the resources that you have access to. You can actually reduce your ecological footprint.

Communities can do that – and it is a lot easier when you're doing it in community with others. Heinberg calls his final option "building lifeboats" – the path by which some people step out of culture, and in which monastic-type communities embody an alternative way of life.

Have you seen specific examples of this?

A community that has been formative for me is Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains. During seminary I also visited Taizé and the Bruderhof Community in upstate New York. All churches can be such communities – sharing the biblical vision of koinonia, life together in love, according to a different vision of abundance.

I'm fascinated by the story in Mark 10 about the rich man who comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It says Jesus "looked at him and loved him." There's no other character that the Gospel of Mark says Jesus loves that way. But still the man turns away and leaves by himself. The really scary part: he leaves because he can't let go of his possessions.

That story can help us because we're in the same predicament as that rich man; we're in danger of turning away because of our possessions. Jesus loves the rich man unconditionally before he makes the hard demand, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and come, follow me." When the man goes away weeping, clearly he misses out on community, on the joy that the disciples have discovered. Eternal life is a matter of giving up something, but even more it is a matter of finding something-life for the ages, life that can last, life in the presence of Jesus' love, abundant life.

We've been seduced into a way of life that isn't even making us happy. We're suffering from what filmmaker John DeGraaf calls “affluenza”. The Affluenza Web site points out that the average American house in the 1950s was 900 square feet; today that's the size of a three-car garage. We're not that much happier than people were in the 1950s.

How should Christians talk about apocalypse?

Hurricane Katrina was a kind of apocalypse. It pulled back a veil and showed us something that maybe we hadn't been able to see. That's the root meaning of the word apocalypse – pulling back a curtain to expose something, showing the difference between illusion and reality. We can ask where apocalyptic moments are happening today, and how such experiences can transform us, since apocalypses are also about transformation. Though we may say "Yes, there's an end," we should look beyond that end and insist that we're called as God's people never to give up on the earth because God is not going to leave it behind and neither can we.

Don't we have to be careful about talking in apocalyptic tones?

The problem arises when talk about the apocalypse is taken up by the powerful. Revelation is not a script or battle plan for those in power. To the extent that we are the ones in power we need to be very careful about how we deploy apocalyptic rhetoric.

But apocalypses can also help us. We need their vision of hope as well as their radical diagnosis of the sorrows of empire. The plagues of Revelation can wake us up to the urgent lament of creation. Revelation also gives more attention to creation than some other books of scripture. Animals and plants join in singing praise to God. Jesus is portrayed as a lamb. Heaven comes down to earth.

Theologian Leonardo Boff argues that we have to listen both to the cry of the poor in the Bible, which he hears in Exodus, and to the cry of the earth, which he hears in the groaning of creation in Romans 8. I hear both of these cries in Revelation: the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. God answers those cries in the river of life for all who thirst, in the tree of life for the world's healing.

Battle for the Bible

Mark Noll. **The Christian Century**. Chicago: May 2, 2006. Vol. 123, Iss. 9

In october 1845, two able theologians debated the Bible's view of slavery in a public event in Cincinnati that went on for eight hours a day through four long days. Jonathan Blanchard spoke for the abolitionist position, Nathan L. Rice for the position that while the Bible pointed toward the eventual, voluntary elimination of slavery, it nowhere called slavery evil as such.

While Rice methodically tied Blanchard in knots over how to interpret the proslavery implications of specific texts, Blanchard returned repeatedly to "the broad principle of common equity and common sense" that he found in scripture, to "the general principles of the Bible" and "the whole scope of the Bible," where to him it was obvious that "the principles of the Bible are justice and righteousness." Early on in the debate, Blanchard's exasperation with Rice's attention to particular passages led him to utter a particularly revealing statement of his own reasoning: "Abolitionists take their stand upon the New Testament doctrine of the natural equity of man, the one-bloodism of human kind [from Acts 17:26]:and upon those great principles of human rights, drawn from the New Testament, and announced in the American Declaration of Independence, declaring that all men have natural and inalienable rights to person, property and the pursuit of happiness."

Blanchard's linkage between themes from scripture and tropes from American republicanism was repeated regularly by abolitionists. But this use of the Bible almost never found support in the South and only rarely among northern moderates and conservatives. In general, it was a use that suffered particular difficulties when, as in the ground rules laid down for Blanchard and Rice in their Cincinnati debate, disputants pledged themselves in good Protestant fashion to base what they said on the Bible as their only authoritative source.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's lightning-rod novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin", provided one of the era's most powerful examples of the abolitionist appeal to the general spirit of the Bible. Stowe, herself a dedicated if romantic partisan for the Bible, nonetheless subtly questioned widespread American notions about the self-interpreting power of scripture. For example, she had one of her slave-owning characters, Augustine St. Clare, suggest that scriptural interpretation was driven more by interest than intellect: "Suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market. Don't you think we should have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way!"

Stowe also intimated the cynical conclusion, which would become more common among secularists after the Civil War, that the Bible was easily manipulated to prove anything that readers might desire with regard to a problem like slavery. At one place in the novel, Stowe had passengers on a steamboat, which was carrying slaves down the Ohio River, exchange biblical texts with each other like bird shot. On the one side: "'It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants – kept in a low condition,' said a grave-looking gentleman in black, a clergyman, seated by the cabin door. "'Cursed be Canaan: a servant of servants shall he be," the scripture says.'"

On the other side: "A tall, slender young man, with a face expressive of great feeling and intelligence, here broke in, and repeated the words, "'All things whatsoever ye would that men

should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." I suppose,' he added, 'that is scripture, as much as "Cursed be Canaan."'"

In each case, Stowe's own sentiments obviously lay with the antislavery use of the Bible, but her portrayal of a divided usage could not have reassured those who paused to reflect on how this novel might awaken uncertainty about the supposedly perspicuous authority of the Bible.

Stowe's most extensive incident featuring an appeal to scripture conveyed a less ambiguous message. After the slave Eliza escapes over the ice-clogged Ohio River with her young son, she comes, exhausted, to the home of Senator and Mrs. Bird just as they have finished discussing the senator's support for Ohio's version of the Fugitive Slave Law. When Mary Bird surprises her husband by attacking all such laws as "shameful, wicked, [and] abominable," John Bird replies with arguments paralleling the biblical defense: "But, Mary, just listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn't suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment."

In response to arguments in favor of fugitive slave laws, which regularly included a proslavery use of the Bible, Mary Bird blows away the equivalent of chapter-and-verse argumentation with a larger *gestalt* of scriptural sentiment:

"Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow."

"But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil…"

"Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can't. It's always safest, all round, to do as He bids us."

"Now, listen to me, Mary, and I can state to you a very clear argument to show…"

"O, nonsense, John! You can talk all night, bnt you wouldn't do it, I put it to you, John – would you now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway? Would you now?"

At that very point the fugitive slave Eliza arrives at their door, and the senator proves his mettle by setting aside his arguments and moving Eliza in the dead of night away from danger.

The significance of Stowes "Uncle Tom's Cabin" for the biblical debate over slavery lay in the novel's emotive power. Stowe exemplified – rather than just announced – the persuasive force of what she regarded as the Bible's overarching general message.

The fact that a novelist brought off this task more effectively than the exegetes did not stop abolitionist scholars and preachers from continuing the battle in their chosen media. On the eve of conflict, George Cheever, a Congregationalist minister from upstate New York, published one of the era's most elaborate biblical attacks on slavery. Cheever labored diligently, if not too convincingly, to show that Old Testament "bondmen" and New Testament "servants" were not slaves at all. He certainly scored points in using biblical prohibitions against "manstealing" when he excoriated the internal trade in slaves and, by implication, all slaveholding. Yet over and over again he appealed to the inconsistency between slavery and "the benevolence commanded in

the Scriptures." At the end he brought his book to a climax by moving from the biblical "letter" to a much broader basis: "The moral argument from Scripture on the subject appeals to the common conscience of all mankind, and at every step enlists the common sense of humanity in its behalf."

So also did Henry Ward Beecher reason in his climactic public statement on the eve of conflict. Maybe, he conceded, a defense of slavery could be teased out of obscure, individual texts of Scripture, but surely the defining message of the Bible was something else entirely. In his fast day sermon of January 4, 1861, Beecher strenuously appealed to the general meaning of the Bible as opposed to the pedantic literalism that undergirded the proslavery view: "'I came to open the prison-doors,' said Christ; and that is the text on which men justify shutting them and locking them. 'I came to loose those that are bound'; and that is the text out of which men spin cords to bind men, women, and children. 'I came to carry light to them that are in darkness and deliverance to the oppressed'; and that is the Book from out of which they argue, with amazing ingenuity, all the infernal meshes and snares by which to keep men in bondage. It is pitiful."

Such use of the Bible doubtless carries more weight today than it did in 1860, when the way that Beecher reasoned disturbed broad reaches of American religious opinion. At the time, however, the conviction that he could easily separate the Bible's antislavery "spirit" from its proslavery "letter" was not only a minority position; it was also widely perceived as a theologically dangerous position.

A devastating theological weakness of this position made many who were otherwise sympathetic shy away. As early as 1846, the Connecticut Congregationalist Leonard Bacon, who very much wanted to oppose slavery as a sin, nonetheless hung back. His analysis of the spirit-over-the-letter argument caught the dilemma exactly: "The evidence that there were both slaves and masters of slaves in the churches founded and directed by the apostles, cannot be got rid of without resorting to methods of interpretation which will get rid of everything." In Bacon's view, the well-intentioned souls who "torture the Scriptures into saying that which the anti-slavery theory requires them to say" did great damage to the scriptures themselves.

To Bacon and many others who were tempted to make a move from the Bible's letter of sanction for slavery to its spirit of universal liberation, the facts of American experience may have been the great stumbling block. Precisely by following the Bible strictly, by tending to its letter when heretics of various kinds were running after its spirit, the churches had prospered, and the balm of the gospel had reached unprecedented numbers of spiritually needy men and women.

This consideration did not deter abolitionists like Cheever and the Beechers. Yet the stronger their arguments based on general humanitarian principles became, the weaker the Bible looked in any traditional sense. By contrast, rebuttal of such arguments from biblical principle increasingly came to look like a defense of scripture itself.

Bacon and those who, like him, wanted both to preserve traditional biblical authority and to oppose slavery still had one more argument to advance. They could concede that the Bible never did in fact condemn slavery *per se*, but they could also contend that, when properly interpreted, Scripture did condemn the kind of slavery practiced in the American South. With a substantial history behind it, this was an argument of some subtlety, and one that Bacon himself, along with a sizable number of other earnest Bible believers, tried to make in the years before war broke out.

In 1808 one of the first and best biblical arguments against the southern system of slavery was published by David Barrow. His “Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy and Scripture” featured arguments denying that the descendants of Canaan were Africans. More generally, he held that the precedents for slavery found by paying close attention to Abraham's life and Mosaic law were, for American experience, irrelevant. If all cotton growers and owners of rice plantations were Hebrews, if they could locate Canaanites for slaves, and if they would then transport their operations to the Middle East, then Barrow would concede a biblical warrant for slavery.

Francis Wayland went over Barrow's argument, only with more erudition and with more detail from the Hebrew language and Old Testament history. To Wayland, in an argument that also loomed large in African-American biblical exegesis, the fact that Abraham circumcised his slaves (Gen. 17:12), and so included them in all the blessings God promised to "his people," set up a very different situation than prevailed in the South. So it was as well with the Mosaic legislation that provided for manumission if a master harmed a slave in any way (such as knocking out a tooth; Exod. 21:27) or if a slave escaped to a Hebrew town (Deut. 23:15-16).

Wayland did not believe that Old Testament slavery provided a legitimate rationale for slavery in other times and places. But even if it did, he held that to follow the Bible meant that Americans would have to abandon the slave system that then existed in their land: "Suppose . . . that whatever was sanctioned to the Hebrews is sanctioned to all men at all times, . . . I do not see in what manner it could justify slavery in the United States. It is, I presume, conceded that a permission of this kind is to be understood according to the utmost strictness of application. If slavery be justified by the law of Moses, it is, of course, only justified in the manner and with the restrictions under which it was placed by that law."

A few years later, a Baptist preacher with far less of a reputation made Wayland's points even more sharply, and he did so in Kentucky, where such opinions could he dangerous. James M. Pendleton was a hard-nosed defender of the Bible's inerrancy as well as of Baptist distinctives, but that cast of mind did not prevent him from mounting a strong case against slavery as practiced in Kentucky at a time when legislation concerning slavery was being considered by a state constitutional convention. Pendleton turned to the standard passages about Abraham and his slaves and observed "that there are points of material dissimilarity between that system and our system of slavery." Unlike owners in the southern states, where it was usually illegal for slaves to be armed, Abraham gave weapons to his slaves, and Abraham was prepared, before his son Isaac was born, to make a slave his heir. The only conclusion that Pendleton could draw was that "it does not follow necessarily that Abraham's servants were slaves in the American acceptation of the word."

Bible scholar Tayler Lewis made an even more extensive case in response to proslavery use of the Bible. He began by arguing that "the Patriarchal Servitude" in ancient times was very different from the slavery found in the American South. And he asserted that, regardless of the social system in place, Scripture never speaks of servants as mere property.

Lewis then expounded at length on what he held to be a key feature of Old Testament teaching: yes, there was divine approval for buying non-Jews as slaves, but never for selling them. More important, since this provision for servitude depended on the distinction in ancient Israel between the people of God and "the heathen," it was imperative to recognize the great change inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ. If, as Christians believe, Jesus opened the doorway of salvation to all people everywhere, who then were the heathen of modern times? In Lewis's

words, "We still speak of heathen, using the term geographically, and, to some extent, ethnologically; but theologically, ecclesiastically, Christianly, there are no heathen." Rather, because the work of Christ accentuated what Lewis called "the blood unity of the race," it was necessary to recognize that there were no longer any heathen whom it was acceptable for the people of God to enslave.

To drive his point home, he asked why, if proslavery advocates were so faithful in believing the Bible, slaves who became Christians (who, that is, stopped being heathen even in the illegitimate sense in which the term was still being used) were not manumitted immediately. Finally, Lewis returned at the end of his long argument to repeat that the slave system practiced in the U.S. could not by any means be considered the same as anything practiced in the ancient world. In his view, even the brutal Roman system was not as degenerate by biblical standards as the American: "No Roman court ever made a decision so casting a man out of the state, and out of the pale of humanity, as the Dred Scott [case]." In sum, Lewis argued that the Bible nowhere legitimated racially defined slavery and everywhere condemned social systems beset with the evils that in fact attended the practice of slavery in the U.S.

Promising as the arguments made by Lewis might now seem, they failed in late 1860 to make much headway in American public debate. Three reasons explain why this nuanced biblical attack on American slavery was so relatively ineffective. The first was that biblical defenders of slavery found it easy to lump Lewis's kind of nuanced biblicism with the arguments of radical abolitionists who claimed that the Bible condemned slavery per se as a sin. Since these radical arguments seemed so obviously to lead to the overthrow of the Bible, the more nuanced position probably did too.

The other two reasons for the failure of a nuanced biblical antislavery concerned the weighty issues of race and common sense. As indicated in Lewis's arguments, an inability to countenance "the blood unity of the race" provided strong support for biblical defenses of slavery.

On the other front, nuanced biblical attacks on American slavery faced rough going precisely because they were nuanced. This position could not simply be read out of any one biblical text; it could not be lifted directly from the page. Rather, it needed patient reflection on the entirety of the scriptures; it required expert knowledge of the historical circumstances of ancient Near Eastern and Roman slave systems as well as of the actually existing conditions in the slave states; and it demanded that sophisticated interpretative practice replace a commonsensically literal approach to the sacred text. In short, this was an argument of elites requiring that the populace defer to its intellectual betters. As such, it contradicted democratic and republican intellectual instincts. In the culture of the U.S., as that culture had been constructed by three generations of evangelical Bible believers, the nuanced biblical argument was doomed.

The question of scripture and slavery constituted a great problem in 1860 because a biblically inspired people had done so much to construct the country they were now pulling apart. The interpretative practices that had grown up with the great antebellum denominations favored democratic, republican, anti-traditional and commonsensical exegesis. Against this historical background, the biblical proslavery argument seemed very strong, the biblical antislavery argument seemed religiously dangerous, and the nuanced biblical argument against slavery in its American form did not comport well with democratic practice and republican theory. Yet many in the North who because of their commonsensical interpretation of the Bible opposed any use of scripture to attack slavery were nonetheless uneasy with the system. They were joined

by at least a few from the South. Though conservative in their attachment to traditional views of the Bible, they continued to struggle against the all-out proslavery biblicism of the South's great champions.

On the eve of the Civil War, interpretations of the Bible that made the most sense to the broadest public were those that incorporated the defining experiences of America into the hermeneutics used for interpreting what the infallible text actually meant. In this effort, those who, like James Henley Thornwell, defended the legitimacy of slavery in the Bible had the easiest task. The procedure, which by 1860 had been repeated countless times, was uncomplicated. First, open the Scriptures and read – at, say, Leviticus 25:45, or, even better, at 1 Corinthians 7:20-21. Second, decide for yourself what these passages mean. Don't wait for a bishop or a king or a president or a meddling Yankee to tell you what the passage means, but decide for yourself. Third, if anyone tries to convince you that you are not interpreting such passages in the commonsensical, ordinary meaning of the words, look hard at what such a one believes with respect to other biblical doctrines. If you find in what he or she says about such doctrines the least hint of unorthodoxy, as inevitably yon will, then you may rest assured that you are being asked to give up not only the plain meaning of scripture, but also the entire trust in the Bible that made the country into such a great Christian civilization.

With debate over the Bible and slavery at such a pass, and especially with the success of the proslavery biblical argument manifestly (if also uncomfortably) convincing to most southerners and many in the North, difficulties abounded. The country had a problem because its most trusted religious authority, the Bible, was sounding an uncertain note. The evangelical Protestant churches had a problem because the mere fact of trusting implicitly in the Bible was not solving disagreements about what the Bible taught concerning slavery. The country and the churches were both in trouble because the remedy that finally solved the question of how to interpret the Bible was recourse to arms. The supreme crisis over the Bible was that there existed no apparent biblical resolution to the crisis. It was left to those consummate theologians, the reverend doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.