



# A Candle Against the Dark

## Reformed Presbyterians and the Struggle Against Slavery in the United States

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Chapter 1: Introduction

1. What information in the Introduction is new to you? Anything surprising?
2. What church denominations have you heard about being involved in the abolitionist movement?
3. What do you think of when you hear the word *ascetic*? What are the differences between ascetic and mystical religions, according to Max Weber? How is *inner-wordly asceticism* different from the *other-wordly asceticism* that the term ascetic often implies?
4. The authors state/argue that the small size of the Reformed Presbyterian Church made it easier for this church to oppose slavery than it was for large denominations. What two factors do they cite to support this claim? Were these factors legitimate reasons for the denomination's antislavery activism?
5. In the 20th and 21st centuries, large "progressive" denominations find it easy to take activist positions on certain social issues. How do they manage to speak with a united voice in taking controversial positions? How are these situations often different than the abolition controversy?

#### Chapter 2: My Kith and Kin Had Died at the Stake

1. What are some of the causes of the Civil War that you were taught in school?
2. The book quotes John Knox (c. 1514–1572) as an influence on the anti-slavery movement. How was Reformed Presbyterian activism about slavery related to Knox's work? Did this affect other aspects of the denomination's activism?
3. Do you see Reformed Presbyterians as activists in the 21st century? If so, in what ways?
4. In the struggle of the Covenanters with the Scottish royalty (the Stuart monarchs), what was the relation between political rivalry and religious persecution? What do you think the Covenanters could have done to avoid or reduce that persecution?

5. What were the differences between the Covenanters' "society meetings" and church services everywhere else? What effect did these meetings have on the growth and life of the denomination in America?
6. Had you heard before of Thomas Jefferson's attempt to mention slavery in the Declaration of Independence (page 17). How might the history of the United States have been different if Jefferson's proposal had been included in the Declaration?
7. When the Federal Constitution was adopted in 1789, Reformed Presbyterians objected to it for two fundamental reasons. What were their objections? How did they make their views known? Explain how this was an outgrowth of their history and beliefs.

### Chapter 3: The Sum of All Villainies

1. When and where did systems of slavery originate? How was American slavery different from the slave systems of the ancient world?
2. The authors point out that there were a number of ways the opponents of slavery could attack it. What was the primary basis for the abolitionism of the Reformed Presbyterians? In the end, what kind of argument succeeded in dismantling American slavery?
3. Modern writers and speakers sometimes claim that "the slave system in the United States was the worst and most degrading slavery in history." On balance, do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not?
4. Why were laws passed forbidding teaching enslaved people to read or write?
5. Of the facts uncovered by Fogel and Engerman (pages 31–35), what surprised you most?

### Chapter 4: This Outrage on the Rights of Men

1. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Patrick Henry, and other presidents and political leaders talked often of freedom and disapproved of slavery, yet they still owned slaves. How do you think they were able to maintain this inconsistency in their lives?
2. In what ways might we be guilty of similar hypocrisy in the 21st century?
3. Why was the ministry of Rev. John Cuthbertson so unusual in Pennsylvania at the time?
4. How was the growth of the Covenanter church in America

- influenced by the organization of the United Irishmen in Ireland?
5. In the years preceding 1830, how was the Reformed Presbyterian prohibition of slavery different from the action of other denominations such as the Quakers, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc.?
  6. Compare the antislavery achievements of Rev. Thomas Donnelly and Rev. James Faris.
  7. Who in this chapter did you find most inspiring?

### Chapter 5: We Have, in Fact, Always Been an Abolition Society

1. What were the reasons behind the founding of the American Colonization Society? Why did Reformed Presbyterians initially support it? Why did they *quit* supporting it?
2. What were the differences between the *gradualists* and *immediatists*? Which of these were the Reformed Presbyterians? Why?
3. Some outstanding leaders of the Covenanter Church (such as James M. Willson) joined antislavery societies and others (such as J. R. W. Sloane) did not. What were the reasons for each approach? Which do you believe is more consistent with the church's doctrine and history? Why? How did the Synod resolve the issue in 1838? In 1841? In 1871?
4. What were the main points on which the Reformed Presbyterians agreed with William Lloyd Garrison? Why did many Northern Christians oppose Garrison so strongly?
5. Many Americans, including many who opposed slavery, called it "wrong," but would not call it "sin." What was the difference? Why was this a major point of contention?
6. Why would the Reformed Presbyterians insist on calling slavery "sin"? Do you think they were right?)

### Chapter 6: The Constitution Is the Magna Carta of Slavery

1. The authors point out six different types of arguments that were used to attack slavery and promote abolition. What are they? Assess the strengths and weaknesses of each.
2. What did the Reformed Presbyterians mean by calling the U.S. Constitution "the Magna Carta of slavery"? What did the Magna Carta (AD 1215) accomplish? How was this relevant to American slavery? In what ways was this not a good comparison?

3. Both enslavers and abolitionists claimed biblical authority for their views. What are some biblical passages or principles that support each side?
4. Why did Alexander McLeod say that a political law of ancient Israel (in Exodus 21:16) applies to nations today?
5. Summarize McLeod's major argument against slavery. Why did J. R. W. Sloane say, "there are no *abuses* of slavery"?
6. Under what conditions were the ancient Israelites permitted to hold people as slaves? How did their situation differ from that in 19th century America?
7. Some writers today insist that slavery was permissible because Christ and the Apostles never condemned slavery. Do you think this is true? How does McLeod answer this argument?
8. How did RPs conclude that the whole nation (and not just the slave states) and all of its citizens (and not only slaveholders) were guilty of sin? What sins can you identify that your nation currently commits? How are Christians guilty in this (these) sins?
9. According to Covenanter doctrine, what is the proper relationship between church and state?
10. Why were Reformed Presbyterians enemies of racism? How did they live out this belief? How can we live out this belief today?
11. What were the three foundations or pillars of a republic, according to J. R. W. Sloane? How did he tie these to the war?

### Chapter 7: The Duty to Refuse Compliance

1. Why was the development of the Underground Railroad necessary? Who organized it? How was it structured? Why has it acquired the status of a national saga? What does that saga have to do with the actual Underground Railroad?
2. Why were so many Northerners angry about the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850?
3. What role did Geneva College play in the Underground Railroad?
4. Reformed Presbyterians today do not generally ignore or disobey the law. Why did they disobey it so freely in the period leading up to the Civil War? What situations might merit such disobedience in the 21st century?
5. Why was there relatively little Underground Railroad activity in Illinois?

6. Has your family or your local church or community passed down other stories about involvement in the Underground Railroad?

### Chapter 8: Ichabod

1. Importing slaves into the United States was illegal after 1808. What were some of the ways that the “slave power” got around that prohibition?

2. Henry Clay was dubbed “the Great Compromiser,” earned when he constructed the Missouri Compromise in 1820. He was still alive in 1850. What did Daniel Webster have to do with the Compromise of 1850? What were its major provisions?

3. Summarize William H. Seward’s speech in the Senate on the proposed Compromise Bill. How did Covenanters respond to that speech? What would be the general response to that speech if delivered today?

4. What was the effect of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on the impulse toward war?

5. What was “Bleeding Kansas” (p. 143) and what was its effect?

6. How did reading Taney’s majority opinion in the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision affect you? What was the significance of that decision?

### Chapter 9: An Inalienable Right

1. Did members of your family, or others in your congregation or community, fight in the Civil War? How has this information been preserved and passed down?

2. Why was the election of Abraham Lincoln as president so controversial (from all perspectives) in 1860?

3. The Covenanters had been unanimous in opposing slavery. Why were they not unanimous in supporting the war? If you had lived in those times, which side of that argument do you think you would have been on?

4. What were the priorities in ministering to the freed slaves during and after the war? How did the Covenanter Church address those priorities? What difficulties did they face in these efforts?

5. What were/are the enduring legacies of the RP ministry in the formerly Confederate states?