

BAPTISTS, JEREMIAH BELL JETER, AND “THE BLIGHTING, WITHERING CURSE”

by
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In December 2018, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Louisville, Kentucky, released a study, *Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*. It was the latest attempt in recent Southern Baptist history to deal full-on with the record of an era in American Baptist life that many would like to forget. Chattel slavery came to the United States in 1619, and through more than two and a half centuries Americans owned, used, and oft-times abused slaves. The report reviewed the history of the seminary’s founders—James Petigru Boyce, John Albert Broadus, and others—plus key supporters like Joseph Emerson Brown, Confederate governor of Georgia, who had been slaveholders and, some, exploiters of slaves, despite being professing Christians. Under current president R. Albert Mohler, the holder of the Joseph Emerson Brown Chair of Christian Theology, the seminary has been assessing ways to deal with its sordid past.² Recommendations might include renaming his endowed chair³ and the payment of reparations.⁴

¹Dr. Straub taught historical theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN, for 16 years. The title of this article is taken from a speech by Congressman James Wilson II (Whig, from New Hampshire) before the House, opposing slavery in the West, 16 Feb 1849, quoted in *Presidents from Taylor to Grant, 1849–1877: Debating the Issues in Pro and Con Primary Documents*, ed. Jeffrey W. Coker (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 27.

²For a history of the chair and Brown, see Jeff Robinson, “Trustees Elect Mohler to Storied Chair of Theology,” *Southern News*, 27 Apr 2005, available online at <https://news.sbts.edu/2005/04/27/trustees-elect-mohler-to-storied-chair-of-theology/>, accessed 21 Oct 2019.

³One frequent solution to address the record of slavery is to eradicate the names of those slaveholders, etc. from buildings, endowed chairs, city streets, and even major United States cities such as Austin, Texas, named for Stephen F. Austin, a defender of slavery. See Matthew Haag, “Stephen F. Austin Defended Slavery: Should the Texas Capital Be Renamed?” *New York Times*, 31 July 2018, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/31/us/stephen-f-austin-renaming.html>, accessed 19 Nov 2019.

⁴One suggestion for redress was a request for reparations in the form of a monetary transfer of a sizable portion of SBTS’s endowment to Simmons College of Louisville, a historically black college. See Billy Kobin, “Louisville’s Southern Baptist

The story of Baptists and slavery is a familiar one for anyone acquainted with the history of thralldom.⁵ Many Southern Baptist ministers owned slaves.⁶ Some vigorously defended the practice for a variety of biblical, theological, and social reasons.⁷ Others owned slaves but expressed a certain reluctance toward the practice. Still other Southern Baptists intensely opposed slavery and either left the South or were driven from it because of their opposition, as was the case of James Madison Pendleton,⁸ or agitated against the practice within their sphere of influence, as in the case of David Barrow⁹ and William Hickman.¹⁰

seminary rejects call to make slavery reparations," *Louisville Courier Journal*, 9 Jun 2019, available online at <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/religion/2019/06/06/louisville-southern-baptist-leaders-reject-slavery-reparations/1350801001/>, accessed 14 Oct 2019.

⁵The literature on proslavery Christianity is massive. Among the best sources are Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchel Snay (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelical and the Social Order, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

⁶A distinction needs to be made at this point between Southerners who were Baptists (southern Baptists) before 1845 and Southern (with a capital S) Baptists who broke away from the larger Baptist body in 1845 over slavery. A list of Baptist clergymen who were proslavery can be gleaned from Larry Tise, "Appendix One: Proslavery Clergymen," *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 363–66. The list includes such Baptist notables as James Petigru Boyce, William Theophilus Brantly, William Tomlinson Brantly, John Leadley Dagg, Richard Fuller, Richard Furman, Robert Boyte Crawford Howell, Basil Manly Sr, Basil Manly Jr, Patrick Hues Mell, Henry Allen Tupper, and others.

⁷Among the most outspoken defenders of slavery were P. H. Mell, *Slavery: a Treatise, Showing That Slavery Is Neither a Moral, Political, nor Social Evil* (Penfield, GA: Benjamin Brantly, 1844); Richard Fuller, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution: In a Correspondence between the Rev. Richard Fuller of Beaufort, S. C., and the Rev. Francis Wayland, of Providence, R. I.*, rev. and cor. by the authors (New York: Lewis Colby, 1845); and Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (Richmond, VA: J. W. Randolph, 1856) and idem, *Slavery: Its Origin, Nature and History* (New York: J. F. Trow, 1861).

⁸Victor B. Howard, "James Madison Pendleton: A Southern Crusader Against Slavery," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 74 (July 1978): 192–215.

⁹David Barrow, *Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy and Scripture* (Lexington, KY: Bradford, 1808). Also, Carlos R. Allen Jr, "David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series XX (July 1963): 440–51 and Keith Harper, "A Strange Kind of Christian": David Barrow and Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; on the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture," *Ohio Valley History* 15 (Fall 2015): 68–77.

¹⁰Jeffrey P. Straub, "William Hickman, 1747–1834," in *A Noble Company: Biographical Essays on Notable Particular-Regular Baptists in America*, vol. 4, ed. Terry Wolever (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2014), 326–48.

This essay will discuss the middle group—*reluctant* slave owners—individuals who owned slaves but expressed a resistance to the practice, yet seemed to be caught in an era where they thought they had few options but to retain slaves. An exemplar of this group is Virginia Baptist Jeremiah Bell Jeter (1802–1880).¹¹ Jeter was a prominent southern Baptist pastor whose life provides an excellent lens through which to consider the conflicted relationship that some Baptists had with owning slaves. If his own sentiments are to be believed, he determined as a young man never to own slaves.

I was born and brought up in the midst of slavery. Slaves were my nurses and the companions of my childhood and youth. To many of them I formed a strong and enduring attachment. Of the system of slavery my early impressions were not favorable. There were families in my neighborhood and in the regions around who, according to common report, treated their slaves with great severity. They were poorly fed, thinly clothed, hardly worked, cruelly chastised for slight or imaginary offenses, and, in some cases, murdered....

I grew up with a determination never to own a slave. Whether slavery was right or wrong, was a question which I did not consider. The management of slaves was attended with so much responsibility, care, and trouble that I was resolved not to be involved in it. They could not be profitably governed without firm authority, and its exercise was uncongenial with my taste and habits.¹²

It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the racist attitudes which may have been beneath the surface of Jeter’s comments. Even in this brief statement, Jeter does not reject slavery outright. But he clearly does not favor it, though for personal reasons rather than biblical ones. Nevertheless, Jeter came to own slaves. It will be his participation as a slave owner, reluctant or otherwise, that will be discussed in this paper. The issue of involvement in slavery will be the primary focus under consideration.¹³ Jeter saw the institution as a difficult one. Yet, he came to possess slaves through his second marriage. This burden would test his attitudes and his resolve. It also demonstrated the pernicious nature

¹¹For a study of Virginia Baptists and Jeter’s role among them, see Reuben Edward Alley, *A History of Virginia Baptists* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist General Board, ca. 1973). Also, on Baptist growth in Virginia, consult Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

¹²J. B. Jeter, *Recollections of a Long Life* (Richmond, VA: Religious Herald, 1902), 67.

¹³The issue of racism is an important parallel conversation in the history of American Christianity. Its omission here should not be construed as implying its lesser importance. The scope of this paper is limited to slavery proper rather than its underlying attitudes. For a discussion of race in the South, see Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2016). Also H. Sheldon Smith, *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972).

of slavery among southern Baptists. What does one do in a world where slavery is part of the warp and woof of society?¹⁴

A Biographical Sketch of J. B. Jeter: Born into a World of Slavery

Slavery was firmly established by the time Jeter was born in early 19th-century Virginia. The first slaves had come to the colony in 1619,¹⁵ though the English slave trade didn't begin in earnest until after 1660. Portugal and Spain, in South America, traded in slaves before that time, but English slavery grew as the English colonized the West Indies and North America. Early efforts to settle the Atlantic colonies attempted to conscript the indigenous population as workers; but these efforts to enslave them proved ineffective. The use of Africans as slaves became the accepted alternative and lasted more than two hundred years—until 1865. As many as twelve million Africans were ripped from their homelands along the west coast of Africa and transported by the Portuguese, Spanish, British, Dutch, and French to the Americas, many of them dying enroute.¹⁶ Slavery provided abundant

¹⁴A further example of this conflicted view of slavery was John Leland (1754–1841). In his early career, Leland came out strongly against slavery as an emancipationist, but at the end of his career he was antiabolitionist. Bruce Gourley argues that Leland's views “evolved.” He goes from being a “strident antislavery” man (1789–1802) to ambivalence to “antiabolitionism” in 1839. Gourley chides Leland for his antigovernment approach to ending slavery but fails to recognize that Leland put the burden for emancipation on the masters themselves: “As a friend to freedom and right, I earnestly recommend to masters to set their slaves at liberty as soon as their good, their choice, and the public safety concur. Until then, be good to them, remembering you have a Master in heaven, whose orders are, ‘Whatsoever you would that men should do unto you, do you even the same unto them.’ Make their lives as happy as circumstances will admit of. If there is a condition for them to be in, better than their present state (where their masters are humane, just, and benevolent), I pray the Lord, and call upon men, to bestow it upon them.” See Bruce Gourley, “John Leland: Evolving Views of Slavery, 1789–1839,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Winter 2005), 110–11. Gourley is quoting an address Leland gave near the end of his life, having lived fifteen years in slaveholding states. A careful reading of Leland suggests that, as an older man near the end of a long life, Leland grasped the complexity of emancipation by the government. If two million slaves were suddenly released, many would be thrown into utter destitution. To purchase their freedom from the masters would be an astronomical expense. The slaves' masters themselves had to figure out a way to end the practice. See John Leland, “Address Delivered at Bennington, Aug 16, 1839,” in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 698–99. Leland, in making the assertion that it was the masters who should resolve the slavery problem, harkens back to the discussion of Virginia Baptist emancipationists as to who should address the problem—the state or the masters? Cf. W. Harrison Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Early Republic,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 80 (Jan 1972): 60–69, for details.

¹⁵For a survey of this event, see Martha McCartney, “Virginia's First Africans,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, available online at http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia/Virginia_s_First_Africans, accessed 17 Oct 2019.

¹⁶For an excellent overview of British slavery, see Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and*

and cheap labor for the production of sugar, coffee, tobacco, cattle, and cotton.

Jeter was born into the family of Pleasant Jeter and Jane Eke Hatcher. His maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister. Early records indicate that the family had at least one slave.¹⁷ Slaves were his “nurses and the companions of [his] childhood.” He grew up around slavery as a Virginian.¹⁸ His parents were not church-going people, though his mother had “strong religious convictions.”¹⁹ Jeter’s spiritual awakening began in 1819 and culminated in 1821 when he and Daniel Witt, his boyhood friend and long-time ministerial colleague, were converted. He was baptized in December. Soon he showed a desire and aptitude to preach and began to labor among Virginia Baptists. In May 1824, he was ordained at the High Hills church at Sussex County and assumed his first pastorates at Hills Creek and Union Hill churches in Campbell County.²⁰

After eight years of ministry at Moratico in Lancaster County, Jeter went to Richmond, Virginia in 1836 as pastor of the First Baptist Church. This was the largest church in the Dover Association at the time, with a membership of 1,699, eighty percent of whom were black. Leading such a large and prestigious church was filled with challenges, not the least of which was caring for a diverse congregation—a large number of poor slaves, many of whom attended irregularly, and their well-heeled masters. Jeter led the church in organizing the first African church of Richmond, giving to the group First Baptist’s older house of worship.²¹ About 2,000 colored members and adherents attended the

the British Empire: from Africa to America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Other countries preceded Britain in the commerce of slavery, Portugal being the first. They introduced slavery into Brazil in 1538; and by 1650 they had imported about 250,000 slaves to Brazil (*ibid.*, 3). The English saw the economic potential and joined the slave trading world by 1660. Of course, as the proslavery men argued, slavery can be found in biblical times as well.

¹⁷Examination of the 1810 United States Census for Botetourt County, Virginia, lists one slave in the Jeter household.

¹⁸It has been estimated that in 1810, when Jeter was eight, Virginia had a population of approximately one million residents, forty percent of which were slaves (data available at https://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm, accessed 11 Nov 2019).

¹⁹Jeter, *Recollections*, 43–44. Additional biographical sources for Jeter include George Braxton Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 3rd series (Lynchburg, VA: J. B. Bell, 1912), 301–27; and Wm. E. Hatcher, *Life of J. B. Jeter* (Baltimore: H. M. Wharton, 1887). Jeter was a prodigious writer and tidbits of his life may be found in his various writings, esp. J. B. Jeter, *The Life of Rev. Daniel Witt, D. D. of Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Richmond: Ellyson, 1875).

²⁰Jeter’s life was long and touched much of southern Baptist life through the 19th century. A helpful summary biography of him may be found in William Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Louis Everts, 1881), 600–601.

²¹Details of this will be discussed below. On the history of First Baptist, see *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780–1880*, ed. H. A.

new church, leaving a white membership of 400.²² In 1849, Jeter moved to St. Louis as pastor of the Second Baptist Church. He returned to Richmond, to the Grace Street Baptist Church, in 1852. This congregation doubled in size during Jeter's tenure. In 1865 at the end of the War, Jeter purchased the controlling interest in the *Religious Herald* and became its editor, a position he held with his pastorate until age forced him to concentrate on the weekly paper until his death in 1880.

Jeter was a prolific author, penning numerous biographical and polemical works in addition to his work as editor of a major denominational paper.²³ He was also a denominational statesman, having been present at the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. He served on the boards of trustees of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Home Mission Board. He also worked with the Virginia African Colonization Society. He was respected far and wide for his leadership and views. Jeter further aided the denomination as president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia (1855–1857). As a token of the esteem in which Virginia Baptists held him, they raised funds to erect Jeter Memorial Hall in his honor on the campus of Richmond College, where Jeter had served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees (1868–1880). His name is still remembered by Jeter Hall on the current campus.²⁴

Jeter was married four times. His first marriage to Margaret P. Waddy of Northumberland County in October 1826 soon ended with her death. In December 1828, he married Sarah Anne Gaskins, a woman of some means who brought to the marriage slaves she had inherited. Sarah died in October 1847, leaving Jeter to marry again in 1849, this time to Charlotte E. Wharton of Bedford County. He was married his fourth and final time in May 1863 to Mary Catherine (nee Dabbs), twice a widow (d. 1887), who succeeded him at death.

It was the anticipation of his second marriage that set before Jeter a dilemma—what would he do with the slaves his fiancée possessed? Jeter had seen slaves treated with “great severity” and “inhumanity” on the part of some, to be “amply fed, comfortably clothed, well housed, not overtaxed in labor, and duly cared for in sickness and old age” by others, but Jeter still resolved to avoid slavery. “While this difference in the

Tupper (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880).

²²Ibid., 28.

²³Jeter's biographical works, in addition to *Daniel Witt* cited above, include J. B. Jeter, *The Sermons and Other Writings of the Rev. Andrew Broaddus with a Memoir of His Life* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman, 1855); and idem, *A Memoir of Mrs. Henrietta Shuck: The First Female Missionary to China* (Boston: Kendall, Gould, and Lincoln, 1850). His most noteworthy polemical work is Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined and Reexamined* (New York: Sheldon, 1860).

²⁴Cf. Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699–1926* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Baptist Board of Missions and Education, 1955), 325.

treatment of slaves modified, in some measure, my views of slavery, it in nowise weakened my determination never to own one.” He purposed that he would have no slaves.

However, Sarah owned slaves which came to her through inheritance. Her family owned slaves, bequeathing some to her, but Jeter announced that if she consented to marriage, they would not own them.

My purpose was unchanged until I became engaged to marry a lady who held slaves. By our marriage, I would become the legal owner of them. I informed her of my determination never to possess slaves, and my wish that she should get rid of hers before our marriage. She stated that her views and feelings regarding slavery were in perfect accord with my own. She had inherited her slaves; they were attached to her, dependent on her for protection, and some of them for support; she did not know how to get rid of them, but would be willing, after our marriage, that I should dispose of them as I might think proper. I could ask nothing more. We were married, and I became the legal owner of slaves.²⁵

Jeter was now thrown into the slave question in earnest. Through his marriage, he became the lawful owner of slaves for whom he would have the legal and moral obligation to care. What would he do? Or better, what *could* he do to both discharge his moral duty to these slaves and release them from bondage? He considered several alternatives:

What I should do with them then became a practical question. I could not free them, for the laws of the State forbade it. If they had not forbidden it, the slaves in my possession were in no condition to support themselves. It was simple cruelty to free a mother with dependent children. Observation, too, had satisfied me that the free negroes were, in general, in a worse condition than the slaves. The manumission of my slaves to remain in the State was not to be thought of. Should I send them to Liberia? Some of them were in a condition, but none of them desired, to go. If sent, they must be forced to leave their wives and children, belonging to other masters, to dwell in a strange land. Besides, to send away the men who could support themselves and aid in the support of others, and retain the women and children to be supported by my own labors, was stretching my humanity quite beyond its power of endurance. They could not go to Africa. The same insuperable difficulties lay in the way of sending them to the North.²⁶

In assessing this statement by Jeter, several questions need to be asked. Could slaves have been freed outright in Virginia in 1828, the year Jeter married Sarah? This had been done in 1784 by David

²⁵Jeter, *Recollections*, 68.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 68–69.

Barrow, pastor of the Baptist church at Southampton and noted Baptist emancipationist. He owned two slaves whom he freed, “fully persuaded that freedom is the Natural and Unalienable right of all Mankind; and having a Single eye to that Golden Rule prescribed in Sacred Writ Vizt ‘do to all Men as ye would they should Do to you.’”²⁷

After the American Revolution, there was a significant decline in manumissions in the South and particularly in Virginia.²⁸ While still legally possible in some cases to release one’s slaves, it was difficult and dangerous. Manumissions in Virginia could only be secured if the slave to be freed had done something meritorious whereby the freedom could be petitioned. Part of the legislative rationale for restricting slave manumissions was to prohibit masters from failing to do their duty by releasing slaves who had no means to care for themselves once age had made them unprofitable to retain. Masters were bound by law to care for their slaves and could not easily release them in the 19th century. These laws were enacted to keep the public from having to maintain slaves no longer useful to their masters.²⁹

Early in the 19th century, slave manumission was restricted in Virginia by legislative action. In 1806, slaves who were manumitted were required by law to leave the state within one year of being set free.³⁰ Again, the rationale was to protect the state from the burden of caring for manumitted slaves. But where might a freed slave go? He would have few resources with which to relocate, and the prospects of the freed slave living elsewhere were scarcely better than in Virginia.³¹ Jeter simply could not release his slaves without great difficulty.³² Moreover, Jeter asserted that he could not free the slaves without serious repercussions for the slaves themselves.

²⁷David Barrow, deed of manumission with the Southampton County Court, 11 Mar 1784, in the Southampton County Deed book 6 (1782–1787), quoted in Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 111.

²⁸For a detailed study of emancipation in Virginia at the time of Jeter’s early life, consult Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

²⁹For a helpful survey of American manumission laws with which Jeter and other Baptists had to contend, see Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, “American Manumission Laws and the Responsibility for Supporting Slaves,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (Oct 1955): 443–53.

³⁰See Samuel Shepherd, ed., *Statutes at Large of Virginia from October Session 1792 to December 1806, Inclusive* (Richmond, VA: Sam Shepherd, 1835), 3:251–53.

³¹For a discussion of the life of freed blacks in the South at this time, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), esp. 135ff.

³²Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States and a noted slave owner, faced the same dilemma (Phillip J. Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia* [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010], 53).

There were numerous reasons why the freeing of slaves outright was a poor option in 19th century Virginia. The emancipation of some raised fears among slaveholders that other slaves would agitate for freedom. In their minds, the Nat Turner revolt of 1831, as well as other slave insurrections, provided more than enough justification on the dangers of the blacks, freed or otherwise, living among the white population. The details of the Turner revolt are well known. Starting on August 21, Turner stirred several of his slave co-conspirators to launch a rebellion against their white masters, resulting in more than five dozen deaths over the next several nights, at least fifty of whom were white. Once the revolt was put down, white militia and roaming mobs murdered more than one hundred twenty blacks, accusing them of complicity in the revolt, though most were doubtless innocent of the charges. In the aftermath, new restrictions were placed on the slave populations, including curtailing of black education, forbidding black preachers, and requiring white ministers to be present at all black church services.³³ Jeter remembered these days. “When the Legislature met it adopted most stringent laws in regard to the negroes. They were forbidden to assemble except with white persons, their preachers were prohibited from preaching, and the most rigid police was established throughout the country.”³⁴ Things eventually returned to normal, but the memories of the revolt lingered.

Additionally, Jeter argued, the slaves had few skills and little or no resources with which to care for themselves if freed. Always there was the possibility of being kidnapped and returned to slavery with another owner who would place them in a worse condition. This was especially the case if the freed slaves failed to leave the state within the requisite timeframe. Finally, slaves were often married to other slaves held by different owners, meaning that while Jeter might free his own slaves, their families would still be enslaved by others. Family separation was an exceedingly high price for freedom.³⁵ The reality for Virginia, at least, is that after 1832, slaves had only a two percent chance of manumission.³⁶

³³For more on the Nat Turner revolt or the Southampton Insurrection, as it was also called, see Patrick H. Breen, *The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a background on Virginia leading up to the Nat Turner revolt, see Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*.

³⁴Jeter, *Recollections*, 175.

³⁵The issue of slave marriages was a troubling dilemma among Virginia Baptist slaveholders who wished to hold a biblical view of marriage while maintaining the right of masters to dispose of their property as they wished. Would a slave be allowed to marry another if his or her marriage was dissolved when a master sold his/her spouse? Was the marriage even legal in the eyes of the state and God in the first place? These questions were raised by Baptist associations of the day (Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 85–86).

³⁶John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619–1865* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1913), 82.

If manumission was not a viable option for J. B. Jeter in Virginia in 1828, the year of his marriage to Sarah, what other alternatives existed for him regarding his slaves?³⁷ A common proposal at the time was to send the freed slaves to Africa. To that end, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was born in 1817, initially to send free blacks to Africa.³⁸ This idea met with several problems. First, many of the proposed beneficiaries had little to no connection with Africa, having been born in the United States, and few blacks actually wished to go there.³⁹ It had been generations since their ancestors had been forced to leave their homelands, so these American-born individuals knew little of the language and culture to which they were offered a one-way ticket. Second, who should bear the expense of sending them to Africa? Few, if any, freedmen had the means to go on their own, even if they so desired; therefore, the Society raised the funds to hire the ships and buy the outfit to send those who did go to Africa. Also, for those who went but decided not to stay and wished to return to the United States, how would this happen and who would pay for their return passage? It is clear from the details above that Jeter, as a member of the Virginia Colonization Society, knew of these issues and felt the burden of them as he considered his alternatives. Few slaves were in a condition to go. Others would have to be forced to abandon their families in order to make the trek. Jeter did not have the personal financial resources to resettle them even if they wished to go. This was a real dilemma for one whose only relationship with slavery was through marriage.⁴⁰

Jeremiah Jeter, having considered his options, found himself on the horns of a dilemma. His only real alternative to be divested of his slaves, so it seemed, was to sell them; but this choice, both for him and

³⁷For a study of the implications of Virginia slave laws, see Schwarz, *Slave Laws in Virginia*.

³⁸Undoubtedly, part of what drove the thinking behind the ACS was racism. White Southerners disliked slavery, but they also did not like the idea of blacks living among them as equals. Many Christians, while feeling sympathy for the enslaved blacks, feared race mixing and its fruits (miscegenation). For a history of ACS, see Eric Burin, *Slavery and that Peculiar Solution: A History of the African Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2005). Also consult David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014).

³⁹Louis R. Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro toward African Colonization," *Journal of Negro History* 1 (Jun 1916): 276–301. Also, James M. McPherson, "Abolitionist and Negro Opposition to Colonization during the Civil War," *Phylon* 26 (1965): 391–99.

⁴⁰The colonization proposal has a long and interesting history. See Eli Seifman, "Education or Emigration: The Schism Within the African Colonization Movement, 1865–1875," *History of Education Quarterly* 7 (Spring 1967): 36–57; also, Bruce Dorsey, "A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States," *Journal of Social History* 34 (Autumn 2000): 77–103. Jeter's participation in the Society would suggest that he looked for a legitimate alternative to owning slaves. He was, at some level, a *reluctant* slave owner. The fact that he didn't force his slaves against their wills to go to Africa suggests that he had their best interests at heart.

for the slaves, was a repugnant idea: “The only practicable method of getting rid of them was to sell them or give them away. Against both these methods they earnestly protested, and my heart revolted.”⁴¹ Had Jeter followed through with this solution, he would have been practicing what he clearly rejected—full-out participation in slavery. To whom could he sell his slaves where he would be assured that they would be treated fairly and humanely and be emancipated when the law permitted? Even if he found a “Christian” master who would “honorably” rule the slaves, he ran the risk of selling the slaves to someone who might, upon death, leave them to another family member without the same sensibilities, leaving his slaves in worse condition than when they were a part of his household. It seems for these reasons that selling the slaves was no real alternative for Jeter.⁴²

If he couldn’t legally emancipate them, and if he couldn’t send them to Africa, and if he wouldn’t sell them for fear of being complicit in the barbarity of slavery, what options did Jeter have left with regard to the slaves? He perhaps could have rejected Miss Gaskins’s hand as an alternative to owning slaves, but by discussing his determination to deal honorably with the slaves he appears to have thought that he could find another way. Even if he had determined not to marry Miss Gaskins, would leaving the slaves under her care with the same restrictions have truly been the better option? Jeter, it seems, was forced into a position that he seemed truly to reject—becoming the legal owner of slaves.⁴³

Having exhausted the options for releasing his slaves, Jeter felt that he had no real alternative but to “retain” the slaves and care for them as best he could until the day came when he could legally, morally, and ethically do otherwise:

After careful inquiry, and, I trust, an honest desire to know my duty, I came to the undoubting conclusion that it was not only allowable for me, but my solemn obligation, to hold and rule them, for their interest and for my own, as best I could. I should have been recreant to my duty and guilty of inhumanity if, under the circumstances,

⁴¹Jeter, *Recollections*, 69.

⁴²Another problem with emancipation in Virginia was so-called delayed emancipation. Slaves were promised emancipation after the death of their masters, but family members often reneged on promises of this nature; worse, families could petition these pledges to be voided and the slaves retained against the indebtedness of their deceased owner. Jeter simply had no guarantee that any slave sold to another might be emancipated sooner or later. On delayed emancipations, see Wolf, *Race and Liberty*, 79ff.

⁴³My point in drawing these implications is to note that there appears to have been no reasonable way to be free of slavery without the bloodshed of the Civil War. It took the appalling conflict to break the back of slavery. But even with the War and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the problems of slavery and race were far from resolved. The postbellum era of Reconstruction, followed by Jim Crow, etc. has left a trail of grief and misery nearly as bad as that which existed in the antebellum South. For a summary of this legacy, see Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Random House, 2008).

I had not assumed the relation of master and endeavored to meet the responsibilities arising from it.⁴⁴

J. B. Jeter and His Acceptance of Slavery

Jeremiah Jeter seemed determined to remain opposed to slavery as a distasteful institution and “rule” his slaves against a better day until he came across the writings of Thornton Stringfellow (1788–1869). Stringfellow was a fellow Virginia Baptist who owned slaves.⁴⁵ He owned a large tract of land and he owned a lot of slaves to work the land. Stringfellow saw that “peculiar institution” as biblically permissible and, in fact, one that brought distinct advantages to those enslaved.

Stringfellow was among the most ardent Southern supporters of slavery. Self-educated, health having prevented him from pursuing advanced ministerial training, he was held in high esteem among fellow Baptists, receiving honorary degrees from Columbian and Richmond Colleges. His ministry began in 1814 in Fauquier County. By 1833, he moved to nearby Culpeper County, where he purchased about 1,000 acres and soon organized a church at Stevensburg. This led him into the Shiloh Baptist Association. Stringfellow also became a denominational leader, serving with the Virginia Baptist Education Society and as vice-president of the Domestic Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1841, Stringfellow issued the first of several defenses of slavery for which he became known. He used Virginia’s Baptist paper, *The Religious Herald*, to make his case. At the time Jeter was pastor of First Baptist Church of Richmond, so he had access to Stringfellow’s view and he stated that it was this polemic that moderated his own views on slavery. Stringfellow advanced four arguments for slavery as a biblically acceptable institution. It had

- 1st. The sanction of the Almighty in the Patriarchal age.
- 2d. That it was incorporated into the only National Constitution which ever emanated from God;
- 3d. That its legality was recognized, and its relative duties regulated, by Jesus Christ in his kingdom and;
- 4th. That it is full of mercy.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Jeter, *Recollections*, 69.

⁴⁵Stringfellow’s father, Robert, possessed about 1,000 acres at the time of his death in 1813, and Thornton had amassed land in excess of 2,000 acres by his own death. To work this land, Stringfellow used slaves, possessing upwards of seventy which he lost during the War between the States (data collected from the wills of Robert and Thornton, also Thornton’s obituary, cited in Drew Gilpin Faust, “Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument,” *The Virginia Magazine* 85 [Jan 1977]: 5).

⁴⁶The original publication of Stringfellow’s defense of slavery may be found in “An Examination of the Scriptures in reference to the Institution of Slavery,” *Religious Herald*, 4 Feb 1841. It was published in tract form in 1850 as *A Brief Examination of*

The essay helped to soften Jeter’s early resistance to slavery and eased his conscience that owning slaves, while not preferable, was biblically permissible:

It would have been strange if my own views on the subject of slavery had not been modified—at least enlarged—by my constant and unavoidable connection with it. Soon after the commencement of the abolition controversy, a pamphlet on the lawfulness of slavery, written by Rev. Thornton Stringfellow, D. D., of Culpeper County, Va., made its appearance. It was a plain, logical, and vigorous statement of the scriptural teaching on the subject. On reading it, I remember remarking that the Scriptures were more favorable to slavery than I had been. Up to that time I had believed that slavery in the South was allowable from the necessity of the case, and that its abolition would be fraught with more mischief than good.

Jeter reflected on Stringfellow’s observations: “Moses, under certain limitations, established slavery, with divine authority,...Christ and his apostles...neither spoke nor wrote a word in condemnation of slavery [and] they pointed out the duties of masters and slaves precisely as they did those of parents and children, husbands and wives, ruler and subjects.” Still, this did not prove that all slavery was right or necessary, only that “it may, under some circumstances, belong to the best order of society that human, or even divine, wisdom can devise.”⁴⁷

Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery (Washington: Congressional Globe Office, 1850). It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage Stringfellow’s views. This was done by others who were his contemporaries. However, appreciating the force of his argument with the veil of being biblical goes to the heart of the problem with Christians and slavery. Stringfellow knew the Bible and was able to muster an argument from Scripture that was compelling if not fully accurate. His argument began with a simple comparison between chattel slavery of the United States with ancient biblical stories of slavery that may or may not have had divine sanction. Even if Stringfellow was right that God did sanction Old Testament slavery at some level (e.g., indentured servitude), just how that “proved” that chattel, race-based slavery of the sort practiced in the South was acceptable is uncertain. At this point it should be noted that American slavery was not simply a white/black issue—some black Americans owned slaves as did some native Americans. See Larry Kroger, *Black Slave Owners: Free Black Slaves Masters in South Carolina, 1790–1860* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1985) and Barbara Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation and Citizenship in the Native American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2015). Still, slavery in the United States had a racial component. Blacks were the enslaved. The masters may have varied, ethnically, but those enslaved were blacks with few exceptions. It should also be noted that black Africans themselves were complicit in slavery: selling their enemies into slavery was a convenient way to end tribal strife (see Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, “When Slave Traders Were African,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Sep 2019, available online at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-the-slave-traders-were-african-11568991595>, accessed 8 Nov 2019).

⁴⁷Jeter, *Recollections*, 70–71. Jeter, in the next paragraph, went on to celebrate the end of slavery “by the overruling providence of God.” For a window in slavery in Richmond during Jeter’s lifetime, consult Midori Takagi, *“Rearing Wolves” to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Richmond Press, 1999).

So, Jeter became a slaveowner, reluctantly, but a slaveowner nonetheless, and he came to terms with the pernicious institution.⁴⁸ This proved to be a thorn in his flesh as time went on. In 1844, Jacob Knapp, a popular and forceful northern Baptist evangelist, was holding revival meetings in Washington, DC. With Richmond near at hand, a delegation visited Knapp to entreat him to come to the city and hold meetings there. One request was made of the feisty evangelist—could he refrain from involving himself in the Southern debate over slavery? Knapp resisted the request. Despite the fact that he made no such commitment, the meetings went ahead.⁴⁹ Abolitionism, at the time of Stringfellow's defense of slavery and of Knapp's planned visit, was a force Virginia Baptists attempted to resist. Knapp, as a Northerner, was a known abolitionist sympathizer. He would not agree to set his views aside and simply preach to the lost in Richmond. Having never given such assurances, Knapp visited Richmond with conflict following, though Jeter naively thought that if Knapp saw things for himself, surely he would exercise caution and not speak to the subject.⁵⁰

Jacob Knapp held his views so strongly that to refrain from speaking against slavery was simply impossible:⁵¹ "I had never made such a pledge and could not be persuaded to put such a muzzle simply because of the prejudices of people in favor of slavery."⁵²

I could hold my peace no longer; the pastor was raising boys and girls for market, like so many calves and pigs; the slave-pen was within the city corporation, and there men, and women, and children, some of them members of the church, were bought and sold every day; husbands and wives were torn asunder; little children were dragged from the arms of their mothers; womanhood was denuded of its modesty, and girls were sold for lust. The whipping-post was close to the house of God, and the crack of the lash and the cries of the slave victims mingled with the songs of devotion and the voice of prayer.⁵³

Knapp was soon visited by a delegation of Richmond Baptists who asked him to cease and desist his public attacks on their pro-slavery

⁴⁸Jeter was not alone in coming to terms with slavery. For an interesting discussion on the Southern attitude toward slavery and how James P. Boyce and his colleagues at the seminary in Greenville viewed slavery, see Thomas J. Nettles, *James Petigru Boyce: A Southern Baptist Statesman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 187–95.

⁴⁹Jeter, *Recollections*, 264.

⁵⁰Knapp discussed this conditional invitation and provided his reaction to it in Jacob Knapp, *Autobiography of Elder Jacob Knapp* (New York: Sheldon, 1867), 153.

⁵¹One gets a sense of just how strong Knapp's views were as he presented his side of this story. In Washington, he "came out against the sin of slavery; denounced it as a sin of the devil; and advocated the equality and universality of human rights" (*ibid.*, 151).

⁵²*Ibid.*, 153.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 154.

position. Once he had been challenged about his public remonstrances over slavery, he could either comply or leave.

I decided to leave. We sent for our clothes, which were out to be washed, packed them up, wet from the tub, and started from the place by six o'clock the next morning. We shook the dust of the city from off our feet as a witness against them, and I have not seen Richmond since.⁵⁴

Knapp's visit to Richmond was especially problematic for Jeter. Knapp stayed in the Jeter home during part of his Richmond ministry and had occasion to witness Jeter's treatment of a slave named Davy. Davy, it seems, was in the habit of wearing a particular coat that had been long in need of replacement. Knapp criticized Jeter for allowing the slave to appear so poorly clad and assumed that Jeter was a typical slaveowner who was, at minimum, careless in his attention to his slave. Jeter was forced to defend himself and his relationship with Davy.

Old Uncle Davy was a slave almost entirely past service, who came into my possession by marriage, and for whose maintenance I was bound by the laws of the State as well as the dictates of humanity. Whether he or I was master it would have been difficult to decide. To me was conceded the right to control, but as a matter of fact Uncle Davy would have his own way. He had a singular penchant for preserving his clothes. He had more, if not of so fine a texture, I dare say, than either myself or Elder Knapp, but he wore his good clothes only on Sundays. He had an overcoat which had probably been in use twenty-five years. It had been patched and darned, and mended again and again, until it had all the colors of the rainbow, and probably contained nothing of the stuff of which it was originally made. I repeatedly expostulated with him against wearing the relic, but he insisted that it was comfortable and that its appearance was of no importance. I could not have prevented him from wearing that and other apparel well suited to it without the exercise of an authority which Elder Knapp would have considered as a bitter fruit of slavery, and to the use of which I had an instinctive repugnance. That the brother gave the impressions made on his mind by the beggarly garments of my old servant or beneficiary I do not question, but whether, as a participant of my hospitality, it was kind in him to report these impressions without some effort to learn whether they were founded in truth or misconception, the reader must judge for himself.⁵⁵

Another important connection that Jeter had with slavery while in Richmond at First Baptist Church (1836–1849) was his work as pastor of a large, mostly slave congregation numbering in excess of 2,000 regular attenders. He could not easily pastor both his white congregants and the large number of black church members and adherents as they

⁵⁴Ibid., 156.

⁵⁵Jeter, *Recollections*, 267.

required, by his way of thinking, two different styles of ministry:⁵⁶

The mixed character of the audience, composed of white and colored people, was thought to militate seriously against the progress of the Church. The colored element was so large, that only a small part of it could be furnished with sittings. Its spiritual oversight was still more difficult to be managed. A large proportion of this class, being slaves, could not be reached and disciplined, except by persons of their own color. Few of them could attend the church-meetings. And the instructions of the pulpit could not be always adapted especially to their wants. It was quite evident, also, that the new edifice could not be so designed, either in size or structure, as to admit the mixed congregation, with any convenience to either class. The interests of both, therefore, imperatively demanded their permanent separation.⁵⁷

The solution was to facilitate the establishment of the first African church of the city. But this was not without complications. Could the church (its white members who presumably paid the bills) afford to simply give the building to the colored group? They planned a \$40,000 new building which needed to be paid for. If they gifted half the value of the existing building to the colored church, could the African church pay the other half? That seemed generous.

As significant as the financial question was, there was a more “delicate” matter. Would Virginia *permit* the establishment of a colored church? An equally important collateral matter was the community sentiment—“If the measure were strictly legal, would public sentiment on some subjects far more potent and more jealous than law, quietly acquiesce in the arrangement?”⁵⁸

These two matters were eventually overcome. It was agreed to form a committee consisting of eighteen white church members, twelve of whom came from First Baptist, including Robert Ryland who served as pastor of the new colored church. A portion of these individuals would directly oversee the church at each of its regular meetings. The old building was assessed at \$13,500 and would be deeded to the colored church once the church raised fifty percent of the appraised value. A

⁵⁶Regrettably, Jeter again manifests an undercurrent of racist ideas in describing the situation: “The style of preaching demanded by the white congregation was not well adapted to the instruction of the colored people. Besides, it was quite impossible for the pastor, with a large white congregation under his care, to pay much attention to the necessities of the colored portion of his flock.” He didn’t give his flock equal care and attention. If he fully ministered to the whites, he must neglect the blacks (ibid., 209).

⁵⁷Robert Ryland, “Origin and History of the First African Church,” *History of First Baptist Church*, 247–48. Ryland (1805–1899) served as the founding pastor of the church and went on to become the first president of the Richmond College (1841–1866), today the University of Richmond. On First African Baptist Church and Ryland, see Andrew Billingsley, *Like a Mighty River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62ff.

⁵⁸Ryland, “Origins,” 248.

member of First Baptist raised \$3,000 of the needed funds from outside the church among Richmond’s leading citizens. The necessary money was in hand and the deed was transferred to the colored church in 1849.

To govern the church, Jeter wrote a constitution. It was more Presbyterian than Baptist in polity due to the oversight the white “Supervising Committee” had to maintain over the congregation’s thirty black deacons. Both the pastor and the deacons were selected by the Supervising Committee subject to the consent of the whole church membership. Regular problems were adjudicated by the pastor and the deacons, but an appeal of their decision could be made to the Supervising Committee. This structure lasted until the end of the War when it was possible for the church to call a colored man to lead their congregation.⁵⁹

Robert Ryland, president at Richmond College, agreed to serve as pastor. Four reasons why he accepted the pastorate of the colored church were offered. First, he found itinerate preaching in rural churches inconvenient. Regular pulpit work at a city church was more conducive to his work at the College. Second, Ryland felt it his duty to help the general welfare of the larger church if the two groups were divided—“he had no right to excuse himself from the duty of helping forward so important an object.” Third, since the legislature forbade colored preachers ministering to their people, it was incumbent upon Ryland to fill the void—“Not that he believed it to be, *semper et ubique* a sin, but that some grievous sins were closely and constantly connected with it.” Finally,

he had long regarded the Christianization of the millions of Africa as likely to be brought to pass only by the conversion of the Americo-African, and by his mission, with the true faith, to the land of his forefathers. If the gospel must be preached “to every creature,” how could one, with the vows of Heaven upon him, refuse to enter so promising a field of usefulness?⁶⁰

In establishing the First African Church of Richmond, Jeter saw himself as advancing the cause of the slaves, even while being unable to free them himself.

Jeter and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention

Tensions between northern and southern men over slavery continued to intensify through the early 1840s as Jeremiah Jeter assumed a larger role in Baptist denominational life. By 1838, he had become a “life member” of the American Baptist Home Mission Society by contributing at least \$100 to the cause of home missions, and he became a

⁵⁹Ibid., 250ff.

⁶⁰Ibid., 252–54.

“director for life” the following year.⁶¹ This entitled him to full participation at the annual meetings and saw Jeter taking a more prominent role in its affairs. His wife Sarah also became a “member for life” during this same period. Through this denominational effort, Jeter rubbed shoulders with most of the prominent northern and southern men who debated the issue of slavery.

As the issue of slavery continued to be argued in Baptist circles, there was great concern that a split was coming over this problem that would disrupt denominational work. Efforts to forestall such a disturbance proved fruitless. Abolitionism was prominent among northern men like Francis Wayland and Jacob Knapp, who argued against slavery for a variety of reasons. The abolitionists used every occasion possible to press their demands for an end of slavery in the South. The issues were argued in the denominational papers, at ministerial gatherings large and small, and especially at the national level at the Triennial Convention. The opponents of slavery kept pressuring their southern brethren to release their slaves while the southerners were equally obdurate that no large-scale emancipation would be forthcoming. The watershed year came in 1844 at the annual triennial meeting. Slavery was placed on the table before ABHMS not to be removed without a thorough debate and satisfactory resolution for both sides. The debate was contentious, with both factions arguing vigorously and each refusing to surrender their position.

A key issue was the refusal of some northern men even to fellowship with slaveholders from the south. Southerners, for their part, attempted to answer the arguments from a variety of angles. Richard Fuller of South Carolina argued that slavery was a political issue not an ecclesiastical one.⁶² He wished the issue to be completely set aside at the current meeting. However, also at the meeting was Nathaniel Colver of Boston’s Tremont Temple, a member since 1838 in the American Antislavery Society. Colver would not yield to this argument, or the threat of a division that might occur if the slaveholders failed to release their slaves. Taking the floor and knowing that the fear of disunion was tempering the debate, Colver argued that if there was to be a split, now was the time so that the Board could move forward.⁶³ William Brisbane,

⁶¹Rather than footnoting each particular year of the ABHMS *Annual Minutes*, the evidence for the particularities may be found in the minutes of each year cited.

⁶²This gets to the heart of the slavery problem. Just who should solve it—the government or the masters? Many argued that the government had no constitutional ability to do this (see for example a resolution brought by Charles Gordon Atherton, a Democrat from New Hampshire, designed to prohibit Congress from involving itself in the antislavery cause, cited in J. A. Smith, *Memoir of the Rev. Nathaniel Colver, D. D.* [Boston: Durkee and Foxcroft, 1873], 15–58).

⁶³For a window into Colver’s larger antislavery activity, see Smith, *Nathaniel Colver*, esp. chaps 8 & 9; also Nathaniel Colver, “Slavery or Freedom Must Die: The Harper’s Ferry Tragedy,” A Sermon Preached Sunday, 11 Dec 1859 (Cincinnati: The Office of the Christian Luminary, 1860).

a South Carolinian proslavery man who repudiated slavery and moved to Wisconsin, addressed the gathering. How could a Baptist who refused to commune with a fellow believer on account of paedobaptism do any less with a brother who refused to see the plight of the bondsman?

Where is the consistency of declining communion with pious Pædo Baptists whilst they hold communion with professors who sell their own brethren and sisters in the same church, who whip women, who disregard the claims of husbands and wives and parent and children, who withhold the Bible itself from believers in Jesus? O, how can we hold fellowship with those who do such things and not feel guilty before God?⁶⁴

In the midst of the debate, J. B. Jeter of Virginia gained the floor.

He seconded the views by the reverend gentleman from South Carolina (Richard Fuller). He did not consider slavery a sin, and he would meet any man with a Bible in his hand upon this question. He thought the Bible sanctioned it, and as proof of his position, he referred to the 25th chapter of Leviticus.⁶⁵

Jeter spoke for the slaveholders on multiple occasions during the contentious meeting. The attendees continued to grapple with the issue of slavery through the duration of its meeting, but no satisfactory compromise could be reached. Jeter remembered long afterwards the events that took place. Without rehearsing many of those details, he recounted the difficulty with which he was given the floor.⁶⁶ In the aftermath, southerners felt their hand was forced. They saw no alternative but to separate from the northerners and begin efforts to form a southern Baptist convention with a full complement of agencies that would allow them to maintain their commitment to slavery in their states.⁶⁷ As a

⁶⁴William Brisbane, “A Speech delivered April 30, 1844 before The Baptist Home Mission Society on the Question of the Propriety of Recognizing Slaveholding Ministers as Proper Missionaries of the Gospel,” (n.p.: n.d.). For more on Brisbane, see J. Brent Morris, “‘We Are Very Guilty Concerning Our Brother’: The Abolitionist Transformation of Planter William Henry Brisbane,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 111 (Jul–Oct 2010) 118–50; also, Stanley Harrold, *Abolitionists and the South, 1831–1861* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1999).

⁶⁵Minutes of the meeting of the ABHMS held in conjunction with the 1844 Triennial Convention (in *Religious Herald*, 9 May 1844).

⁶⁶Jeter, *Recollections*, 229–33.

⁶⁷This Baptist division was one of three evangelical denominational ruptures to occur in the years preceding the Civil War. The Presbyterians split in the mid-1830s, while the Methodists sundered about ten years later. On the Presbyterians, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970). On the Methodists, see Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780–1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965). At least part of the explanation for the disruptive War lay at the feet of these evangelical groups. If the churches couldn’t or wouldn’t resolve the contested issue of slavery, neither would the nation. See C. C.

Virginian and a slaveowner, it is no surprise Jeter would withdraw from the larger Baptist fellowship to aid in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.

May 1845 saw the first meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention with Jeremiah Bell Jeter in attendance. He became a visible participant at the meeting and was elected as the president of the Board of Managers of the new Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, which would be headquartered in Richmond. As the Southern Convention was establishing itself, Jeter was active in the pages of the *Herald* defending the fallout from the separation. As a southerner and a slaveowner, what else could he do?

Conclusion

The *Emancipation Proclamation* delivered by Abraham Lincoln on 1 January 1863, effectively ended chattel slavery in the United States. Once Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House on 9 April 1865, all formal efforts to maintain the slave system in the South collapsed. As one studies the life of Jeremiah Bell Jeter, one of the most prominent Virginia and Southern Baptists at the end of the Civil War, one sees a man who may have been conflicted about slavery in his early life, but a man who seemed willing to defend it forcefully when necessary. For Jeter to participate so loudly in the debate on the floor of the ABHMS meeting of 1844 suggests that he wasn't as conflicted as he later remembered himself to be. At the same time, one must recognize the difficulty of ending slavery in the United States. It had become so much a part of the southern economy with so many benefitting from it that there was just not the will to end it. Jeter, who seems to have recognized its attending evils, simply held up his hands and surrendered to the practice. He didn't initiate slavery and he couldn't end it. So, he made the best of it.

Many looked on slavery as a great blessing, to be defended and perpetuated at all hazards. Others viewed it as a misfortune to be endured and made the best of, under the circumstances in which we were placed, and for the existence of which we were in nowise responsible. Not one in a thousand believed that slavery could be abolished without serious injury to both masters and slaves, with few or no compensating advantages to either party.⁶⁸

Jeter as Editor of the *Religious Herald* – A Postscript

Slavery ended with the Civil War. But the troubles created among

Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); also, Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2006) and Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separation in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁶⁸Jeter, *Recollections*, 230.

the blacks and whites in the South endured and festered. Regrettably, Jeter, in the final fifteen years of his life, did little to heal the wounds created by two-and-a-half centuries of slavery. If anything, he made the problem worse by his regular comments to a larger audience. At the end of the War, he purchased the controlling interest in the denomination's state paper, the *Religious Herald*, and became its editor.

One important method of denominational advance during the 19th century was the state papers. Many states had at least one major voice that offered the churches news and information of importance across the denomination. The paper for Virginia Baptists was *The Religious Herald*. The *Herald* had been published in Richmond since 1828. Throughout Jeter's early life, its editor was William Sands (1793–1868) who had been dispatched from Baltimore by William Crane with the purpose of starting a denominational paper.⁶⁹ To Crane belongs the real credit for the founding of the paper through his financial assistance, but Sands, with the assistance of others, ran the paper from its inception through to the end of the Civil War. In April 1865, the business district of Richmond was burned along with a substantial part of the *Herald*, including its offices and equipment. Only the subscription list was kept from the conflagration.⁷⁰ A few months later, the *Herald* was purchased by Jeter and A. E. Dickenson who gave the paper a new beginning. Jeter ran the paper for the next fifteen years.⁷¹ At the time, Jeter was pastor of the Grace Baptist Church of Richmond. The task of pastoring the church and managing the paper became too great for him, even though he brought in a ministerial assistant to help him with the church. He resigned the church in 1870 to devote himself to the paper for the remainder of his days.⁷²

While slavery was formally over and the War at an end, the issue of the freed blacks remained a significant problem among Baptists of the south. Jeter through the *Herald* contributed essays on the ongoing

⁶⁹Sands was an Englishman and an experienced printer. He and Henry Keeling handled the paper from 1828–1830 after which Sands was assisted by Eli Ball, 1831–1833. He was the sole editor and publisher of the paper until 1856 (Ryland, *Baptists of Virginia*, 221). On William Crane, see *Baptist Encyclopedia*, s.v. “William Crane,” 287–88. The article includes a few details about the *Herald*.

⁷⁰The fire was struck by the fleeing Confederates intent on denying the Union the supplies left behind. It soon was out of control due to the vacated nature of the city and the *Herald* lost all “with its fixtures and records” except for the subscription list. When Jeter and A. E. Dickinson took over, they bought the name, the list, and the “good will,” commencing the paper again with Jeter as the senior editor (Hatcher, *J. B. Jeter*, 383–85).

⁷¹History of the *Herald* is found in bits and pieces. See Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists* (New York: Bryan and Taylor, 1890), 889; also T. T. Eaton, “American Baptist Periodical and Press, Part 2, Southern and Southwestern” in *A Century of Baptist Achievement*, ed. A. H. Newman (Philadelphia: ABPS, 1901), 269. For Jeter's role in the paper, see Hatcher, *J. B. Jeter*, 381ff.

⁷²Hatcher, *J. B. Jeter*, 276–78.

discussion on how to handle the former slaves who were now free. Jeter complained about reports from visitors to the South that the former slaves were mistreated. In some cases, “blinding bias” governed these reports, while in others the reports were tainted by the skewed judgment of the visitors. He exhorted his readers to treat the negro with kindness while they “hold in just abhorrence, the miscegenationist, who warring against the law of the Creator, would degrade our noble saxon race—the race of Newton, Milton and Washington—to a race of degenerate mongrels.”⁷³ In answer to the question of how to treat a freedman who conducts himself currently as he did when he was a slave, Jeter responded,

Having maintained, in all honesty, the lawfulness of slavery, it is incumbent on us to demonstrate that the institution did not pervert our judgment, harden our hearts, or unfit us for the duties of our new relations.... We would say then to our friends: Be just—be generous—be conciliating towards the freedmen. Avoid difficulties with them, if you can; but if you cannot, be sure to place them in the wrong.⁷⁴

These two articles are but a sampling of Jeter editorials and essays that appeared during his tenure as editor of the *Herald*. They speak for themselves. Clearly Jeremiah Bell Jeter, while he may have had some sympathy for the plight of his slaves during his lifetime, manifested an attitude toward them which allowed him to accept Thornton Stringfellow’s arguments for slavery as biblical and fail to seek additional alternatives to slavery. Reluctant or not, Jeter came to terms with slavery and justified it in his own mind.

⁷³Unsigned editorial, “Treatment of Freedmen in the South,” *Religious Herald*, 25 Jan 1866.

⁷⁴Unsigned editorial, “A Query,” *Religious Herald*, 23 Jun 1866.