

God's Name In Vain by Stephen L. Carter (Perseus Book Group: Basic Books: 2001)
(10 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Slavery—Interest Verses Sentiment

The historian Don Fehrenbacher once wrote that the reason slavery was able to persist for so many decades was that those supporting it were moved by interest whereas those opposed to it were moved by sentiment. In other words, the slaveholders would actually be affected in their daily lives by the discontinuance of the institution, whereas abolitionists, by and large, did not suffer any personal consequences if slavery continued. It is an uneasy truth of history that materialism tends to trump idealism, even though subsequent events often prove that the idealists were right all along. Much human misery could have been avoided had enough others, at key moments in the past, spun political interest out of idealistic sentiment. (Page 83)

2. Cry for Abolition Raised by Clergy

The era of the public campaign for abolitionism in America spanned roughly the last three decades of the eighteenth century and the first six decades of the nineteenth. The leaders of the campaign, almost all of them clergy, always cried religious reasons—the Christian Gospel, basically—for their activism. (Page 84)

3. Slavery is Wrong, Love thy Neighbor, says the Bible

And why was holding slaves wrong? For Charles Finney, as for most of the abolitionists, the reason was simple: The Bible commands Christians to love their neighbors as themselves. To the antislavery preachers, the contradiction was so obvious as to need little argument. What the South was doing, the Bible forbade; and the responsibility of the Christians in the North—so the abolitionist insisted—was to end what the Reverend Theodore Parker, another prominent antislavery preacher, called “the plague-spot of slavery—the curse to our industry, our education, our politics, and our religion.” (Page 84)

4. Slavery Was Debated in the Constitutional Convention

Slavery was certainly debated at the Constitutional Convention and in the debate over the ratification of the new document, and, of course, Jefferson's draft language blaming slavery on the king and condemning the practice was removed from Declaration of Independence before it was presented for signature, but it must be admitted that although antislavery feeling might have run high during the eighteenth century, antislavery activism was rare. When the great evangelist William Wilberforce, writing in his diary in 1787, referred to the abolition of slavery as one of the “great objects” God had set before him, he did so as part of a lament: He was expressing sorrow that his

Christian brethren seemed to have cared so little about the issue in the century than tumbling toward its close. (Page 85-86)

5. War to Cleanse the Nation?

The abolitionist Henry Darling suggested that the war was God’s way of purifying a nation that had sinned mightily, and in many different ways. But, once the war began, Darling argued there was no choice but to fight it to a conclusion. In response to efforts to negotiate an end to the war that would allow slavery to continue, he offered withering contempt:

Are other demons to be exorcised from our body politics, and this one to remain? Is God bringing us through this terrible baptism of blood, to cleanse the white robe of our national purity from a few of its minor impurities, but yet to permit this deepest, darkest stain to remain? That would be a strange teleology, indeed, that would lead any to such a conclusion. (Page 88)

6. Millions of Human Beings (Slaves) Are Forcefully Deprived of Their Rights

An 1859 sermon by Nathaniel Hall was explicit:

I undertake to say that there was a more senseless assumption put forth in a all Christendom—one more to be resisted, if need were, to the very death—than that the pulpit, standing as the visible exponent of God’s truth and law, should have nothing to say in reference to the fact that millions of human beings, in the nation in which it stands, are forcefully deprived of their natural rights, and crushed beneath the heel of lawless oppression. (Page 88)

7. Slavery Has Its Moral Side and Christianity is Entitled to Examine It

The abolitionist preachers did not think it possible to confine their vision of justice to a narrow, walled-off region called “church”; they considered action in the world not only justified but imperative. Ezra Gannett explained that the survival of the institution of slavery “is not purely a political question.” Why not? Because “it has its moral side, and religion and Christianity are entitled to examine it as entering within their domain.” That which touches morality, in other words, is precisely that which religion is “entitled” to examine; no argument about separation of church and state can prevent the church from protecting its own side of the wall. One might reasonably ask, of course, what falls on the church’s side of the wall—what aspects of life religion is entitled to “examine”—Gannett, like other abolitionists, seemed quite sure that the question of the size of religion’s sphere was one for religion, not the state, to decide. And, having made its decision, said Gannett, religion has to act in the world. Those

who oppose slavery on religious grounds, he argued, “May take all constitutional and lawful methods for securing an abrogation of those enactments, and of those provisions of the fundamental law [he meant the Constitution], which offered our moral convictions.” (Page 89)

8. Abolition a Tool for Evangelism

Many abolitionists believed that the land would be more fit when it was more Christian. They supported abolition largely as a tool for evangelizing. It was imperative to convert the slaves to Christianity, as it was imperative to convert the slaves to Christianity as it was imperative under the Great Commission to convert everybody, but the effort to evangelize the slaves was that much harder, wrote one abolitionist preacher, because of “the heathenism of oppression” created by enslavement. (Page 89)

9. Slaves Were Children of Ham

One fiery pro-slave preacher, the Reverend Iveson L. Brooks of South Carolina, attacked Abolitionism as a fanaticism near the border of lunacy,” but only because the antislavery clergy misunderstood the Bible. The African slaves, he argued along with many other Christians, were the children of Ham, commended in Genesis 9 to serve. He added, once more in keeping with slave’s other defenders, that the Africans were actually better off as slaves that they would have been in their native land, for in the United States they received the benefits of Christian civilization. (Page 92)

10. Slavery Caused the Civil War and Nothing Else

All through the twentieth century, historian searched for a way to explain the Civil War in particular, and the abolitionist struggle in general, without the need for resort to religion. So, for example, we all have been told that the war was really represented the struggle of the cheap labor. North against toe free-lance South or that it was really all about immigration, or railroads, or even what Lincoln kept insisting, an ideological struggle to keep the Union whole. Yet it was slavery, and nothing but slavery, that caused the Southern states to secede; it was slavery, and nothing but slavery, m that the war’s most ardent Northern supporters addressed. (Page 96)