

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

handwriting from God arrests them in their confidence and restrains their impiety. If the sin and wretchedness of the world are ever cured, it will be by making men acquainted with God, and bringing their lives into harmony with him. This is the great object of revelation. The whole movement of God's providence in the world has had this aim, to bless men with the knowledge of himself.

The knowledge of God can never grow old or become ineffective to the human soul. Other ideas and philosophies will have their day. For a longer or shorter period they may hold the mind; but they are at length outgrown, and other expressions of truth take their place. The idea of God is the oldest ever given to human thought, and it is as fresh and vigorous to-day as when first apprehended by men. The great fact of the world is the fact that God is, and the great thought of the world is the thought of God.

ARTICLE II.

THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT.¹

BY DR. H. VON HOLST, PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF FREIBURG,
GERMANY.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—A foreigner venturing to lecture before an American audience on the Irrepressible Conflict,—is not that “carrying owls to Athens”? Perhaps I would have no right to complain if that should have been your first thought when you learned on what subject I proposed to address you. What I have but studied in dusty documents is with many of you a chapter of your own life, of which no line can ever be obliterated from memory, because it has been written into your hearts with blood and with tears. Yet, as I have these last fifteen years devoted the best part of my time

¹ A Lecture delivered at Oberlin College Oct. 4, 1883. [This has been carefully written out by the distinguished author for the pages of the *Bibliotheca Sacra*. — Eds.]

to the study of this question, it may not be presumptuous to suppose that, in the course of my researches, I may have come across some facts which have escaped your notice at the time and which it is essential to know if one is honestly desirous to judge correctly, i.e. justly, the men and the events of the past. And, at all events, I think that, without exposing myself to being accused of a lack of modesty, I could claim to be able to tell those younger members of my audience who lived through the days of the civil war in the nursery many important things about this pivotal question of their country's history which would be more or less new to them. But however that be, I shall not attempt to do so. It is, on the contrary, my intention to speak about what I do not know myself, because that will not only be of greater interest and more profitable to you, but may also eventually lead to a positive good result. This announcement may possibly appear to you a sheer absurdity, and yet I trust that ere I am done you will admit that I was right.

You remember that William H. Seward was the father of the expression "the irrepressible conflict," a phrase which, like a stroke of lightning, rent the dark clouds in twain, opening the eyes of thousands to the fact which the majority of statesmen and politicians had been so anxiously striving to conceal and cover up by their policy of "compromise." But Seward himself was at that time far from grasping the import of his own declaration in its whole breadth and depth. The conflict between the North and the South really was an irrepressible one in the fullest sense of the word, simply because in the nineteenth century a wedlock between liberty and slavery is a contradiction in terms; but, with the exception of the outright abolitionists nobody wholly grasped this fact, and *they* only *felt* it, but cannot be said to have fully *understood* it. When the catastrophe came, that is to say, when the stern *facts* had put the seal upon the assertion that the conflict was an *irrepressible* one, the same Seward, on his way to Washington to assume the duties of Secretary of State, assured Mr. Russell, the well-known English newspaper

correspondent, that within sixty days the seceded States would have been brought back into the Union. And how long was it before Abraham Lincoln, who had declared that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and with him the majority of the people of the northern States came to see that the Union could not be restored unless the *cause* of the irrepressible conflict was removed!

And did they see more clearly on the other side? By no means. The reasoning of John C. Calhoun, the very embodiment of the instincts of the slavocracy, is always shaped in this way: the Union is irretrievably lost unless Congress does this and that, and unless the people of the free States cease to do this and that. We have lived to see the truth of these assertions proved; but what Calhoun wanted Congress and the people of the North to do were, in the strict sense of the word, impossibilities, and it was this that he failed to see. "Stop agitation," was his simple but unailing remedy. Agitation, however, could not be stopped unless the conflict was not an irrepressible one; nay more, unless the people of both sections could be convinced that it was not a reality, but existed only in their imagination; for as long as free and democratic people believe — no matter whether this belief is well founded in fact or not — that there is something at work touching their vital interests, they will and must unceasingly labor to attain what to them seems a satisfactory solution of the problem. In spite of his unceasing peremptory demand to stop agitation, Calhoun could not close his eyes against this decisive and, one might say without exaggeration, self-evident fact, and therefore he strained his subtle intellect and acute logic to their utmost capacity to demonstrate to the people of the North that slavery was "a good, a positive good," with no other result than thereby to convince more and more people that it was an evil so terrible that there was and could be but one alternative — either to crush it, or to be crushed by it.

Others followed in the wake of Calhoun with regard to this fundamental question. On the eve of the rebellion, to men-

tion but one instance, Alexander H. Stevens wrote to his brother Linton that the whole problem hinged upon the question whether slavery was sinful and immoral; if so the South was wrong, and, no matter what explanations and excuses she might hunt up, sooner or later she would be compelled to strike her flag. But though an honest and devoted Christian, he was perfectly satisfied that it was not sinful and immoral, and therefore he clung to the last to the hope that the Union with slavery might and would be preserved, because, like Calhoun, he failed to see that, even if he was right, that could be of no practical effect whatever unless he could make the people of the North view the subject in the same light. "What is truth?" Pilate asked. Yes, what is truth? I do not deny that there is absolute truth, but finite man will never be able to tell what it is. What we call history is the slow march of mankind towards it; gradually and with frequent deviations they fight their way on in the right direction without ever reaching the goal. Moral truth as an active force among men is not an absolute, but a relative thing, constantly developing with the general development of mankind, and therefore whatever is believed by a people to be a moral truth works in its history as such.

Now here we see a people, upon the whole, of common origin, of a common history, living under institutions of the same character, geographically, economically and politically closely united, and yet differing almost *toto coelo* about the moral character of a question which necessarily became every year more and more the determining element in absolutely every relation of importance in the life of a civilized people. This in itself made the conflict an irrepressible one, for no question could come up which was not, in some way or other, directly or indirectly connected with slavery, and so the two opposing convictions had to clash. The idea of harmonizing them could not be seriously entertained by any reflecting man, for by this time the veriest tyro was aware of the fact, which Calhoun had affirmed for twenty years or more, that the spirit of abolitionism would and must con-

stantly gain ground in the North, while, on the other side, the leading men of the South worked themselves *pari passu* into the belief that slavery was a positive good, and boldly and successfully raised the standard of slavery propagandism — that is to say, the moral convictions of the North and the South with regard to this question steadily and with increasing rapidity moved on in diverging lines. And yet the majority of the politicians and of the people would stick to the delusion that it was after all possible to nail the irreconcilable difference of opinion fast to the misty heights of abstract truth, and to bridge over by legislation the chasms which yawned every day wider and wider under their feet. Every new attempt to accomplish this feat, which was beyond all human skill, because it went contrary to the laws of God and of nature, gave them the lie more directly and in a more striking manner, but still their honest though mistaken patriotism and their high respect for legal rights and obligations drove them on to persist in their futile exertions even after the Hotspurs of the South had at last cut the Gordian knot. The irresistible logic of facts now pushed the people of the North on, step by step, until at last the emancipation proclamation cleared the ground for the sword to find the irrevocable solution of the fearful problem.

It is now universally acknowledged, not only in the North, but also in the South, that the solution is definite and irrevocable, and even five years ago when I travelled in the southern States, I did not find a single person who, though not yielding a hair's breadth with regard to the constitutional question, did not openly declare that for no consideration whatever would the South take back slavery. But in spite of all that, I am still to find the first man either North or South, with whom the fact that the conflict was an irrepressible one is at best more than a half-understood truth. This may seem to you a bold, if not an absurd assertion, and yet I confidently undertake to prove it. And in doing so I go yet one step further, and maintain that it is as yet absolutely impossible fully to understand it, though one may know

enough of it to declare most positively that the time will come when it will be fully understood, and when it will be really proved to be a fact.

Ere this can be done the history of slavery in the United States has to be written, and thus far not even the slightest attempt has been made to do it. You will not suspect me of the foolish vanity of claiming that I know this history. I have told you that I wanted to speak about what I did not know, and here you have it. After having studied for fifteen years the history of the United States under their present Constitution, and principally the slavery question, I have to announce as one of the main results of my studies that I do not know the history of slavery in this republic, and that nobody else does. But I have learned enough about it to venture with the greatest possible assurance, the declaration that ere this history is really known and written in a satisfactory manner it is impossible fully to master the history of the slavery question, or, in other words, fully to understand that and why the conflict between the North and the South was an irrepressible one, which could be solved only by the sword. No further commentary of mine will be needed to make you see the difference between the history of *slavery* and the history of the slavery *question*, and you will admit that all the works known to you treat but of the latter, with only now and then some isolated or loosely connected facts gleaned from the former strewn in. And it is self-evident that as long as the history of the thing itself is not thoroughly known and understood, it is impossible fully to understand the part it has played as a subject of political controversy.

The truth of this assertion will appear to you still more striking when I advance another step in my argument, calling your attention to the all-important fact that the slaveholding States lived in an irrepressible conflict within themselves. The "fiend" that finally succeeded in killing their peculiar institution, "the accursed spirit of abolitionism," — that is, of liberty, — did not only attack them from without,

but it stalked in *their* legislative halls, sat on *their* judicial benches, warmed itself at *their* firesides, nestled in the very centre of *their* hearts. They could not hunt it ignominiously away; and if they could have done it they would rather have laid down their lives than do it. Whatever they did for slavery was a slap in their own faces and a cut into their own flesh. Was the union feeling in the South nothing but a sentimental emotion, only a clinging to recollections and traditions which once had been realities, but had now become empty shadows; or had the slaveholding States, in spite of everything, continued to be living and organic members of this democratic republic? Had not they too issued the Declaration of Independence, with its self-evident truths? Had not they too fought the war of the Revolution, facing the hangman's halter in case they were conquered? Had not they too had a hand in establishing this Constitution, in order to render the Union more perfect, and secure to themselves and their posterity the blessings of liberty? Had not they too continued to maintain the principles of self-government? Were not they too genuine republicans? Was it not, then, an unavoidable consequence of all this, that every conflict generated by slavery necessarily was as much a conflict at home as a conflict with the North, though the people honestly and most thoroughly deceived themselves about it? That is the tragical culmination in the fate of the slavocracy, that the higher they rear the temple of their peculiar institution, the more vigorously they undermine its foundations, because they act against their own interests, against their own principles, against the spirit of their own institutions. Not only the Union, but also the South, was a house divided against itself; and in the South not only the border States standing against the cotton States, the breeding States against the planting States, the slaveholders against the non-slaveholders, but the worst fire-eating southron could not help being a house divided in himself; the slaveholder and the southerner stood against the man and the American citizen, — nay, more, as a slaveholder and a southerner he

found himself entangled in an ever-tightening net of contradictions which admitted of no reconciliation.

The South had early become fully aware of the fact that slavery was doomed, unless she succeeded in retaining the controlling influence in the councils of the Union. Every success of the slavocracy, however, was a Pyrrhus victory, proving more clearly that, in spite of the subserviency of northern politicians, this would at last become impossible, unless she could become a little more equal to the North in the increase of actual power, instead of seeing the distance between the two sections constantly widen. That, however, slavery rendered impossible, and if it had been possible, the interests of the slavocracy would have absolutely forbidden it. Slavery drove many a poor, but strong-limbed and stout-hearted man away from the South into the free States, while immigration shunned the South on account of slavery. The leading slaveholders talked a great deal about attracting immigration, and their wisest men—among them of course Calhoun—came to the conclusion that it would be simply suicide to do so. The South, while asserting, and honestly believing the mad assertion, that the economical ruin of the North would be complete and irretrievable if the South seceded, could not help seeing that her economical dependence upon the North grew every year greater, more humiliating, and more dangerous to the sway of the slavocracy. Her leading men again talked a great deal about establishing all sorts of industries in the slaveholding States. They proved entirely to their own satisfaction that it was an absolute necessity and the easiest thing in the world to do, because in every respect, the pretended cheapness of slave labor included, the advantage was on the side of the South; and year after year they passed formal resolutions that it should and would be done. The end of all that, however, was, that not only nothing at all came of it, because negro slavery proved to be incompatible with industrial pursuits on a larger scale, but also that again their best men—and among them of course Calhoun—became convinced that these attempts, if persisted in and in

the least successful, must necessarily be destructive to the power of the slaveholders. Callhoun was one of the first men in the United States to see what a revolution would be worked in the economical relations of the whole civilized world by the introduction of railroads, and he went at once to work to secure to his section in the highest possible degree the advantages to be derived from this new means of communication. He calculated correctly; for if the South did not move on in this respect with the rest of the world she would at once be distanced so much in the race for material power that the idea of maintaining her political supremacy would be ridiculous. And yet the introduction of railroads was evidently much more suicidal than either the favoring of immigration or the establishment of factories. In consequence of her thin population, caused by the economical nature of slave labor, the South could compete in this respect as little as in any other with the North; and yet she had to have railroads, because she could not suffer herself to be thrown out of the pale of the civilized world; while, on the other hand, isolation became more and more a question of life and death to the peculiar institution. Every year the necessity grew more and more pressing for the South to keep up with the onward march of mankind; every year she fell further back; every year she boasted louder of being the most civilized country of the world;¹ every year she pressed

¹ G. Fitzhugh of Virginia, said in 1857: "Twenty years ago the South had no thought — no opinion of her own. Then she stood behind all Christendom, admitted her social structure, her habits, her economy, and her industrial pursuits to be wrong, deplored them as a necessity, and begged pardon for their existence. Now she is about to lead the thought and direct the practices of Christendom; for Christendom admits and sees that she has acted a silly and suicidal part in abolishing African slavery — the South a wise and prudent one in retaining it. . . . In any view of the subject southern thought and southern example must rule the world. The South has acted wisely and prudently; acted according to the almost universal usage of civilized mankind and the injunctions of the Bible, and she is about to gather her reward for so doing. She flourishes like the bay tree, whilst Europe starves, and she is as remarkable for her exemption from crime as her freedom from poverty. . . . Slavery educates, refines, and moralizes the masses by separating them from each other, and bringing them into constant intercourse with masters of superior minds, information

tighter to her bosom the reptile that fed upon her vitals.¹ Calhoun had expected to find a powerful ally in steam, and what he got was a scorched hand. Steam pushed on the North at lightning rate, and carried into the South not power and wealth, but the spirit of the age, and that was the spirit of abolitionism. The longing and screaming for steam gradually changed into a longing and screaming for the resumption of the African slave-trade.² Congo negroes were

and morality. . . . Slavery is necessary as an educational institution, and is worth ten times all the common schools of the North. Such common schools teach only (1) uncommonly bad morals, and prepare their inmates to graduate in the penitentiary, as the statistics of crime at the North abundantly prove."

¹ The Southern Literary Messenger wrote: "An abolitionist is any man who does not love slavery for its own sake, as a divine institution; who does not worship it as the corner-stone of civil liberty; who does not adore it as the only possible social condition on which a permanent republican government can be erected; and who does not, in his inmost soul, desire to see it extended and perpetuated over the whole earth, as a means of human reformation, second in dignity, importance, and sacredness alone to the Christian religion. He who does not love African slavery with this love is an abolitionist." And the Atlanta Confederacy declared in January 1860: "We regard every man in our midst an enemy to the institutions of the South who does not boldly declare that he or she believes African slavery to be a social, moral, and political blessing. Any person holding other than these sentiments, whether born at the South or North, is unsound, and should be requested to leave the country."

² When secession had become an accomplished fact, and the Confederate States were anxious to gain the sympathy and good-will of Europe, they branded the assertion, that the idea of reintroducing the African slave-trade had ever been seriously entertained, as a base and absolutely unfounded calumny. That was a bold, barefaced perversion of historical truth which must be exposed without mercy, for it concerns a question second in importance to none in the whole history of slavery in the United States. In the fourth and fifth volume of my Constitutional and Political History of the United States, I shall prove this by documentary evidence which I trust will put this once controverted question forever to rest. Here I can adduce but one testimony, which states the facts quite correctly. In a letter from Savannah, Georgia, dated April 27, 1859, it is said: "At the present time it is undoubtedly true that a large majority of the people are opposed to the measure, and not a few bitterly. The people of the interior, planters of the up-country, the old settlers, who accept and are satisfied with the present state of things, and practically regard their slaves as part of their families, dread the agitation, and are pretty well united in sentiment. . . . But, on the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the policy of reopening the slave-trade has been adopted by determined and persevering men; it is the Young America spirit of the South. And in forming a judgment as to the course of public opinion on this grave question, one must take into account that

to be the lever with which the South was to be thrown with one jerk over the yawning gulf which separated her from the rest of the civilized world.¹ She saw that her fate was sealed if she could not again stand abreast with the North among the great nations of the earth; and the only means at her disposal to regain her former position was the very thing which had clogged her feet, only in its most aggravated form. Her most radical sons commenced to blaspheme, declaring in the highest tones that the time would come, and was near at hand, when the world would see that the only possible foundation of true liberty was slavery;² and at the same time

the advocates of the slave-trade, although a minority, are young, ambitious, and unscrupulous." To this I can for the present only add that they steadily gained ground, and had, on the eve of the rebellion, become powerful enough in some of the southern States to try whether they might risk to cry down the conservatives with terroristic denunciations.

¹ T. A. Lyles, of South Carolina, declared in 1856: "Now I admit, with all frankness and candor, that the non-slaveholding States are in all or nearly all the great industrial pursuits of the age greatly in advance of the slaveholding States; but I must, with the same frankness and candor, deny the allegation that the cause is to be found in the local laws, customs, or institutions of either; but that they are to be traced unerringly to the constitution, laws, and policy of the general government. Am I asked to point them out? I do so by referring to one only; there may be others, and no doubt are; but the clause in the Constitution of the United States, and the laws and policy made conformable thereto, prohibiting the African slave-trade in the year 1808, is to my mind so manifestly the immediate and great cause, that I will content myself with a few reflections in regard to it." And L. W. Spratt of South Carolina, in a report to the Southern Commercial Convention in Montgomery, May 1858, said: "Another great want of the South is labor. . . . That, when it [labor] offers profit, will attract abundant capital, and with abundant labor therefore, enterprise will take new lines of action, and there is a firm assurance that the South will take a range of varied culture unsurpassed by any other country of the world. The foreign slave-trade will give us that abundant labor."

² The Rev. Thomas Stringfellow, D.D., of Culpepper County, Virginia, said in his work, *Slavery, its Origin, Nature, and History*: "Either liberty or civilization, or both, must die when the world is subjected to the control of their [the abolitionists] leading principle of 'freedom and equality' among men." I have been astonished, that so far as I know, none of the learned and well-read southern gentlemen who held such views has ever called attention to the interesting fact that J. J. Rousseau the great oracle and infallible apostle of all the radical sects of the first French Revolution, comes very nearly to the same conclusion as to liberty, though, as he correctly states at the end of his argument, he has before proved slavery to be, under all circumstances, unjust. He says: "In

they bitterly complained that the very citadels of slavery, as Charleston, became every year more and more infected and infested with the spirit of abolitionism, in spite of anything they could do.

Thus the South was madly hurled around in a whirlpool of contradictions, and deeper and deeper engulfed in its boiling and poisoning waters by every exertion to extricate herself. And all this was not the result of the short-sightedness or perversity of her political leaders, but the logical consequence of the one fact that slavery had been made the

Greece the people did everything themselves they had to do. They were constantly assembled on the public place, lived in a mild climate, and were not hungry; slaves worked for them; their [the people's] great business was liberty. If one has not the same advantages, how can one maintain the same right? Your climate is severer, and in consequence you have more wants; six months in the year one cannot be for any length of time on the public place; your husky voices cannot make themselves heard in the open air, you are more after prosperity than after liberty, and fear slavery less than misery. *How! Can liberty maintain itself only with the help of slavery? Very possible.* The two extremes touch each other. Everything that is not in nature has its inconveniences, and civil society more than anything else. *There are such unfortunate situations in which one's own liberty can be maintained only at the expense of the liberty of other people, and in which the citizen is not perfectly free, unless the slave is absolutely slave.* Such was the situation of Sparta. You modern nations have no slaves, but you are yourselves slaves; you pay for the liberty of the slaves with your own. You may claim that as a praiseworthy distinction; *I see in it more weakness than humanity.*" It is true, if the slavocracy had adduced the authority of Rousseau, its adversaries might have shown by another quotation from the *Contrat Social* to what abominable absurdities the acutest reasoning is apt to lead, which absolutely and on principle pays no attention to facts, starting abstract logic on a mad race from arbitrary and delusive premises. Let us see what becomes of religious liberty at the hands of the man whose starting-point is the absolute independence, i.e. the sovereignty of the individual. "Thus there is a purely civil creed which the sovereign has to determine upon, not, it is true, exactly as principles of his religion, but as convictions of sociability (*sociabilité*), without which it is impossible to be a good citizen. Without being able to oblige anybody to believe in them, he can banish everybody from the State who does not believe in them; he can banish him not as a godless, but as an unsociable one, as one who is incapable of honestly loving the laws and justice, and, in case of need, of sacrificing his life to his duty. Everybody who, after the public recognition of these principles, acts as if he did not believe in them, shall be punished with death; he has committed the greatest of all crimes, he has lied before the laws." According to Rousseau the immortality of the soul must be one of the principles of this "purely civil creed," which is an absolute requirement of "sociability."

corner-stone of the economical, social, and political life of democratic republics, indissolubly and organically united in one great commonwealth with real democracies.

And now let me ask you, How much of all this has thus far been *proved*? I am sure you will answer unanimously; Nothing, or next to nothing. And I am bold enough to assert that I have collected sufficient materials not by any means to furnish the proofs, but to satisfy every clear-sighted and impartial man that all this *can* be proved, and that it *must* be proved, ere the nature and the history of the irrepressible conflict can be fully understood. To do so in the way it ought to be done is the work of many a laborious lifetime. But that is no reason to leave it undone. Here is a broad field for the young scholars of the United States; and whosoever undertakes to till it in the right spirit will be amply rewarded, and, as the saying was in the French Revolution, will have deserved well of his country. Take up any question you like; there are dozens at your choice,—the history of the non-slaveholders, of landed property, of education, of political and other literature, of migration, of political ideas, of the influence of railroads upon slavery in the slaveholding States, and so forth,—anything you like, but *do* commence to work out *the history of slavery*, no matter at what point you begin.

If it should prove to have been my good fortune to sink into but one mind in this audience a grain which is to germinate, and sooner or later ripen into a literary fruit of the kind indicated, I shall be richly rewarded; and I trust you will graciously grant absolution to the authorities of Oberlin College for having invited me to address you, and to me for having accepted the invitation.