

# Religion and American Slavery

## Teacher's Guide

### *Lesson III. Religious Influences on Tensions Leading to the Civil War*

#### Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will:

1. Investigate the ways some enslaved people used religion to resist their enslavement.
2. Compare religious arguments supporting and opposing slavery, which contributed to tensions leading to the Civil War.

#### Lesson Summary

1. As the revivals of the First and Second Awakening spread, more enslaved people accepted Evangelical Christianity. This led to enslaved people practicing their own form of Christianity in secret on plantations to resist the oppression of slavery. Scholars call this the “Invisible Church.”
2. Westward expansion upset the delicate balance in Congress between slave states and free states, which caused a sectional crisis leading to the Civil War.
3. American Christian ministers usually avoided the topic of slavery, but as the sectional crisis intensified, many churches split as debates over the morality of slavery became fierce.
4. Americans made religious arguments in support of slavery and in opposition to slavery. Some argued that slavery was a sin, while others argued that slavery was ordained by God.

#### For Students to Begin the Lesson

Visit the [Student Learning Hub](#) to begin Lesson III of the *Religion and American Slavery* series. At the bottom of each online step, students will find a button to proceed to the next step. Individual steps are also listed below with hyperlinks, which can be accessed if viewing this document on a digital device.

## Questions to Check for Understanding

### Step 1. Enslaved People Create the Invisible Church as a Form of Resistance

In the Step 1 module, students are prompted to answer these questions. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. What are some examples of African religious traditions found among enslaved people?

In many traditional African religions and in Islam, hats, turbans, and headwraps are worn as an outward sign of faith... While some masters provided rough and demeaning clothing for their slaves, many of the enslaved whenever possible would wear traditional robes, hats, or headwraps as a sign of their faith. There was great diversity among traditional African religions and many shared a belief in the power of the human voice and dance. Singing and dancing were considered prayerful expressions... In the New World, this singing and dancing became known as the “ring shout”. This was different than everyday dancing. “Shouters” could not cross their feet, and the circle only moved counterclockwise. Some scholars believe that the ring shout descended from the Islamic word shaw’t, which means to circle the sacred Ka’bah at Mecca counterclockwise. The joy of dancing and singing the ring shout would eventually develop into energetic, and life-affirming modern day gospel music.

2. What are some ways the religious freedom of enslaved people was suppressed under slavery?

There are many ways religious freedom was suppressed under slavery. The video states: Enslavers sometimes arranged for Christian church services among their enslaved people where preachers quoted Bible passages about obedience and submissiveness to masters.

3. What was the Invisible Church?

The Invisible Church was a form of resistance that undermined the power of the master/slave relationship. It empowered enslaved people to hold to their dignity while they faced the gruesome realities of enslavement. It was called the Invisible Church because enslaved people gathered in secret where their enslavers could not see them. These secret gatherings were held deep in the swamps and woods to avoid detection. At these gatherings, enslaved people worshipped by sharing sermons emphasizing suffering, redemption, deliverance and freedom.

4. What are some ways that enslaved people who participated in the Invisible Church began reclaiming their religious freedom?

These meetings often combined African religious traditions with evangelical Christianity. Worshippers gathered around an inverted iron pot to capture the sound of fervent preaching, praying, and singing. For meetings of the Invisible Church, congregants harvested wild game or pigs from the plantation and roasted them over hot coals in a pit. This prevented smoke from rising in the air and revealing their location. Some scholars believe that this is the origin of the southern tradition of barbecue. These secret meetings gave personal power and hope to the enslaved congregants. It strengthened them to endure the daily trauma and oppression of slavery

## [Step 2. Sectional Crisis](#)

## [Step 3. Timeline of Sectional Crisis](#)

## [Step 4. Sectional Crisis and American Christianity](#)

# **Prepare for Class Discussion**

## [Step 5. Prepare for Class Discussion](#)

After browsing the timeline of events leading to the Civil War, answer this question:

In your opinion, how did Christian churches splitting over the issue of slavery help lead to war?

## [Step 6. Religious Arguments for and Against Slavery](#)

In the Step 6 module, students are prompted to answer these questions. The answers below are drawn from the YouTube video transcript.

1. What are some examples of arguments that supported slavery in the period leading to the Civil War?

Pro-slavery arguments often emphasized that slavery made Black people more docile and obedient and prepared them for heaven. These ideas came from the colonial period where Christian leaders argued for planters to teach Christianity to their enslaved property. Others saw slavery as a necessary evil and argued that God will eliminate it in His own time.

2. Slavery was accepted as normal in the American colonial period. Leading to the Civil War, more Americans began to believe that slavery was immoral. What changed?

Beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, anti-slavery campaigns began to push back against the idea that slavery was ordained of God. Just as the Bible was used to defend slavery and the rights of slave owners, it was also used to denounce it and condemn them. Rather than focusing on specific passages of scripture, the Abolitionist movement focused on broad biblical narratives of love and redemption. They also pointed to specific teaching of Jesus, such “love thy neighbor as thyself.” As a result of these interpretations of scripture, some Americans began to see slavery as immoral. Abolitionists also drew on American founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, that stated all men were endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Some were beginning to see slavery as offending God’s laws of nature.

## Step 7. Proslavery Advocates and Abolitionists

In the Step 7 module, students are prompted to summarize the arguments listed below.

1. What were some of the ways advocates for slavery interpreted the Bible to argue for their viewpoint?

**Thornton Stringfellow** was a minister in Virginia who wrote *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* in which he used the Bible to argue that chattel slavery was ordained of God

*“God enacted that the Israelites should buy slaves of the heathen nations around them, and will them and their increase as property to their children forever (Lev. 25: 44-46). All these nations were made of one blood. Yet God ordained that some should be “chattel” slaves to others, and gave his special aid to effect it. In view of this incontrovertible fact, how can I believe this passage disproves the lawfulness of slavery in the sight of God? How can any sane man believe it, who believes the Bible?”*

**Josiah Priest** was an uneducated leather worker who gave up his work to be a writer. He then published thousands of books and pamphlets. In 1843, he wrote *Slavery As It Relates to the Negro, Or African Race* in which he argued that God created Black people to be slaves. In this quote, he argues that King Solomon had Black slaves, so it is acceptable for ministers to also have slaves.

*“That King Solomon had slaves in abundance, is written by his own hand, which writing is still extant, and that he bought them is also stated by him, and that from slaves thus bought or otherwise procured in the negro countries, he raised others, as do the owners of slaves at the present times. Now Solomon was a preacher or a minister of religion as well as a king, as he calls himself, and if such a man had slaves of the negro race, (as to enslave any other people was not tolerated by their law,) how is it that ministers of religion at the present time may not also have them if they desire it?”*

2. What were some of the ways abolitionists interpreted the Bible to argue for their viewpoint?

**George Bourne** was a pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Virginia. Because of his anti-slavery stance, he was expelled from the church and ultimately settled in New York City in 1829. He wrote *A condensed Anti-slavery Bible Argument, by a citizen of Virginia* in which he argued that Virginia planters had misinterpreted scripture to justify slavery. In this quote, he argues that Abraham’s servants had rights and were treated like his own children. They were not treated like chattel slaves.

*...the same religious rights and privileges were secured to Abraham's servants, that belonged to him and his own children; a strong analogical proof that they shared all other rights, because real slaves have no rights whatever, and it is not likely that these servants would be allowed some rights equally with children, but be denied all others."*

**Theodore Dwight Weld** was an early leader of the abolitionist movement starting in the 1830s. He wrote *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights*. In this quote, he argues slavery robs persons of the personal power God has given to everyone.

*"Two commandments deal death to slavery. 'Thou shalt not steal,' or, 'thou shalt not take from another what belongs to him.' All man's powers are God's gift to him. That they are his own, is proved from the fact that God has given them to him alone, – that each of them is a part of himself, and all of them together constitute himself. All else that belongs to man, is acquired by the use of these powers. The interest belongs to him, because the principal does; the product is his, because he is the producer. Ownership of any thing is ownership of its use. The right to use according to will, is itself ownership. The eighth commandment presupposes and assumes the right of every man to his powers, and their product. Slavery robs of both."*