

# BLACK & TAN

*A Collection of Essays and Excursions  
on Slavery, Culture War, and Scripture in America*

Douglas Wilson

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Douglas Wilson, *Black and Tan: A Collection of Essays and Excursions on Slavery, Culture War, and Scripture in America*

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# Foreword

by Nathan Wilson

I DRANK MY FIRST black and tan in Annapolis, Maryland, my father's hometown. It was poured in the American style, Bass Ale on the bottom and then Guinness, poured carefully over a bent spoon to avoid breaking the layer and mixing the two beers. Across the Atlantic, those tending bar generally chuck the spoon and let the beers blend. The taste is more interesting, but the look less artistic. Regardless of technique, the combination is a lovely one.

In America, our particular blend of races came about through great hypocrisy, in both the North and South. The slave trade was nothing but wickedness. To be a little simplistic: the South wanted to end the trade, but not the slavery, and the North wanted to blame the South for providing the market for the kidnapped souls the North was importing. The whole history and categorization of our various racial hypocrisies is not something I am capable of exploring here. God judged both North and South with the bloodiest of our wars. God judged this nation, and it is impossible to deny that He has continued to do so as we reap various fruits of sinful segregation and of the equally sinful attempts at expiating our guilt through statist salvation. There is much to lament on the subject of race relations, but I find that God has not only judged us. He has blessed us as well; He has blessed all our races, for example, with a great mixed beer.

I am quite grateful for my own ethnic ancestors, in all their Celticness, but I am also grateful that some of their contributions

are where they are: behind me, across the ocean, safely tucked away in graves. They have contributed an attitude to America, a fighting spirit and an individualism that have been both a blessing and a curse. But there is nothing in the idea of a “pure” Celtic America that I love. Bass Ale is fine enough, but I have no desire to go back to drinking it isolated safely in its own glass.

Growing up my father’s son, I was taught the love of many things. I can think fondly of ancestral plaid and bagpipes, but my affection for blues and jazz runs just as deep or deeper. I am extremely grateful to have grown up in a culture influenced and altered by the juxtaposition of races, and even more so because I believe my children and grandchildren will grow up in a culture where that juxtaposition has been more fruitful, and the mutual influences increased.

I love peanut butter. And lest anyone accuse me of being trite or superficial in my praise, it is hardly superficial to me. I would guess that roughly seventy-five percent of the cells that my body has produced over the course of my life have been made out of George Washington Carver’s magical invention. I think that percentage is higher for my father. I love the music that came out of the South and the effect it has had on our national personality. I love athletics and the unique personality they have gained by the mixture of races; segregated basketball was about as interesting as a PTA meeting. Jesse Owens showed up Hitler’s lie, single-handedly, when nations, theologians, and philosophers failed—and he wore our flag. Some would want deeper cultural acknowledgments from me than this, again accusing me of being superficial, but the trouble is that such things only appear to be superficial. I have been shaped by these things, as we all have. Our culture has been impacted in deep and profound ways by such juxtapositions and will continue to be. So the curse connected to slavery, the sin of our white fathers against our black fathers, has come back to bless us. It has shaped every aspect of what it means to be American, and is part of why being an American is still worthwhile. The blessings have always been there, for the culture, for the Church, and some of the greatest of white sins have come in the arrogance of trying to reject those blessings.

But this is not simply a blind or romantic view of race. There has been a great deal of hypocrisy and faithlessness in our racial history—and the traffic has gone both ways. Hatred and bitterness has played a major role for many on both sides. But beyond that, in humility and faithfulness, comes the blessing of the God of paradox, the God who raises the dead. A once white country is no longer white, having been broadened and strengthened by the victims of its white fathers. And as for those first slaves: their descendants, while still sometimes held down by their own sins and residual paganism, not to mention the sins of others against them, have been blessed by being part of this culture. This is why a secular approach to racial reconciliation will always be doomed. Throughout our history, God has brought many blessings to the blacks as well, at the center of which was access to the gospel. The tragedy of pagan Africa was more significant than the tragedy of southern slavery.

In Christ, whites are a blessing to blacks. In Christ, blacks are a blessing to whites. In our history, there has been more than a little of this. But apart from Christ, our races are simply a snare and temptation to one another. So I look forward to the final America, to the final Church, the Church that spans cultures, nations, and ethnic boundaries. I look forward to descendants as affected by a Christian Africa as by a once-upon-a-time Christian Europe. When it comes to culture, pour me a black and tan into the glass of the Christian faith.

No need to use a spoon.

## Introduction

I AM THE PASTOR of a Reformed church in the Pacific Northwest, where I have served since 1977. As this ministry has developed over the years, I have to confess that history keeps getting tangled up in it. I have written two historical biographies<sup>1</sup> for the general reader, and a number of years ago we began hosting an annual history conference that now draws about nine hundred people.

This sort of coloring outside the lines has excited comment in some quarters, and in response to some of my critics, I have sometimes sought to minimize my historical credentials. In this I have simply and cheerfully acknowledged that I am not trained as a professional historian. I do not have a graduate degree in history, and as a general rule I do not make my living through dealing with historical topics. I have claimed that I am a popularizer and a storyteller. I was once speaking with Dr. Harold O. J. Brown about the late Francis Schaeffer, and he used the *appreciative* image of a caricaturist. I have used that same description for myself, not wanting to be seen as claiming more for myself than I ought to. I did this because I don't mind when people see me as more of "a preacher" than a historian. I *am* a preacher.

But all preachers must also be historians in some sense, because we preach from the Bible, most of which is sacred history. The center of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an event in *history*. When a professional historian sidles up to me and says that the event

did not happen, it doesn't even slow me down. When a professional theologian tells me that what actually matters is the Christ-event in the preaching of the *kerygma*, and not whether He actually rose, I cheerfully retreat into my best imitation of a fundamentalist. When a professional postmodernist says that Christian doctrine functions as the "grammar" of our Christian system, just as English grammar functions for English speakers, without any reference to meta-truth, I draw the necessary conclusion that all these professionals are overpaid. The resurrection of Christ defines history, and not the other way around. The central Christian confession—the Apostles' Creed—is full of historical claims, and ministers are the appointed guardians of those claims. At any moment, a trained historian might come into the Garden and say, "Yea, hath God said?"

This ministerial responsibility is not limited to sacred history. I would want to argue further that ministers have a responsibility to be amateur historians of the *post*-apostolic era because they need to know what Wesleyans are, why we Protestants don't believe that Rome is the one true church, why people "go forward" at revival meetings, why America thinks it is all right to conduct murder by the million as long as the victims are unborn, and why some Christians think it is a sin to drink beer. All of this involves the study of uninspired history, and all of it is directly related to a minister's job description. So, while I am always happy to learn how to perform this task better than I do, I do not see that it is possible for me to abandon it without abandoning my ministerial post.

Therefore I see one of my tasks as that of being a ministerial popularizer of history. But no one, not even a popularizer, has the right to get his facts wrong and maintain that Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1498. It is not accurate, and it doesn't rhyme. A popularizer is one who makes difficult material intelligible to a wide audience; he is not one who is ill-informed himself, making things up as he goes along. The name for *that* is demagogue, not popularizer. But sometimes a popularizer can be assumed to be just winging it—perhaps because the people can understand him, or perhaps because he gave a history conference and somebody came. In my case, such



an assumption would be erroneous. Please bear with me, because I genuinely dislike having to talk like this. “I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may boast myself a little” (2 Cor. 11:16). Since 1979, I have maintained a consistent pattern of reading a heap of books covering a wide range of subjects, including history, theology, biographies, commentaries, literature, social criticism, philosophy, poetry, and so on, for which I received not an iota of institutional credit. This makes me an uncertified *generalist*—not to mention a loose cannon on deck—and my previous comments should simply be taken as disavowing any particular training as a historical *specialist*. But even so, as a generalist, I need to say (if it’s “myself what says it”) that I am a reasonably well-informed one. I do not read narrowly, simply reading “party-line” materials which agree with my preconceived notions. What I learn from this kind of reading is what I undertake to “popularize.” I am not making up stuff as I go.

At the same time, the fact that I am willing to teach on historical subjects does not mean that I somehow think I am infallible. I have been wrong on numerous points over the years—sometimes the mistake is mine, and sometimes a source leads me astray. The point of all this is simply to say that on such subjects I am always open to correction, and moreover I am eager for it. But given the nature of the case, that correction is not likely to come from refereed journals. Rather, it will occur when someone saunters up to me after a talk and says that he never knew that Tamerlane was a Swede.

So what does the ministerial task have to do with *American* history? More details on this will come in the pages to follow, but perhaps the relevance can be illustrated by taking a look at the future. Suppose Christians two hundred years from now are being embarrassed with stories about the old evil days when their twisted twentieth century Christian ancestors blew up abortion clinics, shot abortion doctors, mailed anthrax to abortion clinics, etc. “That’s all they ever did, day in and day out,” the instructor said calmly, finishing his lecture. Now the Bible condemns all these murderous activities, and it is not necessary for our future brother to reject this slander of us and

our peaceful pro-life activities in order for him to stand for the *abstract* truth that the Bible condemns murder. But in fact, it remains a slander of twentieth century pro-life Christians, and *if* he accepts it, it is highly likely that he has been completely outmaneuvered by his enemies for strategic reasons, reasons that are pertinent to *their* controversies. He sadly concludes that a hypothetical opposition to abortion is possible in some utopian situation, but alas, not in this world. We believe ourselves to be currently in an analogous situation.

If we want to understand the culture wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we must come to grips with the culture wars of the nineteenth century. In order to do this, it is necessary to get clear on the nature of American slavery, which was *not* what its abolitionist opponents claimed for it. If it had been, it is hard to see how the biblical instructions could have been applicable—for example, I would not cite I Timothy 6:1–4 to a person trying to escape from a Nazi death camp. “Obey the existing authorities!” But if antebellum slavery was the normal kind of sinful situation that Christians have had to deal with regularly down through history (e.g., one comparable to what Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus had to address), then the instructions in I Timothy 6 make perfect sense. We need to learn that the antebellum situation was one of Normal Sin, not one of Apocalyptic Evil.

That our nation did not remove slavery in the *way* it ought to have been removed helps to explain many of our nation’s problems in dealing with contemporary social evils. Those evils include abortion-on-demand, radical feminism, and rampant sodomy. In the pursuit of our constitutional rights, we have legally executed over forty million unborn children in this nation, and we are about to be oppressed with sodomite marriage. We have done this under the “protections” of the Constitution. *When in our history did we take the wrong turn that allowed the Constitution to be abused in this grotesque fashion?* Christians need to learn to argue that the events resulting in the cataclysm of 1861–1865 had something to do with it, which I believe is incontrovertible.

In dealing with these issues, it is not possible to “get at” the world-view aspects of all this in the same way you can get at the 2004 plat-

form of the Republican Party. A lot of reading and meditating is involved, and to grasp the central issues, it is necessary to be steeped in a particular intellectual tradition. The Southern conservative intellectual tradition does not put out a periodic newsletter with bulleted talking points, but there is an identifiable position there nonetheless. When critics are as unsympathetic to *this frame of mind* as many of them have been, I honestly do not believe that detailed explanations will get through to them.

This lack of sympathy is revealed by snatching at words and highlighting inflammatory quotations. For example, in response to one critic, I agreed with him that meticulous analysis was necessary for good history but that it was not sufficient. In my letter I said this:

Now when war comes upon a nation, the people involved in the political turmoil have to make a decision about whether they will go off and start shooting at other people, and they do not have the luxury of making that decision with all the research available to the professional historian. In some ways, such research would simply get in the way of making an honorable decision.

My questioner then claimed that I had once said that the facts alone were necessary, though not sufficient. Then he said I claimed that facts can get in the way. And this, he said, was of “monumental epistemological importance.”

What was actually happening was that his paradigmatic blinders were preventing him from seeing the basic facts of what I actually said. When I agreed that meticulous analysis was necessary, I was talking about *historians*. When I said that facts can get in the way, I was talking about ordinary people who have the burden of *making* history.

The point of my letter was that if there is a young Christian today in a typical evangelical church who is thinking about joining the Marines and going to Iraq, he does not have to get a Ph.D. in American foreign policy studies first. He can make an honorable decision without that. Now this has ramifications for the study of history, but I am in no way commending it as a basic method of studying

history. An infantryman doesn't need to be a historian to help make history. But historians should be competent historians as they study it, and in their study, meticulous attention to the facts matters. At the same time, "competence" cannot be defined from some neutral place. There is no detached realm of "neutral facts" where believer and unbeliever alike can go and find the pristine data. This is not a historical claim; it is a theological claim about history.

We are called to live our lives in a way that realizes there is a world outside the academy. Most of the people in the economy are not economists. Most people who have made history are not historians. Suppose the young man mentioned above came to me for pastoral counsel: "Should I join the Marines?" What would *I* need to have under my belt in order to give godly counsel? A Ph.D. in American foreign policy? Suppose someone wants to shoot abortionists so that he can be the next John Brown. As a pastor, what do I need to have read before I can say, "No, John Brown was an evil man"?

A man once asked me for pastoral counsel on whether he should talk to a nearby factory about software he had developed, software that might cost a significant number of factory workers their jobs. Do I need a graduate degree in economics? Which school? Austrian? Keynesian? How do I give honorable, biblical counsel? I know a few people who do not believe in getting immunizations. Suppose some of them get diphtheria? Do I need to go to medical school? Now, in all these areas, if I give counsel I should give *informed* counsel to the best of my ability—despite the mistakes that I will no doubt make. And the possibility of such mistakes does not require that I go to every conceivable graduate school before giving pastoral (and therefore authoritative and "dogmatic") counsel. Who is sufficient for these things?

As a generalist teaching about history, should I be open to the corrective input of specialists? Of course, and this is entirely reasonable—it would be unreasonable not to be open to it. I consistently turn to specialists in various areas when my responsibilities as a pastor overlap with theirs. To take my earlier example, I *commonly* check with Christian friends who are medical doctors about any number of

questions that come up in the course of my pastoral responsibilities—views on alternative medicine within the church, home-birthing, and so on. I do not begrudge this; rather, I count on it. I *often* turn to others who have greater expertise than I do in various areas, including theology, biblical languages, law, philosophy, and so on. I am a generalist, as I said at the beginning, and I have many friends with more specialized knowledge than I have. But I come to them as an informed generalist, and they receive me as such, and gladly help me out. But if I knew a Christian medical doctor who (for whatever reason) misread my words, actions, and intentions as consistently as some of my historical critics have done, it would be difficult to turn to him, even if he had expertise I could possibly use, because I would get into more tangles than I would get solutions and help. The temptation would be to wonder if I could trust his reading of medical journals if he did such a consistently poor job of reading *me*.

This brings me back to my central theme in this introduction—the propriety of ordinary people making and reading history, along with the necessity of Christian ministers leading their churches and teaching their congregations on how to think about history. One evening not long ago, my wife and I had my parents to dinner, and we had a delightful time at the table with them telling stories to our boarders. Most of these were stories I have heard my entire life, and some of them I had *told* on numerous occasions. As I listened, I was delighted to hear new details, have gaps filled in, and here and there have adjustments made.

History is storytelling. Faithful history is faithful storytelling. Scripture requires parents to tell their children the story (and not to send them to grad school for it). But even here it is amazing how many little errors and emphases can go wrong in just the course of one generation. My parents told the story of how my father's life was spared when his destroyer hit a mine in the Korean War. We heard about how Corrie ten Boom joined them on the last part of their honeymoon in Japan. (And when I was a little kid, Corrie ten Boom gave me a wiffle ball, which I frankly admit I should have kept better track of, perhaps putting it in a glass case.)

As a family recollects all the assorted things that have happened, and as they pass them on to subsequent generations, it is easy to see how memories get blurry, details get hazy, and perspectives vary.

This being the case, where do we get off having a history conference every year? How can I *write* about history? If I am not exactly sure what *I* was doing in 1959, then why would I undertake to talk about events in the nineteenth century? But for a decade now, we have had an annual history conference in February. None of the speakers at this conference is a “trained historian.” And this coming year, the history conference will be moved to August, rolled into a bigger event called the Trinity Festival, and we will do it all again. What are we doing? We are telling stories, and the reason we are doing so is that we believe that God requires it of us.

History depends on the dedicated historians and archivists who sort, assemble, and work through the mountains of material available to them. And when they have done their work, they present to the layman . . . mountains of material. Not only does it appear that we need specialists to deal with the raw material, we also need specialists to sort out the finished products. What is a “definitive” biography? Who says?

Scripture tells us that every fact should be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses, and that in the multitude of counselors there is wisdom. Historical laymen should read broadly enough to make sure they are not reading some truncated account or other, but neither should they be embarrassed by the necessity of popularizing the material. Parents who home school have to make decisions about curricular material. Parents who serve on the curriculum committee of their children’s private Christian school have to decide between this textbook and that one. They may do so in all faithfulness, despite the obvious limitations.

Those textbooks will tell the story a certain way. Andrew Jackson will either look good or he will not look good. The American colonists were either violating Romans 13 in their revolt against King George III or they were not. Cromwell was either a disaster or he wasn’t. And the textbook will lean one way or the other. Everyone

who undertakes this kind of task is in way over his head, and this includes the trained historians. We cannot protect ourselves by means of our own prowess.

This means that we walk by faith, faith in the God who orders all history to His own perfect ends. Trusting Him does not mean that we throw up our hands in a “facts be damned” sort of way and choose some sort of relativistic history that “works for us.” Such postmodern relativism has to be rejected outright. But so does modernist hubris. No one man knows *exactly* what happened at the battle of Waterloo—although we can get the general drift of it. We are not omniscient, and so we must trust the God who is.

One other element has to be mentioned. Just as we trust Him, we also read the story with our loyalties intact. In other words, we cannot love God without loving those whom we believe to be His sons and daughters, and our brothers and sisters. I read the story of Latimer and Ridley while identifying with them. I am pulling for John Knox and not for Mary, Queen of Scots. We are a people, and so we must tell the stories of *our people* to our children. We are not given the option of being silent. And to step out in faith like this is not hubris but rather humility.

Humility is hard. In order to look back at the past, we have to (metaphorically) turn our backs on the future. This means, among other things, that the future can sneak up on us. Our study of history can mean that we give way to an optical illusion—we think we are standing on a fixed promontory, called the present, and before us extends the broad vistas supplied to us by the monthly selection of the History Book Club. But the present is never a fixed point. As C. S. Lewis pointed out in his dedication to *The Allegory of Love*, the present is also “a period”: “Above all, the friend to whom I have dedicated the book, has taught me not to patronize the past, and has trained me to see the present as itself a ‘period.’”<sup>2</sup> We are always standing on the fantail of a moving ship. Future thinkers and historians will one day be staring at us with furrowed brow, with the same baffled expression that we wear when looking at Sir Philip Sidney in his Elizabethan ruff.

But if the present is a historical period, then some of the things that we think are slam-dunk certainties will almost certainly turn out not to be. E. G. Stanley once commented (with some acidity) that the history of scholarship is the history of error. And was it Max Planck who said that science advances funeral by funeral? And Malcolm Muggeridge once said that evolution will be shown to have been one of the great jokes of history. Scholarship of all kinds—scientific, historical, grammatical, philosophical—partakes fully in the tendency the human race has to veer into sin and folly. Some of the dumbest ideas ever to afflict us have been embraced *first* in the academy and abandoned there *last*. Two examples should suffice—Marxism and evolution. Marxists think it can cost a dollar to make a loaf of bread, and that they can make people sell it for fifty cents, and then still have bread. There are people in our university system who *still* think that. And evolutionists think that the Canadian moose and the bright yellow canary are blood cousins. Where are you *most* likely to find people who will defend such things? The answer is some place where people have letters after their names.

But the established historical guild knows how to defend itself. Objectivity is a false god, and the worship of this idol is particularly pernicious in disciplines like journalism and history. It is not possible to be objective—although of course it *is* possible to be honest. By pretending to attain to objectivity, a writer's fundamental faith commitments are not eliminated, but rather submerged—and they then come out in interesting and intellectually dishonest ways.

The study of history is largely a study of sinning, and usually the sinning is on a grand scale involving armies, navies, courtesans, synods, backstabbing, running for Congress, and more. There is the occasional hero, but there is also the hapless character that we might identify as hero fodder. Since everyone likes and admires heroes, sometimes they have to be manufactured for the sake of posterity.

To complicate the picture, the historians doing the study are sinners themselves. Some have embraced the sin and have gone over to the “dark side of the force,” and so they tell us lie after lie about what happened before we got here. Other historians are conscientious



Christians, and they seek to grow in their own personal sanctification as they take on the important task of writing our stories. It makes a difference whether Moses or Jeroboam writes the history curriculum. Some historians sin through hagiography and others sin through debunking. Some strive to be godly while hacking their way through a hagiographic jungle (with the machete of truth) and others strive for godliness as they fight the cynical postmodern debunkers.

The Christian who wants to be faithful here has to be very careful because the boundaries of the acceptable are always vigorously policed. We have all heard about political correctness, but after about a hundred years or so, it turns into historical correctness. The guild does a good job (for the most part) in dealing with the occasional crank who offers up the theory that Robert E. Lee was a space alien. But the guild also does a good job in ostracizing anyone who differs from the current reigning orthodoxy, whatever that orthodoxy may happen to be (and there always *is* one). And so it is that the lunatic and the “heretic” often find themselves sitting side by side on the sidewalk outside after having been “escorted” out. They were each halfway through their lecture at the historical society when they were grabbed where the pants hang loose and frog-marched to the door.

And of course, the question that is then asked of the “heretic” is “why do you associate with those lunatics out there on the sidewalk?” Bad testimony. We have to do better. We have to seek the approval of those who run the guild. And they will always give it . . . but there are conditions.

But it is not enough simply to be contrarians. Should we strive for a *lack* of scholarship in what we do? Certainly not, because such anti-intellectualism has a bad case of its own besetting sins as well. Proud ignorance is no better than proud knowledge. The problem is the human heart, which is always just a few inches below the head, whether or not the head in question is full of axle grease or erudite learning. Why does Paul taunt the wise man, the scholar of the age? It was because with all his learning, he did not know God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). It may sound arrogant to say something like this, but it is genuine

humility. “I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes” (Ps. 119:99). One of the foundational prerequisites for faithful study in *any* area, including that of American history, is a fear of the Lord, and a complete willingness to ground everything on the Word of God. Only God is omniscient, and when we compare how much any human being knows (in his field) with how much there is to be known in that field, the only marvel is that any of us knows anything at all. How much history *is* there, and how much of it made it into the historical record? “What is man, that You are mindful of him?”

### Endnotes

1. *For Kirk and Covenant: The Stalwart Courage of John Knox* (Nashville: Highland Books, 2000), and *Beyond Stateliest Marble: The Passionate Femininity of Anne Bradstreet* (Nashville: Highland Books, 2001).

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), viii.

## Regenerate but Unreconstructed

Ash on an old man's sleeve  
Is all the ash burnt roses leave.  
Dust in the air suspended  
Marks the place where a story ended.  
from "Little Gidding"  
T. S. Eliot

I MUST BEGIN with an apology. The title of this short essay is taken with a little twist from John Crowe Ransom's famous essay, his contribution to the collective defiance rendered to the ugliness of modernity by the Southern Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand*. My apology is for explaining an allusion in such a heavy-handed way, but it is necessary because I am writing this essay as a result of controversy with some "professional historians," men who belong to a class of persons where every important allusion is sure to be missed, or, if caught, misconstrued. But since this is written to explain, rather than obscure, the heavy-handedness must be endured. So what do I mean by *regenerate*? What do I mean by *unreconstructed*?

Ransom meant that the South should accept the encroachments of blighted industrialism as inevitable (reconstructed) but that the South should offer this acceptance with a bad grace (unregenerate): "The South at last is to be physically reconstructed; but it will be fatal if the South should conceive it as her duty to be regenerated."<sup>1</sup> While there is an important point here that is well worth articulating and defending, I am writing from much further downstream. The

river of modernity is still flowing, and there is a lot more gunk in it than there was in 1930, along with a few more shopping carts half-buried in the weeds along the bank. But there is an additional element in all this as well. Way downstream as we are, we have a bit more perspective—and can perhaps identify at least some of the pollution in this particular river as the responsibility of the Old South. And that is why I would want to reverse his phrase to accommodate our changing circumstances—regenerate but unreconstructed. But this requires explanation.

In the fall of 2003, a controversy erupted in the small town where I live in northern Idaho. The controversy concerned a booklet I co-wrote with Steve Wilkins in the mid-nineties entitled *Southern Slavery as It Was*.<sup>2</sup> It was the contention of this booklet that the way in which slavery ended has had ongoing deleterious consequences for modern Christians in our current culture wars, and that slavery was far more benign in practice than it was made to appear in the literature of the abolitionists. We were *not* trying to maintain that slavery in itself was a positive good, like food, air, or sunlight. Our central interest was in defending the integrity and applicability of the Scriptures to our current cultural controversies, and we affirmed that Christians who apologize for what the Bible teaches on slavery will soon be apologizing for what it teaches on marriage. We wrote as Christian apologists, but not the kind who apologize for being Christians.

The relevance of our concerns was underscored this last year when the high court of Massachusetts imposed (in principle) homosexual marriages on the rest of the states through the full faith and credit clause of the Constitution. Somehow, I find it hard to believe that R. L. Dabney would have been surprised by any of this, either with the nature of the cul-de-sac error, or the commonwealth from which it came. We have not seen this level of moral folly in high places since Caligula made his horse a senator.

Our particular controversy arose because the local newspaper erroneously reported that we were holding a conference on the subject of slavery, and it was not long before many of the local leftists were screeching like so many progressive tea kettles. In the course of the

ensuing controversy, I found myself accused of many amazing things, a number of which were as fully immoral as a decision by the United States Supreme Court. Naturally, I felt I needed to defend myself. Some accusations were slanderous, some were confused, and some were just half a bubble off.

In this last category was the accusation that I am a neo-Confederate. This is close in one way, but at the same time it is not at all accurate. The tag *neo-Confederate* conjures up images of a handful of disillusioned yahoos setting up a tiny republic in a trailer park east of Houston somewhere. But it must be admitted that a more accurate name would require explanation as well. This is because I am not a neo-Confederate; I am a *paleo-Confederate*. And with this acknowledgment comes my need for a phrase like “regenerate but unreconstructed.”

You see my difficulty. The problem with such a phrase is not what it actually means. The problem is that it is the kind of phrase that semi-literate journalists *think* they understand. And half-educated history professors react to it by maintaining that I have no right to an opinion on paleo-anything—for I am not a trained professional historian, with a doctorate on “the ingestion of cough syrups in west London, 1815–1830, a study in contrasts.”<sup>3</sup>

But I have used the term *paleo-Confederate* anyway, for the honest reader will be honest enough to wonder what such a word could mean, and perhaps be curious enough to read a small essay on it. At the same time, it is important for me to emphasize that by using the term *paleo-Confederate* I do not wish to limit my historical allegiances to anything so provincially American, and so I would *also* want to identify myself as a paleo-medieval, a paleo-conservative, a paleo-Constantinian, a paleo-Puritan, a paleo-Chestertonian, and a paleo-spear Dane.

### Regenerate

As a conservative Reformed minister, I affirm that God governs the world through covenant sanctions; He both blesses and curses. I take it as self-evident that in the disastrous outcome of the War Between the States, God was pouring out His wrath *upon the South*. Since our

God is never capricious or arbitrary in His judgments, this outpouring of wrath was just and righteous in every respect.

Understanding the outcome of the war as a judgment from God was common among pious Southerners at the time. This understanding in no way vindicated the sins of the North, for God had once used the wickedness of Assyria to humiliate a backslidden Israel. Our sovereign God draws straight with crooked lines. This was a lesson that Habbakuk had to learn, and Dabney sorrowfully repeated the lesson: "A righteous God, for our sins towards Him, has permitted us to be overthrown by our enemies and His."<sup>4</sup>

A biblical view of the world makes a distinction between a wicked nation, an axe in the hand of God, and the holiness of the sovereign hand that wields it (Is. 10:5). This is why, when considering something as awful as Sherman's March to the Sea, we should be aghast at the wickedness of this form of warfare, and simultaneously we must recognize that as wielded by the hand of God, this judgment was not wickedness at all. It was not falling upon the South because of some few cultural peccadilloes or trifles. Whatever it was that caused God to bring such a judgment, it was a really big deal.

But confession of sin and repentance require that the sins be *named*. This involves more than acknowledging the mere fact of unnamed sin somewhere. It means that specific sins should be named. In *Southern Slavery as It Was*, we repudiated the racism that was often seen as justification for the system of slavery. The fact that racism was virtually universal, in both the North and South, does not serve as an adequate justification. Our standard must be Scripture, and never what is commonly practiced around us.

The reason we were attacked in our little controversy in Moscow was not because we would not condemn racism as a sin; we had done so repeatedly and clearly. The reason we were slandered in the way we were was simply because we refused to say that racism was a sin against the State or against humanity. All sin, if it is indeed sin, is sin *against God*. It is God's character and law which are offended by sin. We maintain that racism is a sin against God, and that it will be judged in the light of His holiness at the last day. It is not a sin against

Congress or against the Supreme Court. It is not a sin against the whims of *demos* or against the bureaucrats down at Health and Human Services. God hates it, and He always will. But democrats do not want a final or ultimate word like this. Of course sins against God do harm and hurt individuals, and in this lesser sense, sins against God are also sins against the victim. But even here, when King David confessed his sin of murder and adultery, he says to God, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4).

We are living in the Regeneration of the world, an eon brought about by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of this, we answer to Him, and because we answer to Him, we condemn racism. The necessity of condemning racism is clearly revealed in Scripture, an acknowledged authority by many Southerners. Their racism was less virulent in a number of ways than what was found in the North, but it was more blameworthy. To whom much is given, much is required.

Both Northerners and Southerners were misled by the obvious inferiority of black *culture* at that time, which had nothing to do with whether blacks bore the image of God in man, and everything to do with whether the gospel had yet had an opportunity to do its work within black culture. There are few things funnier than watching Europeans and those of European descent look down their noses at primitive cultures, taking pride in themselves. But what do you have, St. Paul asks, that you did not receive as a gift? And if you received it as a gift, why do you boast as though you did not? What was Europe like before the gospel arrived *there*? The answer is that it was every bit as wretched as anything you might dredge up from the history of the fens of Africa. Not that many centuries ago, *my* ancestors were engaged in idolatry, human sacrifice, and mindless superstitions, and I have heard about some berserkers who would strip naked, paint themselves blue, and run into battle. Just a few centuries later, taking the long view, their descendants would be building cathedrals and writing symphonies. The gospel is the issue—grace, not race.

Anyone who would labor fruitfully in building the kingdom of God must understand this. Anyone who wants to learn what is valu-

able from the theology of the Southern theologians, political theorists, cultural writers, and so on (and there is a great deal to learn), must resolve to understand this as well. The kingdom of God is not tied to one nation, one ethnic tradition, or one stream of cultural development. Christ commanded us to preach the gospel to every creature. The universal salvation offered by Him means that all who turn in repentance away from their idolatries—whether African, aboriginal, American, or alternative—will be forgiven. Moreover, the prophets declare in many glorious passages that all the ends of the earth will turn, repent, and call upon the Lord. Their lives, families, households, tribes, and nations will be transformed by the power of the gospel. The Christian faith *is* the future of this world.<sup>5</sup> The wonderful result will be a Trinitarian glory which will include lots of brown and tan, red and yellow, black and white.

Any political or theological conservatism that does not accept this, press for it, pray for it, and yearn for it is a conservatism that must be born again. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*” This means that regeneration, in the sense I am speaking of here, must include rejection of every form of racial hatred, animosity or vainglory. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female. But here is the difficulty—we know how to “reject” such forms of racism in our modern and sentimental way. We know how to throw racism off the egalitarian train. But how do we deal with this problem in Christendom? The Old South was a nation in that old order of Christendom, and they did *not* deal with it. Why didn’t they? And if we learn from them on subjects like culture, order, hierarchy, honor, and agrarianism, will this mean that we (inevitably) must buy into racist assumptions? Certainly not, and working through these issues is one of the reasons for this book.

### Unreconstructed

So I also take it as a given that the South was right on all the essential constitutional and cultural issues surrounding the war, and this is my reason for calling myself unreconstructed. I do not want to stick to my guns on this as a matter of pride, or because the issue is at the



top of my list of priorities. It is not. But even so, I will not recant anything concerning that war, however trivial, simply because the current regime of *intoleristas* demands that I do so. Robert E. Lee is not at the center of my worldview or my theology. But when people start demanding that I treat him as an historical pariah, a peer in some way to Himmler, I am not going to do it. Lee was a gracious Christian gentleman, a brother in Christ, and an honorable man. Part of his greatness was his role in resisting the progress of the Revolution here in America.

The American Revolution was not a true revolution in the modern sense of that word, but the French Revolution *was* such a true revolution. This does not exhaust the subject. The fact that the American Revolution was not part of *the* Revolution does not mean that we have not gone through our own Revolution, one that corresponds to that of France. We *have* experienced our equivalent of the French Revolution, and it was a revolution that ended at Appomattox: "Nor can we rely upon any evidence from the United States of America. The real revolution in that country was not what is called the Revolution in the history books, but is a consequence of the Civil War."<sup>6</sup>

The nineteenth century was the century for revolutions, even if we allow for the French Revolution in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the Russian Revolution in the first decades of the twentieth. The War Between the States was our participation in those widespread global upheavals. The Revolution, generically considered, is an enemy of the Christian faith, and it is an enemy that has not gone away. The effect and the influence of it surround us daily. Although some of the new currents were involved in it, the American War for Independence was fundamentally a conservative movement in defense of the old order. The Civil War was not; that conflagration transformed our nation in much the same way that the French Revolution transformed France.

But our concern in all this is not to go back and try to undo the French Revolution or fight the battle of Gettysburg all over again. Our central concern (and in some ways, our only concern) is to be

faithful Christians *now*. And we cannot be faithful Christians now if we try to build the kingdom of God on shaky or rotten foundations. The new wine of the gospel will necessarily burst the Enlightenment wineskins. And yet, most contemporary Christians have turned their wine into grape juice in order to prevent the wineskins from coming to such an unhappy end.

The culture wars we are currently engaged in are real and consequential, but those on the “traditional values” side of the conflict are consistently outmaneuvered because they refuse to go back to first principles. They do not see that unless Christ is acknowledged as Lord in the public square (but first in the church and home), then every manner of rebellion and disobedience must be tolerated there. Given that Christ is our only possible Savior, how is it that Christians believe that Christ can be banished from our public life, while simultaneously believing that sin and disobedience can be kept out of our public life by some other means, some other savior? How can we reject Christ in this way and *not* have homosexual marriage?

This has happened because Christians have allowed themselves to be maneuvered into accepting the tag of “right wing.” But the terms *left wing* and *right wing* come from the seating of the revolutionary legislature in France *following* the Revolution. Those seated on the right were the moderate revolutionaries. Those on the left were the fire eaters, the radicals. And this is why the Revolution continues on, not resisted by many consistent voices at all. The car of the Revolution is barreling down the highway, and a few traditional-values conservatives have got a back door open and are trying to slow the thing down by dragging their feet on the pavement. It does not appear to be working. Virtually all conservatives accept the *fact* of the car and the *fact* of the highway. The only thing they dispute anymore is the speed. Groen van Prinsterer put it well when he said, “Conservatism, without a Christian-historical basis, is the inconsistent wing of liberalism.”<sup>7</sup> And those inconsistencies will eventually work their way out into the light of day. R. L. Dabney made the same point when referring to a certain species of conservatism:

American conservatism is merely the shadow that follows Radicalism as it moves forward toward perdition. . . . It is worthless because it is the conservatism of expediency only, and not of sturdy principle. It intends to risk nothing serious for the sake of the truth, and has no idea of being guilty of the folly of martyrdom.<sup>8</sup>

One wag has commented that if the Democrats suggested a plan to burn down the Capitol building, the Republicans would counter with a plan to do it over the course of three years. Our nation's leftists want to drive the car over the cliff at 100 mph. Republicans want to go 50 mph.

This is why it is important for us to know what needs to stay unreconstructed and what must submit to the agony of the new birth. This unreconstructed worldview has to deal with culture, egalitarianism, constitutional interpretation, and fundamentally with race and slavery. Eugene Genovese makes an important comment in this respect in a review of a book by Clyde Wilson:

But Wilson, like his fellow southern conservatives, pays dearly for his philosophical idealism. Hostile to slavery and racism, he seeks to root the positive qualities he finds in the life of the Old South in an older Christian civilization and transatlantic republicanism. Too good a historian to treat slavery as a bagatelle, he nonetheless underestimates its effect on the formation of southern culture, ideals, and character.<sup>9</sup>

This is the dilemma for the one who would be unreconstructed. I don't want to underestimate the effects of slavery on the South or minimize any enormities. As Genovese said, slavery was no bagatelle. But neither do I want to ignore the biblical teaching on slavery and act as though the Christian defenders of antebellum slavery had no clue what the Scriptures said about this. They knew the apostolic instructions precisely, had their exegesis in hand, and consistently bested the abolitionists in debate.

All of this means that the areas that need to remain unreconstructed and the areas that must be regenerate are not discrete, but