

## Religion and the U.S. Civil War

**Grades:** High School

**Goal:** Students will be able to assess and explain the role that religion played in the causes and conclusion of the American Civil War.

**OBJECTIVES:**

1. Using primary and secondary sources, students will be able to analyze events, motivations, conditions, and actions motivated by religious understandings, leading up to, during, and at the conclusion of the American Civil War.
2. Students will be able to compare and contrast the religious arguments that were used for and against slavery.
3. Students will be able to compare and contrast the different American viewpoints of Providence during the American Civil War.

**HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE STANDARDS OF LEARNING FOR VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (2015):**

USI.1 (a), (d), (e), (g), (j)

USI.9 (a) and (d)

VUS.1 (a), (d), (e), (g), and (i)

VUS.7 (b) and (c)

**NCSS STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES:**

1—Culture

2—Time, Continuity, and Change

3—People, Places, and Environment

5—Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

6—Power, Authority, and Governance

10—Civic, Ideals, and Practices

**MATERIALS:**

1. "Religion in the American Experience" podcast episode - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvdze6-A5hc>
2. *The Prayers of Both Could Not Be Answered* - [https://youtu.be/8ax9Dvvl\\_A](https://youtu.be/8ax9Dvvl_A) (the first film in the series "Religious Thought During Times of National Crisis")
3. [OPTIONAL] *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, by Mark Noll (chapters 2-5, 8)

## SCHEDULE:

- Day 1 - Setting the Stage
  - Introductory lecture by teacher using synopsis below as notes

### Religion and the Civil War

Understanding religion in the Civil War requires understanding earlier American history. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and their fellows had founded the United States on republican principles. They rejected European hierarchies, including churches supported by the state. They believed that concentrated authority fed on vice and led to tyranny. Freedom and social flourishing depended on formal checks to restrain power and positive encouragements to promote virtue in the entire population.

As in the colonies, religion in the new nation remained largely Protestant. (In 1790, barely one percent of the nation's 4,700 churches were Roman Catholic. By 1860, Catholic churches had increased, but to only five percent out of 50,000; in that year Jews were still less than one percent of the population.) But the Protestant churches that best exploited the republican landscape were not the Congregationalists and Episcopalians dominant in the colonial era. Instead, Baptists and especially Methodists led a spectacular expansion of religious adherence, increasing several times more rapidly than the general population. In 1860, there were more Methodist ministers (20,000) than men on active duty in the U.S. Army.

These groups stressed a religion based on "the Bible alone," a message that resonated powerfully in the new republic. Reliance on Scripture, promoted voluntarily and yet touching lives everywhere, seemed ideal for inculcating the virtue without which republics failed. When tax-supported public schooling began, educational reformers instituted daily readings from the Protestant King James Version. Textbooks like *McGuffey's Graded Readers* provided selections from Scripture. Ministers and some political leaders likened the United States to ancient Israel as "God's chosen nation." Public spokespersons drew liberally on biblical rhetoric (think of Abraham Lincoln's warning about "a house divided," echoing a saying of Jesus, or the militant biblical language that filled Julia Ward Howe's "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord").

Yet as national conflict heated up over slavery, the public prominence of Scripture became a source of controversy. Arguments over the institution, often with Bible in hand, had begun in the eighteenth century. They intensified during negotiations leading to the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The next year white Charlestonians discovered a revolt planned by a free African American, Denmark Vesey, who had used the story of Exodus from the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) to inspire a conspiracy. In response, white southerners doubled down on biblical justification for the system—not now as a "necessary evil" but a "positive good."

Biblical arguments drew even more attention when in 1829 a Black Bostonian, David Walker, published *An Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World* that used Scripture to excoriate enslavement. And more in 1831 when William Lloyd Garrison began a strongly abolitionist periodical that denounced the churches for tolerating slavery. And still more when later that same year Nat Turner, drawing inspiration from the Bible, led a much-publicized slave revolt in Virginia.

Events in 1844-1845 showed how disruptive these controversies could be. The national Baptist and Methodist denominations drew together more citizens from more parts of the country than any other economic, cultural, or even political organization. Yet in those years contentions over the appointment of slave-holders as a bishop (Methodists) or a missionary (Baptists) led to schism and the creation of separate northern and southern sub-denominations. Henry Clay, the master of Congressional compromise, was worried: “this sundering of the religious ties which have hitherto bound our people together, I consider the greatest source of danger to our country.”

White Americans who defended the legitimacy of slavery from Scripture pointed out that Abraham, “the father of the faithful,” had owned slaves and Moses, the great lawgiver, had permitted the Israelites to take slaves from surrounding peoples. They made a great deal of the fact that Jesus had never spoken against slavery and that several epistles of the Apostle Paul commanded slaves to obey their masters “as unto Christ.” Virtually all southern whites—along with probably a majority of northern whites—were persuaded by these arguments.

Abolitionists, white and black, constantly quoted the Golden Rule from Matthew 7:12 (“all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them”) and emphasized that both Moses in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament condemned “manstealers.” A few pointed out that, if the Bible did not condemn slavery explicitly, the slaves mentioned in Scripture were not Africans—thus, Scripture could not be used to defend the American system of black-only slavery.

African Americans, like Frederick Douglass, were confident that the Bible supported an agenda of liberation. For them, the miraculous Exodus of Hebrews from bondage in Egypt was a model for liberation of enslaved people in the present.

During the War itself, the Bible provided comfort, encouragement, and support for troops on the front lines. Many in the opposing home fronts continued to see themselves as “God’s people” and view the enemy as sinners. Because religion provided a world-and-life view for so many Americans, the shooting war also became a religious war.

- Watch some of this podcast episode together  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvdze6-A5hc>
- Homework: finish podcast, answer questions (questions and answers listed below)

1. What were some of the American religious habits of mind on the eve of the Civil War? [public life infused with the bible; God’s special providence for the United States; protestant biblicism – the bible has all the answers one needs; providentialism – God determines events in human history]
2. How was the bible used to attack or defend slavery (use at least two biblical verse for each side)? [see chart below]
3. What was the bible unable to do regarding the slavery question? [persuade a majority of Americans that African chattel slavery was morally wrong or right and thus avoid civil war]
4. Abraham Lincoln wrote this in his second inaugural: “The Almighty has His own purposes.” How did he use this? [to explain his belief that God is involved in the course of human events but that we can have little confidence of knowing exactly what His purposes are regarding these events, such as the U.S. civil war]
5. What was allowed to remain after the Civil War because of the bible’s inability to differentiate between race and slavery? [racism; and since the bible was effectively removed as a part of the argument by its failure to prevent the war, racism would become even more vicious]
6. What did Stonewall Jackson’s death mean to the South and to the North? [South – we can’t win this by ourselves no matter how good we are; North – God is on our side not the South’s side]
7. What was the effect of the “hollowness of providential reasoning” on display during the Civil War? [the replacement of religion by science, rationalism, law, and pragmatism as critical to the American project’s success]
8. What arguments in Europe held sway there but not here? [that the Golden Rule and general progress of Christian civilization makes it clear that slavery is immoral]
9. What was the Catholic opinion of the Civil War? [A democratic approach to bible interpretation – such as in Protestantism - leads to chaos; this proved the need for an ultimate earthly authority such as the Pope]
10. Mark Noll wrote “The Civil War took the steam out of Protestant’s moral energy.” What was the result besides the racism’s entrenchment? [Americans did not bring the bible to bear on post-Civil War problems such as industrialization, extreme wealth, labor and capital strife, and urban poverty as they had with the slavery question]

- Day 2 – What Have We Learned?
  - Collect for grade, then go over worksheet in class together
  - Watch film about Lincoln’s religious thoughts in his second inaugural [https://youtu.be/8ax9Dvvjl\\_A](https://youtu.be/8ax9Dvvjl_A)
  - Assessment – select four questions from reading comprehension worksheet plus a question about one of the religious thoughts of Abraham Lincoln found in his second inaugural (what purpose does it serve?)
- OPTIONAL – reading comprehension questions if using *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*

**Questions for *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (chapters 2-5 and 8)**

(2) Historical Contexts

What were the main characteristics of American religious life in the years before the Civil War?

*Mostly Protestant, and with that strong anti-Catholicism. Skeptical of traditional hierarchies and religious tradition. Committed to promoting virtue for the sake of the republic. Comfortable with Enlightenment assumptions about the possibility of unambiguous knowledge. Comfortable assumptions about a free-market economy. Often believing that the U.S. enjoyed a special place in Providence.*

Why were popular appeals to the Bible, as opposed to pronouncements of church leaders, more influential in America than in European Christian countries?

*American republican values feared the corruption coming from elite leaders; American democracy encouraged trust in opinions about the world from the people at large.*

Why did leading Protestants think it was “easy” or “simple” to apply the teachings of the Bible to American life?

*Many American Protestants adopted Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge and the possibility of humans understanding the world with great clarity.*

In 1844-1845, Methodists and Baptists split apart over whether church-sponsored officers could own slaves. Why was that division in the churches so important for the country?

*These two denominations were the most widely spread organizations of any kind in the United States at that time.*

### (3) The Crisis Over the Bible

Why did those who defended slavery from the Bible think that those who read Scripture to attack slavery were “infidels”?

*They were so confident that they read the Scriptures correctly that the only conclusion about those who differed must be that they were deliberately ignoring the obvious truths of the Word of God.*

Please summarize why so many white Americans believed that the Bible approved of slavery and why some white Americans thought it did not?

*[See the arguments from Scripture as outlined in the accompanying chart.]*

Mark Noll, the author of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (2006) later published another book that also described biblical arguments over slavery, *America’s Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization* (2022). In this second book he concluded that abolitionist arguments from the

Bible were actually stronger than pro-slavery arguments. But why in the 2006 book did he conclude that, given the assumptions of the time, the proslavery arguments were stronger?

*So many assumptions of the time, especially concerning the innate inferiority of Black people and standards of democratic and republican knowledge acquisition, made pro-slavery arguments from the Bible seem much stronger than they do today.*

What in the American churches of the 1840s and 1850s made it so difficult for arguments against slavery from the Bible to convince white Americans? (Remember that a majority of northern whites believed that in some sense the Bible allowed for slavery.)

*Again, widespread assumptions about race along with widespread attitudes toward respecting intellectual authority, tilted receptivity in the direction of approving the pro-slavery Bible arguments.*

(4) “The negro question lies far deeper than the slavery question”

Why, although nothing in the Bible treats Blacks and Whites differently, did so many white Americans take for granted that the slavery mentioned in Scripture justified the black-only system of American enslavement?

*It was very difficult to appropriate the racially neutral messages of the Bible when it just seemed so obvious that “slavery” always meant “Black-only chattel slavery.”*

Defenders of slavery often added “experience” and “common sense” to what they viewed as conclusions from the Bible. Why was it so hard to differentiate between teachings from Scripture and either “common sense” or “experience”? (Can you think of assumptions today about public life that lie beneath the level of consciousness?)

*If everyone with whom you dealt assumed the same things as “common sense” and read “experience” as you did, there were only rare challenges to those ways of viewing the world.*

Black authors like Daniel Coker developed strong arguments from Scripture against slavery. Why did these arguments not convince the public at large?

*It would not be until after World War II that the American public at large paid significant attention to any pronouncements coming from African Americans.*

#### (5) The Crisis Over Providence

What was the difference between believing that God was in control and believing that I could know how God was directing events?

*The belief that God controls events in the world is part of Islam and Judaism, as well as Christianity. The belief that I can see clearly what God is doing in the world depended on Enlightenment assumptions about general human capacities.*

Can you explain in a single sentence why there was a crisis over Providence during the Civil War?

*Opposing sides, trusting the same biblical authority, came to diametrically opposite conclusions about how God was directing human affairs.*

What made Abraham Lincoln's convictions about Providence so distinct?

*He had both a stronger belief in God's control of the world than many of his fellow-Americans and more uncertainty about whether he could discern what that control meant than almost all of his peers.*

#### (8) Retrospect and Prospect



What might the religious history of the Civil War have to do with the relatively scant religious evaluation of national industrialization after the Civil War?

*The inability to find a common moral basis in Scripture for judging slavery and the War probably undercut general confidence in the notion that the Bible could deliver an unequivocal message concerning the nation's rapid industrialization.*

Why did Orestes Brownson believe that Roman Catholicism was necessary for a democracy?

*He reasoned that American democracy could not deliver a single, authoritative opinion on slavery (and many other matters) and so concluded that a form of Christianity with stronger centralized authority (that is, the Catholic Church) could deliver where Protestantism could not.*

In the United States today, it would be hard to find a single moral authority that all, or even most, citizens respected. Particularly with the founders' theory about republican government in mind, does the absence of such an agreed-upon moral authority pose a problem?

*[Encourage students to be as specific as possibility in defending their answers.]*

## The Bible<sup>1</sup> interpreted to . . .

. . . SUPPORT SLAVERY	. . . ATTACK SLAVERY
<p><u>Genesis 9:25</u> <i>The “curse of Canaan” applies to all Africans.</i></p>	<p><u>Genesis 9:25</u> <i>The “curse of Canaan” cannot apply to all Africans.</i></p>
<p><u>Genesis 16 and 17</u> <i>Abraham had slaves.</i></p>	<p><u>Genesis 17</u> <i>Abraham circumcised his slaves and thereafter treated them as part of “Israel,” and Israelite slaves of Israelites were all freed every 7<sup>th</sup> year (the Year of Jubilee).</i></p>
<p><u>Leviticus 25:44-46</u> <i>Israel was allowed to take slaves “from the heathen that are round about you” and pass them on to succeeding generations.</i></p>	<p><u>Exodus 21:16</u> and <u>1 Timothy 1:10</u> <i>Moses in the Old Testament and the Apostle Paul in the New condemned “manstealing.” You cannot have slavery without kidnapping.</i></p>
<p><i>In <u>the four Gospels</u> Jesus modified many regulations from the Old Testament, but said nothing about slavery.</i></p>	<p><u>Jeremiah 22:13</u> <i>God condemned individuals who “useth his neighbour’s service without wages, and giveth him not for his work.”</i></p>
<p><u>Colossians 3:22</u> <i>The Apostle Paul commanded slaves to obey their masters “in singleness of heart, fearing God.”</i></p>	<p><u>Matthew 7:12</u> (“The Golden Rule”) <i>Do to others what you want them to do to you.</i></p>
<p><u>Philemon</u>. The Apostle Paul returned the escaped slave Onesimus to his master, Philemon.</p>	<p><u>Philemon</u> <i>The Apostle Paul urged Philemon to treat his returned slave as a “brother,” and no one enslaves his brother.</i></p>

<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from the King James Version, the standard Bible for all American Protestants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.