Prior to the 1820's very little in the way of pro-slavery theory had been developed in the South. The institution of slavery was taken for granted and the majority of the white people in the region supported it. Only occasionally did someone feel it necessary or advisable to articulate a philosophical defense of the institution of slavery as such.

After 1830 there arose in the train of the "young politicians" of the era in the South a group of clerics who sought to defend slavery on scriptural and moral grounds. Their arguments effectively complemented the political theory so clearly enunciated by John C. Calhoun, the theory which became the foundation of the South's pro-slavery apologetic.¹

Among the clergymen who rose to repel the threat of abolitionism were two from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—William Capers of South Carolina and William A. Smith of Virginia. These men and their pro-slavery writings have occupied relatively obscure places in modern scholarly research; they seem to have been overshadowed by their more prominent contemporaries who as clergymen also wrote in defense of slavery—James Henly Thornwell, Thornton Stringfellow, Charles Hodge, and others.

William Capers (1790-1855) was born on the Bull-Head Swamp plantation near Charleston, South Carolina. He became a Methodist preacher in 1808 and, after having served several pastoral charges, was appointed editor of the Wesleyan Journal of the South Carolina Conference in 1825. Four years later Capers founded the Methodist Episcopal Church's mission to the slaves. From 1837 to 1840 he edited the Southern Christian Advocate, an organ of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He served as Secretary of the Southern Missionary Department of the Church during the following four years and in 1846 was elected a bishop of the newly-formed Methodist Episcopal Church, South.²

¹ Dr. Smith is Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics, The Divinity School, Duke University.

² W. S. Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), ch. III.

Less well known among modern historians of the period is William Andrew Smith of Virginia. Born in Fredericksburg in 1802, Smith was ordained to the Methodist ministry in 1827. Only five years later he was elected a delegate to the General Conference of 1832. He was re-elected to each succeeding General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church until 1844; and, from that time until his death in 1870, he was a delegate to every General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Smith played important roles in the General Conference of 1844, representing both the Reverend F. A. Harding and Bishop James O. Andrew in the proceedings against them for their involvement in alleged slave-holding. In 1846 he became president of Randolph-Macon College and professor of moral and intellectual philosophy.3

While both of these men made significant contributions to the Methodist Episcopal Church, and more particularly to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, our concern with them here pertains to their apprehension and advancement of selected aspects of the pro-slavery moral argument. While neither Smith nor Capers proposed new categories or original insights for the defense of slavery, both did reflect certain emphases that indicate the solidarity of the Southern mind in the decades immediately prior to the Civil War.4

At the outset, we may say that Smith’s forte was the philosophical argument, supported by Scripture, which was applied to the various contemporary associations, such as church and state, master and

3 Ibid., XVII, pp. 361-2. No biography of Smith has been written. A pamphlet by W. J. Smithson, entitled In Memoriam, is reputed to include a funeral discourse on Smith, but it was not available to this writer. Scattered references are made to Smith in most histories of Methodism which give attention to this period. Smith may have edited the Christian Sentinel for a time but this is uncertain. His only published work is a series of Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery (Nashville: Stevenson and Evans, 1856). His remarks before the 1844 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church may be found in R. A. West, Report of Debates in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844 (New York: Lane and Tippett, 1844).

4 W. B. Hesseline rightly maintains that the pro-slavery argument was neither immediately nor altogether occasioned by abolitionist agitation but that, in fact, it had developed from the spread of slavery in America, beginning in the colonial period. Moreover, as Hesseline interprets the matter, the real theme of Southern history is to be found in the struggle to maintain the control of the planter class; and the pro-slavery argument, while offering no promise of security or betterment to the lower-class whites, succeeds in drawing a line of demarcation between the exploited groups, both Negro and white, of the South. Cf. W. B. Hesseline, “Some New Aspects of the Pro-Slavery Argument” in The Journal of Negro History (Washington: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., 1936), XXI, 1, pp. 1-14.
slave. Capers, on the other hand, possessing no conspicuous ability as a scholar, devoted his energies to editorializing, in the main, from a "firm Scriptural basis" on the church-state relationship as it pertained to slavery.

Smith endeavored to formulate the categories of a moral philosophy within which pro-slavery thought could be couched. The thesis of Smith's work is that

\[
\text{.... slavery, per se, is right ....} \text{ The great abstract principle of slavery is right, because it is a fundamental principle of the social state; and .... domestic slavery, as an institution, is fully justified by the condition and circumstances (essential and relative) of the African race in this country, and therefore equally right.}^6
\]

This was his direct answer to the abolitionist argument which claimed that slavery effected the reduction of the nature of the slave below that of a person, that it divested him of certain rights essential to his humanity, and that it converted his person into a thing inasmuch as it destroyed his essential moral agency by subjecting his duty to God entirely to the will of man.

For Smith, it was "utterly impossible" that slavery "contemplates him [the slave], not as responsible, but a mere sentient being—not as a man, but a brute." And, as for the institution's infraction of human rights, Smith contended that human rights in "moral science" are not synonymous with the natural rights advocated by John Locke. In fact, Jefferson's denunciation of domestic slavery is expressly disavowed, and M. Victor Cousin, a French idealist who insisted upon the psychological method as the basis of philosophy, is called upon as support for Smith's own version of Cartesian self-certainty.\(^8\)

Thus, assuming the Aristotelian standpoint,\(^9\) that "the abstract principle of slavery is the general principle of submission or subjection to control by the will of another," Smith formulated his definition of the "right":

\[
\ldots \text{the RIGHT, as it conforms to the essential GOOD, is of the nature of the GOOD. It is properly a signifyc of the good, and not a signifi-}
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\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 147-148.

\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 15, 28-29.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 84.

\(^9\) Aristotle, in his *Politics*, asserts the principle of domination and subjection as pervading all of nature. He contends that the attainment of all human progress involves a necessary combination of obedience and command. This is, of course, contrary to John Locke and the philosophy of natural and human rights developed by the rational Enlightenment, where it is insisted that no slavery can exist under the law of nature but that, rather, enslavement results from loss of protection by that same natural law. Aristotle, it appears, was the strongest ancient appeal for the pro-slavery argument.

cate of the will of God ... it coincides with the will of God. But such coincidence does not constitute anything right in itself; but it is because, like the will of God, it conforms to, or is of the nature, ESSENTIAL GOOD, that it is right. The RIGHT then, in itself, is the GOOD.11

Smith’s entire philosophical argument thus hinges on this claim that while a wrong can never be, by circumstance or otherwise, other than what it is, viz., a wrong, nevertheless the state of a thing not ideologically considered may, under one set of circumstances, be considered wrong while under other conditions it can be interpreted to be right. The a priori supposition for our purposes is, of course, that slavery as such is not wrong: it may be under certain circumstances, but this is not inherently the case. In fact, with Aristotle Smith proposes that slavery as the submission or subordination of will is in the order of nature, divinely ordained.12 With this notion Smith repudiates the philosophy of the Enlightenment and concludes that inequality among men is the will of God.13 Since man must yield to the Source above himself for the determination of right and wrong and since the Bible, literally interpreted, is the Word of God, all questions of abstract morality are forever settled by the biblical revelation. Moreover, if the will of God is the rule of right in the sense that it always conforms to that which, in itself, is right, God Himself cannot alter right and wrong “as they are in themselves.” Thus, the slavery provided for the Jews, being right in principle, is right for all time.14

Through this inductive process Smith thus arrived at the biblical argument which, as W. S. Jenkins rightly claims, is the essential moral desideratum in the pro-slavery dialectic.15

Although William Capers was not disposed in his editorials to develop a philosophical argument, he did concur with and advocate the point of view which Smith held. On the basis of the most popular pro-slavery passages in the Bible,16 Capers admonished his readers:

In this thing they [the abolitionists] follow not the Word of God, and walk not as the Apostles did. ‘Philosophy falsely so called’ has deluded them, and caused them to offend ... [they are] offenders against Moses and the prophets, Christ and the Apostles, and confessors, and

11 Ibid., p. 94.
12 Ibid., ch. I-II.
13 Ibid., pp. 208-209.
14 Ibid., pp. 145-146.
15 Jenkins, op. cit., p. 200 ff.
16 The account of Canaan’s curse in Genesis 9:25-27 appears to be the most popularly used text as proof of slavery’s divine decree. Divine sanction for the system was claimed from Exodus 14:14; Genesis 16:9, 17:12, 30:43; Exodus 21:2-8; Leviticus 25:38-43; and Deuteronomy 15:12. Leviticus 25:44-46 authorizes buying, selling, holding, and bequeathing slaves as property; and inevitably appears in all of the Biblical defenses as proof of the positive sanction of divine law. The most frequently cited New Testament texts include the book of Philemon, St. Luke 7:2-10; I Corinthians 7:20-23; Titus 2:9-10; I Peter 2:18; Colossians 3:22-25; and I Timothy 6:1-9.
martyrs, and all who have suffered slavery to exist without uprooting society and overthrowing government for its removal.\textsuperscript{17}

In reply to the editor of the Boston periodical \textit{Zion's Herald}, with whom he carried on a colloquy for several months, Capers stated unequivocally that he

\ldots holds the Scriptures to be the rule, and the only rule, for determining what is, and what is not, moral evil. \ldots Slavery, \textit{simply as such} \ldots is not a moral evil \ldots [because given the] explicit sanction of the Almighty \ldots in the New [Testament], it was never formally abolished.\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, far from disestablishing slavery, the Scriptures urge that it be \lq\lq \ldots appropriated for the exercise of peculiar Christian virtues.\rq\rq And in America \ldots thus far [slavery] has been productive of more good than evil.\textsuperscript{20}

Smith voiced his approbation of the same doctrine in the General Conference debates of 1844: \lq\lq \ldots if in the days of Christ it [slavery] passed unreproved \ldots surely it is fair to conclude that it is not 'necessarily a sin.'\rq\rq But, more than this and in terms of strict morality, the Bible accords to man \lq\lq \ldots simply the \textit{right} to do that which in itself is \textit{right}—that is, \textit{good}.\rq\rq Moreover, the Scriptures assume that man

\ldots has power to do either \textit{right} or \textit{wrong}, but only a \textit{right} to do that which is right. Whoever, then, sets up a \textit{right} to do a thing, and can give no better reason for it than that he has power to do it in virtue of his humanity, and that therefore others should not interpose obstacles in the way of his doing it, on peril of abridging him of a natural right, assumes far more than the Scriptures allow him; nay, he assumes that which is forbidden him in Holy Scripture.\ldots\textsuperscript{22}

Smith assumes that there is no higher law in God's nature than His revealed law, i.e., the Bible; and accompanying this is an implicit assumption that bears directly on our study, namely, that civilized and cultured man can fully apprehend that revealed law. Stated positively, and for the Church, this means that she derives her authority and obligation only from the Bible. Moreover, the Church's sphere of activity is limited and exists only in enunciating the principles and enforcing the commands of the Bible. The Church, therefore, has no prerogative, much less a province, to invade the

\textsuperscript{17} William Capers, editor, \textit{Southern Christian Advocate} (Charleston: Burges and James, 1838), II, 60, 10 August 1838, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., I, 38, 9 March 1838, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Smith, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
social, political, economic, and civil spheres; and slavery, as a problem within these spheres, transcends the "proper" scope of the Church's interest.

Four years before the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Capers proclaimed to his readers:

The only action which we conceive the . . . General Conference could take . . . would be to expunge from the Discipline all that is said about Slavery, leaving the subject in the hands of the civil power to whom it properly belongs . . . We regarded the action of the last General Conference [1836] upon this subject as decisive, and settling the view which the Church took of it: viz., that slavery was a civil institution, and one over which ecclesiastical bodies had no control.

Two years earlier, in 1838, Capers had insisted that the law authorizing and regulating slavery was not "answerable to the Church" and that "therefore the Church has nothing to do with the question of the evil of slavery." In the same year the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church unanimously adopted a Capers-authored resolution which announced that henceforth

. . . this conference will not intermeddle with it [slavery], farther than to express our regret that it has ever been introduced in any form, into any one of the judicatures of the Church.

In a speech before the General Conference six years later, Smith was of the same mind. Referring to the Disciplinary affirmation that the Methodist Episcopal Church held slavery to be a "great evil," he commented:

I believe it—with all my heart I subscribe to it . . . I say it is an evil, because I feel it to be an evil . . . It is an evil . . . [but] while the Discipline deprecates the evil of slavery, it requires the members of the Church within those states to conform their action to the rules or laws of those states in which they live.

Smith declared:

The twenty-third article of our faith acknowledges the supreme authority of the state in all civil matters. The conference act specifically subjects our rules on slavery to be controlled by state legislation.
It is apparent by now that just as Calhoun refused to recognize that the Constitution had changed since 1789, so Smith and Capers claimed that

The law of the Church on slavery has always existed since 1785, but especially since 1804, and in view of the adjustment of the whole subject, in 1816, as a *virtual, though informal, contract of mutual concession and forbearance*, between the north [sic] and the south [sic]....

From the standpoint of this argument and with the compact made and suzerainty granted to the constitution, it is, indeed, irrelevant to discuss the morality of slavery as an institution of the state. From this viewpoint the duty of Christians with respect to the "law of the Church" is the only point needful of discussion, for the Church's jurisdiction is exercised properly only with a view of our Lord's declaration that "my Kingdom is not of this world." In a word:

Their field is the state; ours is the Church. We keep to our subject. We admit of no confounding of Church and state on any subject, and especially not on this one.

While there is no documented evidence within the primary sources, there can be no reasonable doubt that both Smith and Capers were well acquainted with the thought of John C. Calhoun. And the parallel directions of their respective missions would seem to warrant the observation that as Calhoun was interpreting a strict construction of the federal constitution, so Smith and Capers were waging the same battle over the constitution of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Scriptures.

"The unity of the Church is not concerned with it [slavery]," declared Capers, "but rests upon the basis which the Bible furnishes. Indeed it is the root of the error of abolitionists, that, leaving the constitution of the New Testament Church and practice of the Apostles, they make Christianity a scheme of revolution." 

Shortly after Calhoun had wrestled with the problem of protecting minority rights against a numerical majority, Smith and Capers, along with the other delegates from the Southern Conferences, signed "The Protest of the Minority in the Case of Bishop Andrew," which read, in part,

Domestic slavery . . . wherever it exists in this country, is a civil regulation, existing under the highest sanctions of constitutional and municipal law known to the tribunals of the country. . . . [Thus] the
north [sic] or non-slaveholding states had no right, civil or moral, to interfere with the relations and interests thus secured to the people of the south [sic] by all the graver forms of law and social order . . . without an abuse of the constitutional rights of citizenship.  

The development of this position is a direct product of the earlier quest for a pro-slavery moral standpoint which utilized the philosophy of Aristotle, and with it we are afforded another interesting parallel with Calhoun's version of Aristotelian political theory. Using Aristotle's principle of domination and subjection, Smith asserts that all governments have the principles of slavery and liberty combined in different ratios. And since the Africans came to this country in "a state of extreme barbarism," and continue in a state of semi-barbarism, they are not "entitled to the rights which inure only to a state of civilization." The structure of government for slaves must be, therefore,  

. . . such a form of government as, from its adoption to their intellectual, moral, relative, and physical condition, is best calculated to promote their happiness and the happiness of those with whom they are necessarily associated.  

Domestic slavery is thus defined by Smith as "one of the subordinate forms of civil government. It may be defined an imperium in imperio." Moreover, Calhoun's theory of the sovereignty of states and the prerogatives of sections is adopted by both Smith and Capers in the effort to thwart the encroaching abolitionists. Reminiscent of Calhoun's doctrine of the concurrent majority and his fear of centralization, Smith pleaded with the 1844 General Conference to give heed to the voice of the general membership of the Church and to settle differences by negotiation. In the same Conference, Capers premised that  

. . . those of the north [sic], acting in this General Conference for the whole Church, in all the states, have no more right to run counter to the constitution and laws of the state of Georgia [the legal residence of Bishop Andrew, whose trial was in progress], than we of the south [sic] should have to oppose the laws of any of the northern [sic] states. South or north [sic], the authority of the laws is the same.  

Both men felt that the precedent had been set forth a half-century earlier and reaffirmed as recently as the immediately preceding General Conference when the delegates in 1840 adopted a "Letter  

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81 West, op. cit., p. 205.  
82 Cf. pp. 4-5 supra.  
83 Smith, op. cit., pp. 48-51.  
84 Ibid., p. 73.  
85 Ibid., p. 156.  
86 Ibid., p. 154.  
to the British Conference,” drafted by Capers, which stated that, with regard to slavery in the American Church

Each one of all these States is independent of the rest and sovereign, with respect to its internal government, (as much so as if there existed among them no confederation for ends of common interest,) and therefore it is impossible to frame a rule on slavery for our people in all the States alike.41

While Calhoun, Smith, and Capers alike repudiated the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, they augmented their pro-slavery defenses with a benevolent paternalism. Capers, who had founded a mission to the slaves in 1819, later declared:

...we do know that slavery has tended, and is tending to the salvation of the negroes [sic]; and in saying so... only tell the truth.42

Moreover, in his 1836 “Report to the South Carolina Conference Missionary Society,” he reaffirmed his conviction that no less an authority than the Holy Scriptures enjoin both master and slave to fulfill their mutual obligations, which, for the white, included his care of the Negro, on the basis of their relation to God.43 Smith fully concurred with this view but gave more attention to ethnological distinctions and the philosophy of natural rights. As the difference between an idiot and a sane man serves as a bar to their mental and physical equality, “...so also certain races of men are by their physical condition barred from social equality.” 44 In fact, whatever the cause, the case remains the same: Negroes are neither intellectually, morally, nor otherwise fitted for equality in any sphere with whites.45 Smith’s rationale for this position is enunciated in his reply to the objection that slavery is an abridgment of certain inalienable rights and in which he expressly repudiates the theory of natural rights developed in the Enlightenment, namely,

...we can only judge what he [God] wills from that which he has done. Now we have seen that he has not endowed the souls of men with equal capacity, nor has he even placed them in circumstances of providential equality, favorable to an equal development of the unequal capacities he has given them. Superior intelligence is the condition of inequality. Where this exists, there is essential inequality. ...Hence inequality among men is the will of God.46

With this the case,

...we of the South maintain that, from their [the slaves’] present state of mental imbecility, moral degradation, and physical inferiority, they should be placed under that... form of control called domestic slavery.47

42 Capers, op. cit., III, 142, 6 March 1840, p. 150.
43 Wightman, op. cit., p. 119.
44 Smith, op. cit., p. 119.
46 Ibid., p. 63. Italics mine.
This is not only warranted from the circumstances; it is also a matter of moral rectitude because

... the Africans in this country, in common with minors, imbeciles, and uncivilized persons, have a right to be governed and protected, and to such means of physical comfort and moral improvement as are necessary and compatible with their providential condition."

It remains now only to mark the final and perhaps most obvious parallel of all between Calhoun’s thought and that of Capers and Smith, namely, the tenet of slavery as a positive good. We have already taken notice of how, in the thinking of these men, the abstract principle of the institution of slavery and the view of natural rights coincide with the “unqualified approbation of Holy Scriptures.” 49 It is sufficient to indicate, with a single reference to William A. Smith, the thrust of this claim:

Multitudes were brought to this country who had otherwise perished in barbarous warfare, or been murdered as captives, and the others would have remained in a state of pagan ignorance, superstition, and slavery. By coming into the country [the United States] they have been greatly improved in their mental, moral, and physical condition. ... Hence, we conclude, that whatever were the cruelties of individuals engaged in the original slave trade ... and whatever may have been the abuses of the system since ... the system itself was originally founded in a profound view of the principles of political science, so far as regards this country, and of political economy, and the claims of Christian benevolences, so far as it regards the Africans themselves.60

One may conclude on the basis of the evidence, however, that by whatever rational processes the pro-slavery moral argument was evolved, William Capers stated the crux of the matter for many Southerners, both Churchmen and citizens, when he declaimed:

We denounce the principles and opinions by the abolitionists in toto, and do solemnly declare our conviction and belief, that whether they were originated, as some business men have thought, as a money speculation, or as some politicians think, for party electioneering purposes, or, as we are inclined to believe, in a false philosophy, overreaching and setting aside the Scripture, through a vain conceit of a higher refinement, they are utterly erroneous, and altogether hurtful.61

48 Ibid., p. 282.
49 Ibid., p. 151.
50 Ibid., pp. 174-175.