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A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South (Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures Ser.)

Eugene Genovese

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The fall of the Confederacy proved traumatic for a people who fought with the belief that God was on their side. Yet, as Eugene D. Genovese writes in *A Consuming Fire*, Southern Christians continued to trust in the Lord's will. The churches had long defended "southern rights" and insisted upon the divine sanction for slavery, but they also warned that God was testing His people, who must bring slavery up to biblical standards or face the wrath of an angry God.

In the eyes of proslavery theorists, clerical and lay, social relations and material conditions affected the extent and pace of the spread of the Gospel and men's preparation to receive it. For proslavery spokesmen, "Christian slavery" offered the South, indeed the world, the best hope for the vital work of preparation for the Kingdom, but they acknowledged that, from a Christian point of view, the slavery practiced in the South left much to be desired. For them, the struggle to reform, or rather transform, social relations was nothing less than a struggle to justify the trust God placed in them when He sanctioned slavery.

The reform campaign of prominent ministers and church laymen featured demands to secure slave marriages and family life, repeal the laws against slave literacy, and punish cruel masters. *A Consuming Fire* analyzes the strength, weakness, and failure of the struggle for reform and the nature and significance of southern Christian orthodoxy and its vision of a proper social order, class structure, and race relations.

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