The Character and Influence of Abolitionism: A Sermon that Gripped a Nation and Defined a Man

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This article examines Henry Van Dyke’s antiabolitionist sermon *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* and civilian responses to it. Preached shortly before South Carolina’s secession, the sermon’s timely appearance led to a wide distribution throughout the nation and stimulated opinions on slavery and abolition in relation to the Bible, clearly revealing a divided citizenry. Van Dyke’s preference for conciliation caused some Northerners to question his loyalty, and while he represented himself as apolitical in order to preserve the unity of the church, his famous address contributed to the politicization of religion during the secession crisis and Civil War.

**Keywords:** secession; Civil War; slavery; abolitionism; religion; loyalty; civilian opinion

After Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860, apprehensive citizens North and South fretted over the future of their fragile union. Many hoped that another political compromise might stave off sectional division, but others must have wondered if the spirit of disunion would triumph and tear the nation asunder. President James Buchanan and the Thirty-sixth Congress, both lame ducks after the November canvass, inspired little confidence and seemed altogether unprepared to meet the looming crisis. Nevertheless, northern religious newspapers of all denominations remained optimistic that union and peace would prevail. On 3 December as Congress convened its winter session, concerned Christians assembled in churches in New York City and Washington to supplicate God to preserve the Union, and they continued to meet for noontime prayer throughout the week. While some ministers seemed content to rely on prayer and patiently wait for events to unfold as God willed, one clergyman attempted to shape popular opinion to support continued union and peace. He likely regarded his address as unmistakable evidence of his patriotism and love for his country, but with the onset of war his opponents pointed to his polarizing sermon as incontrovertible proof of disloyalty.1

Henry J. Van Dyke, the 38-year-old pastor of Brooklyn’s First Presbyterian Church, personified antebellum Old School Presbyterianism. As a theological
conservative he held a high view of Scripture, affirmed the sovereignty of God over history, and opposed social movements and new-fangled theories that undermined the church’s institutional authority. His insistence on an apolitical church that prioritized the preaching of the gospel over sermons specifically aimed at producing political or social change made him averse to antislavery agitation that threatened to disrupt the existing social order. Furthermore, as a political conservative he supported the Democratic party, approved the Constitution’s protection of slavery, and numbered many southern churchmen among his personal friends. He most certainly never expected that one oration would catapult him to national prominence.

Few sermons in American history have reverberated throughout the nation, but the timing of *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* caused it to spread like wildfire. When Van Dyke stepped to the pulpit on Sunday evening, 9 December 1860, the Union was still intact. However, South Carolina soon severed those tenuous bonds, and the national distribution of his discourse provided a sounding board for concerned civilians to espouse their own opinions on the state of the country during the uncertain secession winter of 1860–1861. Moreover, his unequivocal condemnation of abolitionists, whom he blamed for stirring up sectional strife and placing the country on the brink of ruin, convinced many people that he could counter the radical abolitionist views of Henry Ward Beecher, arguably the country’s most renowned preacher. Scores of letters written to the Presbyterian minister illuminate the division within the North over slavery as social conservatives and antislavery advocates both found biblical justification for their positions. Southerners rejoiced to find an able defender for their cause, but most feared that Van Dyke’s critique of abolitionism came too late to save the country from disunion. In these enlightening missives to Van Dyke, civilians analyzed the roles of the clergy and abolitionists in imperiling the Union, contemplated possible actions that southern states might take to maintain their political rights, and ultimately speculated on God’s divine purposes and future plans for America. More significantly, these candid epistles demonstrate how extensively the sectional crisis had politicized religion and foreshadow the rift that would grow even deeper as religionists North and South viewed the coming war as a religious contest.

Over the course of his ministry in Brooklyn, Van Dyke’s parishioners had grown accustomed to hearing learned discourses on biblical doctrines, and recent sermons bore titles such as “Christ’s Second Coming,” “The Leadings of Providence,” “The Word of the Lord Endureth Forever,” and “The Great Sin of Unbelief.” Many church members may have been surprised when he announced the subject of the evening’s message, but in his introduction he underscored that he was not meddling in politics by discussing abolitionism from the pulpit. As a minister who claimed the Bible as the “one authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice” for Christians, he would carefully expost I Timothy 6:1–5, in which Paul addressed the master-slave relationship. But before delving into the text, he defined an abolitionist as a person who regarded slavery as sinful and therefore the ownership of slaves as an immoral practice. Since a clergyman’s duty clearly involved exposing and condemning what the Bible decreed to be sin, he believed that his pastoral responsibilities compelled him to examine the claims of abolitionism in light of scriptural teaching on sin. If any listeners remained uncertain as to which side of the argument Van Dyke would
take, his clearly articulated thesis at the end of his prefatory remarks removed all doubt. “This tree of Abolitionism is evil, and only evil,” he avowed, for “it springs from, and is nourished by, an utter rejection of the Scriptures.” As a movement in direct opposition to God, abolitionism “produces no real benefit to the enslaved, and is the fruitful source of division and strife, and infidelity, in both Church and State.”

After this attention-grabbing opening, Van Dyke transitioned to his first point, the unscriptural nature of abolitionism. He cited Leviticus 25 as evidence that God had allowed the Israelites to hold in bondage their countrymen shackled with poverty and indebtedness. Every 50th year, these Jewish slaves were manumitted as part of the celebration of the Year of Jubilee, a practice that abolitionists trumpeted. This humane provision, however, did not apply to foreign-born slaves who, according to Leviticus, remained “bondmen forever” as a “possession” passed down from generation to generation. Since the Bible clearly allowed perpetual servitude, Van Dyke reasoned, abolitionists who labeled slaveholding as sinful deliberately flouted Holy Writ. Furthermore, in claiming that Old Testament regulations did not apply to current conditions in America and appealing instead to “the higher tribunal of the gospel,” these abolitionists ignored the New Testament record of the words and actions of Christ and the apostles, who never condemned slaveholding as sin despite living in a period of history when slavery was both widespread and abusive. Far from denouncing slavery, the apostles even received slaveholders into church membership. The New Testament, Van Dyke explained, gave principles for what constituted the proper master-slave relationship, and masters who violated them justifiably faced church discipline. Kind treatment of slaves, not emancipation, led to unity within the church in apostolic times and the present, and the benign influences of the preaching of the gospel, not the vitriolic rants of abolitionists, contributed to the elevation and Christianization of Africans. In Van Dyke’s opinion, the “fanaticism” of abolitionists had hindered the spread of the gospel in the South, and southern ministers such as James Henley Thornwell and Benjamin Morgan Palmer had recently advocated secession in order to eliminate the “constant agitations” and “incessant turmoil” fostered by “the unscriptural dogma” of these meddling militants in order to obtain “peace for the prosecution of their Master’s work, which the constitution of the United States has hitherto failed to secure for them.”

After affirming his personal affection for these soon-to-be politically schismatic southern brethren, Van Dyke criticized the unchristian manner in which abolitionists disseminated their views. In this second point, he lambasted abolitionists for consistently misrepresenting the truth about slavery, always emphasizing extreme cases of cruelty rather than the more numerous examples of beneficent master-slave relationships. Instead of printing and broadcasting falsehoods about slaveholders with language “full of wrath and bitterness,” abolitionists needed to repent of this sin and be reconciled to conservatives throughout the Union. As instigators of the growing sectional strife, abolitionists needed to take the lead and “proffer the olive-branch of peace” in order to dispel the gathering political storm.

Having devoted more than two thirds of his sermon to presenting his case for the unscriptural basis of abolitionism and unchristian behavior of its proponents, Van
Dyke leveled his most condemning points. He maintained that abolitionism generally led to religious infidelity because many abolitionists had elevated human reason and opinions over the unchangeable and sure Word of God. In their unflinching devotion to freedom, abolitionists had ignored the Bible’s clear teaching on slavery, and this total disregard for the authority of Scripture demonstrated their slide into infidelity. As evidence, he cited *The Church and Slavery*, published in 1857 by Philadelphia’s noted New School Presbyterian Albert Barnes, who had written, “If a book claiming to be a revelation from God … defended slavery, … such a book would not, and could not, be received by the mass of mankind as a Divine revelation.” Abolitionists like Barnes, still claiming orthodoxy, had abandoned the Calvinistic doctrines of grace and played fast and loose with Scripture in order to condemn slaveholding, while self-professed infidels like William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith had made no attempt to hide their contempt for the Bible. As a conscientious shepherd of the flock of Christ’s church, Van Dyke had a biblical mandate to warn undiscerning listeners of the theological heresies propounded by these false teachers.8

After discussing the theological shortcomings of abolitionism in his first three points, Van Dyke concluded by examining the political consequences of the movement. He regarded abolitionism as the primary source of national contention and ultimate cause of the looming political division. First, he clarified that he was not equating the Republican party with abolitionism; indeed, president-elect Abraham Lincoln seemed to be one of “the more conservative and Bible-loving men of his party.” Although abolitionism had unquestionably played a role in deciding the past month’s presidential election, its entry into politics was far from recent. Even 20 years ago, Van Dyke recalled, the conservative *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* had perceptively predicted that abolitionism’s insistence on the sinfulness of slaveholding would “produce the disunion of the States and the division of all ecclesiastical societies in this country.” The fulfillment of the latter half of this prophecy and probable accomplishment of the former portion had proven to Van Dyke’s satisfaction that abolitionism had birthed disunion, suckled it with “poisoned milk,” and ultimately derived its power from demonic sources. Closing with a patriotic flourish, he bemoaned abolitionism’s destructive influence on the country, specifically its shunning of the statesmanlike spirit of compromise that had characterized the nation’s history to that point, an attitude that had helped preserve the perpetual Union established by Providence. Now abolitionism threatened to dash his hope that his beloved USA would shine as a beacon among the nations until the moment when its radiance merged seamlessly with the resplendent inauguration of Christ’s millennial kingdom.9

Van Dyke’s arguments against abolitionism were by no means original but complemented and reflected a long-standing northern critique of abolitionism. For instance, his conclusions about the Bible’s failure to condemn slavery in the abstract echoed those made by Moses Stuart, who in 1850 had ruffled abolitionists’ feathers for defending enforcement of the fugitive slave clause against the higher law of conscience. Yet far from endorsing the peculiar institution as practiced in the American South, Stuart and other antislavery moderates emphasized how the ameliorative effect of the gospel and the principle of loving one’s neighbor as oneself would undermine and eventually eradicate slavery. Historian Molly Oshatz has carefully
demonstrated how these antislavery, antiabolitionist Protestants conceded that over time “moral progress” could cause a practice that had been acceptable in one era to become sinful at a later date, thus undermining biblical authority and ultimately paving the way for theological liberalism in the late-nineteenth century. Van Dyke’s conservative Old School Presbyterianism prevented him from countenancing even moderate antislavery views, and theologically likeminded southerners capably used his sermon to further the proslavery cause.10

Although he claimed to be avoiding political preaching, his sermon in fact sent a distinct political message. Throughout the sectional crisis and Civil War, partisan newspaper editors routinely censured clergymen for preaching politics. In truth, many ministers found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Some preachers unabashedly promoted the Union cause in church and delivered rousing addresses that extrapolated wildly from a biblical text in order to make a contemporary application. Democratic editors branded such men as little more than political operatives who gave stump speeches on Sundays. Ministers who avoided mentioning the war in church drew the ire of Republican editors, who contended that this claim to preaching only the gospel was merely a cloak for hiding traitorous sympathies. Since most sermons published in newspapers or as pamphlets addressed sectionalism or the war, it has given the impression that political preaching was quite common, when in reality most ministers likely addressed a political subject only a handful of times each year. However, those few occasions starkly defined a minister’s position and promoted an essentially partisan public persona. It is impossible, of course, for historians to know with exact certainty the motives of Civil War era clergy in selecting their sermon topics. In Van Dyke’s case, he most certainly desired to focus on biblical themes, but at the same time his exposition of slavery underscored his conservative views on race and the social order that ultimately furthered a political agenda.11

In the midst of the country’s political upheaval, Van Dyke likely expected his address would attract local attention. The New York Herald copied the entire sermon on Monday, and an editorial the following day praised his “admirable” discourse for demonstrating that the Bible did not condemn slavery as inherently sinful. The Democratic Brooklyn Eagle predictably defended the rights of politically conservative ministers to counter the arguments of abolitionist preachers. The Republican leaning New York Tribune, in contrast, took offense with the sermon and accused Van Dyke of slander by claiming that abolitionism led to religious infidelity. Several papers capitalized on the groundswell of public interest in the sermon by printing letters from readers eager to weigh in on the subject. A few ministers, most notably prominent New Haven Congregationalist Leonard Bacon, delivered addresses specifically aimed at refuting his arguments. Another antagonist, J. R. W. Sloane of New York’s Third Reformed Presbyterian Church, challenged him to public debate on the Bible and American slavery in order to “further the cause of truth and righteousness.” Unwilling to dialog with men like Bacon and Sloane, whom he believed had engaged in unwarranted personal attacks, Van Dyke kept silent. However, he responded in the pages of the New York World to criticism from Professor Tayler Lewis of Union College because he had “used the language of a scholar and a Christian gentleman.”12
The exposure afforded by the national circulation of the *Herald* and *World* undoubtedly helped publicize Van Dyke’s views, but it was merely a drop in the bucket compared to the widespread reprinting of his sermon in secular and religious newspapers throughout the country. More than 20 newspapers carried the entire discourse or extracts of it in the months after its delivery, and although Democratic sheets or denominational organs primarily reprinted the sermon, the cities represented in this number included Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Richmond, and New Orleans. No matter how surprised Van Dyke might have been by the attention his sermon received in the nation’s newspapers, he must have been completely astonished by the demand for his discourse in pamphlet form. The first printing of 5000 copies sold out quickly, and eventually 11 different publishers offered editions of *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism*. Publishers in Baltimore and Toledo were so anxious to sell sermon pamphlets that they went to press before consulting with Van Dyke. “I would have asked your permission but time would not permit,” the enterprising Henry Taylor lamely apologized after printing the sermon from a copy of the *New York Herald*. His hasty gambit evidently paid dividends, for one Presbyterian minister claimed that “probably” 50,000 copies were sold in Baltimore alone over the next two months. This number likely was inflated, but sales were certainly high. The *Journal of Commerce* reported that 27,500 copies of *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* had been sold by the end of January 1861. In fact, numerous concerned civilians actively spread the pamphlet. Firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt asked for 1000 copies to distribute throughout Connecticut, and several less notable individuals personally requested Van Dyke to send them a handful of pamphlets, oftentimes enclosing stamps to cover the postage.13

This inundation of letters from friends, acquaintances, total strangers, and, at least in one case, an autograph hound must have completely overwhelmed Van Dyke, who had become a household name practically overnight. Most of this correspondence was supportive, but several writers disputed his understanding of Scripture and questioned his loyalty to the Union. In response to the sermon, at least one member of First Presbyterian asked for a certificate of dismission because he regarded his pastor as sympathetic to slavery. A satisfied congregant, in contrast, expected Van Dyke to “be assailed on all hands” and encouraged him to stand firm in the face of intense opposition and even persecution. Advising Van Dyke to refrain from any retaliatory war of words with his abolitionist antagonists, he claimed that his friend would emerge from the fray unscathed. The church member wrote,

If all the devil’s hounds bark at your heels, they cannot bite a man clad in your panoply. … You have said enough. You have said it well. Now let them howl and bark and lie and traduce. Their fangs are powerless & poisonless.

Personal criticism can be difficult to shrug off, but Van Dyke likely took satisfaction in his principled stand for Scripture and for the preservation of the Union. If some abolitionists pilloried him for branding as heterodoxy their higher law creed, sympathetic religious and social conservatives recognized the sermon as ample proof of personal patriotism. Seeking to buoy Van Dyke’s spirits after a barrage of criticism and a
bout with sickness, one fellow minister offered encouragement. “I hope you will soon be strong again; if for no other reason, lest the abolitionists should rejoice. I think you are suffering judgments for so nobly playing the man for your country.” From Philadelphia his brother Frederick reported that someone had praised the sermon’s “peroration” containing his “personal love of country” as “the best effort of your life.” His patriotic flourishes notwithstanding, over the next few months Van Dyke would be subjected to the relentless pursuit of the so-called “devil’s hounds,” for his sermon had sealed his reputation as a leading apologist for slavery, white southerners, and, by association, the Confederacy itself.

More than anything, letters written to Van Dyke in response to his preaching *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* demonstrate the ubiquitous mingling of religion and politics that predominated throughout the antebellum era and intensified during the Civil War. Despite variations in geography and the disparate political leanings of its authors, these epistles generally addressed one or more of the following issues: the role of abolitionists in instigating sectional polarization; the clergy’s responsibility in actively abetting abolitionists or failing to resist them through passivity or indifference; the alleged conflict between the practices of Israel in the Old Testament and the spirit of the gospel in the New Testament; the reasons why white southerners were right or wrong in their views on slavery and secession; and ultimately the superintendence of God in allowing or causing the political impasse and speculation as to what his divine will might be. Added together, these themes demonstrate letter writers’ inability to reach a consensus on what the Bible taught about slavery and revealed a growing concern over the future effectiveness of the church and survival of the country.

In the months after delivering his sermon, Van Dyke must have gained some personal satisfaction to learn that countless other northern civilians agreed with his views on abolitionism. A Massachusetts resident asserted that the discourse was “a true and faithful exposition of Gospel truth,” and in an attempt “to uproot this miserable abolition principle” he had loaned his newspaper copy to so many neighbors that it was now unreadable. From Chicago Congregationalist minister Willis Lord thanked his Presbyterian counterpart for his “noble exposure of error” that might help combat the “wild and abounding Radicalism” that had infected much of the Old Northwest. Lord concurred that abolitionism was completely “godless” and defined “a Simon Pure abolitionist” as “one who claims to be wiser and holier than God… and who applies his superdivine wisdom and goodness to the matter of Slavery, so as directly to contravene Bible Morality.” A writer from East Glenville, New York, would have appreciated this description as he railed against Henry Ward Beecher, whom he identified as “one of those things in human shape” referred to in II Thessalonians 2:11, “God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned, who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” Abolitionists, the man claimed, warred against God, the Bible, and the Constitution, and by attacking this holy triumvirate they demonstrated the satanic nature of their enterprise.

In contrast to these observers who already maintained a deep-seated aversion to abolitionism, other civilians acknowledged that Van Dyke’s arguments had convinced
them of the errors of abolitionism. One New Yorker admitted that, although disapproving of the methods of abolitionists, he nonetheless had agreed with their principles and had regarded slavery as immoral. The sermon had corrected this misconception, and he hoped that it would continue to instruct and change the hearts of “the masses of well-meaning but misguided voters.” A resident of Logan County, Illinois, informed Van Dyke that he formerly had believed the Bible to condemn slavery, “but you have clearly proved to my mind that slavery is not incompatible with morality, or Christianity.” A 25-year-old Pennsylvanian confessed as much and expressed gratitude to Van Dyke for his courage to combat the “religious fanaticism” that had overtaken so many gullible minds. Unlike most of the minister’s correspondents who mentioned their denominational affiliation or affirmed their brotherhood in Christ, this young man unashamedly claimed no personal faith, yet his “love for this Glorious Union” would motivate him to “pray tonight to God to raise up more men to speak the truth.”

Many writers alleged that northern clergymen, as leaders in society, bore a grave responsibility for either promoting abolitionism and bringing the country to the brink of political chaos or for failing to combat those evil influences and ignoring the approaching danger. One Philadelphian blamed ministers for “the fearful alienation which now estranges those who ought to be brothers” and deemed Lincoln’s election as the proverbial crossing of the Rubicon that made further compromise impossible. A New Yorker specifically censured the “false prophets, teachers, & ministers of our sacred Religion [who] have poisoned the minds of the masses until indeed Infidelity does pervade the land.” Instead of reproaching abolitionists, an Episcopalian rector in Boston indicted the majority of northern preachers of all denominations who shirked their duty to refute “Beecher and his satellites.” Now with Van Dyke having thundered “like the voice of God” in defense of the truth, other ministers could courageously follow suit, possibly even rescuing Boston itself from the clutches of abolitionism. A Wisconsin man similarly hoped that the bold proclamation of similar sermons might preserve the nation from destruction.

Although most white southerners enthusiastically welcomed Van Dyke’s critique of abolitionism, wholeheartedly embraced the man himself, and generally concurred with many of the opinions espoused by conservative Northerners, they entertained little hope that one sermon could overcome decades of abolitionist insults and injuries and at the last moment stave off disunion. Three days after his friend’s “noble discourse,” Presbyterian minister Moses Hoge of Richmond faced the future with stoic resignation. “We do not anticipate the formation of a Southern Confederacy with any exultation, but view it as a stern & solemn necessity.” From Augusta, Georgia, Joseph Wilson closely followed developments in South Carolina and predicted that all the slave states would follow her lead. “The South can no longer tolerate the fanaticism of the North,” he asserted, “and we fear that it is so ingrained with the very education and even the religious sentiments of the deluded masses there, as to leave no hope” for continued union. Nearly three weeks after his state seceded, John Harris conveyed his gratitude to Van Dyke that at least one northern Presbyterian clergyman considered slaveholders like himself to be “better than infidels and tyrants & murderers and menstealers.” Nevertheless, white South Carolinians considered Van
Dyke’s views to be far from representative among the northern populace, so “dozens” of “sincere Christian men” from Harris’s family and church had begun to prepare for war in order to defend their liberties. Writing on the last day of 1860, Samuel K. Talmage, president of Oglethorpe University in Georgia, applauded South Carolina’s bold step to leave the Union in order to protect “our Institutions,” which Lincoln’s election, in his opinion, clearly jeopardized. The only development that might mollify the South, Talmage imagined wildly, was for the president-elect to resign. The odds of this happening, he knew, were highly unlikely, for “ordinary men cannot forego the prospect of preferment to save a nation.” The day before Christmas, Joseph Wilson followed up his first letter with a report that nearly all white Georgians favored secession, the only disagreement being whether it should occur immediately or at some juncture before Lincoln’s inauguration. On 3 January 1861, a resident of Tuscaloosa offered a similar assessment of the certainty of Alabama’s seceding. “Nearly every man in this country has deliberately made up his mind to sacrifice life and fortune in this struggle,” he claimed. However, no signs of desperation or irrational enthusiasm could be detected among the people, and even “gray-headed ministers,” with calm and serious demeanor, had pledged “to take the field with their flocks and pray, and preach, and fight.”

Religion’s role in undergirding secession cannot be emphasized enough, and some southerners accused abolitionists of hindering the continued Christianization of slaves. Talmage alleged that servitude in the South was “the best possible position for the half civilized African,” and the “happiest portion” of these slaves, approximately 400,000 strong, enjoyed membership in various churches. According to the Georgia minister and educator, secession would eliminate “the intolerant spirit of Abolitionism” and allow Southerners to live in peaceful isolation where they could continue “to do good to our servants.” An Alabamian informed Van Dyke that his slaves were “taught their duty from Paul’s & Peter’s letters,” and two of his literate bondsmen read their New Testaments and instructed others. He even had furnished them their own church on his plantation and claimed that this was commonplace throughout the South. “The world never saw a slave population so well cared for, physically & morally,” he asserted confidently.

Yet for all their self-assurance in the rectitude of secession and the benignity of slavery, a few southerners who wrote Van Dyke sounded notes of uncertainty regarding the Confederacy’s future. A unionist pastor in Wilmington promised to head North if North Carolina joined the Confederacy. Lacking a viable navy and financial resources to wage war, the Confederacy, he believed, was doomed to fail. Even after Louisiana’s secession, a conservative resident possessed faith that the wide circulation of Van Dyke’s sermon would prevent “the general dismemberment of our great & glorious country.” Indeed, the Presbyterian’s carefully reasoned address could reassure white southerners who had not accepted the fire-eaters’ insistence on war that a satisfactory compromise could still be reached.

Other white southerners may have surprised Van Dyke by disputing his biblical defense of slavery. One slaveholding Virginian, a lifelong southerner, knew firsthand the “evils” of slavery and sought to make the best of a wicked system by paying his slaves wages and allowing them to leave his service if they wished. In fact, he
desired to manumit all of them, but since Virginia’s laws prohibited free blacks from residing in the state, he set aside funds to assist in their forced relocation upon his death. Probably even more astounding, he fully supported the Republicans as the only party with “the manliness to stand up and contend for…the extension of Freedom.” A denizen of New Orleans experienced “astonishment and deep sorrow” after learning that a northern minister could uphold an “unchristian and immoral” institution that broke apart families, failed to recognize slave marriages as legally binding, and prohibited bondsmen from learning to read “that Book which testifies of Him who shed his blood for the black man as well as the white.” The “many encomiums from the Southern press” may have demonstrated the sermon’s popularity among most white southerners, but the writer knew that four million slaves, if literate, “would protest against its spirit and principles” and cry out for relief.21

Northern abolitionists would have rejoiced to know that a few southern dissidents rejected Van Dyke’s arguments. Their unsympathetic letters, although a fraction of his mail, plainly reveal the conflict over biblical interpretation among certain religious Northerners. In fact, some of these detractors appealed to Scripture with as much fervency as he. Asa Prescott, a minister in Illinois, conceded that Van Dyke’s discourse contained portions of truth; however, he had overlooked three significant verses that clearly demonstrated the sinfulness of American slavery. Exodus 21:16 read, “He that stealeth a man, & selleth him, … shall surely be put to death.” I Timothy 1:10 included “man-stealers” in a list of wicked individuals. Finally, Deuteronomy 23:15 commanded, “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the serv[an]t which is escaped from his master unto thee.” According to Prescott, slavery came to America as stolen Africans were unloaded on its shores; the Constitution had protected this “tragic [sic] in stolen men” for 20 years; and the Fugitive Slave Law clearly violated Scripture. Prescott agreed that ministers needed to denounce sin, but their definitions of what constituted sin differed markedly. R. O. Warinner took umbrage with Van Dyke’s use of the Old Testament and the practices of ancient Israel to defend slavery and argued that a consistent application of this principle would justify “an eye for an eye” retribution, divorce, polygamy, bastardy, and murder. These Old Testament laws, Warinner asserted, had been superseded by Christ’s golden rule to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. A New York minister concurred and insisted that Old Testament slavery was “a special arrangement made by God for a peculiar people” and therefore “not applicable” to nineteenth-century America. He maintained that Van Dyke’s less than subtle defense of slavery blatantly ignored “the spirit of the gospel” which motivated man to love his neighbor as his himself.22

The aforementioned critics all cited Scripture to critique Van Dyke’s sermon, but other correspondents likely confirmed in his mind that abolitionism led to infidelity. Daniel Bowen, a Congregationalist minister from Massachusetts, frankly admitted, “I feel that you are right; that we must either confess slaveholding to be no sin or the Bible to be fallible & no sufficient guide.” He chose the latter option and elevated “conscience & reason,” which testified to the sinfulness of slavery, over the authority of Scripture. James Hillard of Boston even accused Van Dyke of helping persuade abolitionists like Bowen into embracing the very infidelity the Brooklyn clergyman so
detested. “I cease to wonder,” Hillard reproached the Presbyterian, “that the preaching of such men as yourself & Dr Palmer of N[ew] Orleans, prostituting the bible to conserve the worst system the world ever saw—makes infidels who reason, if this is bible teaching, I want none of it.” If this slam were not humiliating enough, a resident of Ohio informed Van Dyke that his sermon was “almost nightly read and expatiated upon” in local grogshops frequented by lower-class Democrats. Quite possibly, the sarcastic Republican noted, this recitation of his address in settings generally untouched by matters “of a divine character” signified a fulfillment of Matthew 11:5, “The poor have the gospel preached ... [to] them.”

A few letter writers engaged in personal attacks rather than seeking to refute his arguments. One hostile Pennsylvanian alleged that Van Dyke and slaveholding “christians of the South” would not enter heaven, and an anonymous New Yorker encouraged him to put himself under the yoke of bondage since he regarded slavery as “such a beautiful & christian institution.” In contrast to these mean-spirited critics, at least one ministerial colleague recognized that only a man of deep conviction could preach as Van Dyke had done. Although Frederick T. Brown, pastor of Cleveland’s Westminster Presbyterian Church, completely disagreed with the opinions of his suddenly “Notorious friend,” he nevertheless deeply respected his counterpart’s “outspoken manliness and bravery.”

Despite their differences on abolitionism, slavery, and secession, northern and southern correspondents both emphasized God’s providential control over America’s future course and expressed faith that whatever happened would accomplish his divine plan. The day before South Carolina seceded, a Philadelphian straightforwardly asserted, “Politicians are now powerless. God only can heal our unhappy divisions: & to him all patriots & christians must look.” Georgian Joseph Wilson likewise hoped prior to secession that God would “avert fratricidal war” but conjectured that he instead might “punish our national sins by leading us through a sea of blood.” Nearly a month after secession, a resident of Atlanta claimed “that God will in due time destroy” abolitionism, that “great curse of our country,” through “the present revolution.” Antislavery advocates, of course, envisioned a different outcome. According to one northerner, slavery, that “sum of all villainies” in the timeless words of John Wesley, merited God’s wrath on the nation, and God surely would “make bare his arm” and give freedom to slaves. Southerner George Walker conceded that manifold sins plagued the nation, but it seemed strange to him that “christianized African Slavery” should be the cause that would destroy “the fairest and the grandest of governments, that patriotism and wisdom ever constructed.”

The Bible clearly taught that God controlled the destinies of nations, establishing or tearing down kingdoms according to his will, but Walker did not assume that man could always discern God’s intentions in human history. This inscrutability of providence necessitated that man humbly accept God’s sovereign direction. Outgoing president James Buchanan afforded religious citizens the opportunity to seek God’s mercy when he designated 4 January 1861 as a day of national prayer and fasting. Skeptics regarded Buchanan’s gesture as an act of desperation, but Ohioan Morris Grimes informed Van Dyke that he “went to the house of God on the Fast Day, and preached & prayed for the whole Union.” John Pratt of Alabama, however, pointed out that
depending on God through prayer and submitting to his divine will and sovereign rule over the nations was not identical to fatalism. Human actions still mattered and could affect the outcome of events. Fully acknowledging God’s divine power, Pratt maintained that “God only can arrest” the approaching “revolution,” yet he would do it, “if at all, through human instrumentalities” rather than through miraculous acts.26

Those human instrumentalities, of course, plunged the nation into Civil War. Although The Character and Influence of Abolitionism had no direct effect on any decisions that led to war, it nonetheless struck a nerve in both sections of the country, revealing a polarized citizenry convinced that its side was morally just in God’s eyes. Van Dyke may have hoped that his sermon would help discredit abolitionist preachers, restrain the influences of religious and political fanaticism in the North, and convince white southerners to sit quietly until the abolitionist frenzy died out, but he failed to see any of these things come to pass. In fact, his critique of abolitionism mirrored popular Democratic opinion. For example, in his annual message to Congress in early December, President Buchanan had blamed abolitionists for the sectional crisis, and as weeks and even months passed after southern states began seceding, no consensus on a policy of coercion emerged. Instead, many northern Democrats, especially urban merchants with financial ties to the South, condemned disunion in principle while admitting that they preferred peace foremost. New York City in particular was a hub of conciliationist sentiment, and Van Dyke’s Brooklyn congregation included numerous businessmen who agreed with their pastor’s overall assessment of the crisis. Van Dyke undoubtedly viewed his sermon as a patriotic address that showed how a theologically conservative interpretation and application of the Bible’s teaching on slavery could preserve sectional peace. However, he soon discovered that his outspoken public stance brought unwelcomed controversy that dogged him for months.27

Two weeks after his address on abolitionism, Van Dyke again opened himself to criticism when he preached from the Sermon on the Mount on the blessedness of peacemakers. He asserted that peacemaking entailed more than simply compromising in order to avoid conflict; genuine peacemakers never made concessions with evil but spoke the truth, even if unpopular. In his mind, the Garrisonian claim that the Constitution was a covenant with death because it protected slavery must be rejected outright. Opinions of this nature had ignited the present crisis, but he maintained that political concessions could be made, even to the point of sacrificing the Union he loved if it would prevent Civil War. This statement tolerating the Union’s “peaceful dissolution” to avoid war opened him to charges of conciliating the South, and his earlier words of brotherly affection for Thornwell and Palmer made it easy for opponents to brand him a secessionist. In reality, he considered preserving the unity of the faith among orthodox believers to be paramount, even more important than maintaining a political union. In January 1861 he expressed as much to a New Jersey minister offended by an allegedly inaccurate statement in The Character and Influence of Abolitionism. “I would do nothing to alienate brethren who agree in the great principles of a common faith, and who ought to labour together in their preaching and progress for the peace of Jerusalem,” he insisted. “May God save our country from disunion and civil war,” he added, “and our beloved church from schism.”
Private correspondence to Georgian Joseph Wilson, conveniently altered and printed in the northern papers in order to cast him as unconditionally favoring secession, further underscored the value he placed in Christian unity. “Whatever may be the fate of our country,” he concluded, “there is a union in Christ between such southern men as you and such northern men as I am, which earth and hell can never dissolve.”

In late February 1861 Van Dyke tangibly demonstrated this fondness for his southern churchmen by traveling to South Carolina and on 10 March preaching for the 50th anniversary of the Charleston Bible Society. The popularity of The Character and Influence of Abolitionism drew approximately 2000 listeners, but those in the audience who hoped to have their ears tickled with a sympathetic political discourse instead witnessed a preacher concerned about spiritual matters. According to a newspaper correspondent, Van Dyke emphatically asserted, “Cotton was not King – neither was hay nor grain – but God alone.” He also related that, prior to leaving New York, a friend had quipped about his visiting a foreign country, and he admitted that it had been unsettling to see a “strange flag” flying in Charleston harbor rather than the Stars and Stripes that “he loved, and should always love.” However, after disembarking and reuniting with friends and fellow believers, he was reminded that “there was a union higher and holier and more imperishable than any on this earth.”

On his way home near the end of March he preached at Second Presbyterian in Richmond, Virginia, swapping pulpits with his friend Moses Hoge. His antiabolitionist credentials again drew an inquisitive and unusually large crowd to the church. With Virginia’s future course and continuation in the Union uncertain, Van Dyke assured his apprehensive listeners that the promise of God’s presence with and preservation of his people remained sure even though the immediate future might hold temporal trials. According to an editor of a local religious weekly, the New Yorker’s comforting words encouraged southern Presbyterians who needed such “tokens of cordial, Christian sympathy” from brothers in the faith. Van Dyke arrived home in Brooklyn the first week of April and enjoyed a brief visit with Hoge. After the Virginian’s message during the midweek service, Van Dyke earnestly prayed that sectional divisions would not prevent likeminded brothers from exchanging pulpits or disrupt the unity of Old School Presbyterians.

Most Northerners failed to understand why Van Dyke valued an indissoluble, eternal, spiritual unity with southern Christians more than he regarded the preservation of the fragile, temporal political union of the states. Having been a target of criticism since his preaching The Character and Influence of Abolitionism four months earlier, Van Dyke’s trials began in earnest with the fall of Fort Sumter and outbreak of armed hostilities. Northern churches brimmed with patriotism, and many of New York City’s houses of worship—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish alike—exhibited support for the war by hoisting up the flag. The New York Herald carried lengthy accounts of the riveting ceremonies, in one case involving a man’s daring climb of a church spire nearly 350 feet above street level to attach a flagpole bearing an enormous banner 30 feet by 20 feet to the steeple’s cross. Since some citizens already questioned his loyalty, flying a flag at First Presbyterian Church would have been a prudent public relations gesture. Nevertheless, he did nothing, and on 22 April a crowd assembled outside his house to force him to act. Accounts of this confrontation conflict, but it
seems to have been hostile. Whatever transpired, the encounter did not convince the intransigent preacher to raise the Stars and Stripes at his church, even after a congregation advised him to swallow his pride and “throw out a flag.” After another member ignored his pastor’s known wishes and surreptitiously hung up a flag in the church, Van Dyke indicated that he would not preach under the banner, and it was dutifully removed. Unwilling to compromise over a symbolic display of patriotism, he instead affirmed in the newspapers his personal devotion to the government, love for the flag, and desire for “an honorable and permanent peace.”

This declaration of loyalty failed to convince some antagonists that his sympathies truly lay with the North. “Your equivocal note in the public papers does not satisfy an indignant public,” an anonymous correspondent warned. “Your treason has been too foul to be wiped out in that way.” The writer claimed that a Southerner in the city reported that Van Dyke had pledged assistance to the South during his recent visit to Charleston, and such traitorous attitudes were unforgiveable. The writer wished that the embattled Presbyterian would “go into obscurity & ‘sit in sackcloth & ashes’” until the war’s conclusion. A 15-year-old congregant of First Presbyterian informed her pastor that she had overheard a lady call him “a regular traitor” because of his sermon against abolitionists and his refusal to display the flag. It grieved her that some individuals “think more of politics than they do of a great and good God.” Having branded Van Dyke a traitor, two correspondents even urged him to relocate to the South, for it would be “a more congenial clime for one whose sympathies are with rebels.”

Leaving Brooklyn was indeed an option, and he could have relocated to a church in Nashville where residents, according to one report, “esteemed [him] the greatest man living.” Nevertheless, Van Dyke had no reason to abandon a congregation that generally supported him. As a conservative Democrat, he sought to show that a citizen could be loyal yet oppose the war. However, the exigencies of the times led many citizens to demand a more rigorous definition of loyalty, one that excluded conciliationists and branded anyone who opposed war as a traitor. Historian William Blair has shown how “popular conceptions” of what constituted treason during the war were very broad, and local pressure oftentimes forced public figures to display certain levels of patriotism to prove their loyalty. Needing to clarify his position again in early May 1861 after the New-York Observer misrepresented some recent remarks from the pulpit, he stopped short of condemning secession, instead affirming that it was not inconsistent to espouse “the doctrine of obedience to Government as a Christian duty” while personally deploiring “the fierce war spirit” that abounded. Indeed, he claimed to have staked out a position of neutrality and refrained from expressing publicly any sentiments intended to condemn or endorse specific policies of the Lincoln administration.

Regardless of Van Dyke’s intentions, during the Civil War silence on national affairs became something of a political statement. Even Old School Presbyterians could not avoid the issue, and after the patriotic majority at the General Assembly in 1861 passed the Spring Resolutions calling for churches to unequivocally support the US government, he became a minority voice within his own denomination. For most of the war he determined to keep a low profile, but in reality the damage
had already been done. In his mind not even a shadow of disloyalty ever darkened any of his actions, but some contemporaries disagreed. As a northern minister who had upheld the scriptural validity of slavery on the eve of the Civil War, he could not escape being construed as a southern apologist from the moment he preached *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism.*

In fact, from hindsight this polarizing sermon may have been the defining moment of his long and distinguished ministry, and there is no telling how many people misunderstood or misremembered it. For instance, in 1867 a Congregational minister in Connecticut asked him for a copy of the sermon “in wh[ich] you gave your views of the rightfulness of secession.” In all likelihood, the address assured countless southerners that God and the Bible sanctioned slavery and by extension the Confederacy itself. About a year after the war’s conclusion, Confederate surgeon S. W. Carmichael asked Van Dyke for a copy of the widely publicized sermon. The Virginian explained, “It was the best defence of slavery I ever read & I prized it so highly that I had it with me all the time I was in the Confederate Army but unfortunately lost it just after Gen’l Lees surrender. … I want to preserve it to show my children.” Carmichael’s testimony demonstrates the wide and lasting appeal of Van Dyke’s antiabolitionist sermon, serving in some small measure to bolster the morale of a committed Confederate during a long, discouraging conflict; assuring his offspring that their father’s military service was noble and grounded in spiritual principles; and ultimately buttressing the postwar development of the Lost Cause.35

For all the truth of this assessment, Van Dyke would not have wanted people to associate him first and foremost with antiabolitionism. Instead, he would have preferred being characterized as a minister committed to faithful biblical preaching and church unity. These two emphases best explain his actions during the secession crisis and Civil War. He epitomized a small class of theologically conservative ministers whom historian Timothy Wesley has labeled “antiwar conciliationists,” the genuinely loyal clergyman who “feared that politicized ministers were leading men into the political arena instead of into the light of salvation.” For example, one visitor to several churches in New York City and Brooklyn confessed that over a three-month period he “heard but one gospel sermon” and commended Van Dyke for preaching it. Yet at the same time, the rampant partisanship that flourished in the North caused many people to misunderstand him and denounce his conservative views on biblical interpretation that defended slavery as scriptural and ultimately divided the church and nation. Four generations ago church historian Lewis Vander Velde brushed aside Van Dyke’s critics who branded him as disloyal simply because he refused to fly the American flag or actively support the war. Vander Velde perceptively observed, “That a man might find that his principles prescribed such a course for him, and still be loyal at heart, did not seem to occur to his accusers.” He undoubtedly considered his attempt to preserve national unity by attacking a perceived source of sectional division to be a patriotic act, but it instead brought personal trials and allegations of disloyalty. While Van Dyke deplored the war’s politicization of religion that neither he nor his Old School brethren could escape, he most certainly had contributed to it in early December 1860 when he preached his famous antiabolitionist sermon that resounded throughout the nation.36
Disclosure statement

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Notes


2. Moorhead, “Henry J. Van Dyke, Sr.,” 22–4. In 1837 Old School Presbyterians divided from New School Presbyterians primarily over theological differences, revivalism, and interdenominational cooperation. New School adherents typically supported temperance and antislavery societies throughout the antebellum era and thus developed a robust political agenda that socially conservative Old Schoolers like Van Dyke rejected.

3. Scholars generally have paid scant attention to Van Dyke, typically mentioning the significance of *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* in a sentence or two. See Chesbrough, “*God Ordained This War*,” 25; Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 284; Varon, *Disunion!* 340–1. More contextualized treatments can be found in Noll, who places the sermon within debates over the Bible and slavery in *America’s God*, 393, and *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 3–4, and in Harlow, who highlights its positive reception in Kentucky in *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 118–19. Moorhead’s article, the only modern, in-depth treatment of Van Dyke’s life, covers the sermon in slightly more than one page.

4. Sermon manuscripts from 1860, box 3, Henry Van Dyke Family Papers, Firestone Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University (hereafter VDP).


12. *New York Herald*, December 11, 1860; *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 14, 1860; *New York Tribune*, December 14, 1860; Bacon, *Jugglers Detected*; J. R. W. Sloane to Henry J. Van Dyke (hereafter HVD), December 13, 1860, box 32, VDP; *New York Herald*, December 30, 1860; Sloane, *Review*, 40. In this sermon, preached at his own church on 23 December and repeated by invitation at George Cheever’s Church of the Puritans on 6 January, Sloane called *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism* “the lowest point that the northern pulpit has ever reached.” *New York World*, January 30, 1861. Lewis initially wrote a four-part critique of the sermon (January 9, 12, 16, 19), and Van Dyke responded with a three-part rejoinder that he hoped would end the exchange (January 30, February 2, 6). It did not, and the final three installments lacked the amiable spirit of the earlier pieces.

13. Patten, *Lives of the Clergy*, 591; Henry Taylor to HVD, December 15, 1860, box 34; Dennison B. Smith to HVD, December 26, 1860, box 32; N. C. Burt to HVD, February 19, 1861, box 10; Lee, *Discontent in New York City*, 127; Samuel Colt to HVD, December 31, 1860, box 12, VDP.
14. James Mitchell to HVD, January 11, 1861, box 23; George S. Sampson to HVD, December 14, 1860, box 30; William J. Hoge to HVD, December 28, 1860, box 18; Frederick Augustus Van Dyke Jr. to HVD, December 12, 1860, box 35, VDP.
15. William Kilburn to HVD, February 25, 1861, box 20; Willis Lord to HVD, December 19, 1860, box 21; R. Kelley to HVD, January 10, 1861, box 20, VDP.
16. O. W. Wheeler to HVD, December 26, 1860, box 41; Edward Jones to HVD, March 29, 1861, box 20; Oliver W. Sees to HVD, December 11, 1860, box 31, VDP.
17. W. Brantly to HVD, December 19, 1860, box 9; James Bogle to HVD, January 16, 1861, box 9; James Bolles to HVD, December 11, 1860, box 9; N. M. Harrington to HVD, December 21, 1860, box 17, VDP.
18. Moses D. Hoge to HVD, December 12, 1860, box 18; Joseph R. Wilson to HVD, December 17, 1860, box 42; John S. Harris to HVD, January 8, 1861, box 17; Samuel K. Talmage to HVD, December 31, 1860, box 34; Joseph R. Wilson to HVD, December 24, 1860, box 42; John W. Pratt to HVD, January 3, 1860 [1861], box 28, VDP.
19. Samuel K. Talmage to HVD, December 31, 1860, box 34; George S. J. Walker to HVD, January 18, 1861, box 40, VDP.
21. “Veratis” to HVD, January 19, 1861; “Southerner” to HVD, April 2, 1861, both box 43, VDP.
22. Asa Prescott to HVD, January 23, 1861, box 28; R. O. Warinner to HVD, January 9, 1861, box 40; A. S. Gardiner to HVD, January 18, 1861, box 16, VDP.
23. Daniel Bowen to HVD, January 7, 1861, box 9; James Hillard to HVD, January 3, 1861, box 18; J. H. Cannan to HVD, January 17, 1861, box 11.
24. J. W. Kerr to HVD, December 13, 1860, box 20; Anonymous to HVD, December 11, 1860, box 43; Frederick T. Brown to HVD, January 28, 1861, box 10, VDP.
25. W. Brantly to HVD, December 19, 1860, box 9; Joseph R. Wilson to HVD, December 17, 1860, box 42; J. L. Rogers to HVD, January 18, 1861, box 29; R. O. Warinner to HVD, January 9, 1861, box 40; George S. J. Walker to HVD, January 18, 1861, box 40.
26. W. Morris Grimes to HVD, January 14, 1861, box 16; John W. Pratt to HVD, January 3, 1860 [1861], box 28, VDP.
27. Patten, Lives of the Clergy, 592; McClintock, Lincoln and the Decision for War, 64, 66, 74–5.
28. New York World, December 25, 1860; Brooklyn Eagle, December 24, 28, 1860, January 11, 17, 1861; HVD to William H. Hornblower, January 22, 1861, box 19, VDP; Daily Cleveland Herald, January 12, 1861. After Tayler Lewis quoted from and commented upon this letter, drolly dubbing it the “Epistle to the Georgians,” Van Dyke responded with a card in which he supplied the vital phrases edited from the original letter. See New York World, February 12, 19, 28, 1861.
30. Moses D. Hoge to HVD, March 20, 1861, box 18, VDP; Central Presbyterian (Richmond, VA), March 30, 1861, box 13, VDP.
31. For flag raising descriptions, see New York Herald, April 21, 27–8, May 3–5, 10, 15, 1861; Daily Cleveland Herald, April 26, 1861; Milwaukee Daily News, copied in Newark (Ohio) Advocate, May 31, 1861; Van Dyke and Van Dyke, Henry Jackson Van Dyke, 11; Brooklyn Eagle, April 24, 1861; George S. Sampson to HVD, April 22, 1861, box 30, VDP; Scioto (Ohio) Gazette, June 4, 1861.
33. Frederick Augustus Van Dyke to HVD, May 23, 1861, box 35, VDP; Silbey, Respectable Minority, 48–9; Smith, No Party Now, 85–6; Blair, With Malice Toward Some, 2, 36–8; Independent (New York), May 15, 1861; Central Presbyterian, May 25, 1861.
35. R. B. Thurston to HVD, February 26, 1867, box 34; S. W. Carmichael to HVD, May 17, 1866, box 11, VDP.

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