

Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation

Katherine Daley-Bailey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Daley-Bailey, Katherine (2014) "Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.22

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss4/21>

Review

Daley-Bailey, Katherine

Fall 2014

Dorn, T. Felder *Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation*. University of South Carolina Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9781611172492

Re-Constructing the Theological World of the Civil War

Diocesan journals, sermons, personal letters, notes, religious pamphlets, editorials in local papers, memoirs, biographies, census records, as well as private journals, these are just some of the seemingly disparate materials from which Dorn reconstructs the ideological and theological edifices which framed the views of Episcopal bishops, in the North and South, regarding slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation. Dorn's tome is well researched and heavy on documentation and although these attributes are praised in scholastic circles, these aspects might intimidate the casual reader. Or at least, that was my fear when I first opened the book.

To my surprise and delight, Dorn carefully crafts these varied documents and texts such that they lend support and a type of intimate texture to civil and theological arguments which might prove both abstract and shockingly immoral in the minds of twenty-first century readers. Perhaps the greatest feat of the book is that it is able to forge together, albeit temporarily, a glimpse into a world strangely alien to modern readers... a world in which Episcopal bishops from all regions were reluctant to address what modern readers might assume was the most salient moral issue of the Civil War era, the question of human slavery. One can imagine that such silence does not ingratiate these voices to a modern American audience, and yet, Dorn opens up a space in which we can hear these bishops speak, often in their own words, about meeting these civil and religious challenges in the context in which they lived.

Dorn's text is primarily chronologically and regionally partitioned: he sets the stage by sketching out a brief historical background and continues by outlining the theological blueprints which allowed a number of these bishops to

not only remain silent on slavery but also permitted a few of them to actually interpret slavery as a blessing on the African race. How could these men of God not speak out against slavery? How could they endorse it? Slavery, according to many of these bishops, especially prior to the war, was a civil matter and not an appropriate topic for the pulpit. And yet, when slavery is addressed in the context of the church, a whole host of these bishops, Northern as well as Southern, attest to the biblical precedent of slavery, despite the fact that they personally may have found the institution problematic. Some bishops, such as Bishop Meade of Virginia, preached that slaves should be grateful they were born in a country in which the Gospel had taken hold and that they should accept their God mandated station. According to Bishop Meade, slavery may be God's way of Christianizing Africa by way of converted former slaves. In the mind of bishops like Meade spiritual liberation took precedent over physical emancipation.

Other surprises await the avid reader, such as excerpts from a pro-Union Northern bishop's pamphlet on slavery as biblically sanctioned, a Southern bishop's scathing critique of the American Constitution (for its lack of deference to God's authority), tales of churches shut down and clergy arrested for refusing to pray for the President of the United States, and a Bishop's defense of the Sioux after a massacre which resulted in the death of more than 400 Americans. Despite how diverse these episodes may appear to be, Dorn uses these colorful stories to illustrate and illumine a textual history which might otherwise appear dull and antiquated. Dorn focuses on certain 'load bearing walls' if you will in his reconstruction of these bishop's lives and ministries such as the shared view of these bishops that God was indeed the author of all of these events (no matter how one 'read' such events). Another foundational tenant many of these bishops held to was that this was not a war about slavery but a "war of national existence" (315). Clergy who did voice their views on the war either championed the Union by insisting that all good Christians do as the Apostle Paul commanded and submit to the 'powers that be' or supported the Southern states right to secede and affirmed the Christian's duty to defend the South against the Union bully.

Dorn's text requires readers to slow down and investigate their own immediate emotional and often dismissive reactions towards the religious and political reviews of these men, especially bishops in the South, "who had to confront slavery not as an abstract question, but as a state-sanctioned institution right on their doorsteps that posed questions concerning the role their church

should play with respect to the slaves in their midst" (26). Dorn does not exculpate the view of these religious men but his text does beckon readers to ponder what type of religious understanding allowed many of the most dominant leaders in the Episcopal Church of that time to see slavery as either completely outside the domain of the church's purview or as a biblically sanctioned institution. This subtle challenge to readers might make them question what they think they know... and perhaps explains Dorn's allusion to the biblical story of the disciples' challenges on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35) in his title.

Katherine Daley-Bailey