Scripture in the Public Forum: The Fuller-Wayland Letters and the Debate over Domestic Slavery

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Introduction

In a letter written to the editor of the Christian Reflector on November 7, 1844, Richard Fuller of Beaufort, South Carolina would respond to what he termed “abolitionist doctrine” and affirm his belief that slavery was not, in and of itself, a moral evil or sin. Responding at the request of the paper’s editor, Fuller would attack the abolitionist position which, as he described it, held that slavery was “…itself a sin; it is therefore always a sin; a sin amid any circumstances; a crime which must involve the criminal in perdition unless he repents; and should be abandoned at once, and without reference to consequences.” Fuller would recognize and denounce what he saw as unjust treatment of slaves, and would lobby for legislative reform that assured the safety and protection of slaves, but he was nonetheless at odds with the Reflector’s definition, maintaining that the institution of slavery was not a moral evil. As a learned Baptist minister, Fuller yielded to Christian Scripture, arguing that though the Bible condemns the abuses of slavery, the system itself is permitted.

When published, Fuller’s letter to the Christian Reflector would catch the eye of another Baptist minister, and Brown University president, Francis Wayland. Wayland would respond to Fuller with a series of eight letters, arguing his own position on the evils of slavery. According to Wayland, slavery was indeed an immoral institution that should consequently be abolished. However, Wayland would agree that the abolitionist approach to the issue was not conducive to civil discourse, and that “the spirit which many of them (abolitionist press) manifested was very different from the spirit of Christ.” Fuller would respond to these letters with a series of six others, and the conversation of the two would turn public as both ministers would submit their correspondence for publication in the Christian Reflector.

The letters would be published from November of 1844 until February of 1845. In the spring of 1845, Wayland would write an introduction to the letters, at the request of Richard Fuller, and a printed copy of the entire correspondence would be published for the public. According to Wayland, the writings of Fuller would “in many cases modify the views, and in still more the feelings, of Christians at the North.” His hope was that his writing would do the same in the South.

Regrettably, this “modification” would not be sufficient to hold the Baptist Church together, and in May of 1845 the foundation Southern Baptist Convention would sever the ties of the Baptists regionally. The Union would fall some twenty years later, and history would prove the moral superiority of Wayland’s case. As Thomas McKibbens notes, “No one today would

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dispute the issue: Fuller was wrong and Wayland was right.” Yet this correspondence nonetheless yields a great deal of insight as concerns the potentiality of Christian reasoning. For both Fuller and Wayland, their debate was primarily an issue of Christian reasoning. Holding Christian Scripture as the centerpiece of their respective arguments, Fuller and Wayland were able to unite in dialogue based on a common allegiance to Scripture. This allegiance manifested itself in a civil debate void of personal attack or defamation of character, and it held true to the instruction of their common authority: “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD.”

Nonetheless, an analysis of the Fuller-Wayland letters reveals conflicting approaches to a common authority. While Scripture provided an imperative to unite these men in conversation, ultimately the interpretive practices of Fuller and Wayland would prohibit either man from persuading his opponent. Fuller would take a literalist approach, arguing that if God, in both Old and New Testaments, prohibited slavery, then it could not be, in and of itself, a moral evil. Wayland, on the other hand, would employ natural law, moral development, and overall themes of Scripture to argue in favor of God’s natural revelation over time. While the congeniality of these men may be applauded in the modern context, their conflicting approaches to the common authority of Scripture would ultimately prohibit Fuller and Wayland from maintaining the unity of their own faith, and they therefore must be critically assessed.

The Authority of Scripture in the Fuller-Wayland Letters

The priority of Scripture in Baptist Theology places the role of authority on a written text, rather than councils or creeds. As Baptist ministers, both Fuller and Wayland recognized Scripture as the ultimate authority in the Baptist, and in their opinion, the Christian life. Consequently, in the writings of Fuller and Wayland, the Christian Scriptures function as the centerpiece around which the authors’ respective arguments are built. While Wayland would appeal to more general themes, as opposed to Fuller who was more inclined to reference specific passages, both men would recognize Scripture as “a perfect rule of duty,” and their letters would reflect such an allegiance.

Although Wayland’s arguments are indebted to his own philosophical and political leanings, Wayland argues that these perspectives are, “enlightened...by the teachings of the Holy Scriptures.” Furthermore, Wayland’s opposition to Fuller, and his insistence upon the immorality of the institution of slavery, is offered as a Christian defense. Employing texts such as Psalm 94 and 1 Corinthians 3, Wayland illustrates a knowledge of both Old and New Testament texts and builds his arguments upon a foundation of Christian Scripture. Strongly appealing to the primary rule of Christianity—i.e., love for God and for neighbor—Wayland concludes that the institution of slavery must be abolished by the inculcation of the principles of the Gospel.

In like manner, Fuller places the Christian Scriptures at the center of his arguments. Citing both Old and New Testament texts in his initial letter to the Christian Reflector, Fuller establishes

5 Isaiah 1:18.
his belief that institutions permitted by God in the Bible cannot be, in and of themselves, immoral or sinful. According to Fuller, if slavery is to be found in conflict with Scripture, Christians must necessarily oppose it. However, Fuller would argue to the contrary, convinced that the Scriptures do sanction the institution and that slavery was therefore permissible. In his appeal to “the responses of the sacred oracles,” Fuller finds himself at odds with Wayland despite a common allegiance.

An analysis of the arguments of Fuller and Wayland reveals a primary allegiance to Christian Scripture possessed by both men. Moreover, this common allegiance necessitates fraternal and congenial dialogue in the spirit of biblical Christianity. Fuller’s initial letter to the Christian Reflector served as a Christian apology for the institution of slavery, against what Fuller considered being the arrogant and monomaniac attacks of abolitionists. According to Fuller, all who love the gospel should be found in harmony. On this point, Wayland would agree with his colleague in the South, and place the burden of reason on the Scriptures themselves. Hoping that their common allegiance would prove a sufficient means of determining the truth of slavery’s intrinsic morality, Wayland would write, “With pleasure I proceed to consider the argument on this part of the question. Believing as we both do that the Bible is a perfect rule of duty, if we can ascertain what it teaches, we may reasonably hope that our opinions may yet coincide.”

**Civil-Christian Discourse**

In a twenty-first century analysis of the Fuller-Wayland letters it is difficult (and unnecessary) to entertain the pro-slavery position of Richard Fuller. History has proved the case of Wayland, and moral development and societal progress renders the position of Fuller ridiculous in the modern context. However, a great deal can nonetheless be gleaned from the rhetoric and tone expressed between these two colleagues. Furthermore, considering their common allegiance to Christian Scripture and role of Scripture as the center point of each respective position, such congeniality may be attributed to the unity cultivated by Scripture. As Mark Noll notes, “This exchange was one of the United States’ last serious one-on-one debates where advocates for and against slavery engaged each other directly, with reasonable restraint, and with evident intent to hear out the opponent to the extent possible.” If Noll is correct in his assertion, the imperatives of Scripture may therefore be considered a vital source of civil-Christian discourse.

Both Fuller and Wayland would begin their letter with the salutation “My Dear Brother,” and each would find points of resonance between their conflicting positions. At a time in which many abolitionists argued for the dismissal of slaveholding members from the community of the Baptists, and many Southerners would gladly sever the ties of Baptist fellowship regionally, the efforts of Fuller and Wayland serve as a remarkable contrast to the hostile and divisive rhetoric of many of their contemporaries. Wayland would acknowledge such rhetoric in his initial letter to Fuller, writing, “I unite with you and the late lamented Dr. Channing, in the opinion that the tone of the abolitionists at the north has been frequently, I fear I must say generally, ‘fierce, bitter, and abusive.’” Fuller and Wayland would agree that such hostility had prevented civil, reasonable

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discourse throughout the country, and they took careful note to avoid such rhetoric in their own writings to one another.

Perhaps the most notable evidence of the congeniality shared between Fuller and Wayland is the introduction to the letters published in 1845. Upon Fuller’s request, Wayland would write an introduction that celebrated the efforts of his brother in the South, and he pleaded with the reader to consider the evidence presented. Wayland would conclude the introduction with the words, “In behalf of my brother and myself, I commend this correspondence to the disciples of Christ, both at the North and the South, in the humble hope that it may be the means of directing a calm yet earnest attention to this important subject.”

The important subject considered by these men was the intrinsic morality of the institution of slavery, a subject deliberated over in a spirit of camaraderie and mutual investment in reasonable debate. This spirit arose out of a common allegiance to Christian Scripture, and the desire of both men to yield their arguments to that authority. While the arguments themselves may be of little value to modern debate, the tone and rhetoric employed by Fuller and Wayland reflect a commitment to civil-Christian discourse as the appropriate means of exercising biblical debate. In the words of Thomas McKibbens, “What is significant in [these letters] is the truly extraordinary degree to which these two friends on opposing sides of an explosive issue could relate to each other.” This ability to establish friendship and relate to one another emerges out of the common Scripture that united Fuller and Wayland as Baptists and Christians.

An Interpretive Stumbling Block

United under the common authority of Christian Scripture, the Fuller-Wayland letters illustrate the potential for civil-Christian discourse in the midst of tremendous hostilities. Regrettably, however, the common authority of Fuller and Wayland would not prove any more sufficient to progressive development than their kind words towards one another. While their efforts may be applauded, their tangible accomplishments concerning the issue of slavery are minimal, if any. An analysis of their writings reveals an interpretive stumbling block, an inability to approach their common authority with a common set of tools and utensils. For Fuller, Scripture served as a plain, literal guideline to faithful living. Indifferent to cultural and societal development, the Bible offered hard line instruction, intended for all people at all times. Wayland, on the other hand, was able to incorporate a greater degree of natural reason, making room for divine revelation throughout history and allowing Scripture to function as a living text that required continual interpretation. Fuller’s approach would bind the faithful to their ancient text in a way that rejected Christian progress, whereas Wayland was able to utilize Scripture in a way that proved advantageous to progressive culture and society.

Fuller’s initial argument in the Christian Reflector, and his subsequent defense of this position to Wayland, hinges upon the existence of slavery in the times of the composition of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Citing Leviticus 25:44-46a, Fuller illustrates that the institution of slavery is sanctioned by Scripture: “And ye shall take them as a inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever.” Likewise, according to Fuller, the New Testament at the very least tolerates the institution. If, therefore, the Bible does sanction slavery, then the institution cannot, in and of itself, be considered

18 McKibbens, 62.
a moral sin. Certainly the Church must combat the abuses of slavery, according to Fuller, but the institution itself cannot be rendered sinful. Furthermore, Fuller would make such plain interpretations the standard for which all biblical debate must be conducted: “Whatever importance others may attach to the deductions of human reasoning, and thus impiously array against the Scriptures those ‘oppositions of science falsely so called,’ which the Apostle terms ‘profane and vain babblings,’ you and I have long since put on our shields one motto—‘Let God be true and every man a liar.”20

An analysis of Wayland’s reasoning suggests that he was not as agreeable concerning this standard as Fuller assumes. While Wayland certainly uses Scripture as the ultimate guide for Christian life, he was not quick to reject “human reasoning” and “science” in the way that Fuller was. Rather, Wayland argues that texts like Leviticus 25 were intended for specific persons in specific time periods and contexts. Citing 1 Corinthians 3, Wayland argues that Paul rendered instruction “not in its totality, but in such portions, and in such manner, as the weakened understandings and benighted consciences of his hearers would enable them to receive it.”21 Likewise, according to Wayland, God exercised the right to withhold certain instruction from earlier generations, preferring to gradually reveal God’s purposes in light of Christianity’s own developments. Appealing to the spirit of the gospel, Wayland concludes that slavery must be rejected based on the imperative to love one’s neighbor, even if the letter of the law must also be rejected.22

Despite a common authority and a mutual investment in civil dialogue, Fuller and Wayland entered into their debate with conflicting interpretive approaches. For Fuller, Scripture was set in stone, revealed by God for all people at all times. Wayland, however, notes God’s continued revelation throughout Scripture and suggests that such revelation is a continuous process. That process, according to Wayland, required that those who adhered to Scripture oppose the institution of slavery. Measuring the results of their respective arguments, one may conclude that Wayland’s approach allows Scripture to function as an authoritative guide that directs the faithful towards moral and ethical advancements, whereas Fuller’s approach binds the modern person of faith to the practices of an ancient people.

Conclusion

Since their initial correspondence in 1844, the letters of Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland have been celebrated for the civility and congeniality that defines them. United as Baptists and Christians, Fuller and Wayland recognized their common allegiance to Christian Scripture, which seemed a sufficient commonality for cordial and reasonable dialogue. For modern persons of faith, this discourse serves as an example of civil dialogue in the midst of hostile conditions, and it encourages persons of any faith to unite in conversation centered upon holy texts. Debate can all too often turn to militant dialogue, wars of words that are rhetorically violent and filled with aggressive attacks void of the intention to legitimately understand opposing viewpoints. The letters of Fuller and Wayland illustrate that, for persons of faith, there can be an alternative approach of reasonable and tempered conversation and dialogue.

At the same time, the efforts of Fuller and Wayland failed to render any significant conclusions on the matter of slavery. Fuller is convinced that the institution is not intrinsically

sinful, and Wayland fails to convince his opponent otherwise. For the modern reader, the arguments of Fuller seem an absurdity, as their conclusions must be deemed morally unacceptable in light of moral and ethical norms in the twenty-first century. These conclusions are the product of a limited approach to Scripture which minimizes the interpretive tools of Scriptural exegetes, therefore revealing an approach to Scripture that infringes upon moral advancement.

In modern religious discourse, one may apply the approach and intentions of Fuller and Wayland as concerns the unifying dynamic of Scripture and the civility that emerges from a mutual adherence to holy writ, while at the same time rejecting any approach that limits interpretation to a plain reading void of considerations outside of the texts themselves. Natural law, science, moral and ethical developments, and other tools may be utilized in conversation with Scripture in an effort to appropriately interpret religious texts in the modern context. Such a reservoir of resources does not minimize Scripture, but rather prevents an application thereof that violates the morality of religious groups. Furthermore, as society develops, Scripture must be free to speak to future generations, rather than forcing religious communities to adhere to standards of the past that violate the basic tenants of their respective religions.

In the case of slavery in the United States, reason would give way to war, and hundreds of thousands of Americans—black and white, north and south—would pay for it with their lives. On a national and political level, the country would suffer the bloodiest war in its history. Politicians and citizens failed to progress through reason and discourse, and war would ironically become the means of abolishing an immoral institution. Perhaps even more disheartening, religious leaders failed as well.

The American Civil War may be measured as the cost of such failure, and it serve as an imperative to reason and progress. Fuller and Wayland endeavored to engage in reasonable debate that would yield progress, and on many points their endeavors must be applauded. Yet their ultimate failure to render a united opposition to the institution of slavery reveals the importance of healthy and rational interpretive practices. If modern persons of faith are to prevent future calamity, interpretive practices that acknowledge living Scripture must be encouraged. Scripture provides a focal point for religious dialogue and, if appropriately interpreted, may powerfully contribute to moral and ethical advancement. While Fuller and Wayland may have ultimately failed in their endeavors, by critically analyzing and assessing their efforts, perhaps their letters might yet encourage future generations to engage in progressive religious dialogue.
Bibliography

