

The Gospel as preached in the South

Henry Cooke's Testimony New Haven Jan 30th 1844

Henry Cooke a mulatto aged 21 born and always lived on a plantation of about 200 slaves 7 miles from Donaldsonville St. James County – Louisiana belonging to a Mr. Richard C. Nicholas Secretary of State when he left wh. was in the fall of 1843 (see list of officers of the state of Louisiana in the American Almanac for 1844) the aforesaid Henry Cooke gives the following testimony respecting the preaching of the Gospel. Cooke was a runaway slave. He has never heard any one preach (except in the towns Donaldsonville 7 miles distance + a Catholic church called Bed Church 20 miles off & N. Orleans) but an old slave fr. Virginia on the plantation __ they assemble unbeknown to the planters in the woods. if discovered they are whipped – their meetings are usually on Saturday or Sunday evenings late at night – notice of the meeting is passed round to neighbouring plantations so that fr 2 to 5 hundred sometimes assemble. The amount of the old mans (William Ellis “Uncle Billy”) preaching is – “That Jesus Christ is their Saviour that he suffered a great deal and they must try to bear their sufferings – it will not always be as it is God did not make them to work that way always – they must try to please their masters and do as they say; this was the best way to get along some day they would be up in heaven and perhaps look down and see their masters down below them” This old man could read- had a Bible he concealed in the ground wh. he brought fr Virginia the master had tried discover it but could not. had discovered the bibles of others and burned them, for wh. they mourned saying “it was a pity

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They should loose those books they had brought all the way fr. Virginia.” The old man who preached had 2 handsome daughters one of wh. the white overseer took for his wife when Mr. Nicholas was absent at Washington being member of Congress on account of this the old man persuaded the overseer to let them have meetings oftener while the master was absent. yhey were held 3 times a week sometimes- but were stopped when the master returned – The singing and loud shouting are the means by wh. the planters discover the meeting. When heard the neighbouring planters are sent for they assemble and rush upon the congregation and all they can catch they whip. One slave in the plantation was heard Praying was whipped after it he said “much obliged massa but till the last day comes I’ll never stop praising Jesus yet again he was heard to pray and again was whipped. the Same remark was made “much obliged massa but till the last day comes I’ll never stop praising Jesus yet.” Again the same thing was repeated till the overseer went to the owner of the plantation and told him “they was pprating and all the dam’d niggers were rising” The master told him it was “no use to whip that slave so” “he hadnt got any sense” that he must be removed one side away frm where his cabin was. His hut was removed and he was left to pray as much as he pleased The old man above mentioned was the only

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Preacher to be found on any of the plantations around, at least H. Cooke knew of no others. The nearest church was a catholic 7 miles off at Donaldsenville where the slaves never attended except when they wanted and excuse for going off Cooke had attended their service but could not understand it. This was the only church in the place. Mr. Nicholas the owner of Cooke, would when in good humour call in his

slaves and ask them whether they would like to have the Bible read to them Yes massa would like to have the Bible read they would say. The master would then begin to read when some one of the slaves would say “You see that word it means so and so (giving the meaning of it) massa” Who told you that asked Mr. N. God told me massa answered the servant. Well replies Mr. N. I believe you do know some thing Seeing you know so much I guess you had better have a glass of grog – at same time offering the liquor which if refused the slave was whipped untill made to drink it. It being the custom among planters their to make their slaves always take a thing that is offered them whether they want it or not. Mr N. says I can preach too as well as you – you are damb fools – dont pray any more – When you feel bad take a fiddle and go to dancing. Ask me any time when you want a ball & I will let you have one. This man it will be recollected was Secretary of the State of Louisiana (see above)

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I asked Cooke if he thought the old man who preached could read any where in the Bible He said he believed he could. I question Cooke about his own knowledge of the Scriptures – all he knew amounted to about this “Jesus Christ was his Saviour Mary was his mother. God was his father. the Jews crucified him because he taught the people how to be good – after he was crucified he went up to heaven. He said the old man taught him this and also taught him his letters- he had learned to read a little since he had come to the North. He had heard of Adam & Eve – Judas who betrayed Jesus –but had not heard of King David, Solomon, Peter- nor the Deluge or Confusion of Tongues – I told him about the Deluge and Noah’s building a great boat and how their came to be so many languages spoken at wh. he was much pleased – He said the old man wh. preached was a very faithful steady slave and was very much looked up to by the slaves on the plantation when any got to quarreling he would settle the difficulty – his word was law.